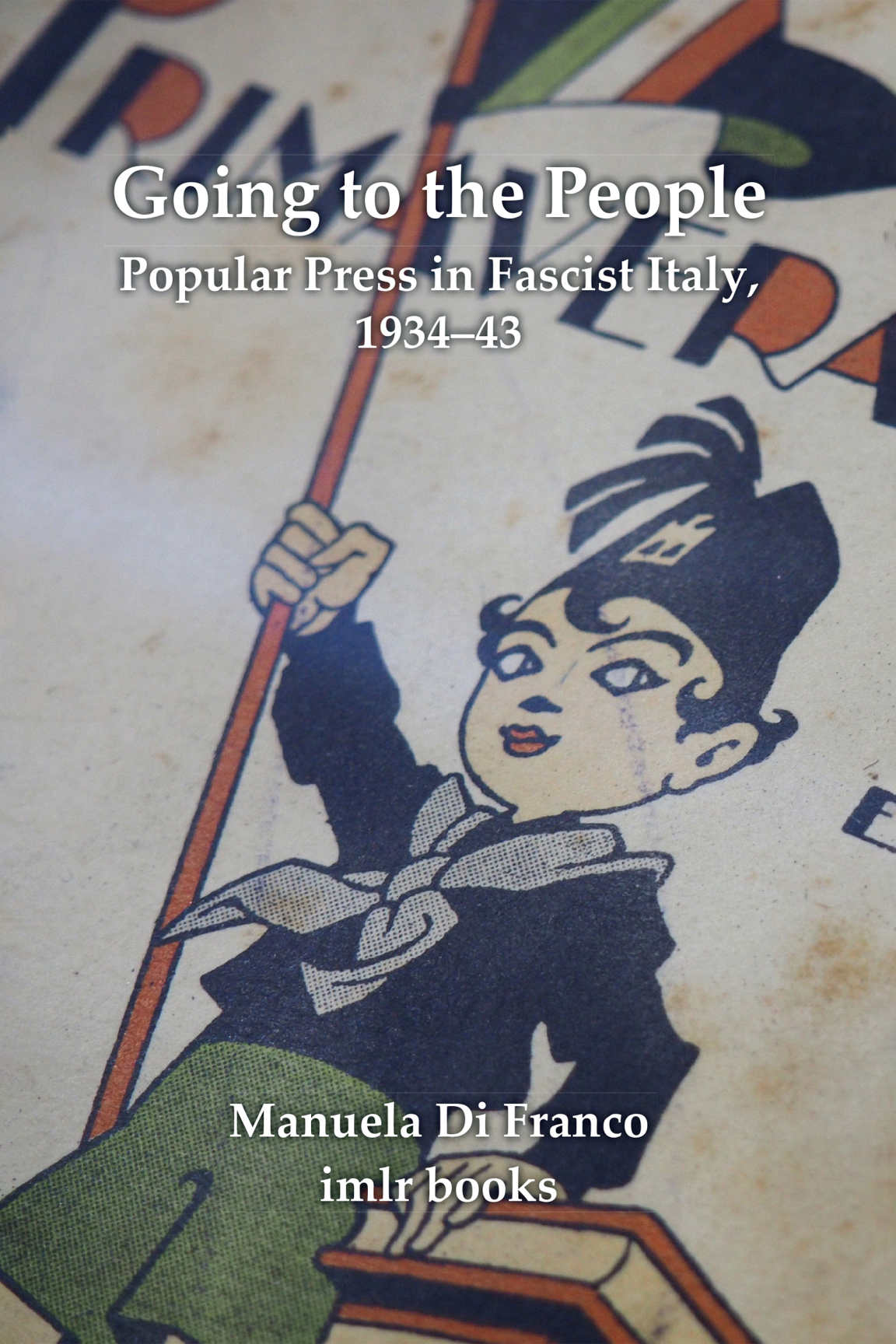


Going to the People

Popular Press in Fascist Italy, 1934–43

Manuela Di Franco

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SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
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Going to the People
Popular Press in Fascist Italy, 1934–43

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Going to the People
Popular Press in Fascist Italy, 1934–43

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To my parents

Contents

	Acknowledgements	ix
	Illustrations	xi
	Archives and Abbreviations	xv
	Introduction	1
1.	The Fascist Regime, Culture and the Periodical Press	27
2.	The Evolution of Illustrated Magazines: Western Europe and the United States	55
3.	Creating a New Imagination: *L'Avventuroso* (1934–43)	83
4.	The First Italian *Rotocalco*: *Omnibus* (1937–39)	161
5.	An Ideal Magazine for the Ideal Woman: *Grazia* (1938–43)	203
	Conclusion	255
	Bibliography	263
	Index	283

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Illustrations

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Figure 1 Cover of *La Tribuna illustrata*, 4, 26 January 1890. Image reproduced here courtesy of the Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna – Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna. 57

Figure 2 [Left] Cover of the September 1929 issue of *Black Mask* magazine, artwork by H. C. Murphy (via Wikimedia Commons/public domain). [Right] Cover of the August 1930 issue of *Amazing Detective Tales*, artwork by Earle K. Bergey (via Wikimedia Commons/public domain). 88

Figure 3 [Left] 'Rob the Rover', first published in *Pluck*, 29 October 1940. Permission to reproduce this image granted by Rebellion Publishing Ltd. [Right] 'Lucio l'avanguardista' from *Jumbo*, 17 December 1932. It has not proved possible to trace the creator(s) of the Italian translation/adaptation (the publisher of which died in 1985); the image is now presumed to be in the public domain. 95

Figure 4 The first issue of *Topolino*, artwork by Giove Toppi, 31 December 1932. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 97

Figure 5 First advertisement for *L'Avventuroso* in *Topolino*, 14 October 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 111

Figure 6 Emilio Fancelli's 'Filibustieri del gran golfo', illustrated by Giove Toppi in *L'Avventuroso*, 14 October 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 113

Figure 7 Corrado Sarri's 'Il cacciatore di serpenti' in *L'Avventuroso*, 14 October 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 118

Figure 8 The white woman, captured and surrounded by villains (native Ethiopians), illustrated by Guido Moroni-Celsi in *L'Avventuroso*, 15 September 1935. Available online at http://annitrenta.blogspot.com/2010/05/lavventuroso-7-1935-quarta parte-gli.html [28 April 2025] and reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 121

Figure 9 The first strip of 'The Phantom' by Lee Falk in *L'Avventuroso*, 13 September 1936. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 124

Figure 10 Second episode of 'L'uomo mascherato', in which Diana Palmesi meets the villains. She is named 'gattina' for her attitude and beauty. In this strip there is the first reference to the hero: 'la scorta è per qualcun'altro' [the bodyguard is for someone else]. From *L'Avventuroso*, 20 September 1936. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 125

Figure 11 The Phantom rescues Diana. Their kiss in the strip is possibly the first published in a children's comics magazine in Italy. In *L'Avventuroso*, 1 November 1936. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 126

Figure 12 A possible love triangle. *L'Avventuroso*, 9 May 1937. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 126

Figure 13 Another panel showing the romance between Diana and the hero. In *L'Avventuroso*, 6 December 1937. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 127

Figure 14 [Top] *L'Avventuroso* masthead for the 4 September 1938 issue; and [below] for the 11 September 1938 issue. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 130

Figure 15 Ferdinando Vichi's villain Monk Eastman in *L'Avventuroso*, 30 January 1938. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 135

Figure 16 Panels showing Dale Arden's sensuality in 'La distruzione del mondo' in *L'Avventuroso*, 9 December 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 141

Figure 17 'Agente Segreto X-9' in *L'Avventuroso*, 9 December 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 142

Figure 18 The manipulated version of Alex Raymond's 'Flash Gordon', which appeared in *L'Avventuroso*, 13 January 1935. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 143

Figure 19 In the Italian version Princess Narda's ('Daran') appearance has been altered by Nerbini's self-imposed censorship: covering the nudity of her upper body with a corset-like design. Image from the 11 August 1935 issue. Reproduced here from the comic book published in February 1936, courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 144

Figure 20 The ending of the third episode as reproduced in *L'Avventuroso*, 28 October 1934. In the original 'to be continued' appears in the last panel; in the Italian version, it appears in the centre of the page (first panel of the image as it appears here). Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 147

Figure 21 'Flash Gordon' as depicted in the 18 November 1934 and 30 December 1934 issues of *L'Avventuroso*: Princess Aurora [top] and Dale Arden [bottom]. Note the use of the informal 'tu' in the bottom panel. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 148

Figure 22 Flash Gordon in a submarine adventure on Planet Mongo in this original strip dating to 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 152

Figure 23 Giove Toppi's 'La regina d'Atalanta' undersea scene, featuring the attack by a giant octopus from *L'Avventuroso*, 14 June 1936. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 153

Figure 24 Mandrake is attacked by a giant octopus and saved by his servant Lothar in 'Il mistero della casa da giuoco', 6 February 1936 (6 October 1935; published in the States as 'The Hawk', 6 December 1934). Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 154

Figure 25 Arabel French in 'La regina d'Atalanta' in *L'Avventuroso*, 8 March 1938. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 154

Figure 26 The Phantom with Diana in 'L'uomo mascherato' (*L'Avventuroso*, 11 April 1937); and the kidnapping of Arabel in 'La regina d'Atalanta' (*L'Avventuroso*, 12 April 1936). Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 155

Figure 27 Mandrake in 'Il cammello di argilla', 1 November 1936, reproduced as a stand-alone album in March 1937, from which the image is taken. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini. 156

Figure 28 Front cover of first issue of *Grazia*, 10 November 1938. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia. 211

Figure 29 Front cover of *Grazia*, 5 September 1940. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia. 214

Figure 30 Table of Contents from the first issue of *Grazia*, 10 November 1938. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia. 223

Figure 31 'Grazia vi scrive', from the 10 November 1938 issue of *Grazia*. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia. 240

Figure 32 'Grazia vi scrive', from the 29 December 1939 issue of *Grazia*. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia. 240

Archives and Abbreviations

Archivio Guglielmo Emanuel, Fondazione Franco Fossati, Milan

Archivio storico, Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Istat), Rome

The following abbreviations have been used throughout the text:

ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome
DAGR	Divisione affari generali e riservati, Archivio generale (1870–1958), Rome
DGPS	Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Rome
MCP	Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Rome
MI	Ministero dell'Interno, Rome

Introduction

In the interwar years Italy experienced significant changes which profoundly transformed Italian culture and habits and established the premises for a modern culture of mass consumption. After rising to power in 1922 the Fascist regime became one of the key factors which contributed to shaping Italian society and influencing cultural production. The Fascist project aimed at controlling not only the State, its people and their conscience,[1] but also cultural production and dissemination. In this context, culture was seen as a means to build consensus, control public opinion and educate Italians in the ideology and values of Fascism. This book examines the development of mass print culture in Italy during Fascism, focusing on the second half of the 1930s and on the presence and influence of foreign models. The establishment of a controlling State that aimed at creating a purely national culture and moulding the attitudes and mindset of the Italian population according to its ideology offers a particularly interesting case for the study of the periodical press as a mirror to society and a force for change. The Fascist regime, its repressive policies and centralised system of control over the press and cultural production make Fascist Italy a unique case, differentiating it both from the liberal democracies of the time, in which cultural exchange was not actively suppressed, and from Nazi Germany, whose censorship of the press was stricter and under the direct control of the Party. In a way, despite the efforts of Benito Mussolini's government apparatus Italy falls almost in between, making a compelling case for studying the effects of both authoritarian and marketing forces on the emerging mass popular press. The cracks in the system of control and censorship of the press allow for further analysis of the limits of

1 In this context 'its people' refers to the Italian population as a whole, particularly in relation to how Fascist ideology sought to shape public consciousness and identity.

the Fascist regime with regard not just to cultural production but also to its long-term effects on Italian culture and society.

The partial freedom or ability to take advantage of the heavy bureaucratic system of Fascist governance has fuelled debates around the political nature of the regime. Starting from the work of scholars such as Renzo De Felice, Giovanni Gentile, Alberto Aquarone and, more broadly, Hannah Arendt, the question of whether Mussolini's system of power was totalitarian or not is still debated. The term 'totalitarian' is here used as intended by Giovanni Amendola, the first to define the Fascist regime as a totalitarian system due to its goal of gaining 'dominio assoluto e dello spadroneggiamento completo e incontrollato nel campo della vita politica e amministrativa' [absolute domination and complete and uncontrolled rule in the field of political and administrative life], and by Mussolini himself: 'Occorre, dopo il partito unico, lo Stato totalitario, cioè lo Stato che assorba in sé, per trasformarla e potenziarla, tutta l'energia, tutti gli interessi, tutta la Speranza di un popolo' [After the single party, we need the totalitarian State, that is, the state that absorbs unto itself, to transform and empower it, all the energy, all the interests, all the Hope of a people].[2]

While this book does not aim to come to a conclusion on the authoritarian or totalitarian nature of the Fascist regime, its analysis of the popular press offers another perspective on Fascist Italy, one that reflects the society of the time and enables reflection on the impact of both the predominant ideology and its limitation, especially regarding the pursuit of cultural independence or autarchy. One of the aims of this study is, therefore, to show how, in spite of the presence of a centralised system of State control over cultural production, foreign culture still circulated and influenced the development of the popular press in the Fascist era, contributing to change (and modernising) the tastes and aspirations of Italians. The analysis of popular magazines in the 1930s reveals the presence of a constant dialogue between Italian and foreign cultures, including French, German and especially American models, showing how the development of the popular illustrated weeklies (*rotocalchi*) in Fascist

2 Giovanni Amendola, 'Maggioranza e minoranza', *Il Mondo*, 12 May 1923, p. 1; Benito Mussolini, 'Discorso per lo Stato Corporativo', 11 November 1933, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, 35 vols (Florence: La Fenice, 1957), xxvi, *Dal patto a quattro all'inaugurazione della provincia di Littoria (18 giugno 1933–18 dicembre 1934)*, pp. 86–96 (p. 96). All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

Italy followed the more general modernisation and massification of the press taking place in Western countries.[3]

Through the analysis of three magazines chosen as case studies – *L'Avventuroso*, *Omnibus* and *Grazia* – this book provides an in-depth study of the popular illustrated press in the Fascist era, putting together a range of different publishing fields and concentrating on both the influence of foreign culture and the impact of censorship and cultural autarchy. The three case studies have been chosen as representative of three key sectors of the popular press – comics, general culture and women's magazines – and the three main publishing companies of the time – Nerbini, Rizzoli and Mondadori.[4] Taken together, they shed light on both the development of the magazines in a crucial period in the 1930s and on the modernisation of the Italian publishing sector in general. The choice of magazines is based on the relevance of these publications to the development of a modern Italian popular press due to the innovations they introduced and their popularity, as inferred from available contemporary commentaries and the mark they left on subsequent publications. These magazines are examined in detail to fill a gap in the field and provide new interpretations and elements in order the better to understand the development of Italian illustrated magazines.

Because the three publishers availed themselves of highly educated people as writers and targeted a mass readership, the analysis of their magazine production is also revealing of the role of intellectuals in the popular press. Generally speaking, in *rotocalchi* the intellectual élite wrote and created a product aimed at the masses, highlighting the complex relationship between intellectuals and a popular readership. Popular periodicals were also influenced by Fascist cultural policies, which at the same time limited intellectuals' freedom of manoeuvre.

3 The 'massification of the press' refers to the historical process which transformed print media from an elite medium into one that reached a mass audience. Driven by technological advancements, rising literacy rates and new strategies like advertising, this shift made newspapers and magazines widely accessible.

4 Each magazine is also taken as a representative example for the three key publishers. For reasons of space, and due to the extensive research already carried out on the topic, film magazines have not been included in this analysis. Key studies on illustrated film magazines in Italy in the 1930s include: *Riviste italiane di cinema, 1930–1955*, ed. by Davide Turconi (Pavia: Amministrazione provinciale, 1980); *Un secolo di cinema a Milano*, ed. by Raffele De Berti (Milan: Il Castoro, 1996); Raffale De Berti, 'I rotocalchi illustrati', in *Storia del cinema italiano*, ed. by Orio Caldiron and others, 13 vols (Venice: Marsilio Edizioni di Bianco & Nero, 2006), v, *1934–1939*, pp. 512–19.

Rotocalchi therefore reflect a top-down influence on 'popular' culture shaped by both 'high' culture and the Fascist regime's control over cultural production. The content of popular magazines, however, was not only shaped from the top: *rotocalchi* also reflected the taste of the Italian populace, influencing in turn what intellectuals wrote about and the way they did so. Italian illustrated magazines of the time therefore offer a gaze on predominant culture, aspirations and tastes across different sectors of society – and different social classes.

The focus of this study is on the years 1934 to 1943, that is to say, from the publication of the first issue of the comics magazine *L'Avventuroso* and the transformation of the Fascist Press Office (Ufficio Stampa del Capo del Governo) into the Under-Secretariat of State for Press and Propaganda (Sottosegretariato di Stato per la stampa e la propaganda) up to the fall of Mussolini's system of power in 1943, when conditions for the press, among many other sectors, were dramatically transformed. For these reasons 1934 is taken as a key year in the history of the Italian popular press: it marked the beginning of the centralisation of Fascist control over cultural production and saw the launch of *L'Avventuroso*, which revolutionised Italian comics and disseminated images of American heroes among young Italian readers. By covering the second half of the 1930s, the book also addresses the impact and limits of Fascist censorship and control in its most intense phase of the campaign for cultural independence, which reached its peak in Ethiopia after the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935.[5] These years also coincide with what Renzo De Felice defines as the years of 'the totalitarian State' (1936–40).[6] This book follows the timeline delineated by Stanley Payne, which divides Italian Fascism into seven phases: the rise to power (1922–25); 'the construction of the dictatorship' (1925–29); the years of the consensus (1929–32); the 'period of active foreign policy and continued consensus' (1933–36); 'the years of autarchy' (1936–40);

5 The Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–36) started with Italy's invasion of Ethiopia under Mussolini, aiming to expand its colonial empire. Despite Ethiopian resistance and international condemnation, Italy used modern weaponry and chemical attacks to seize the country, annexing it into Italian East Africa. See Angelo Del Boca, *La guerra d'Etiopia. L'ultima impresa del colonialismo* (Milan: Longanesi, 2010); and *I gas di Mussolini. Il fascismo e la Guerra d'Etiopia* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996).

6 They were preceded by 'the years of the consensus' (1929–36). See Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1974–76), I (1974), *Gli anni del consenso (1929–1936)* and II (1976), *Lo Stato totalitario (1936–1940)*.

the war (1940–43); and the Republic of Salò (1943–45).[7] Using Payne's and De Felice's categorisations, by examining popular culture in the years 1934–43 the book offers a perspective on autarchic culture within the totalitarian State and up to the war phase.

Terminology

Writing about the emergence of a new printed product and about a particular context such as Fascist Italy requires the use of specific terminology, which requires clarification. First, the book uses terminology drawn from Fascist doctrine, such as the concept of the 'new man' and the 'new woman', or the notions of 'totalitarianism' and 'autarchy'. Second, before clarifying the way these terms are used in this study, it is necessary to delineate the notion of 'Fascist ideology'. The analysis here draws primarily on the reflections on Fascism made by philosophers and intellectuals of the time, such as Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) and Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944), as well as on the declarations by Benito Mussolini during his years as *Presidente del Consiglio* of Italy (r. 1922–43). The book also relies on, and engages with, the interpretations of and studies on Fascist Italy, its history and cultural apparatus undertaken by historians whose work has shaped the field of study. Defining Fascism is not an easy task, due to the 'liquid' nature of the political movement born in Italy after the First World War and to its transnational development; these aspects still fuel debate in both academia and broader society.[8] In Western Europe and the United States in particular, the events of the last decade have led to discussion about and comparisons between the rise of Fascism in interwar Europe and the current success of populist and neo-Fascist leaders and parties. Leaving aside the multiple disputes surrounding its definition which have characterised public debate in recent years, current events have contributed to the

7 Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 68.

8 Studies on Fascism that adopt a transnational methodology include *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*, ed. by Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe (New York: Berghahn, 2017); and Kevin Passmore, 'Fascism as a Social Movement in a Transnational Context', in *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective*, ed. by Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring, Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 579–617. See also Ángel Alcalde, 'The Transnational Consensus: Fascism and Nazism in Current Research', *Contemporary European History*, 29 (2020), 243–52.

reassessment of the theoretical and methodological foundations shaping the study of Fascism.[9] A book like this cannot avoid establishing a working definition of the political regime that ruled Italy between 1922 and 1943. A codification of its Fascist doctrine also needs to take into account specific features of the political movement that stemmed from the First World War and is linked to, and intertwined with, cultural and philosophical foundations. These are nation-specific aspects which cannot be ignored: it is in these foundations that the distinctiveness of Italian Fascism is rooted. Studying the development of popular culture is, therefore, a timely topic, as it reveals how these nation-specific elements were mobilised to construct the system of power established in Italy by Mussolini and his followers. At the core of this system lies Fascist ideology, a key issue for any study that aims to address popular culture in Italy because its impact on the culture industry and Italian society cannot be overlooked. The ideology of the regime is particularly important in the analysis of the cultural exchange that contributed to shaping modern Italy. The Italian Fascist State created a system of control that imposed limitations on foreign products, transposing ideology onto cultural production.[10]

The ideology of Italian Fascism has been widely questioned for its tendency to shape its ideas in line with its needs. This malleability finds its roots in the Fascist focus on action: ideas would be developed only afterwards, resulting in a lack of organic conceptualisation and models. The absence of a solid doctrine has

9 At the time this book was written, a rise in support for so-called 'Far-Right' and 'populist' parties is evident across Europe, as demonstrated by the victory of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party) in Austrian elections in September 2024 and the near-win of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in federal elections in Germany in February 2025, alongside the already established governments of Giorgia Meloni in Italy and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. In the United States, Donald J. Trump began his second term in office in January 2025. The question of whether contemporary governments and political movements can be classified as 'Fascist' has sparked intense scholarly (and non-scholarly) debate since Trump's first election in 2016. See, for example, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (New York: Norton, 2020); Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018); and Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

10 Francesca Billiani, *National Cultures and Foreign Narratives in Italy, 1903–1943* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); on Fascist ideology and cultural production see in particular Chapter 4, 'The 1930s: The Spaces of Culture (1932–1938)' (pp. 119–52).

been the main reason for some historians denying the existence of a Fascist ideology, especially in comparison to other 'isms' of the time (like Socialism and Liberalism), and talking instead about a set of heterogeneous ideas and a powerful propaganda machine.[11] This book follows Emilio Gentile's conceptualisation of ideology as the sum of the forms of expression and sets of values of those who identified as Fascists, even when the beginning of such an ideology coincides with the identification of Fascism with anti-ideology.[12] The definition of Fascism in the present study also takes into account its emotional engagement with the masses. Emotion emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping the movement and, subsequently, the regime, intertwining with a series of rituals and imagery which conveyed the mysticism and irrationality of Fascism. This fostered a collective sensory connection to the (alleged) national destiny that resulted in a spiritual engagement by the masses with the rituals of the regime. The importance of emotional response in the building of Italian Fascism reflects its focus on 'style' and, in turn, its lack of the sort of codified, coherent doctrine that characterised other ideologies of the time. As Mabel Berezin defines it, Fascists 'believed in action and style', leading to an ideology that 'is a convenient matrix for a set of political and cultural practices but not a body of discursive ideas'.[13] Put another way, Mussolini's ethos of power emphasised action and focused on emotions to create a set of cultural beliefs that found expression in performative rituals rather than in a codified ideological identity.

Ultimately, Fascist ideology can be defined in a series of principles which were intended to change the Italian character and create a new nation and people, marking a difference from liberal Italy and consolidating the Fascist revolution that had started in 1919 with the founding of the Fascist movement. Italian Fascism pursued a spiritual

11 See Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 11–38; Jeffrey Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); and Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2004).

12 Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione* (Rome: Laterza, 2002), pp. 77–79. The idea of Fascist ideology is backed by the success Fascism enjoyed among the Italian people and beyond, particularly in its presentation of itself as a spiritual revolution (p. 80).

13 Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self*, p. 30. A reflection on Fascism and style can also be found in Adrian Lyttelton, *Italian Fascisms: From Pareto to Gentile* (London: Cape, 1973).

renewal and did so through a set of values, ideas and actions which, although sometimes conflicting, formed what we refer to here as Fascist ideology. Key aspects of such ideals, which were also reflected in the popular press, included: the glorification of Rome's imperial past; the myth of *italianità* [Italianness]; the superiority of Italian civilisation; the pursuit of a totalitarian State in which the private sphere dissolves into the public sphere and the State is the ultimate goal; the sacralisation of politics, which introduced religious rhetoric and the idea of Fascism as a faith. This in turn led to another aspect of Fascist ideology, namely, the establishment of collective rituals which resulted in the spectacularisation of politics; the creation of a 'new Italian'; and, finally, the cult of its leader. These myths were disseminated using a specific language, the *fascistese*, the political language of Mussolini's regime, 'substantially made up of three dimensions: religious, military, and bureaucratic'.[14] The religious aspect of Fascist language is a crucial aspect of this ideology because it enabled the regime to integrate already known practices into new rituals and beliefs, appealing to the wide Catholic population, which was thus easily able to connect with Fascist ideas.

While Fascist ideology can be summarised by the principle 'tutto nello Stato, niente al di fuori dello Stato, nulla contro lo Stato' [everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State],[15] its main strength was its ability to mobilise the middle class.[16] Such mass organisation followed the principle of totalitarianism, shaping the life of the Italians by integrating them into Fascist

14 Emilio Gentile, '*Fascistese*: The Religious Dimensions of Political Language in Fascist Italy', in *Political Languages in the Age of Extremes*, ed. by Willibald Steinmetz, Studies of the German Historical Institute, London (Oxford: Oxford University Press; German Historical Institute, London, 2011), pp. 69–82 (p. 69).

15 Benito Mussolini, 'Per la medaglia dei benemeriti del comune di Milano', in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XXI, *Dal delitto Matteotti all'attentato Zaniboni (14 giugno 1924–4 novembre 1925)*, pp. 422–27 (p. 425). In this speech Mussolini specifies that Fascism represented a new political regime: '[N]ell'ottobre del 1922, non c'è stato un cambiamento di ministero, ma c'è stata la creazione di un nuovo regime politico' [[I]n October 1922 there was not a change of ministry, but there was the creation of a new political regime] (p. 425).

16 As Gramsci writes: 'Il fatto caratteristico del fascismo consiste nell'essere riuscito a costituire una organizzazione di massa della piccola borghesia. È la prima volta nella storia che ciò si verifica' [The characteristic fact of Fascism consists in having succeeded in establishing a mass organisation of the petite bourgeoisie. This is the first time in history this has occurred] (Antonio Gramsci, 'La crisi italiana', *Ordine Nuovo*, 1 September 1924, pp. 1–3 (p. 2)).

organisations at every stage of their lives in an effort to regenerate the Italian character for an anthropological revolution,[17] one that wanted to 'create a new civilisation based on the principles and institutions of Fascist totalitarianism'.[18] This revolutionary project implied the creation of a 'new man' and his faithful and reliable companion, the 'new woman'. The new man was a virile soldier, ready to sacrifice himself for the Motherland, whilst women found in motherhood the highest expression of patriotism. The ideals behind the 'new Italian' saw men and women with established roles summarised by Mussolini's precept: 'La guerra sta all'uomo, come la maternità alla donna' [War is to man as motherhood is to woman].[19] This parallelism reveals another important aspect of Fascist ideology (and rhetoric): the militarisation of politics, which found its expression in the military training to which boys were exposed from an early age; in the features of the 'new man' as a strong man ready to fight; and in the glorification of the heroic ultimate sacrifice for the Motherland.

To achieve the renewal of the Italian spirit and build the totalitarian State, Fascism needed consensus; and it was able to obtain it through the personal cult of Mussolini, whose image and speeches were echoed across the media to reach even the most isolated rural communities. The figure of Mussolini became the connection between the individual and the collective and formed a central part of the spectacularisation of Fascist politics through collective ceremonies in which the individual would merge into the mass.[20] An important expression of the idolatry of Mussolini by the regime, and of the Fascist effort to reach and permeate every member of Italian society and to gather consensus, was its portrayal of the Duce in different moments of his life, from public to private. The dissemination of the image of Mussolini was particularly important in the campaign for

17 Throughout the book terms are used which refer to the Fascist organisation of Italian youth: *balilla* refers to members of the Fascist paramilitary youth movement for children aged eight to fourteen years (*piccole italiane* for girls); and *avanguardisti* for boys between fourteen and eighteen (*giovani italiane* for young women). On the organisation of adults' free time see Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture Of Consent: Mass Organisation of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

18 Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*, Italian and Italian American Studies (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), p. 7.

19 Benito Mussolini, 'La situazione economica', in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, xxvi, *Dal Patto a Quattro all'inaugrazione della Provincia di Littoria. (8 giugno 1933–18 dicembre 1934)*, pp. 233–59 (p. 259).

20 See Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Lo spettacolo del fascismo* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003).

autarchy, the effort by the regime to achieve national economic and cultural self-sufficiency.

As a response to the economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations against Italy for its invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the Fascist government launched a campaign for cultural independence that led to the limitation of the imitation or import of foreign products, which were deemed to be a 'contamination' of the Italian spirit. Soon the campaign affected cultural production, with the Fascist regime's new aim of creating a culture which was purely national. This idea of an Italian (and Fascist) culture was part of Mussolini's totalitarian project and was reflected by the periodical press. The use of the term 'autarchy' in the present study therefore refers to that specific moment in Italian history when the economic isolation of the country after its invasion of Ethiopia led to the theorisation of a self-sufficiency charged with political significance. The 'autarchic phase' in cultural production coincides with the end of the regime's support for aesthetic experimentation. This had been the result of exposure to and reinterpretations of international artistic and cultural trends generated beyond national borders. The Italo-Ethiopian War, therefore, marks a change in Fascist ideology, putting internal production at the centre and closing the door to cultural exchange, ending what Ruth Ben-Ghiat terms 'an era of cultural debate that many intellectuals would remember as the most intense and engaging period of the dictatorship'.[21] This shift in Mussolini's ruling system is reflected in the modernisation of cultural practices of production and consumption, as explored through the case studies analysed here.

Fascist jargon is not the only terminology used in this book that is worth clarifying. The reader will notice the use of 'America' as a synonym for 'the United States'. This choice has been made in order to be faithful to the Italian use of the term 'America', a word that is not limited to a geographical area but encompasses the set of values and myths that arrived in Italy and created an idyllic image of the United States and its society. In the *Ventennio*, the 'myth of America' became connected to a form of resistance to the Fascist regime, an idea of freedom and intellectual stimulus which was particularly expressed through the translation of contemporary American works of literature.[22] Another important difference is the use of the terms

21 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p. 120.

22 See Valerio Ferme, *Tradurre è tradire. La traduzione come sovversione culturale sotto il fascismo* (Ravenna: Longo, 2002); and Cesare Pavese, *La letteratura americana e altri saggi* (Milan: Einaudi, 1951), particularly 'Ieri e oggi', pp. 193–96 (originally

'comic strips' and 'comic book'. Although the two media can overlap, there is a substantial difference in their format and, in particular, the readership they targeted. This book adopts Bradford Wright's definition: '[C]omic strips are a syndicated feature in newspapers sold to a mass and mostly adult audience, comic books are created, distributed, and sold on their own merits to a paying […] young audience'.[23] Specifically, in the Italian context 'comic strip' refers to the serialised comic stories published in comics magazines, whereas 'comic book' refers to the stand-alone story published on its own. Finally, this study refers to 'comics magazines' when talking about illustrated periodicals focused on comics, whether in the form of comics strips or serialised comics.

Context

By the time the Fascist party gained control of the country, the culture industry was already developing as a system of mass production and distribution, driven as much by profitability as by state intervention. At the same time, models coming from abroad were influencing Italian cultural production and people's taste. Although the impact of foreign cultures is visible across different media, in the 1930s it became striking in film production and advertising. Both sectors brought to the attention of Italian consumers new products and lifestyles which contributed to shaping modern tastes and spreading a consumerist culture that came mostly from the United States. Mussolini's system of power saw the emergence of this culture of consumption as dangerous for its totalitarian project because it fuelled personal aspirations that worked against the submission of the individual to the state. American advertising was indeed spreading a consumer culture focused on the self, which contrasted with the Fascist focus on the collective. The Italian reaction came about when the regime launched the campaign for autarchy. Despite the main goal being the limitation of imports in all sectors, the pursuit of self-sufficiency indirectly encouraged the expansion of consumption. Italian products were praised and their purchase endorsed as an act of patriotism, thus making the consumption of Italian goods an important element in national growth, with the regime actively promoting the creation

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published as 'In Giro per l'America', in *L'Unità. Edizione Piemontese*, 3 August 1947, p. 3).

23 Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. xiii–xiv.

of an Italian consumer whose spending was guided by the State. In the process of centralising cultural production and the education of the masses within the State, consumption became a concern and a significant element in the construction of Fascist society.

Strictly connected to the emergence of the masses as protagonists of the Fascist State, consumerism was also seen as a means of control. By standardising people's demands, the regime sought to prioritise the needs of the collective over individual desire and to use consumer goods to shape a specifically Fascist version of modernity. In the 1930s the expansion of advertising deeply affected the press, becoming not only a crucial source of revenue for magazines but also changing their appearance. Despite intervention by the regime, the development of advertising contributed to the spreading of foreign lifestyles – and lifestyle aspirations – that influenced both the content and look of magazines and, consequently, consumer taste and demands.

In this context the periodical press is revealing of the forces at play which contributed to the shaping of modern Italy. Magazines mirrored not only cultural change and the State's intervention in and influence on cultural production, but also the modernisation of Italian society and the impact of foreign models. The illustrated-magazine format, the *rotocalco*, a new product launched in the 1930s and aimed at the masses, is a privileged source for the study of the evolution of the popular press and modern consumption in Italy within the peculiar dynamics of a controlling regime. The commercial nature of the *rotocalco*, its mass production and targeted distribution demonstrate the complexity of cultural production in the *Ventennio* and the emerging mass-consumer culture, as well as the mixed national and international forces that shaped it. Although the Fascist government considered the manipulation of the press a crucial element in establishing its power and consensus, periodicals had a certain margin of freedom thanks to their nature as entertainment products. While daily newspapers were heavily influenced by politics and considered a social necessity, the purchase of a magazine reflected more directly the preferences of the readers. As cultural products, periodicals were still subject to Fascist control and had to comply with specific directives in terms of what could and could not be published. Nonetheless, modern forms of consumption and models coming from abroad found space for expression in the new *rotocalchi*, meeting the demands of an emerging, modern readership influenced by the foreign culture brought to popularity mainly by American films and advertising.

While there is a lack of official statistics for the 1930s, the analysis of the data on periodical publications provided by the Istituto nazionale di statistica [National Institute of Statistics – Istat] between 1881 and 1932 indicates a constant growth in the number of periodicals published until 1928, when a fall in numbers is registered. These data confirm the increasing popularity of the periodical press and seem to reflect the more restrictive press regulation introduced by the Fascist regime. In 1912 the records show the publication of 3,341 periodicals, while the number fell to 3,030 in 1928 and to 2,946 in 1929.[24] The last available data refer to 1929, when 2,946 periodicals were being published, 473 of which were weeklies.[25] The study of illustrated magazines reveals that the field grew rapidly in the 1930s. This decade was characterised by the production of an increasing number of weeklies which targeted a specific readership and covered several distinct areas of interest and specialisation, such as women's magazines, the introduction of comics magazines and magazines dealing with literature, the Arts and current affairs. For example, between 1881 and 1919 there were only a few established women's periodicals, aimed mainly at the bourgeoisie, such as *Cordelia* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1881–1942), *La Donna* (Turin: La Stampa and Rome: La Tribuna, 1905–22; then Milan: Mondadori, 1922–26) and *Lidel* (Milan: Lidel, 1919–35). Between 1933 and 1938 the most successful and longest-running women's *rotocalchi*, which also targeted less-educated women, were launched, considerably expanding the field and the readership. These included *Eva: settimanale per la donna italiana* (Milan: Vitaliano, 1933–36; then Rusconi, 1936–68); *Gioia!* (Milan: Rusconi, 1937–2006); *Annabella* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1938–; previously *Lei* 1933–38); and *Grazia: un'amica al vostro fianco* (Milan: Mondadori, 1938–). The layout introduced by these publications can also be seen in post-war magazines. The same can be said for illustrated weeklies covering current events and culture, in which photographs are the main feature and means of information in the magazine. The first prototype in Italy was *Omnibus* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1937–39), followed by weeklies such as *Tempo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1939–76) and *Panorama* (Milan: Mondadori, 1939–); their layout was maintained by post-war magazines such as *Europeo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1945–47, then Domus, 1945–2013) and

24 *Annuario statistico italiano* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato) 1916, 1930 and 1932, pp. 100, 108 and 122 respectively.

25 *Annuario statistico italiano* (1932), p. 122.

L'Espresso (Rome: N.E.R, 1955–). These magazines began to target a wider range of readers in the 1930s, as demonstrated by the variety of topics addressed. Their layout and approach to the readership grew increasingly similar, distancing them from the illustrated journals of the previous era and showing how the illustrated magazines of the 1930s represent a watershed in the history of the Italian popular press. Comics magazines are another example of this, with comic weeklies flourishing in the 1930s and changing the Italian children's press. Analysis of the number of comics and children's magazines published since the beginning of the twentieth century reveals the rapid growth of these publications in the 1930s: between 1900 and 1922 approximately six periodicals were launched, followed by only a few new publications – mainly Fascist – between 1922 and 1929, whereas between 1932 and 1937 more than thirteen comics magazines were launched, among them the long-running *Topolino* (Florence: Nerbini, 1932–35; then Milan: Mondadori, 1935–43 and 1945–88; then Milan: The Walt Disney Company Italia, 1988–2013; then Modena: Panini Comics, 2013–) and *Il Vittorioso* (Rome: AVE, 1937–66).

Organisation

This book is divided into five chapters. The first introduces the political, cultural and social background against which Italian illustrated popular magazines – from now on referred to as *rotocalchi* – developed. The cultural politics of the regime and its organisation of control over culture are crucial in understanding the impact of the general ethos of power on the popular press. The better to understand how the regime established a structured control over the press and culture, one built at the same pace as the theorisation of the Fascist idea of a culture for the masses, Chapter 1 retraces the key steps taken by Mussolini's government to organise both its system of control and its idea of popular culture. The latter is strictly connected to the control of cultural production, here examined in terms of the practical organisation of the dissemination of popular culture and its formal government institution: the Ministero della Cultura Popolare [Ministry of Popular Culture]. The examination of these aspects provides the necessary context in which to understand the significance of the production of modern *rotocalchi*. The chapter also introduces the evolution of the Italian publishing industry, which in the interwar years saw the emergence of new publishing companies with a key role in the modernisation and shaping of the popular Italian mass press: Mondadori, Rizzoli and Nerbini. The founders of these publishing companies, Alberto Mondadori, Angelo Rizzoli and

Giuseppe Nerbini, changed Italian magazine production. Their activity as publishers is closely connected to the Fascist apparatus, thus proving a significant source of information on how the publishing field engaged in dialogue with Mussolini's controlling regime.

Because this study aims to address the cultural dialogue which helped to shape Italian popular culture, Chapter 2 introduces the international factors that influenced the development of the Italian illustrated press. It retraces key steps in the history of the Italian production of periodicals and compares it to the foreign cultures whose influence is visible in *rotocalchi*, namely, those of Western European countries and the United States. The latter had a particularly important role in the general development of the modern popular press, influencing not just Italy but Western Europe in general. The influence of the American model on Italian popular culture is therefore analysed to assess whether and how the process of Americanisation was already shaping Italian society despite Fascist efforts to create a purely Italian culture. Many studies have highlighted how a process of Americanisation became visible throughout Western Europe in the interwar years.[26] Through examining the complex presence of American and other influences on popular magazines, the present study makes a significant contribution to this debate on the processes of the Americanisation of Italian culture and shows how modern Italian culture developed in constant dialogue with that of America, but also of other European countries. Its analysis suggests that American culture was not the only force shaping and influencing the Italian popular press and demonstrates the presence of a converse process of the Italianisation of foreign models coming from both the United States and Europe. These elements are examined in Chapter 2, alongside the relationship of Fascist Italy to American culture and its products, including the attitude of the regime towards the United States. This chapter provides the necessary framework for a detailed analysis of the case studies, *L'Avventuroso*, *Omnibus* and *Grazia*,

26 Key works on Americanisation include: Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); David Ellwood, *The Shock of America: Europe and the Challenge of the Century*, Oxford History of Modern Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe*, ed. by Rob Kroes, R. W. Rydell and Doeko F. J. Bosscher, European Contributions to American Studies, 25 (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993); Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Mel van Elteren, *Americanism and Americanization: A Critical History of Domestic and Global Influence* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

which demonstrate the presence of a multicultural dialogue shaping the popular press in Italy and beyond.

Chapters 3 to 5 are each dedicated to one of the three case studies, following both a chronological order of first appearance and the level of visible impact of both censorship and foreign models. Each case study is first contextualised to offer a broad view of the state of the publishing field which the magazines in question contributed to changing. The examination of each case study takes into account not only the socio-political context, but also how each magazine situates itself in the relevant printing market and how it communicates with other similar products. For this reason each chapter offers an in-depth analysis of specific aspects which a) are revealing of the multicultural dialogue that shaped Italian *rotocalchi*; b) define the nature of the magazine; and c) illustrate the readership targeted.

Chapter 3 examines the comics magazine *L'Avventuroso*, launched in 1934 and based almost entirely on American comics. It was deeply affected by the Italian government's ban on foreign comics, issued in 1938, which eventually led to an abrupt interruption of its publication in 1943. Comics are analysed here in their role as a vehicle of foreign culture in Italian society through new forms of Italian print media. The qualitative content-analysis of *L'Avventuroso* addresses two main themes: Americanisation and the representation of gender. Specifically, the chapter provides a detailed analysis of the production of particular comics that reveals American models and the patterns of imitation and re-elaboration of these models. Representation of gender roles and male and female bodies is then examined in its visual and textual elements to assess national and international views on gender. The focus on these elements allows an exploration of changes in the modes of comics-production and of how the medium contributed to the Americanisation of modern Italian society (and cultural production). The direct Fascist intervention in comics magazines provides an excellent example of the reach of State censorship and, in turn, of how rooted American models were in the consumption of comics. Because of the significance of American comics in the development of *L'Avventuroso*, this chapter briefly examines the rise of comics in the United States in order better to frame the cultural differences which made the Italian readership so receptive to the innovation brought in by Mario Nerbini. Although a brief analysis of Fascist cultural policies is necessary in order to contextualise the research, this study aims to overcome the political implications of the history of modern comics in the *Ventennio* and seeks instead to highlight the process of Americanisation of Italian comics

and the Italianisation of imported American ones. The introduction to the field of comics in Italy is followed by an examination of the case study, *L'Avventuroso*, which retraces and investigates its evolution with particular attention paid to its connections to American comics and the impact of censorship. The analysis of the magazine is divided into two parts, the first presenting an overview of the content and format of *L'Avventuroso* in the years from 1934 to 1942; and the second focusing on specific aspects which highlight its particular position in relation to its sources and constraints: the portrayal of women; the translation of American names; and the features of four comic strips that combined American models and modern Italian comics.[27]

Chapter 4 focuses on the general illustrated weekly *Omnibus*, launched in 1937 and closed by the regime in 1939. Although its similarity with foreign magazines is mentioned by previous scholarship, this book addresses and assesses in greater depth the impact of foreign models on the shaping of what is known as the first Italian *rotocalco*. The main focus of this chapter is the reinterpretation, imitation and depiction of foreign culture in *Omnibus*. The selection of the content for close examination is therefore defined by the cultural and foreign elements exhibited in the magazine. Particular attention is paid to the presence of European and American cultural models from the point of view of both form and substance. The analysis thus seeks to verify the claims made by various contributors to *Omnibus* that foreign models profoundly influenced the magazine.[28] The discussion of the second case study is structured as follows: it outlines, first, the general aspects and key features of *Omnibus*, particularly the influence of foreign models on its layout; second, how the magazine was produced; and, third, the role of images. It then examines the attention paid by *Omnibus* to foreign culture through the analysis of 'Giorno e notte' [Day and Night], a section of the magazine devoted to cinema, and of the literary content, which reveals the constant, although ambivalent, presence of American culture in the magazine. Specific attention is then paid to the feature on page 10 of each issue,

27 A note on primary sources: Nerbini's offices were attacked twice – in 1943 by the Fascists and in 1944 by partisan brigades – and the archives of his periodicals burnt, causing the loss of precious original materials. Therefore, most of the material consulted and presented here is taken from facsimile reprintings of *L'Avventuroso* done in the 1970s.

28 These include the French *Marianne* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1932–40) and the German *Uhu* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1924–34); the American *The New Yorker* (New York: Condé Nast, 1925–) and especially *Life* (Chicago: Time, 1936–).

which contains an instalment from a serialised novel, taking 1937 as a sample year. Aspects considered in analysing the role of novels in *Omnibus* are their translation, their place and language of origin and the kinds of issue that arose from censorship. The analysis of 'Giorno e notte' focuses instead on the perspective adopted by *Omnibus* towards the film industry, and especially Hollywood, which played a crucial role in this period as both the dominant producer of films and symbol of cinema and of American culture in general.[29] A final consideration of the attitude of *Omnibus* to the United States is undertaken through analyses of the different, and often contradictory, images of America and American culture disseminated through an array of other images and articles in the magazine. Overall, the chapter provides a still image of the perception of American society and culture and of the dynamics between the ideology of the regime and national cultural production.

Finally, Chapter 5 analyses *Grazia*, launched at the end of 1938 as a specifically Italian women's magazine shaped according to Fascist culture and values but with many hybrid elements. The chapter offers a close examination of the issues published from 1938 to 1943, when due to the war the majority of publishers had to stop printing their periodicals. To address the elements that made *Grazia* an innovative magazine which reflected the transnational cultural exchange that characterises the development of *rotocalchi*, the chapter focuses on content that addresses the readership directly. The analysis of this material serves to examine how even a publication steeped in Fascist culture such as this one was, in fact, shaped and influenced by varied foreign models and modern attitudes, in this case coming mainly from the United States and France. Scholarly studies of the Italian periodical press are in general fragmentary; and while recently the analyses of illustrated weeklies have multiplied, examination of them still seems to be incomplete when it comes to publications for women, especially in the interwar years. The first study that specifically addresses women's magazines in the Mussolini era is Elisabetta Mondello's *La nuova italiana. La donna nella stampa e nella cultura del Ventennio*, published in 1987, which questions the omissions in and narrow perspective created by previous scholarship

29 In the 1930s the success of cinema, dominated by Hollywood, encouraged the launch of several magazines focused exclusively on cinema, featuring film criticism, the biographies of film stars, feature articles, advice columns and cine-novels. Key examples include: *Cinema Illustrazione* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1926–39); *Cine Romanzo* (Milan: Editrice Popolare Milanese, 1929–35; then *Cine Illustrato*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1935–60); and *Cinema* (Milan: Hoepli; then Rizzoli, 1936–43).

and investigates important periodicals such as the *Almanacco della donna* (Florence: Bemporad, 1920–43). Mondello's investigation sought to be a starting point for further research, suggesting a new interpretation for the role of women's magazines as a revelatory source for the complexity behind the monolithic image suggested by the general ethos of power. Subsequent studies on women's magazines have flourished, but only a few focus on the new genre launched by *rotocalchi* and their relationship to the Fascist regime.[30] This chapter provides a better understanding of women's illustrated magazines and their relevance to both the development of a modern mass press and the shaping of an idea and culture of modern Italian women in the *Ventennio*.

The study of *Grazia* provides a new perspective on publications for women and demonstrates the complexity of the image of women circulated by these magazines in spite of the ideal proposed by the Fascist ideologues and in the face of the impact of government propaganda about the field. In so doing, this chapter takes Mondello's research further and provides additional, important elements to the contradictions between the regime's ideals and women's experience. The analysis of *Grazia* offers another revealing example of how the emerging mass press developed under Mussolini's system of power and shows how foreign and modern models co-existed with, and sometimes overcame, Fascist ideals. The focus on women also offers insights into the development of a new, modern model of femininity and of readers' thoughts, desires and taste as reflected in popular magazines – that is to say, reflected by a product shaped to sell, and therefore to appeal, to as a wide a readership as possible.

The chapter is divided into two main parts. In order to provide a solid frame for the analysis of the case study, the first part introduces the development of women's illustrated magazines in the 1930s and the model of femininity proposed by Fascism. The second is the core of the chapter and presents the case study, *Grazia*, which is analysed in detail, from the founding of the magazine and its relationship with the regime to the launch of the first issue in November 1938. It starts by setting out the story of the creation and development of *Grazia* as

30 One of the key analyses of the topic is by Silvia Salvatici, 'Il rotocalco femminile: una presenza nuova negli anni del fascismo', in *Donne e giornalismo. Percorsi e presenze di una storia di genere*, ed. by Simonetta Soldani and Silvia Franchini, Studi e ricerche di storia dell'editoria (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2004), pp. 110–26.

a modern *rotocalco*. The choices and decisions made by the editor and the publishing company are analysed so as to understand how the project was initiated and how the production of the magazine was subsequently organised over its first six years. The main features of *Grazia* are then analysed by examining its approach to its readers and its writing style. In particular, the focus is on the analysis of the column 'Essere donna' [Being a Woman], offering a man's perspective, and on two main regular sections, 'Vivere in due' [Living as a Couple] and 'Grazia vi scrive' [Grazia Writes to You]. These three sections have been chosen as epitomes of the characteristics of the magazine because they represent both a feature unique to *Grazia* (as is the case with 'Essere donna') and the customisation of a type of column (the advice column) common to many *rotocalchi*. Furthermore, they provide rich information for the study of women's magazines in relation to wider Italian society and Mussolini's regime, revealing details not only about the women who read and contributed to *Grazia* but also about the influence of Fascism on the magazine. 'Vivere in due' offers a strong illustration of the perfect Fascist bride and mother, whereas in 'Grazia vi scrive' we see a complex model of femininity which combines elements of modernity with traditional values and Fascist precepts. The three columns present the opportunity to analyse the informal language of the magazine as well as its methods of reaching out to the everyday woman.

Overall, the analysis of the case studies looks at defining features of practice and cultural imagination which show their interaction with Fascist rhetoric, morals and ideals, as well as with foreign cultures and models. By paying particular attention to recurring themes that echo and mirror the predominant discourse of the regime – e.g., the ideal of the 'soldier', the 'angel of the hearth', or the virility and bravery of the Italian race – and were part of the project of creating and moulding the new Italian, the core chapters in this book assess the penetration of Fascist language and ideology into the Italian popular press. At the same time, because of the pervasive presence of contrasting myths and models coming from abroad, this study also tests and exposes the limits of Mussolini's system of control over the press and the general penetration of the Fascist language and mindset amongst the Italians who read and consumed *rotocalchi*.

Methodology and Aims

Each analysis of the three case studies focuses further on how models from abroad were adapted to an Italian readership and context,

suggesting that the study of popular magazines is also revealing of a process of Italianisation, a topic which is often neglected in scholarly literature. The methodology used to study Italian *rotocalchi* is interdisciplinary, including, in particular, literary and film studies, material culture and cultural studies, with a special focus on cultural, social and political history. Magazines are approached as a multilayered product, a hybrid form combining visual representation with modern forms of consumption, advertising and print culture; and as a result of the political and social circumstances in which they developed. The analysis of *rotocalchi* from the 1930s therefore takes into account not only the peculiarity of Mussolini's power structure, which heavily influenced and controlled cultural production through legislation, censorship and institutional control, but also the emergence of a consumer culture of consumption and production. *Rotocalchi* are here seen as a product of their time, one in which the predominant Fascist culture emerges as much as other international forces and models, revealing how these factors all contributed to shaping the development of a modern Italian mass-print culture. The examination of *L'Avventuroso*, *Omnibus* and *Grazia* reveals the complex dynamic of a printing field caught between commercial needs and ideological pressures. Finally, this study takes into account the implementation of modern forms of mass production, in terms of technology – e.g. the *rotocalco* itself – and in terms of the demands of the readership targeted.

Retracing the readership of magazines from the 1930s is not a simple task. There are no official records of circulation or sales; and even if there were, they would be only vaguely indicative: a magazine can be passed on to friends and family members, making one copy available to different people and thus increasing the number of readers in practice. Furthermore, any analysis of Italian readership must take into account two things: first, the illiteracy rate, which in 1921 encompassed 27% of the population (women 30%; men 25%) and 21% in 1931 (women 24%; men 17%); and, second, the economic and cultural inequalities between the North and South of Italy. These were both important factors which affected the spread of the mass media in general.[31] However, testimonies from protagonists of the time shed

31 See *Annuario statistico italiano 1922–1925*, p. 71; *Annuario statistico italiano 1934*, p. 207; Valerio Castronovo, 'La politica economica del fascismo e il Mezzogiorno', *Studi storici*, 17.3 (1976), 25–39. See also Emanuele Felice and Giovanni Vecchi, 'Italy's Modern Economic Growth, 1861–2011', *Enterprise and Society*, 16 (2015), 225–48; David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880–1980* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 17–25.

light by providing a description of the targeted readership of the major *rotocalchi*, at least: Zavattini, for example, as reported by Raffaele De Berti, describes these as 'riviste ancillari scritte per le serve ma lette anche dalle padrone' [ancillary magazines written for servants but also read by their [female] bosses].[32] Although Zavattini's definition refers to women's magazines, it is still revealing of how *rotocalchi* in general targeted lower classes. Generally speaking, according to Vittorio Spinazzola, 'occorreva che i filoni e le formule [editoriali] su cui puntare fossero in grado di attrarre anche l'attenzione delle classi subalterne' [it was necessary that the strands and [editorial] formulas to be focused on were also capable of attracting the attention of the subaltern classes].[33] *Rotocalchi* differentiated themselves from early periodicals aimed at upper or more highly educated classes by targeting middle- and lower-middle-class readers, as well as the lower classes. The reader of *Omnibus*, for example, could be any literate adult, man or woman, from different cultural backgrounds, as the magazine included commentary on current events and literary, theatre and music reviews, but also Hollywood interviews and reviews and comments on sports and fashion. *Grazia* targeted a wide range of women as well, with articles and advice on relationships, housework, parenting and fashion that could be followed by any woman, be she a housewife, employee, or adolescent. For its part, *L'Avventuroso* also aimed to entertain all children with no class distinctions whatsoever. The innovative formulas of these magazines were well received by the readership, as demonstrated by the high number of copies reported sold by former collaborators and, in the case of *Grazia*, by the longevity of the publication. However, the impact of these magazines on Italian readers was altered and limited by the Fascist regime, which, for example, closed *Omnibus*, had a negative impact on *L'Avventuroso*, forcing its discontinuation, and controlled or influenced the content of such publications in general.[34]

32 Raffaele De Berti, 'Il nuovo periodico. Rotocalchi tra fotogiornalismo, cronaca e costume', in *Forme e modelli del rotocalco italiano tra fascismo e guerra*, ed. by Raffaele De Berti and Irene Piazzoni, Quaderni di Acme, 115 (Milan: Cisalpino, 2009), pp. 3–64 (p. 54).

33 Vittorio Spinazzola, 'Scrittori, lettori ed editori nella Milano fra le due guerre', *Studi Novecenteschi*, 8 (1981), 163–83 (p. 168).

34 For reasons of space, in spite of their importance satirical periodicals have been left out. On this topic see *Eia, eia, eia, Alalà! La stampa italiana sotto il fascismo, 1919–1943*, ed. by Oreste Del Buono (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971); Niccolò Zapponi, *Il fascismo nella caricatura* (Rome: Laterza, 1981); and Adolfo Chiesa, *Come ridevano gli italiani* (Rome: Newton, 1984).

All these aspects are treated in the chapters dedicated to the three case studies, the analysis of which is adapted to the different nature of each publication. In *L'Avventuroso*, for example, visual aspects and the influence of American models were more prominent than in *Omnibus* and *Grazia*. On the other hand, politics played a major role in *Omnibus* in ways not found in the other two magazines. Finally, *Grazia* mirrored the contradictions in women's roles and identities in the Fascist era and, compared to *L'Avventuroso* and *Omnibus*, is the magazine most influenced by Fascist rhetoric. Therefore, each magazine is approached taking into account the different readership targeted and the varying content, form and aims of the publication.

In so doing, this study paints a picture of the profound changes that touched the Italian popular press in the 1930s. It fills a gap in scholarship by directly addressing the presence of a multicultural dialogue in the shaping of the *rotocalchi* and highlighting the complex dynamics of printing popular magazines under a controlling regime, an aspect which has been generally overlooked or only partially studied. Academic studies on the periodical press have mainly focused on products of 'high' culture and on the binary debate over their so-called 'Fascist' or 'non-Fascist' aspects, meaning that our understanding of the field is still fragmentary and incomplete, despite the rich array of previous research referred to throughout this book. *Rotocalchi* have not yet been adequately analysed as a cultural product which also mirrors the presence of foreign models – amongst them the seeds of a process of Americanisation widely visible in post-war Italy – and, crucially, of European models, variously French, German and British, which have been only marginally studied. This book, by contrast, sheds light on the international interactions which contributed to the shaping of an innovative product, the *rotocalco*, while at the same time highlighting its Italian specificities: that is, it offers insights into the adaptation, or Italianisation, of all these models. As far as comics are concerned, Italian comics published before 1946 have been quite extensively studied. This book contributes to that rich scholarship through a comprehensive, detailed analysis of the content of *L'Avventuroso*, one that illustrates the process of the Americanisation of Italian comics and Italianisation of American comics by closely examining the content of the magazine and the early processes of translation. The latter is a topic that reveals a great deal about the evolution not just of translation practices, but also of how American language and culture were received and re-elaborated in the Italian context. By examining how popular culture combines international and national models, the book shows how

rotocalchi mediated transnational cultural exchange and contributed to the creation of a national identity shaped by different, and often contrasting, forces.[35]

The adoption of a transnational lens is key to a better understanding of the complexity of the forces at play within Italian Fascism. While Italian Fascism is often associated with its nationalist rhetoric and policies – such as autarchy – it was, from its inception, deeply entangled with transnational dynamics. The expansionist ambitions of the regime, evident in its campaigns in Libya, Ethiopia and beyond, illustrate its outward-looking drive to exert influence across borders.[36] Furthermore, the origins of the Italian Fascist movement are rooted in the international context of the Great War, which established networks and exchanges which transcended national boundaries. As Roger Griffin's concept of 'palingenetic ultranationalism' suggests, Fascism emerged as a response to the shared sense of crisis and disillusionment that permeated post-war Europe, creating ideological conditions which resonated across borders.[37] The aftermath of the Great War not only shaped the domestic ambitions of Mussolini's system of power, but also embedded it within a transnational web of mutual influences, as Fascist movements across Europe drew on one another's ideas, tactics and structures. In other words, Italian Fascism did not develop in a vacuum, but rather as part of a broader web of interconnected ideological currents across the Continent. These currents were not confined to political movements alone but were also disseminated and amplified by the popular press, which played a pivotal role in fostering cross-border exchange – from the circulation of international journalism to the diffusion of broader cultural influences. Such interactions further demonstrate the transnational dimension of Fascism, as the media facilitated the flow of ideas which shaped its development within a wider European and global context. The interwar years in Europe were fundamentally shaped by transnationalism, making it essential to situate Mussolini's regime within the broader political, social and cultural transformations of

35 On transnational cultural production in Italy see *Transcultural Italies: Mobility, Memory and Translation*, ed. by Charles Burdett, Loredana Polezzi and Barbara Spadaro, Transnational Italian Cultures (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

36 On the importance of expansionism in the identity of Italian Fascism see Aristotle Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922–1945* (London: Routledge, 2000).

37 See Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Themes in Right-Wing Ideology and Politics (London: Routledge, 1991).

the time. Italian Fascism serves as a particularly revealing case for examining the interplay between nationalist ideologies and global cultural influences. Italian *rotocalchi*, as cultural products heavily shaped by foreign aesthetics, technologies and journalistic practices, offer a vivid example of how transnational currents permeated even the most nationalist of regimes. By situating Italian Fascism within these broader exchanges, this book not only deepens our understanding of Fascist Italy but also highlights its role in the global cultural and ideological transformation of the interwar years. In so doing, it contributes to the growing body of literature that reframes Fascism as part of the transnational exchanges which shaped contemporary Europe.[38]

Italian popular magazines of the 1930s, as a key cultural product of that era, both shaped and symptomatically reflected the emergent mass-cultural field of modern print culture, operating in complex synergy and conflict with the constraints of the Fascist State. As David Abrahamson puts it:

> [M]agazines not only reflect or are a product of the social reality of the times, but they also serve a larger and more proactive function – that they can also be a catalyst, shaping the very social reality of their sociocultural moment.[39]

The analysis of the field of Italian magazines through the case studies of *L'Avventuroso*, *Omnibus* and *Grazia* adds further important elements to Abrahamson's original insight and helps us to refine it by shedding light not only on the production, form and contents of the magazines, but also on the socio-cultural significance and complexity of such products. In this sense, the study of the popular press offers rich insights into the process of the 'domestication' of foreign culture. As conceptualised by Casey Brienza, 'domestication' is identified as 'an entire transcultural field', the study of which 'is not merely textual translation from one language to another or straightforward

38 See, for example, *Fascism Without Borders*, ed. by Bauerkämper and Rossoliński-Liebe; Artistotle Kallis, 'The Transnational Co-production of Interwar "Fascism": On the Dynamics of Ideational Mobility and Localization', *European History Quarterly*, 5 (2021), 189–213; Zachary P. Schwartz, 'Fascism: Transnational Frameworks', *Webster Review of International History*, 2 (2022), 2–11; and Daniele Toro, 'Fascist Transnationalism: The Networking between the German, Austrian, and Italian Radical Nationalist Milieux during the Long 1920s', *Fascism*, 13 (2024), 13–37.

39 David Abrahamson, 'Magazine Exceptionalism: The Concepts, the Criteria, the Challenge', *Journalism Studies*, 8 (2007), 667–70 (p. 668).

importation of objects from one country to another – but rather a complex, organised, collective process'.[40] *Rotocalchi* in particular are a revealing primary source for understanding the changes taking place in cultural practices, production and value over a wide cross-section of Italian culture and society in the closing years of the *Ventennio*.

At a time when 'the other F word', to cite a BBC Radio 4 podcast by Jonathan Freedland,[41] has become part of the public discourse and is at the forefront of political debates, understanding Italian Fascism can help us to frame the present without losing sight of what Fascism really was – or at least aimed to be. This book situates itself in the need to understand the past in order to navigate the challenges of the present. While politicians and public opinion alike are quick to label someone (or something) 'Fascist' and the freedom of the press (and safety of journalists) are increasingly at risk, the exploration of the system of control over popular culture created by the Fascist regime in Italy can help us to achieve a greater level of understanding of the dynamics at play in the 2020s. The transition in mass culture which we are experiencing today, fuelled by the rapid changes in the media industries and challenges posed by the digital world, and driven by technological advancements, echoes that of the 1930s, when new printing techniques influenced the way culture was produced and consumed. This book cannot provide an answer to the oft-debated issue of whether we are living through a 'new 1930s', but it can certainly help us to appreciate what the Fascist totalitarian project was; what the reasons for and aims in controlling the press were; and how transnational forces and cultural exchange can shape a society and contribute to building (or challenging) national identity.

40 Casey Brienza, *Manga in America: Transnational Book Publishing and the Domestication of Japanese Comics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 38.

41 Jonathan Freedland, 'The Other F Word', *Archive on 4*, 21 April 2023.

1. The Fascist Regime, Culture and the Periodical Press

[I]l fascismo non ha mirato tanto a governare l'Italia, quanto a monopolizzare il controllo delle coscienze italiane. Non gli basta il possesso del potere: vuole il possesso della coscienza privata di tutti i cittadini, vuole la 'conversione' degli italiani.[1]

[Fascism did not aim so much to rule Italy as to monopolise the control of Italian consciences. It is not enough for it to hold power: it wants possession of the private conscience of all citizens, it wants the 'conversion' of the Italians.]

From the Press Office to the Ministry of Popular Culture

The role of Mussolini's regime in controlling the press, manipulating the news and intervening in cultural production was linked to its view of the press as a tool of the Fascist State, a means for directing the political and social conscience of Italians for the greater good of the Nation.[2] The press therefore performed a crucial role within the Fascist apparatus. It was a means of propaganda for disseminating its policies and ideology and the instrument through which the regime removed any hostile voices and imposed its own. Between 1923 and 1928 Mussolini's political machine started systematically to exercise and perfect its

1 Giovanni Amendola, 'Conversione', *Il Mondo*, 1 April 1923, pp. 1–2 (p. 1).

2 See Philip V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media*, Tempi nuovi, 74 (Rome: Laterza, 1975); Riccardo Cassero, *Le veline del duce*, Saggi, Storia (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 2004); and Mauro Forno, *La stampa del Ventennio. Strutture e trasformazioni nello stato totalitario*, Saggi, 159 (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005).

control over the press, mainly through the Ufficio Stampa del Capo del Governo [Press Office of the Head of the Government] and through the approval of a series of laws and decrees created *ad hoc*. Royal Decrees (R.D.) no. 3288 (15 July 1923) and no. 2307 (31 December 1925),[3] for example, established the first forms of control by giving Prefects the power to confiscate and suppress any publication the content of which was judged to be against national interests.[4]

The decree of 1923 introduced the figure of the *gerente responsabile* [manager-in-chief] for periodical publications, who had to be approved by the competent Prefect. This regulation, which excluded Members of Parliament from the role, gave the government the power to control periodicals because the Prefects could potentially refuse to approve a *gerente*. In 1925 R.D. decree no. 2307 increased the government's control by assigning legal responsibility for periodical publications to the *direttore responsabile*, the editor-in-chief, who was expected to oversee everything that was published in a given magazine and was legally responsible for all content. The editor-in-chief had to be approved by the *procuratore generale* of the *Corte d'Appello* [Attorney General of the Court of Appeal], who needed to know the personal details of the owner and printer of each periodical. In March 1926 the new regulations for the periodical press were approved, establishing that the Court of Appeal would need to

3 R.D. 10 July 1924, no. 3288, 'Norme sulla gerenza e vigilanza dei giornali e delle pubblicazioni periodiche', published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 11 July 1924, p. 2570, containing rules on the management and supervision of newspapers and periodical publications; the law of 31 December 1925, no. 2307, 'Disposizioni sulla stampa periodica', *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 5 January 1926, pp. 22–23, containing provisions on the periodical press.

4 The figure of the *Prefetto* was created with R.D. no. 250 (9 October 1861), which conferred the title of 'Prefects' upon the governors of the provinces, who represented the executive authority within their jurisdiction. Under Mussolini the power of the Prefects was expanded, beginning with the R.D. no. 660 (3 April 1926) establishing that '[i] Prefetti provvedono ad assicurare, in conformità con le generali direttive del Governo, unità d'indirizzo politico nello svolgimento dei diversi servizi di spettanza dello Stato e degli Enti locali, entro l'ambito delle rispettive Provincie, coordinando l'azione di tutti gli uffici pubblici ed invigilandone i servizi' [[t]he Prefects ensure, in accordance with the general directives of the Government, the unity of political direction in the execution of the various services under the responsibility of the State and local authorities within their respective provinces, co-ordinating the actions of all public offices and overseeing their services] ('Estensione delle attribuzioni dei Prefetti', *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 27 April 1926, p. 1750). With these expanded powers, the Prefects under Fascism became even more central to the regime's control, acting as the highest authority at the provincial level and enforcing State policy with increased oversight. See Robert C. Fried, 'Il prefetto fascista', in *Il prefetto in Italia*, Valori politici (Milan: Giuffrè, 1967), pp. 1965–84.

carry out a background check on the editor-in-chief before approving him and passing on the information to the Prefect.[5] Through these decrees the Fascist regime obtained detailed information on who was working for any publication and the power to approve or decline any request for a new publication based on the arbitrary decision of the Prefects. Finally, in 1928 R.D. 384 established the rules for the Albo professionale dei giornalisti [Professional Register of Journalists], which extended the regime's power of control over journalists:

> In nessun caso possono essere iscritti e, qualora vi si trovino iscritti, devono essere cancellati, coloro che abbiano svolto una pubblica attività in contraddizione con gli interessi della Nazione. […] Prima di provvedere sulla iscrizione il Comitato domanderà al Prefetto della provincia, in cui il richiedente risiede, *un'attestazione sulla condotta politica di questo ultimo*, per stabilire se alla iscrizione osti il motivo indicato nel secondo capoverso dell'art. 5.[6]
>
> [In no case may those who have engaged in public activity in contradiction to the interests of the Nation be registered and if they are found to be registered therein they must be removed. […] Before registering, the Committee shall request from the Prefect of the province in which the applicant resides *a statement on the latter's political conduct*, to determine whether the reason indicated in the second paragraph of Article 5 precludes registration.]

These decrees show how, within five years of coming to power, the Fascist regime had built a system of press regulation that granted the government widespread control over the press, both daily and periodical, including editors, journalists and authors. Between 1925 and 1926, moreover, Mussolini carried out a process of *fascistizzazione integrale* [full Fascistisation] of the daily press. Rather than eliminate all newspapers that were against or not openly in favour of the regime, Mussolini forcibly took them over and used the prestige of established publications such as *La Stampa* and the *Corriere della Sera* to build control and create consensus among the Italian population. During this process the Press Office became the institution through which Mussolini distributed his orders to the press – the *veline* [flimsy papers], so-called because of the thin paper on which they

5 See R.D. 4 March 1926, no. 371, 'Approvazione del regolamento contenente disposizioni sulla stampa periodica', published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 11 March 1926, pp. 1094–95 (esp. p. 1094, Art. 3).

6 R.D. 26 February 1928, no. 384, 'Norme per la istituzione dell'albo professionale dei giornalisti', *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 13 March 1928, pp. 1106–08 (pp. 1106–07) (emphasis mine).

were written; together with the Agenzia Stefani it constituted the regime's operational arm for controlling the press and manipulating information.[7]

At the same time Mussolini also unified and brought under central control the press of the Partito Nazionale Fascista [Fascist National Party], which produced many local publications that had enjoyed, until then, a certain autonomy. As a result, by 1926 the daily press was an instrument with which to build consensus around Mussolini and the regime and a major means of propaganda. In the aftermath of the approval of the *leggi fascistissime* [ultra-Fascist laws] in 1925–26, the press was declared an element of the totalitarian State: 'In un regime totalitario, come dev'essere necessariamente un regime sorto da una rivoluzione trionfante, la stampa è un elemento di questo regime, una forza al servizio di questo regime' [In a totalitarian regime, as a regime that has arisen from a triumphant revolution must be, the press is an element of this regime, a force at the service of this regime].[8]

The attention Mussolini, a former journalist, paid to the press, and particularly to controlling its specific operations rather than simply silencing any voices hostile to the Fascist authority, demonstrates that he had understood the importance of this medium – and subsequently of emerging mass media such as radio and cinema. Indeed, he used them to disseminate an ideal image of Fascist Italy both within and outside Italy. Moreover, it shows the regime paid particular attention to modern media and their role within society, seen as playing a crucial role in the building of the popular consensus. By the end of the 1920s Mussolini's government had imposed on the press its rhetoric and, through *disposizioni e ordini alla stampa* [dispositions and orders to the press], intended to shape a new 'Fascist culture' to replace the old, liberal Italian culture. Thus, according to this project, the press had a key role:

7 The Agenzia Stefani was established in 1853 and from 1924 onwards was led by Manlio Morgagni, a *sansepolcrista* – that is, one of the first members of the *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento*, founded by Mussolini at the meeting held in Piazza San Sepolcro (Milan) on 23 March 1919. In the Fascist era not only was Stefani the only news agency, but it was also the authorised organisation for the distribution of the government's press releases, the Fascist National Party and Mussolini's speeches and any other news regarding the regime, taking over the former role of the Ufficio stampa. On the Agenzia Stefani, see Romano Canosa, *La voce del duce. L'agenzia Stefani, l'arma segreta di Mussolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002).

8 Benito Mussolini, 'Il giornalismo come missione', 10 October 1928, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XXIII, *Dal Discorso dell'Ascensione agli accordi del Laterano (27 maggio 1927–11 febbraio 1929)*, pp. 230–34 (p. 230).

> Il Gran Consiglio, esaminato il problema della stampa in funzione di regime di Partito […] riafferma la *funzione educativa della stampa e la necessità che essa sia permeata e modellata dallo spirito fascista* […]; e riconoscendo la necessità che il regime possa contare incondizionatamente sui più importanti organi giornalistici, affida al segretario generale del Partito l'esame del problema, fermo restando il concetto che i posti di direzione e di comando devono essere affidati a camicie nere fedelissime.[9]
>
> [The Grand Council, having examined the problem of the press as a function of the regime of the Party […] reaffirms *the educational function of the press and the need for it to be permeated and shaped by the Fascist spirit* […]; and recognising the need for the regime to rely unconditionally on the most important journalistic organs, entrusts the Secretary General of the Party with the examination of the problem, without prejudice to the concept that the posts of leadership and command must be entrusted to loyal Blackshirts.]

The idea of the press as a means of education of the masses remained one of the leitmotifs of the regime until its end. By disseminating Fascist ideology and culture, the press was to contribute to the consensus of the masses in favour of the regime and its leader: '[L]a stampa nazionale, regionale e provinciale serve il regime illustrandone l'opera quotidiana, creando e mantenendo un ambiente di consenso intorno a quest'opera' [[T]he national, regional and provincial press serves the regime by illustrating its daily work, creating and maintaining an environment of consensus around this work].[10]

The control over the press was perfected and extended in the 1930s, starting in June 1931 with the approval of R.D. 773, which expanded the *Testo Unico di Pubblica Sicurezza* [Public Security Laws] approved in 1926. These stated that any publication needed a permit from the local authority in charge of public security; forbade any mention of abortion, suicide, or crime; and established the consequences for those who violated the regulations: 'I giornali o gli scritti periodici, con cui si contravviene alle disposizioni […] sono sequestrati in via amministrativa dall'autorità locale di pubblica sicurezza' [Newspapers or periodicals that contravene the dispositions […] shall be administratively seized by the local public

9 '88ª riunione del Gran Consiglio del Fascismo', 17 November 1927, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XXIII, *Dal Discorso dell'Ascensione agli accordi del Laterano (27 maggio 1927–11 febbraio 1929)*, pp. 68–69 (emphasis mine).

10 Mussolini, 'Il giornalismo come missione', p. 232.

security authority].[11] Under this regulation, any publication could be confiscated *after* having been distributed; and the main focus of censorship was to provide an image of Italy as a disciplined country where there was no violence.

Two years later, in 1933, the approval of new regulations marked a new phase in the control of the Fascist regime over press and culture. That year the nomination in August of Galeazzo Ciano as head of the Ufficio Stampa, only a few weeks after Joseph Goebbels's visit to Italy, accelerated the reform of the Press Office and promoted a more active and centralised control over press and cultural production.[12] This resulted in the evolution of the Ufficio Stampa into a Sottosegretariato di Stato per la stampa e la propaganda [Under-Secretariat of State for Press and Propaganda] in 1934, headed by Ciano; it co-ordinated Fascist propaganda and control over all means of communication and culture. The transformation of the Press Office into an Under-Secretariat was substantial: from about thirty-five people employed in the former, the number of people working in the latter reached 686.[13] It comprised three *direttorati generali* [General Directorates] – *per la stampa italiana* [for the Italian press], *per la stampa estera* [for the foreign press] and *per la propaganda* [for propaganda] – and expanded the jurisdiction of the previous Press Office, taking over the Ministero delle corporazioni e dell'Interno [Ministry of Corporations and the Interior], the Commissariato per il Turismo [Tourism Commissariat] and the Ministero dell'educazione nazionale [Ministry for the National Education], as far as these dealt with cinema, censorship, tourism, theatre and music.[14] This process of centralising control over

11 R.D. 18 June 1931 no. 773, 'Testo Unico delle Leggi di Pubblica Sicurezza', in 'Supplemento Ordinario', *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 26 June 1931, pp. 2–27 (p. 15).

12 Galeazzo Ciano (1903–1944) was Mussolini's son-in-law and one of his closest advisors. Besides moulding the Fascist system of propaganda, he served as Foreign Minister from 1936 to 1943. Ciano had a pivotal role in shaping Italy's foreign policy and was one of the key members of the Grand Council that voted Mussolini out in July 1943. His secret diaries (1937–43), in which he recorded his meetings with Mussolini, Fascist leaders and foreign diplomats and leaders, offer insights into the regime. Parts of the diaries were first published by Rizzoli in 1946 and are now widely available in their – allegedly – integral version. On the publication of Ciano's diaries see Marco Palla, 'La fortuna di un documento: il diario di Ciano', *Italia Contemporanea*, 33 (1981), 31–54.

13 Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy*, Toronto Italian Studies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 110.

14 See R.D. 6 September 1934, no. 1434, 'Istituzione, alla diretta dipendenza del Capo del Governo, del Sottosegretariato di Stato per la stampa e la propaganda', in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 11 September 1934, pp. 4100–01.

culture – and its censorship – was consistent with the Fascist plan of shaping Italian society, but was also heavily influenced by the rise to power of Hitler in 1933 and, in particular, by Goebbels's organisation of the Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda [Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda].

If 1933 is a key date for the reorganisation of the press under the control of the regime, 1934 represents a crucial date for the establishment of censorship. On 3 April 1934 a circular from the Ministry of the Interior, signed by Mussolini, ordered publishers to send to the prefectures copies of their final product to have its distribution approved: '[T]utti gli editori o stampatori di qualsiasi pubblicazione o disegno, anche di carattere periodico, dovranno prima di metterli in vendita aut comunque effettuarne diffusione, presentare tre copie di ciascuna pubblicazione alla Prefettura' [[A]ll publishers or printers of any publication or drawing, even of a periodical nature, shall, before offering them for sale or otherwise making dissemination, submit three copies of each publication to the Prefecture].[15] The new regulation established that any publication could be confiscated *before* being distributed and *after* its publication, in practice forcing the publishing companies to censor their publications themselves in order to avoid financial losses in the case that the government stopped distribution. This form of preventive censorship had two major consequences. First, it gave control to the government over any publication before people could read it and, purely formally, maintained freedom of press, because in theory publishers could print anything they wanted, although in practice they could not distribute their products without the prior approval of Fascist authorities. More importantly, the ministerial circular changed the centre of power over censorship from the Ministry of the Interior to the Press Office led by Ciano. This system allowed the regime to control the content of magazines and, particularly, to silence any hostile voice.

The centralisation of control over the press led to the creation in June 1935 of an autonomous administrative organisation overseeing both media and culture, instituted and shaped on the example set by Goebbels: the Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda [Ministry of Press and Propaganda]. It comprised six *direzioni generali* [General Directorates] – three more than the Sottosegretariato – and its jurisdiction was further expanded to include radio broadcasting and

15 Circular no. 442/9532, 3 April 1934, ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, b. 11, found by and first quoted in Giorgio Fabre, *L'elenco. Censura fascista, editoria e autori ebrei* (Turin: Zamorani, 1998), p. 22.

cultural production.[16] According to Mussolini's totalitarian project, cultural production had to be controlled and organised by the regime. It was thus between 1934 and 1935 that the Fascist system started to focus broadly on cultural production. This evolution had a crucial impact on the theorisation of 'popular culture', a concept the regime developed in those years to reach the masses and mould the new Italian (analysed in greater detail below). The years between 1934 and 1943, that is, from the beginning of an organised system of censorship and control of cultural production until the end of Fascist power, mark a crucial phase in the development of the popular press.

The year 1936 marks another important change: Dino Alfieri was officially appointed in June as the Head of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda, the powers of which were expanded due to the war against Ethiopia and the consequent need for a strong propaganda campaign to sustain the war effort.[17] It was also another crucial step towards the regime's control over cultural institutions, which were used to disseminate Fascist propaganda at all levels of society. For the first time Alfieri involved cultural institutions such as the Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista [National Institute of Fascist Culture], the Accademia d'Italia and the Dante Alighieri Society to counterbalance foreign propaganda (mainly French and British) against Italy by disseminating messages of an Italian civilising mission in Africa. Moreover, the Ministry of Press and Propaganda was now the highest authority in all matters of censorship, taking over the Ministry of the Interior and centralising all power of decision on the matter. One year after its creation, the government expanded the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda, placing under its control sixteen cultural institutions, including the Istituto LUCE; the Ente Nazionale Italiano del Turismo [National Tourism Authority]; the Istituto nazionale del dramma antico [National Institute of Ancient Drama];

16 See R.D. 24 June 1935, no. 1009, 'Istituzione del Ministero per la stampa e la propaganda', *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 6 June 1935, p. 3186.

17 Dino Alfieri (1888–1966) joined Fascism early on and served as member of the Chamber of Deputies from 1924. He was an important figure in the regime and held many roles, including Under-Secretary for Corporations (1929–32), Under-Secretary for Press and Propaganda (1935) and Minister of Popular Culture (1936). Alfieri also served as Italy's Ambassador to the Holy See and Germany between 1939 and 1940. In the Fascist Grand Council vote of 24 July 1943 he voted in favour of the 'Grandi-Ciano' order of the day to vote out Mussolini. He was sentenced to death *in absentia* by the tribunal of the Italian Social Republic in Verona in January 1944. Alfieri was one of the key figures in the centralisation of control over the media, making them into tools for indoctrination and for maintaining control over public opinion.

the Discoteca di Stato [State Musical Archive]; and the Enti provinciali per il turismo [Provincial Tourism Authorities].[18] This centralisation of control over culture sought to enable the Ministry's oversight of cultural production and to ensure that 'tutto ciò che si presenta[va] alle masse attraverso giornali, libri, radio, teatro e cinema [fosse] governato da un chiaro e sincero spirito fascista' [everything that [was] presented to the masses through newspapers, books, radio, theatre, and cinema [was] governed by a clear and sincere Fascist spirit].[19]

It can thus be said that between 1933 and 1936 the cultural policies of the regime were at their most extensive and systematic level and its power of control centralised in a structured administrative institution, the Ministry of Press and Propaganda. The progressive monopolisation of control over culture and the extensive use of mass media to involve all social classes can also be seen as part of the process towards the creation of a totalitarian State. However, as far as popular culture and the popular press are concerned, the importance of the creation of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda lies in its aim of educating the masses and elevating popular culture in order to overcome class distinctions and to create a Fascist culture that would put into practice Mussolini's ambitious plan to 'andare al popolo' [go to the people] and reach the masses.[20] In 1937 the Ministry was given the new name of Ministero per la Cultura popolare [Ministry of

18 The Istituto LUCE was established in 1925 as part of the regime's conception of cinema as a tool for building public support and disseminating Fascist ideology and popular culture through newsreels and films. The Ministry for Press and Propaganda was given the power to nominate the press officers of prefectures, a power which until then had belonged to the Ministry of the Interior (R.D.L. 24 September 1936, no. 1834, 'Ordinamento del Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda', in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 22 October 1936, p. 3103). It is worth noting that one year earlier, on 27 August 1924, the Unione Radiofonica Italiana [Italian Radio Union] had been created as part of the regime's aim to control the mass media.

19 'Relazione di Dino Alfieri al Senato del 1937', in ACS, MCP, b. 113, f. 2, 'Alfieri Dino'; also reported in 'La cultura popolare nel discorso di S. E. Alfieri al Senato', *La Stampa*, 22 May 1937, p. 1. See also Philip V. Cannistraro, 'Burocrazia e politica culturale nello stato fascista: Il Ministero della cultura popolare', in *Il regime fascista*, ed. by Alberto Aquarone and Maurizio Vernassa (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1974), pp. 169–93.

20 According to Mussolini: 'Nel campo della cultura bisogna andare al popolo. Bisogna andarvi […] in estensione e soprattutto in profondità' [In the field of culture we must go to the people. We must go there […] in breadth and especially in depth] (Benito Mussolini, 'Anche nel campo della cultura bisogna andare al popolo', 31 October 1936, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XXVIII, *Dalla proclamazione dell'Impero al viaggio in Germania (10 maggio 1936–30 settembre 1937)*, p. 66).

Popular Culture], reflecting the interest of the regime in culture and eliminating the word 'propaganda', which by then was perceived negatively.[21]

The use of the expression 'popular culture' reflected the regime's commitment and attention to cultural production, highlighting the role of Fascism in disseminating its culture at all levels of society. The word 'popular' indicated a culture available to everyone, reflecting the emphasis of the Fascist system on mass participation in national life and therefore mirroring the importance of the masses within the State. Thus, given the central role of the masses in Fascist ideology, the regime aimed to elevate popular culture to the status of 'high' culture, striving fully to integrate ordinary citizens into the nation's cultural life. In practice, popular culture meant the education of society according to Fascist values through a state-controlled culture created centrally to disseminate Fascist ideology and change Italian habits. As stated in 1937 in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, popular culture 'è, nella definizione, e dovrà esserlo nella realtà, lo sbocco conclusivo di tutta l'opera e dei complessi sforzi della Rivoluzione, per dare al popolo consapevolezza fascista, spirito fascista, slancio, equilibrio e giudizio fascista' [is, in [its] definition, and must be in reality, the final outlet of the whole work and complex efforts of the Revolution, to give the people Fascist awareness, Fascist spirit, momentum, balance and Fascist judgement].[22] It was the natural consequence of the Fascist revolution that, after bringing the people into the State, it sought to bring a new spiritual dimension to the Italians, one that matched Fascist ethics and ideals.

The creation of the Ministry of Popular Culture was thus meant to lead Italian cultural life and control all cultural production and dissemination. It was organised in seven *direzioni generali* [General Directorates] and one *ispettorato* [Inspectorate], amongst which were two General Directorates for the press: the Direzione Generale per la Stampa Italiana [General Directorate for the Italian Press] and the Direzione Generale per la Stampa Estera [Directorate General for the Foreign Press]. The first had four departments – Affari Generali [General Affairs], Stampa quotidiana e periodica [Daily and Periodical Press], Libri [Books] and Propaganda interna [Domestic Propaganda] – and controlled all kinds of publications printed and distributed within Italy. It is worth highlighting that the main sections

21 The Ministry of Popular Culture is known in Italy as 'Minculpop', an originally contemptuous nickname that is now widely used to refer to the Fascist Ministry.

22 Ottavio Dinale, 'Cultura Popolare', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 30 May 1937, p. 5.

controlling the periodical press came under Domestic Propaganda, which comprised:

- Propaganda a mezzo della stampa [Propaganda by means of the press]
- Stampa periodica, letteraria, artistica e sportiva [Literary, artistic and sports periodicals]
- Stampa periodica per ragazzi [Children's periodicals]
- Stampa periodica illustrata e umoristica [Illustrated and satirical periodicals]
- Giornalismo radiofonico [Radio journalism]
- Stampa cinematografica [Film press][23]

Just by examining the structure of the Ministry of Popular Culture, one can see how the press was still considered a means of propaganda. The extended organisation of the new Ministry reflected the increasing importance of the institution: it had one division more than its predecessor and its functionaries grew in number from 183 to eight hundred.[24]

In spite of the change in the name of the Ministry reflecting the idea of elevating the masses through a Fascist culture promoted by the regime, in practice the Ministry of Popular Culture bureaucratised all aspects of cultural production and dissemination. As a result, Mussolini's idea of the press as a means through which to educate and control the masses was applied to other sectors such as radio, cinema, theatre and tourism. The fact that the structure of the Ministry of Popular Culture put all aspects of the press under the propaganda division demonstrates how popular culture was meant to control and influence public opinion, that is, to function as a new form of propaganda.[25] As far as the daily press was concerned, this

23 [Anon.], 'Il Ministero della Cultura Popolare e il suo ordinamento', *Annuario della stampa italiana*, 20.1 (1939), 3–12 (p. 6).

24 Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, p. 133.

25 As early as 1935 Mussolini had expressed the idea of culture as a means of propaganda when, speaking of the role of the Istituto LUCE, he stated that cinematographic production should become a 'mezzo efficace di elevazione culturale, etica ed estetica del popolo, come ancora di propaganda in funzione dei fini propri dello Stato' [effective means of cultural, ethical and aesthetic elevation of the people, as well as an anchor of propaganda in the function of the State's own aims] (Benito Mussolini, 'Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri', 15 January 1935, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, xxvii, *Dall'inaugurazione della provincia di Littoria alla proclamazione dell'Impero (19 dicembre 1934–9 maggio 1936)*, pp. 10–15 (p. 11)).

resulted in a uniformity of information guided by and based on the *veline* distributed by the Ministry of Popular Culture and the Agenzia Stefani. Through this well-structured instrument, in the 1930s the Fascist apparatus was committed to carrying out a process of control of information for the alignment of public opinion with its ideology and values and for the idealisation of the leader, Mussolini.

As for the periodical press, despite extensive control by the regime it enjoyed greater freedom than the daily press. This can be explained by the fact that periodicals were not as widely distributed and read as newspapers, were not used as a source of information and, more importantly, were not usually aimed at the masses but targeted at a specific readership. At a moment when Fascist rule aimed to reach the masses, periodicals were not the main target of the regime's control because they were deemed to be leisure items generally not affordable for the lower classes and therefore with a limited circulation. However, in the 1930s the illustrated press was revolutionised by the use of the rotogravure, which allowed the printing of more copies at a lower cost and the reproduction of higher-quality images than traditional printing. The new product which resulted from this technique – the *rotocalco* – made wider dissemination possible and expanded the readership of magazines, making them available and appealing to readers from different classes and with different levels of education. A report by the Direzione Generale Stampa Italiana [Directorate General of the Italian Press] shows that in 1937 the illustrated press was kept under control by the Ministry of Popular Culture. Editors-in-chief of illustrated magazines would receive instructions on the topics which should be covered by their publications: 'vita della famiglia, maternità, economia domestica, partecipazione alla vita fascista, allo sport, alla assistenza, ed in generale a tutto ciò che si intona con la nuova coscienza fascista' [family life, motherhood, home economics, participation in Fascist life, sports, welfare and in general everything in tune with the new Fascist consciousness].[26]

26 'Relazione riassuntiva sulla attività svolta dalla Direzione Generale per la Stampa Italiana nel mese di dicembre 1937–XVI', in ACS, MCP, b. 28, f. 424. One month earlier the Ministry of Popular Culture had intervened to 'imprimere alla stampa settimanale illustrata un carattere diverso da quello attuale, che è basato tutto su un tono equivoco e malsano assolutamente contrario allo spirito con cui il Regime intende educare la gioventù italiana' [imprint on the weekly illustrated press a different nature from the present one, which is based entirely on an equivocal and unhealthy tone absolutely contrary to the spirit in which the Regime intends to educate the Italian youth] ('Relazione riassuntiva sulla attività svolta dalla Direzione Generale per la Stampa Italiana nel mese di dicembre

The bureaucratic apparatus of the Ministry of Popular Culture thus controlled every field of the press and cultural production, a control which included the content and programmes of popular *rotocalchi*. This was a consequence of the wide distribution which illustrated magazines had achieved at the time and which reflected the Italians' tastes and aspirations: 'Se si guarda alle pubblicazioni periodiche soprattutto settimanali, si vede che sono in testa con *varie centinaia di migliaia di copie, proprio quelle che per il loro contenuto, soddisfano maggiormente al desiderio di […] gran parte dei lettori* [If one looks at the periodical publications, especially the weekly ones, one sees that they are in the lead with *several hundred thousand copies, precisely those that, due to their content, most satisfy the desire of […] a large part of the readers]*.[27] If the Fascist power wanted to revolutionise the Italian spirit, control of the production of *rotocalchi* had become necessary.

The ministry led by Alfieri also enjoyed a central role in Mussolini's project of spiritually elevating the masses through the dissemination of a Fascist culture. The State's cultural policies reflected the significant role played by the masses in the ideology of regime and its aim of creating the new man (*uomo nuovo*), a Fascist citizen who

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1937–XVI', quoted in 'Verso la vera autarchia! Con una magnifica circolare il ministro Alfieri vieta le indecenze di tanti giornali illustrati', in *La vita cattolica*, 6 gennaio 1938, p. 1; and Gianni Spulcioni, *L'organizzazione del consenso nel ventennio fascista. Dall'Ufficio Stampa al Ministero dell Cultura*, Cronogrammi, 18 (Rome: Aracne, 2014), p. 330). The newspaper *La Stampa* resumed the directives on 4 January 1938: 'S. E. Alfieri […] diramava recentemente ai direttori di giornali illustrate direttive sulla loro opera, notando che in alcune fotografie e scritti di settimanali illustrati risulta un tono equivoco e malsano assolutamente contrario allo spirito con cui il Regime intende educare la la gioventù italiana. L'ostentazione di nudità, di fotografie di donne in pose equivoche, un torbido sensualismo diffuso ovunque costituiscono altrettanti elementi negativi a una sana e rigorosa educazione. […] Bisogna preferire soggetti, tipi e autori italiani anche e soprattutto nel campo cinematografico a quelli stranieri' [His Excellency Alfieri […] recently issued directives to the editors of illustrated magazines regarding their work, noting that in some photographs and articles of illustrated weeklies there appears an ambiguous and unhealthy tone that is absolutely contrary to the spirit with which the Regime intends to educate Italian youth. The display of nudity, photographs of women in suggestive poses, and a pervasive murky sensualism all represent negative elements for a sound and rigorous education. […] Preference must be given to Italian subjects, types and authors, especially in the field of cinema, over foreign ones] ([Anon.], 'Direttive del Ministro Alfieri ai direttori degli illustrati', *La Stampa*, 5 January 1938, p. 5).

27 'Relazione di Dino Alfieri al Senato del 1937', in ACS, MCP, b. 113, f. 2; 'La cultura popolare nel discorso di S. E. Alfieri al Senato', *La Stampa*, 22 May 1937, p. 1 (emphasis mine).

had internalised and acted according to Fascist morality, existing less as an individual than as a corporate element of the 'Fascist people'. To mould the new Italian, the regime intended to create a new culture for the masses, a popular culture that reflected the modernity of Mussolini's system of power and the increasingly important role of mass media. Therefore, the development and spread of popular culture were declared to be the main aim of the Ministry of Popular Culture and a crucial part of the process of changing the habits of Italian people: '[L]a rivoluzione […], dal punto di vista del costume, del carattere, delle distanze sociali, [era] appena cominciata' [[T]he revolution […], from the point of view of custom, character, social distances [had] just begun].[28] In this project of cultural revolution the masses had a key role – hence the need for a popular culture and a ministry that represented the:

> elemento propulsore di attività che interessano da vicino i *più vasti strati sociali* e che *non possono in tempo fascista essere privilegio di pochi*. […] [I]l rinnovamento operato dal Fascismo […] rend[e] sempre più necessario il *contatto fra la cultura e le masse*.[29]
>
> [driving element in activities that closely affect the *broadest layers of society* and *that cannot in Fascist times be the privilege of a few*. […] [T]he renewal brought about by Fascism […] make[s] *contact between culture and the masses* increasingly necessary.]

If in the 1920s the regime was focused on controlling and making the press Fascist, in the 1930s, after gaining control over and developing the means of communication, Mussolini concentrated on generating a culture that could shape the new man and established the Ministry of Popular Culture as its operating arm. Although the actions of the Ministry of Popular Culture were theoretically aimed at both stimulating and disciplining cultural production, in practice the Ministry only extended the government's totalitarian control over culture by exercising its power of censorship. In 1937 Alfieri outlined the measures the Ministry should undertake to put into effect the Fascist cultural project: the expansion of the jurisdiction of the Ministry and the creation of a popular culture

28 Benito Mussolini 'Alla vecchia guardia', 26 March 1939, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XXIX, *Dal viaggio in Germania all'intervento dell'Italia nella Seconda guerra mondiale (1 ottobre 1937–10 giugno 1940)*, pp. 249–53 (p. 250).

29 [Anon.], 'Il Ministero della Cultura Popolare', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 27 May 1937, p. 1 (emphasis mine).

that would stimulate the participation of the masses in the cultural life of the nation.

The five categories of state intervention described by Stephen Gundle and David Forgacs – subvention and premiums; protectionism; promotion of export; propaganda; and censorship – coincide with the policy of intervention in culture of the Ministry of Popular Culture. Such intervention resulted in: direct economic support for Italian cultural production ('subventions and premiums'); the limitation of imported cultural products, be they films, comics, magazines, or novels ('protectionism'); the facilitation of foreign trade and direct support for the export of Italian cultural products ('promotion of export'); the centralisation of State promotion of Fascist culture ('propaganda'); and the evolution of a system of control that progressively resulted in direct, pervasive State intervention to control all cultural production and silence voices against the predominant ideology ('censorship').[30] This comprehensive intervention by the State in Italian culture was, in short, centralised in the power of the Ministry of Popular Culture. Through circulars indicating what topics should be covered and the writing style that should be adopted, the Ministry interfered with the press and conditioned the content of publications. Direct instructions on what to write were not the only way it intervened in the press. The Ministry launched a series of campaigns to mould the Fascist new man: against pre-Fascist liberal Italian culture; against dialects; praising Mussolini and depicting him as the archetype of the new man; in exaltation of *romanità* [Roman spirit] and the myth of the Italian race; against bourgeois habits; and, finally, against Jews. These campaigns heavily influenced cultural production and in particular the content of magazines. To give some examples from our case studies: the campaign against local dialects and foreign languages, carried out to unify the language and give the people a strong national identity and consciousness through their everyday speech, was reflected in *Grazia* in its column 'Voi non dovete dire' [You Must Not Say], which listed foreign words in common usage, highlighting their limited meaning and urging readers to use the more precise Italian equivalent instead.[31] In 1938 the publisher Nerbini declared

30 David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society: From Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 203–18.

31 For example, in the first issue readers were advised not to use the word 'chignon': '[Se] questa deliziosa acconciatura è dura a morire, altrettanto dura a morire ne è il nome – *chignon* – non molto italiano, in verità […]. Si dirà

'Giornali italiani ai lettori italiani' [Italian magazines for Italian readers] and completely changed the content of its most popular comics magazine, *L'Avventuroso*, to reflect the efforts by the Ministry of Popular Culture against foreign influence.[32] It also published new columns glorifying the Italian imperial past, disseminating to its young readers the myth of *romanità*.

By reflecting the Ministry's policies and dispositions, popular magazines were effectively educating their readers in Fascist values and therefore offer a clear example of the influence and control of the regime over the popular press. Despite its undeniable impact, Fascist ideology was far from being the only force that conditioned and shaped these magazines. Control became more rigid at the end of 1937, when Alfieri targeted entertainment publications such as women's magazines, recommending publishers to focus on topics such as maternity, domestic economy and family life, that is, themes consistent with Fascist precepts. One year later, at the end of 1938, it was the turn of children's magazines, which fell victim to a renewed campaign for cultural autarchy. On this occasion the Ministry of Popular Culture urged all publishers to eliminate foreign material from their magazines and to exalt the Italian tradition instead. Moreover, publishers and printers were required to send the Ministry a list of their publications, which Alfieri double-checked against the lists sent by the Prefects, tightening control over the periodical press.

While the aim of the Ministry was to supervise all cultural production and stimulate the dissemination of Fascist culture, in practice other forces restricted its influence. State forces such as the Foreign Ministry and Ministry of the Interior, the local power of the Prefects and personal antagonisms and interests, for example, limited Alfieri's ambitious plan of controlling the emerging mass culture. Other factors such as the cultural economy and the audience's taste also significantly influenced and contributed to the shaping of modern Italian mass culture.[33] These factors have to be taken into

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pertanto: "Ella portava i capelli acconciati in un graziosissimo nodo a sommo della nuca"' [[If] this delightful hairstyle is hard to kill, equally hard to kill is its name – *chignon* – not very Italian […]. It shall therefore be said: 'She wore her hair styled in a most graceful knot at the top of her nape'] ([Anon.], 'Voi non dovete dire', *Grazia*, 10 November 1938, p. 3). The column appeared in the years 1938–40.

32 L'Editore, 'Ai lettori', *L'Avventuroso*, 20 November 1938, p. 2.

33 Forgacs and Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society*, pp. 197–203.

account, especially when analysing a popular product such as the *rotocalchi*, which were aimed at selling as many copies as possible and targeting a mass public. For this reason, they had both to reflect and to shape the taste of their readership. As a commercial product, magazines mirrored both the popular demand for specific products and the restrictions of censorship. The three case studies presented in this book – *L'Avventuroso*, *Omnibus* and *Grazia* – all show the ramifications of a popular culture shaped by different factors under totalitarian rule. The short history of *Omnibus* is a clear example of the difficulty of obtaining authorisation for new periodicals and of the personal and political plots which censored and closed down the magazine, whose use of irony and foreign models was hardly tolerated by the regime. *L'Avventuroso* demonstrates both state intervention and the influence of American models in shaping a popular product that targeted a young readership. *Grazia* reveals the complexity of the role of women within the regime, targeting women as modern consumers, presenting lifestyles characterised by fashionable clothes and sporting activities, but counterbalancing this image by articles suggesting the Fascist ideal roles of mother and wife. These magazines demonstrate the different forces that contributed to the modernisation of Italian popular culture and of the industry and society that produced it; in the second half of the 1930s it was informed by consumerism, foreign models and new lifestyle ambitions – all aspects reflected in the *rotocalchi* published in that era, especially those produced by the three main publishing houses of the time: Rizzoli, Mondadori and Nerbini.

The *Rotocalchi* Revolution

In 1924 the publisher Angelo Rizzoli, who had founded his own publishing company in Milan in 1909, bought a rotogravure printing machine, the first to be introduced into Italy; while in 1925 Arnoldo Mondadori, whose publishing company had been founded in 1907, launched the first weekly printed with rotogravure, *Il Secolo illustrato*. The next turning point came in 1927, when due to financial difficulties Mondadori sold his illustrated periodicals *Secolo illustrato*, *Comoedia*, *Novella* (1919) and *La Donna* (1922) to Rizzoli, who turned them into modern illustrated magazines. *Novella* offers a clear example of how Angelo Rizzoli conceived modern periodicals. When it was launched by Casa Editrice Italia (Milan), *Novella* was a collection of short literary stories and explicitly claimed not be 'quel tipico zibaldone

giornalistico-letterario-fotografico che va sotto il nome di rivista' [that typical journalistic-literary-photographic medley that goes by the name of magazine].[34] In 1921 Mondadori acquired the fortnightly magazine and introduced artworks and photographs related to the short stories published. Although the novellas remained the focus of the magazine and were still written by prominent Italian writers such as Gabriele D'Annunzio, Massimo Bontempelli and Luigi Pirandello, Mondadori gave more space and relevance to images. When Rizzoli bought the periodical and turned it into a weekly publication using the rotogravure, illustrations became a key feature and novellas were replaced by popular romances written by popular authors such as Luciana Peverelli, Mura (pseudonym of Maria Assunta Giulia Volpi Nannipieri) and Milly Dandolo. More importantly, *Novella* started publishing photos of famous actors and actresses. Cesare Zavattini, who contributed to the magazine, recalls: '[B]astava pubblicare la faccia di una certa diva che *Novella* saliva. Era una delle chiavi di successo dei rotocalchi di Rizzoli' [[A]ll you had to do was publish the photo of a diva and *Novella* would sell. It was one of the keys to the success of Rizzoli's illustrated weeklies].[35] What is more, Rizzoli's *Novella* also included a correspondence column which became a model for future women's magazines and a characteristic feature of the new illustrated magazines that changed the relationship with the readership from passive to active readers. The new layout and popular content of *Novella* made it successful, with 150,000 copies

34 [Anon.], 'Novella', in *Bibliografia dei periodici femminili lombardi, 1786–1945*, ed. by Rita Carrarini and Michele Giordano, Fonte e strumenti, 22 (Milan: Bibliografica, 1993), pp. 275–76 (p. 276). This definition also reveals the prejudice surrounding popular magazines, the focus of which was not only on the content of the text but also, and perhaps mainly, on illustrations. On Rizzoli's creation of illustrated weeklies see Fabio Guidali, 'Developing Middlebrow Culture in Fascist Italy: The Case of Rizzoli's Illustrated Magazines', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 4.2 (2019), 106–21.

35 Cesare Zavattini, *Io. Un'autobiografia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), p. 68; see also Franco Bechis and Sergio Rizzo, *In nome della rosa* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1991), pp. 31–33. Cesare Zavattini (1902–1989) is recognised as one of the leading figures in Italian Neorealism. He played an influential role in Italian culture as a screenwriter, director and writer and worked in publishing from 1930 onwards. Zavattini worked for Rizzoli first and then Mondadori, where he served as editorial director for the latter's periodicals. He also contributed to Italian comics, notably writing storylines and, in 1936, creating *Saturno contro la Terra*, Italy's first science-fiction comic.

sold weekly, turning Rizzoli into a competitive publisher and one of the leading figures in the *rotocalchi* revolution.[36]

Milan was not the only city where new publishing companies flourished. In the last decade of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, many publishers established themselves as players in the publishing field, such as Zanichelli (Bologna, 1859), Bemporad (Florence, 1889) and Laterza (Bari, 1901). Although Mondadori and Rizzoli are undoubtedly the main figures in the popular-press revolution of the 1930s, another publisher emerged in those years as a prominent figure: Giuseppe Nerbini, who founded his publishing company in Florence between 1895 and 1898.[37] Florence was already an important centre of cultural production, with active publishers such as Le Monnier (1837), Paggi (1841), Salani (1862) and Sansoni (1873). Nerbini established himself as a publisher of popular products from the beginning, targeting a wide, heterogeneous readership. A Socialist, he started printing political texts and literature inspired by or connected to his political beliefs, disseminating the work of authors such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Leo Tolstoy, Émile Zola and Edmondo De Amicis. Nerbini also published entertainment novels, literature aimed at the emerging working class. Between 1914 and 1918 he put his efforts into expanding his readership, publishing American dime novels such

36 Alberto Mazzuca, *La erre verde. Ascesa e declino dell'impero Rizzoli* (Milan: Longanesi, 1991), p. 35; Nicola Tranfaglia and Albertina Vittoria, *Storia degli editori italiani. Dall'Unità alla fine degli anni Sessanta*, Storia e società (Rome: Laterza, 2000), p. 319. See also Forgacs and Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society*, pp. 98–102.

37 Due to the lack of documentation, an exact date cannot be given. Gianfranco Tortorelli, the most authoritative biographer of Giuseppe Nerbini and his publishing company, highlights the fact that different studies on Nerbini give different dates of foundation: Mario Bonetti maintains that the publishing company was founded in 1898 (*Storia dell'editoria italiana*, 2 vols (Rome: Gazzetta del Libro, 1960), I, 288–89); while in his introduction to the reprintings of *L'Avventuroso* Romolo Baccani states that 1897 was the year of foundation ('La casa editrice Nerbini dal 1897 ad oggi', *L'Avventuroso*, 22 vols (Florence: Nerbini, 1973–79), I (1973), ii–iv). Although a journal article mentions a Socialist leaflet published by Nerbini in 1895 and a legal document mentions 1899, Tortorelli asserts that 1897 is the most likely date for the beginning of Nerbini's activity as a publisher (Gianfranco Tortorelli, 'Chapter 1', in *Le edizioni Nerbini (1897–1921)*, ed. by Gianfranco Tortorelli, Inventari e cataloghi toscani, 12 (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1983), pp. 1–38 (pp. 2–3)).

as *Nick Carter* (which he later changed into *Nick Porter* in 1923), the quintessential Western series *Buffalo Bill* and the mysterious *Lord Lister* in 1922, amongst others. This strategy is clear in the way in which, throughout his publishing career, Nerbini concentrated on commercial products, starting with the publication of popular novels (mainly French, Russian and, from 1914, American) targeting a less-educated readership.[38] In particular, Nerbini's booklets combined images and writing and used illustrations as a crucial element for the expansion of the readership, laying the basis for the development of modern mass-print culture. The most important innovation introduced by Nerbini were, perhaps, American adventure comics, which revolutionised both children's magazines and Italian comics, as seen in *L'Avventuroso*.

Despite the increasing importance of these popular publishers, the editorial staff behind each magazine was quite small: as Rizzoli recalled in 1970, there were 'un paio di direttori che facevano tutto con un piccolissimo gruppo di persone. Erano tempi in cui io conoscevo nome, cognome, famiglia di ognuno dei miei dipendenti' [a couple of directors who did everything with a very small group of people. Those were times when I knew the first name, last name and family of each of my employees].[39] Mario Nerbini, who took over from his father Giuseppe in 1934, used to supervise every aspect of his comics magazines before authorising their printing and relied on regular collaborators who worked behind the scenes on several different publications, such as Emilio Fancelli (author of adventure novels, writer of Buffalo Bill adventure stories and storywriter for comics); Paolo Lorenzini (editor-in-chief and storywriter for *Topolino* and *L'Avventuroso*); and Giove Toppi and Tancredi Scarpelli (illustrators of covers, comic strips and stories). Mondadori and Rizzoli also had regular collaborators, some of whom worked for both companies, as in the case of Cesare Zavattini and Giorgio Scerbanenco. Scerbanenco, for example, worked for Mondadori's *Grazia* from 1938 onwards, using the pseudonym 'Luciano', but had already published articles and serialised novels in Rizzoli's *Lei*, *Novella*, *Cinema Illustrazione* and even in the children's periodical *Novellino*. After 1945 he contributed regular columns to Rizzoli's *Annabella* ('La posta di Adrian' [Adrian's

38 Pier Francesco Listri, *Il mondo di Nerbini. Un editore nell'Italia unita* (Florence: Nerbini, 1993), pp. 113–23.

39 Guido Gerosa, Libero Montesi and Franco Pierini, '"L'Europeo" chiede tutta la verità a Rizzoli', *L'Europeo*, 26 March 1970, pp. 21–25 (p. 22); also quoted in Mazzuca, *La erre verde*, p. 36; see pp. 48–58 on Rizzoli's employees.

Mail], the responses to which were collected in the book *Voci di Adrian* [*Adrian's Voices*] in 1969); and *Bella* ('La posta di Valentino' [Valentino's Mail]). Zavattini offers another instructive example: in 1930 he worked for Rizzoli, writing in *Cinema Illustrazione*, *Novella*, *La Donna* and *Il Secolo Illustrato*; for Bompiani's *Almanacco letterario* (1931, 1932, 1933, 1934 and 1935); and was finally hired by Mondadori in 1936 as editor-in-chief for the magazines and writer of Italian Walt Disney stories. In 1937 Zavattini became manager-in-chief of *Le Grandi Firme*, a fortnightly publication by Vitagliano, which was revolutionised in layout by editor Pitigrilli (pseudonym of Dino Segre) to adapt to the readers' demands:

> Oggi il pubblico non si accontenta di leggere. Vuole la fotografia. *Lo stadio e il cine gli hanno insegnato a vedere*. Fra le colonne di composizione tipografica e di fantasia pura, vuole qualche fotografia, ossia qualche finestra affacciata sulla vita e sulla realtà.[40]
>
> [Today the public are not satisfied with reading. They want photography. *The stadium and the cinema have taught them to see*. Between the columns of typesetting and pure fantasy, they want some photography, that is, some windows opening onto life and reality.]

As also stated by Leo Longanesi in 1937 in a letter to friend and journalist Giovanni Ansaldo,[41] Italian readers wanted photographs,

40 'Secondo tempo', *Le Grandi Firme*, 22 April 1937, p. 2; quoted in 'Le Grandi Firme', in *Bibliografia dei periodici femminili*, ed. by Carrarini and Giordano, pp. 182–83 (p. 182) (emphasis mine). See also Irene Piazzoni, 'Shaping a Weekly "For Everyone": Italian Rotocalchi Entre-Deux-Guerres', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 5.1 (Summer 2020), 24–42.

41 See Marcello Staglieno, 'Obiettivo all'arsenico', *Il Giornale*, 24 March 1977, p. 3; also quoted in Giuseppe Appella, 'Leo Longanesi. Vita, opere, fortuna critica', in *Leo Longanesi: 1905–1957. Editore, scrittore, artista*, ed. by Giuseppe Appella, Paolo Longanesi and Marco Vallora, I marmi, 169 (Milan: Longanesi, 1996), pp. 207–333 (p. 267). Leo Longanesi (1905–1957) was a journalist, writer and painter who is considered by many to be the first modern Italian journalist, as well as the creator of the modern form of the *rotocalco*. His influence is visible across such Italian periodicals as *L'Europeo* and *L'Espresso*, which had a pivotal role in shaping the Italian press. See Indro Montanelli and Marcello Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1984). Giovanni Ansaldo (1895–1969) was a prominent journalist known for his initial opposition to Fascism. He signed Benedetto Croce's *Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals* (1925) and led an anti-Fascist campaign in the newspaper *Lavoro*, for which he became a target of Squadrist violence – that is, he was attacked by Fascist militants organised in groups called 'squadre d'azione' [action squads]. Starting in 1929, after a failed attempt to flee Italy and a brief period of confinement on the island of Lipari, Ansaldo was

confirming the idea of modern popular magazines as a film on paper, that is to say, dynamic.[42] Therefore, in order to keep up with the times and sell their products, publishers had to adapt to the tastes of the new readers and modernise their periodicals. Furthermore, the presence of foreign culture and the adoption of a visual layout emerge as an established model which deeply affected modern magazines. The format introduced ten years previously by Rizzoli was transformed into *rotocalchi*, a genre defined by the use of well-printed images that accompanied the text and caught the reader's eye, made cheap by the use of rotogravure printing.

The development of popular magazines in the 1930s offers a sound view of the dynamics operating between Mussolini's regime and the publishing sector. It reveals a certain complexity in which political faiths and practical business aspects merge and fade, sometimes even overlapping. Although it would be tempting to group publishers as Fascists or anti-Fascists, a clear dividing line cannot be drawn. While throughout those years politics and ideology were a pervading aspect of public life, the cultural production of publishers such as Mondadori, Rizzoli and Nerbini seems to have followed business needs more prominently than political beliefs. In the magazine sector, the actions of these publishers reflected the changes in publishing happening throughout Western Europe and the United States, where illustrated magazines for a mass readership began to appear and develop particularly from the 1920s onwards, in parallel to the regime's increasing control over culture and its efforts to shape public opinion. The widespread control exerted by the Fascist State over the press affected the production and content of magazines and, more importantly, represented a crucial factor for all publishers. The analysis of the relationship of Rizzoli, Mondadori

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banned from publishing under his own name and began writing as 'Stella Nera' [Black Star], after the typographic symbol used in place of his name. His articles earned him a reputation within the regime and led to a collaboration with Leo Longanesi. Between 1935 and 1936 Ansaldo gradually aligned himself with Fascism and joined the Party in 1936 (Eugenio Marcucci, *Giornalisti grandi firme. L'età del mito*, 2nd edn (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005 [1998]), pp. 41–45).

42 Illustrated magazines from the 1930s contain many references to cinema, from the focus on film stars to the use of photomontage. Works on the topic include: Anna Cellinese, 'Le riviste fotografiche: "Life", "Look" e l'importazione di uno stile americano', in *Italiamerica. L'editoria*, ed. by Emanuela Scarpellini and Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2008), pp. 125–55; and Raffaele De Berti, *Dallo schermo alla carta. Romanzi, fotoromanzi, rotocalchi cinematografici: il film e i suoi paratesti*, La città e lo spettacolo, 10 (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000).

and Nerbini to the authorities shows that the development of popular magazines benefited from a certain freedom until about 1938, a date which suggests the connection between censorship on the one hand and the increasing convergence of Italy and Nazi Germany on the other. It reveals the privileged channels of communication each publisher enjoyed with prominent Fascist officials, shedding light on the hidden dynamics behind cultural production under Fascism.

Angelo Rizzoli, who never joined the Fascist National Party or tolerated the membership of his employees in the Fascist Union of Journalists, was not hindered by the regime from publishing any periodical. His long list includes the satirical *Bertoldo* (1936–43); the film magazine *Cinema Illustrazione* (1926–39); the short-lived *Omnibus* (1937–39); the women's magazine *Lei* (1933 –; *Annabella* from 1938); the even shorter-lived *Tutto* (1939), which substituted for *Omnibus* in content and layout; and *Oggi* (1939–). Apart from the ambivalent attitude of *Omnibus* towards the governing power, it is worth highlighting that *Lei* was a challenging magazine, too, due to its inclusion of photographs portraying women – mostly foreign – performing non-traditional tasks and far from the curvaceous housewife idealised by the regime. Photos of female pilots, tennis players, golf champions and Amazons were displayed on the cover of *Lei*, suggesting a different ideal of womanhood. In 1932 a policeman noted down the testimony of an informer, who stated that 'quella di Rizzoli è la tipografia dell'antifascismo, […] da dove escono periodicamente stampe antifasciste' [Rizzoli's is the typography of anti-Fascism, […] where anti-Fascist publications are regularly released].[43] At the same time, Angelo Rizzoli collaborated with Mussolini's son Vittorio (who became editor-in-chief of *Cinema* in October 1938) and never had a problem with censorship, at least not until he was forced to change the title of *Lei* to *Annabella* in 1938 to conform to the campaign against the use of *lei* as a form of address; and again in 1939, when *Omnibus* was forcibly closed and its substitute *Tutto* was accused of ignoring censorship. It was only in 1940 that Angelo Rizzoli was investigated by the political police; and although insufficient reports are held in the Italian National Archive to be certain, it appears that he was never officially accused of being an anti-Fascist. Rizzoli's position within the regime seems to have been governed by consideration for the fortunes of his company, as he formally abandoned his Socialist beliefs and supported Mussolini's establishment to increase his business: '[P]ur dando

43 Bechis and Rizzo, *In nome della rosa*, p. 47.

lavoro a parecchi perseguitati del regime e dicendo peste e corna del fascismo, in pubblico Rizzoli continua[va] a frequentare i gerarchi' [[W]hile giving employment to several persecuted by the regime and vilifying Fascism as a plague, in public Rizzoli continue[ed] to hang out with party officials].[44]

By contrast, both Mondadori and Nerbini actively supported the Fascist regime. Arnoldo Mondadori, for example, published leaflets on the March on Rome in late October 1922, which resulted in the appointment of Mussolini as Presidente del Consiglio; and Giuseppe Nerbini participated in the March alongside his son Mario. Nonetheless, even in these cases business choices seemed to prevail over any political faith. Arnoldo Mondadori in particular aimed to become *the* publisher for the Fascist State, apparently one reason behind the editorial decisions of *Il Secolo*, which he planned to make the newspaper of the regime in opposition to *Corriere della Sera*, at the time under the editorship of Aldo Borelli. However, although Mondadori's actions and connections seemed to have gained him the favour of Mussolini himself, in 1932 an informer claimed that in the Mondadori company 'tutti – chi più o chi meno – [erano] antifascisti' [everyone – some more, some less – [was] anti-Fascist].[45] In 1937 Mondadori founded Anonima Periodici Italiani with the declared aim of publishing Fascist periodicals: 'per dar vita e consistenza a questo gruppo di pubblicazioni [*Il Balilla*, *Passo Romano*, *Donna Fascista* e *Gioventù Sportiva*]' [to give life and substance to this group of publications [*Il Balilla*, *Passo Romano*, *Donna Fascista* and *Gioventù Sportiva*]].[46] However, his book series 'I libri gialli' and 'Medusa' published many foreign authors, mainly British or American.[47] After the promulgation of the racial laws in 1938, Mondadori was accused

44 Mazzuca, *La erre verde*, pp. 30–31 (p. 31), 100–101. The hypothesis of a more formal than substantial alignment of Rizzoli with the Fascist regime is further proved by the firing of Zavattini in 1936 after he had joined the Fascist Union of Journalists.

45 Bechis and Rizzo, *In nome della rosa,* pp. 31–33; Enrico Decleva, *Arnoldo Mondadori*, La vita sociale della nuova Italia, 41 (Turin: Utet, 1993), p. 141.

46 Bechis and Rizzo, *In nome della rosa*, p. 66.

47 The series 'I libri gialli' (literally: 'yellow books') was launched in 1929 following the success of crime fiction abroad. Since then, the word 'giallo' has become synonymous with crime fiction in Italy, an example of how the popular press contributed to shaping modern Italian culture. The series 'Medusa' was launched a few years later in 1933 and published contemporary foreign authors. As reported by Billiani, in the mid-1930s 'translation accounted for 47.53% of Mondadori's production' (Billiani, *National Cultures*, p. 122).

of not supporting the regime's racial policies because he kept on publishing Jewish authors and, as a consequence, many books in his series were blacklisted.[48] In June 1943 the pressure of censorship and recurrent requisitions led Mondadori to stop the distribution of the 'Gialli' series.[49] At the same time, Mondadori's most successful women's magazine, *Grazia*, launched to compete with Rizzoli's *Lei*, presented a complex portrait of women. Whilst in many columns it promoted the Fascist ideal of the 'exemplary wife and mother', it also offered alternative representations of women. This editorial strategy suggests that Mondadori prioritised his company's profits over his allegiance to Mussolini and the regime, or at least treated these as competing factors.

Like Arnoldo Mondadori, Giuseppe Nerbini openly supported the Fascist State. Although he published popular *romanzi d'appendice* (feuilletons) characterised by national-popular content and read by the lower classes, Nerbini's real success came when he introduced American adventure comics into Italy through the revolutionary magazine *L'Avventuroso*. After Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, when the publication of foreign material began to be condemned by the regime for being against the interests of the Italian 'race' and the Fascist campaign for cultural autarchy had as its aim the liberation of Italian culture from foreign influence, the popularity of American comics was nevertheless on the rise. When in 1938 the authorities banned American comics, Mario Nerbini, who had been specifically accused of printing material not suitable for children, sought the help of Mussolini himself through his private secretary Osvaldo Sebastiani, highlighting his Fascist faith in order to keep publishing his comics

48 Italy's racial laws (*leggi razziali*) enforced discrimination primarily against Jews, excluding them from public education, professions and civil rights and aligning Fascist Italy more closely with Nazi Germany's racial policies. Fascist Italy's racial view of society was established with the *Manifesto della Razza* [*Manifesto of Race*] published on 15 July 1938 on the front page of many newspapers (see, for example, S. S., 'Il problema della razza nell'Italia Fascista', *La Stampa*, 15 July 1938, p. 1; [Anon.], 'Il Fascismo e il problema della razza', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 15 July 1938, p. 1; and [Anon.], 'Il Fascismo e il problema della razza', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 15 July 1938, p. 1). It was later codified with a series of decrees, including the R.D.L. 5 September 1938, no. 1390, 'Provvedimenti per la difesa della razza nella scuola fascista', in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 13 September 1938, p. 3878; and R.D.L. 17 November 1938, no. 1728, 'Provvedimenti per la difesa della razza italiana', in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 19 November 1938, pp. 4794–96.

49 Bechis and Rizzo, *In nome della rosa*, pp. 66–75. See also Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy*, p. 43.

magazine.[50] Despite his close connections within the Fascist apparatus, Nerbini was not able to save his magazines from censorship. The ban on foreign comics caused his magazines to suffer a massive fall in the number of copies sold. Such a contradictory relationship with the regime, supported on the one side but defied on the other for the sake of business, appears to have been confirmed by an attack in 1941, when the company's offices were destroyed and archives and magazines allegedly burnt by some *squadristi* (Blackshirts) who were displeased with Nerbini's publication of American comics.

All three publishers, Nerbini, Mondadori and Rizzoli, knew Mussolini personally and enjoyed strong connections to prominent figures within the Establishment. Nonetheless, they all suffered from censorship and put their business interests before any political beliefs, complying with the regime's restrictions only when they had to. They were also self-consciously producing cultural products consistent with models coming from other European countries and the United States, adopting the same successful formulas and editorial patterns that had secured these models a faithful readership and developing modern mass-produced – and mass-read – magazines. Their activities also confirm the margin of freedom experienced by the periodical press compared to the daily press and the book industry; and, above all, demonstrate that publishers' output was predominantly business-oriented, highlighting the nature of magazines as commercial products. The magazines launched by Nerbini, Mondadori and Rizzoli were intended to reflect their readers' tastes and sell as many copies as possible, thus mirroring the modernisation of taste and values within Italian society as much as any imposed set of Fascist beliefs and values did.

Readers, too, were part of the relationship between magazines and the regime. Magazines like *L'Avventuroso* and *Grazia*, for example, were read mainly by young people born in the 1920s, which means they were a product of the education programme of the Fascist State. *Grazia*, for example, was taken as a point of reference – a guide to modern times – by young women who were growing up in a context completely different from that of their mothers. These young readers sought advice from columns in *Grazia* and other women's magazines on adapting traditional models of behaviour to modern times and

50 Fabio Gadducci, Leonardo Gori and Sergio Lama, *Eccetto Topolino. Lo scontro culturale tra Fascismo e Fumetti*, L'arte delle nuvole, 35 (Rome: Nicola Pesce Editore, 2020 [2011]), pp. 127–30. A similar attitude was adopted by Leo Longanesi after his *Omnibus* was forcibly closed.

needs. They approached magazines not as their mothers had done – simply as readers of stories – but in a new way that saw them as active consumers of the information in these publications: they not only relied on the guidance provided, but interacted with them by writing letters, sending photographs and participating in competitions, thereby contributing to the creation of the magazine itself. Similarly, the young men growing up reading *L'Avventuroso* fell in love with American comic heroes; and while they were being educated by the Fascist State and integrated into its organisations, these American stories nevertheless did become part of their patterns of play and their exotic imaginary, as had happened at the beginning of the century with Buffalo Bill.[51] Readers educated by Mussolini's regime became the affectionate readership of popular magazines that were disseminating images and lifestyles that did not entirely coincide with the Fascist precepts. Hollywood represents possibly the clearest parallel example of this, with photographs of film stars attracting readers – as Zavattini noted – and setting new models of beauty, as extensively described by Irene Brin:

> Marlene Dietrich […] inaugurò, al momento di partire per l'America, un ampio e fumoso velo da viaggio […], e le signorine, fatte audaci, se ne ispiravano per il loro primo ballo. Gloria Swanson […] si era fatta la promulgatrice del fasto sportivo, e fu probabilmente merito suo se i cappelli di feltro, ed i maglioni sobriamente decorati con una mazza da golf, divennero rapidamente popolari.[52]
>
> [Marlene Dietrich […] inaugurated, when she left for America, a broad, smoky travel veil […], and young ladies, made bold, were inspired by it for their first dance. Gloria Swanson […] had made herself the promoter of sporting splendour and it was probably thanks to her that felt hats, and sweaters soberly decorated with a golf club, quickly became popular.]

51 In Umberto Eco's *La misteriosa fiamma della regina Loana* (Milan: Bompiani, 2004) the protagonist recalls his childhood through, among other things, comics from the 1930s. It is worth mentioning that the title of the novel is taken from a *Cino e Franco* comic published by Nerbini in 1934 (see Chapter 3). On the impact of the Buffalo Bill Show in Italy, see Renee Laegreid, 'Finding the American West in Twentieth-First Century Italy', *Western Historical Quarterly*, 45 (2014), 411–28; and Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869–1922* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2005).

52 Irene Brin, *Usi e costumi. 1920–1940*, 3rd edn (Palermo: Sellerio, 2001 [1944]), pp. 92–95, p. 116. Irene Brin regularly wrote a column on fashion in *Omnibus* (1937–39), also using the pseudonym 'Mariù'.

Considering the popularity of a magazine such as *Novella*, which made film-star photos its key feature, and that almost any *rotocalco* published photos of Hollywood stars, the influence on Italian women of American models of beauty is not surprising. Once more *rotocalchi* show their tendency to mirror Italian society's popular models and habits in the 1930s alongside a reflection of the regime's influence and control, thereby representing a useful means of studying the multifaceted impact of Fascism on Italian culture at a popular level.

The steps that led to the creation of the Ministry of Popular Culture and its centralised system of control went hand-in-hand with the Fascist effort to create a popular culture that reflected its values and ideology. As Giovanni Amendola remarks, the aim of Italian Fascism was 'to monopolise the control of Italian consciences', an aim which found practical application in the creation of the Ministry of Popular Culture and the campaign for cultural autarchy. In this sense, popular culture was meant to be an expression of the totalitarian project and the Ministry of Popular Culture the tool with which to monopolise control over cultural production and consumption and ultimately the Italians' conscience. The *rotocalco* offered a form of culture that became popular in the sense of being available to, and consumed by, a wide readership; and in a way its popularity did influence Italian consciences by disseminating models of beauty, literary genres, authors and, ultimately, a set of values and morals. Considering that illustrated weeklies represent a significant aspect of the emerging mass consumerism in Italy, the regime's efforts to control their content is consistent with the idea of shaping the Italians' private consciences to create the 'new Italian'. In short, because of their popularity and wide dissemination, *rotocalchi* offered a unique opportunity to the Fascist system to apply its theories of control over cultural production and consumption. In practice, the content, transnational influences and cultural effects on readers of *rotocalchi* allow reflection on the effectiveness and limits of the structured system of control established by the regime and the Ministry's efforts towards the creation of a purely Italian culture.

2. The Evolution of Illustrated Magazines: Western Europe and the United States

[I]n Italia […] il giornalismo, più che professione o mestiere, diventa missione di una importanza grande e delicata, poiché nell'età contemporanea, […] è il giornalismo che circola tra le masse e vi svolge la sua opera di informazione e di formazione.[1]

[[I]n Italy […] journalism, more than a profession or trade, has become a mission of great and delicate importance, since in the contemporary age, […] it is journalism that circulates among the masses and carries out its work of information and education.]

The Evolution of the Popular Press in Europe

In order to understand the importance of the innovation introduced by the *rotocalchi* and its impact on the Italian magazine sector and its readership, it is necessary to take a step back and briefly outline the main stages in the history of illustrated periodicals in Italy. This by no means exhaustive introduction to the field is also useful in understanding the changes in the publishing sector that made companies such as Nerbini, Mondadori and Rizzoli key players in the modernisation of Italian popular magazines in the 1930s. At the end of the nineteenth century significant technological advances in the press industry marked the beginning of a process of modernisation of the publishing sector that particularly affected periodicals. In January 1847 the first illustrated magazine appeared in Italy: *Il Mondo illustrato* (Turin: Pomba, 1847–48). The publisher's aim was to create a national illustrated periodical capable of competing with European illustrated journals:

1 Benito Mussolini, 'Il discorso fondamentale del Capo del Governo ai settanta Direttori dei giornali del Regime', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 11 October 1928, p. 1; also quoted in Mussolini, 'Il giornalismo come missione'.

> Per una singolare fatalità il paese che fu la culla delle belle arti, […] si è lasciata precedere nei giornali illustrati dall'Inghilterra, dalla Francia e dalla Germania. […] [I]l *Mondo illustrato* […] è opera civile, italiana e artistica nel tempo stesso […]. È un pensiero patrio, […] e saremo lietissimi di mostrare al resto d'Europa, che l'Italia è capace di fare un *giornale illustrato*.[2]
>
> [By a peculiar fate, the country that was the cradle of the Fine Arts, […] has allowed itself to be preceded in illustrated journals by England, France, and Germany. […] *Mondo illustrato* is a civil, Italian and artistic work at the same time […]. It is a patriotic thought […] and we shall be delighted to show the rest of Europe that Italy is capable of creating an *illustrated journal*.]

Whereas elsewhere in Europe illustrated periodicals were already in circulation from the first half of the 1840s,[3] in Italy this was still an unexplored field soon to be modernised by publishing companies such as Treves (Milan) and Sonzogno (Milan). With the launch of *L'Illustratione italiana* (Milan: Treves, 1875–1962) in 1875, illustrated periodicals began to be popular throughout Italy.[4] After Treves's successful attempt, other publishers launched their own illustrated journals, such as *Il Secolo illustrato* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1889–1927), *La Tribuna illustrata* (Rome: Bontempelli, 1890–1969) and *La Domenica del Corriere* (Milan: Corriere della Sera, 1899–1989). These periodicals had many features in common: they covered various topics, from sport and fashion to literature, the Arts and science, with a particular focus on current events, from both Italy and the rest of the world. They offered not only news but, more importantly, entertainment. The illustrations, which were the main feature and novelty in these journals, were rich artworks or reproductions of paintings and photographs and were printed mainly in black and white, with colour used only on the front-page, as the following example shows (Fig. 1):

2 [Anon.], 'Gli Editori', *Il Mondo Illustrato*, 2 January 1847, pp. 3–4.

3 Key publications include: *The Illustrated London News* (London: William Little, 1842–2003); *L'Illustration: Journal Universel* (Paris: [n. pub.],1844–1944); and *Die Illustrierte Zeitung* (Leipzig: Weber, 1843–1944).

4 The circulation of any publication was limited by the high rate of illiteracy, which in 1871 was 68.8% (Istituto centrale di statistica, *Sommario di statistiche storiche dell'Italia 1861–1975* (Rome: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, 1976), p. 14). For a history of the periodical press in Italy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Mario Lombardo and Fabrizio Pignatel, *La stampa periodica in Italia. Mezzo secolo di riviste illustrate*, Universale, 151 (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1985), esp. pp. 19–37 for the nineteenth century.



Figure 1 *Cover of La Tribuna illustrata*, 4, 26 January 1890. Image reproduced here courtesy of the Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna – Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna.

Treves and Sonzogno, both based in Milan, dominated the Italian publishing scene at the end of the nineteenth century. The first focused on high culture and targeted an educated bourgeois readership; the second aimed to attract the petite bourgeoisie and the emerging urban working class with publications specifically aimed at them, such as illustrated journals, women's periodicals and popular romance. Despite this distinction, Treves and Sonzogno competed with each other in the periodical sector, which mainly targeted a broad readership and strove for widespread distribution at different levels of society.[5] The new technologies for the reproduction of images were crucial: images were a powerful means quickly and directly to deliver and support the news, contributing to the expansion of the readership and the beginning of the transformation of the press into a mass product. The process of technological innovation in image-printing began in the 1850s, when photogravure was introduced and progressively replaced lithography, a printing method used since the end of the eighteenth century. In the 1890s technological advances brought the development of an improved printing machine: rotogravure. Thanks to its mechanical innovations, rotogravure allowed the high-volume printing of standardised products, making it a cost-effective technique for printing mass-circulation magazines.[6] The importance of this new technology lay not only in its speed of printing, but also in its high-quality reproduction of images that attracted readers and, consequently, advertisers, thereby turning periodicals into commercial products. The new technique, combined with readers' new expectations and habits, allowed the development, in the interwar years, of modern mass magazines in the United States and across Europe.

In the preface to the first issue of *Il Mondo illustrato* (2 January 1847) the editors highlight the fact that Italy's illustrated press was one step behind other European countries where illustrated periodicals

5 Regarding popular periodicals, it is worth mentioning Treves's *L'Illustratione popolare* (1869–1917), a publication specifically aimed at a less-educated readership, as demonstrated by the style of the articles, which were written in an educational tone.

6 On photogravure printing techniques see Dusan C. Stulik and Art Kaplan, *The Atlas of Analytical Signatures of Photographic Processes. Photogravure.* (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2013) <https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/pdf/atlas_photogravure.pdf> [accessed 9 July 2025].

had begun to flourish a few years before.[7] *The Illustrated London News*, for example, was launched in 1842, while the German *Illustrierte Zeitung* and the French *L'Illustration* were published in 1843 and 1844 respectively, anticipating *Il Mondo illustrato*. At the beginning of the twentieth century these countries were still ahead of Italy in terms of magazine production and set examples that conditioned the shaping of modern Italian illustrated periodicals. In particular, magazines which developed in Germany and France in the 1920s had a great influence on the layout and editorial formulas of Italian *rotocalchi* in the 1930s. Following the example set by nineteenth-century illustrated periodicals, modern magazines were characterised by an extensive use of pictures. In the 1920s, playing a role similar to that of illustrations at the end of the previous century, photographs became a privileged means of information and storytelling accessible to the emerging mass readership. Moreover, as already mentioned, in the 1920s readers had become used to visual images thanks to the popularity of films, which turned readers into spectators and, subsequently, magazines into visual products.[8] In that decade the increasing use of photography led to the development of a new form of journalism: photojournalism.[9]

Photojournalism as a means to deliver the news in magazines developed in Germany, where illustrated magazines such as the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1892–1945), *Uhu* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1924–34) and *Das Magazin* (Leipzig: Giesecke & Devrient; then Berlin: Eysler, 1924–41) gained great popularity.

7 [Anon.], 'Gli Editori', p. 3.

8 The evolution of illustrated magazines has many features in common and is strictly connected to the popularity of films. See Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: Tauris, 2002); Francesco Casetti, *L'occhio del Novecento. Cinema, esperienza, modernità*, Studi Bompiani, Spettacolo e comunicazione (Milan: Bompiani, 2005); László Moholy-Nagy, *Pittura Fotografia Film*, ed. by Antonello Negri (Milan: Scalpendi, 2008).

9 Bonnie Brennan writes: 'Although the term was coined in response to the development of picture magazines established during the 1920s and 1930s, the concept of photojournalism has actually been used to showcase a variety of photographic practices that began in the 1830s' (Bonnie Brennan, 'Photojournalism: Historical Dimensions to Contemporary Debates', in *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, ed. by Stuart Allan (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 71–81 (p. 73)). On the transformation of periodical press in Europe between 1880 and 1920 see Evanghélia Stead and Hélène Védrine, *L'Europe des revues (1880–1920). Estampes, photographies, illustrations* (Paris: Press de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008). On photojournalism see Jennifer Good and Paul Lowe, *Understanding Photojournalism* (London: Routledge, 2017).

As Kurt Korff, picture editor of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* – a pioneering picture magazine – put it:

> Life has become more hectic and the individual has become less prepared to peruse a newspaper in leisurely reflection. Accordingly, it has become necessary to find a keener and more succinct form of pictorial representation that has an effect on readers even if they just skim through the pages. The public has become more and more used to *taking in world events through pictures rather than words*.[10]

Photojournalism emerged as a consequence of modern life and technological innovations, such as the introduction of the portable Leica camera in 1925 that allowed photographers to take photos of subjects in motion. The introduction of rotary presses, the superseding of halftone printing and the establishment of the rotogravure printing technique advanced technological innovation and the process of expansion of the readership that had begun in the nineteenth century.

In the 1920s magazines in Weimar Germany were among the first to introduce the use of images as a visual representation of events, either as single images or in photo series. In those years new uses for photos as a means of communication also emerged, such as photo-essays and photomontages, used to express the contradictions and social crises of modern life. Not only did these magazines focus on images, but they were also put together to recall the dynamism of films, highlighting the connection to this medium and creating a distinctive feature of illustrated magazines worldwide. The *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* in particular was the first to rely entirely on photographs, a feature that turned it into a national success with a circulation record of two million copies in 1931, making it 'the largest mass circulation magazine' in Germany.[11] It covered a large variety of topics, mainly

10 Originally published in Kurt Korff (pseudonym of Kurt Karfunkel), 'Die illustrierte Zeitschrift', *Fünfzig Jahre Ullstein (1877–1927)* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1927), pp. 279–303; and quoted in Mason Klein, 'Modern Look: Photography and the American Magazine', in *Modern Look: Photography and the American Magazine*, ed. by Mason Klein and others (New York: The Jewish Museum & Yale University Press, 2020), pp. 22–85 (p. 26) (emphasis mine). It has proved impossible to trace a page reference for the original.

11 Hanno Hardt, 'Pictures for the Masses: Photography and the Rise of Popular Magazines in Weimar Germany', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 13 (1989), 7–29 (p. 14; see also pp. 7–9). On the German periodical press and photojournalism see Karl Christian Führer and Corey Ross, *Mass Media, Culture and Society in Twentieth Century Germany*, New Perspectives in German Political Studies (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009 [2006]); Daniel H. Magilow, *The Photography of Crisis: The Photo Essays of Weimar Germany* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012).

sports, the Arts and technology; and although use of the text was limited to its being a support to images, the magazine also included serialised novels. This successful formula was later emulated by other European magazines, such as the French *L'Illustration*, *Vu* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1928–40) and *Marianne* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1932–40). Although *L'Illustration* was historically the first successful illustrated French magazine, it was the modern-looking *Vu* that revolutionised French picture magazines. Created using the model set by the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, *Vu* aimed to cover a wide range of topics to keep up with 'the fast rhythm of modern life' like a film, as stated in the launch issue.[12] Like its German equivalent, *Vu* used photos to inform and illustrate the news, making images its key feature and, thanks to rotogravure, distanced itself from *L'Illustration*, which was still printed using halftones. With a modern layout, extensive use of pictures and a wide range of topics covered, from fashion to politics, *Vu* targeted a broad range of readers and became the most successful mass-circulation French magazine of the time. It is worth highlighting that *Vu* combined serious political analyses with lighter topics – like popular fashion and beauty tips – and published photos by the most famous photographers of the time, such as the Hungarian-American Robert Capa (1913–1954), whose famous shot of a falling soldier during the Spanish Civil War was published for the first time in *Vu*.[13]

Like the German and the French illustrated magazines, the British *Weekly Illustrated* (London: Oldhams, 1934–39) and *Picture Post*

12 'Il existe [...] des revues littéraires et des journaux humoristiques. Mais on ne trouve pas chez nous un JOURNAL ILLUSTRÉ dont la lecture traduise le rythme précipité de la vie actuelle, un journal qui renseigne, et document sur toutes les manifestations de la vie contemporaine […]. Animé comme un beau film, *Vu* sera attendu chaque semaine de tous ses lecteurs' [There are […] literary magazines and humorous journals. However, we do not have an ILLUSTRATED JOURNAL that reflects the hurried pace of modern life, a newspaper that informs and documents all the events of contemporary life […]. Edited like a fine film, *Vu* will be awaited each week by all its readers' ([Anon.], 'Vu Remarques sur un nouveau journal illustré', *Vu*, 21 March 1928, pp. 11–12 (p. 11)). Emphasis in original.

13 [Anon.], 'La guerre civile en Espagne', *Vu*, 23 September 1936, p. 1106. The caption above Capa's photo reads: 'Comment ils sont tombés' [How they fell]. On *Vu* see Danielle Leenaerts, *Petite histoire du magazine Vu (1928–1940). Entre Photographie d'Information Et Photographie d'Art* (Brussels: Lang, 2010); and Michel Frizot and Cédric de Veigy, *Vu: The Story of a Magazine that Made an Era* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009). On the French popular press see *Popular Culture and Mass Communication in Twentieth-Century France*, ed. by Rosemary Chapman and Nicholas Hewitt (New York: Mellen, 1992).

(London: Hulton Press, 1938–56) focused entirely on photographs and copied the formula of the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*. In both cases, Stefan Lorant, who had been the chief editor of another pioneering German illustrated magazine, the *Münchner Illustrierte Presse* (Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1924–44), the main competitor to the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, edited the weekly, bringing into the British periodical press the features of German illustrated magazines. Lorant also had a role in the creation of *Life*: he had met Henry Luce in 1934 when Luce was planning the publication of an American illustrated magazine on the model set by the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Weekly Illustrated*.[14] When the first issue of *Life* (Chicago: Time, 1936–72) was launched in November 1936 its layout resembled that of *Weekly Illustrated*. At the same time, when *Picture Post* was first published in 1938 it had many similarities with *Life*, demonstrating how in the 1930s European and American illustrated magazines influenced one another, creating similar layouts and formulas which can be found in various magazines, including Italian *rotocalchi*.[15] Moreover, these magazines often had in common the crucial role played by their lead editors: Kurt Korff (*Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*), Lucien Vogel (*Vu*), Stefan Lorant (*Picture Post*), Henry Luce (*Life*) and, in the case of Italy, Leo Longanesi (*Omnibus*). Each was the mind behind the magazine, shaping it and giving it its distinctive features.

Fascist Italy and the Perception of 'America' as a Myth, a Model and a Threat

Another country that influenced the development of the Italian popular press, particularly the use of illustrations and the structuring of magazines as visual products, were the United States, a country with which Fascist Italy had a contradictory and often conflicting relationship. Whereas politics was not the focus of popular magazines,

14 Michael Hallett, *Stefan Lorant: Godfather of Photojournalism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005), pp. 51–53, 69–76. On the British periodical press see Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Matthew Engel, *Tickle the Public: One Hundred Years of the Popular Press* (London: Indigo, 1997).

15 Looking at the covers of the British *Picture Post*, the French *Match* (Paris: Prouvost, 1938–40) and the Italian *Tempo* from the 1930s and early 1940s, the similarities with *Life* are striking: all covers feature a full-page photograph, usually of contemporary events (especially in times of war) and all have the name of the magazine in white on a red geometric shape – *Picture Post* and *Tempo* on a red rectangle just like *Life*, *Match* in a red circle.

the dynamics between Italy and the United States conditioned the content of the Italian popular press, making their relationship one of the factors to be taken into account in the analysis of Italian *rotocalchi*.

Starting from the end of the nineteenth century, American society, economy and politics underwent a transformation which made the United States one of the most powerful countries in the world. In the interwar years the importance of this new role on the international scene was accompanied by the spreading of the American way of life through American culture and products, which in those years began to invade the European market. The Fascist regime, which in the second half of the 1930s launched a plan for economic and cultural autarchy, viewed the United States both as a model and, particularly from 1936 onwards, a threat to the Italian spirit. In spite of Fascist efforts to create a purely Italian culture and Fascist opposition to the spread of American products and ways of life in Italy – as demonstrated by the regulation of the film industry and censorship of translations and publication in general – the Italian perception of America was more ambivalent than it may seem. As Jane Dunnett argues in her study on the Italian literary scene, in the *Ventennio* Italian culture was in dialogue with that of America, reflecting the complexity and ambiguities of the regime and overcoming the idea of its monolithic opposition to America.[16] That same dialogue can be found in Italian popular magazines, whose cultural content was deeply influenced by and steeped in American culture. This reflected and contributed to the dissemination of American values and aspirations across Italian society. Despite the Fascist system of control of the press and its ever stricter directives against the publishing of foreign materials, the widespread presence of American influence in Italian illustrated weeklies can be seen as evidence that the process of the Americanisation of Italian culture and society started well before the end of the Second World War. Italian *rotocalchi* thus serve as a litmus test for analysing both the effectiveness of Fascist censorship and the depth of the fascination with America felt by Italians during (and despite) the years of Mussolini's rule. A brief analysis of the origins of this attraction to anything American and the reaction of the regime to it helps us better to understand the roots of this process of Americanisation and of how Italy received and reinterpreted models and values by Italianising American products.

16 See Jane Dunnett, *The 'mito americano' and Italian Literary Culture Under Fascism*, Studi e testi di Palazzo Serra, 5 (Ariccia: Aracne, 2015). On American culture and Fascist Italy see also Guido Bonsaver, 'American Culture in Fascist Italy, 1922–1943', in *America in Italian Culture: The Rise of a New Model of Modernity, 1861–1943* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 175–489.

An Ambivalent Image of the United States: The View from Fascist Italy

After the Great War Europe experienced a phase of uncertainty and instability that many viewed as a sign of the decline of European civilisation. The decadence of European culture, the perceived decline of its political and intellectual dominance and the rise of mass society – characterised by the increased participation of the lower classes in culture and politics – were seen as the end of the European Order, as predicted by Oswald Spengler's two-volume *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* [*The Decline of the West*] (1918 and 1922) and as described by Paul Valéry's *The Crisis of the Mind* (1919) and José Ortega y Gasset's *La rebelión de las masas* [*The Revolt of the Masses*] (1930). While Europe was struggling to deal with modernisation and the participation of the masses in public life, American economic and political power was rising and its society and culture became the symbol of modernity, perceived as both a threat and a model. 'America' became synonymous with 'modernity' and was identified with mass production, mass culture and consumption, an idea disseminated in Europe by American products.

The Fascist regime, which saw 'Americanism as the main mythical metaphors of modernity',[17] responded to the challenge in a unique way, presenting itself as able to combine modernity and spirituality, creating a modern mass society without losing national traditions and identity. Mussolini's rule offered an alternative model that could revitalise Italy and set an example for the rest of the world. Throughout the *Ventennio* we can see ambivalent feelings towards American culture which determined a conflicting attitude towards the United States. Two main phases can be identified: a first phase from 1922 to 1937, during which the United States were admired, although this period was also characterised by the rise in negative critiques of American society after the economic crisis in 1929; and a second phase, from late 1937 to the collapse of the Fascist system of power, when anti-American propaganda increased and finally reached its peak during the war.[18]

17 Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity*, p. 161.

18 The myth of America shared by many Italian intellectuals has since been interpreted as a form of anti-Fascism and resistance to Fascist culture. See, e.g., Dominique Fernandez, *Il mito dell'America negli intellettuali italiani*, Aretusa, 27 (Caltanissetta: Sciascia, 1969); and Piero Garofalo, 'Myths and Counter Myths: The Making of America in Fascist Italy', *Italian Culture*, 15 (1997), 91–110. The discovery

The relationship of Fascist Italy with the United States and their modern culture and society offers a compelling case for the study of the modernisation – through the process of Americanisation – of Italian society in the interwar years. Italian magazines were a product which reflected both the American commercial invasion of Europe – with films, make-up, fashion, interior design and habits of entertainment influencing and attracting Italian consumers – and the Fascist government's position towards the United States, revealing the contradictions and discrepancy between Italian society and Fascism, and within Fascist culture itself. The ambivalent relationship the regime had with America has been widely studied.[19] It is not possible here to analyse all the elements which characterised the complex, even contradictory way the Fascist system looked at the United States; however, to understand the significance of the presence of American culture in popular Italian magazines it is important to outline how the United States were depicted and perceived by Mussolini's regime, particularly as concerns politics, economics and society; modernity; and women. All these three aspects of the perception of America by the Fascist State were reflected in Italian popular magazines.[20]

Politics, Economics and Society

When Mussolini formed his government in 1922 the relationship between Italy and the United States revolved around war debts and

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of American authors by Italian intellectuals in the 1930s had both cultural and political significance: cultural, because American literature was the result of a culture without the past and traditions which anchored Italian literature; political, because the United States represented democracy and freedom, an opposite model to Italian Fascism. See Michel Beynet, *L'image de l'Amerique dans la culture Italienne de l'entre-deux-guerres* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1990), esp. p. 35; and Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana, 4 vols, 2nd edn (Turin: Einaudi, 1977 [1975]), esp. 'Quaderno 22 (v). 1934. Americanismo e fordismo', III, 'Quaderni 12–29', pp. 2137–81.

19 Key studies include Beynet, *L'image de l'Amérique*; Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*; Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity*; Rosario Forlenza and Bjørn Thomassen, 'Fascist Modernity', in *Italian Modernities: Competing Narratives of Nationhood*, Italian and Italian American Studies (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2016), pp. 119–48; Bonsaver, *America in Italian Culture*.

20 Another important aspect of this complex relationship is the view of Italian intellectuals on American culture. On the topic see Claudio Antonelli, *Pavese, Vittorini e gli americanisti. Il mito dell'America* (Florence: Edarc, 2008); *Chi stramalediva gli inglesi. La diffusione della letteratura inglese e americana in Italia tra le due guerre*, ed. by Arturo Cattaneo (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2007); Dunnett, *The 'mito americano'*; and Pavese, *La letteratura americana*.

migration flow, with an increasing number of Italians settling in North America. On 16 November 1922, in one of his first addresses to the Italian parliament, Mussolini declared: 'I nostri rapporti con gli Stati Uniti sono ottimi e sarà mia cura di perfezionarli, soprattutto nel campo di una desiderabile intima collaborazione d'ordine economico' [Our relations with the United States are excellent and it will be my concern to perfect them, especially in the field of a desirable, close economic co-operation].[21] Not only was a good relationship with the United States desirable, it was essential in order to attract American investors, settle the quota for Italian migration on more favourable terms, disseminate an image of Italy as a strong protagonist in the international arena and, more importantly, to consolidate the regime.

The appointment of Dino Grandi as Foreign Minister on 12 September 1929 contributed to the consolidation of a friendly relationship between the two countries. In spite of the aggressive colonial ideology and policies of the Fascist state, Grandi supported international disarmament, which would have aligned Italy with the American position. In this first phase in its attitude towards America, one characterised by the attempt to build a strong alliance with the United States, the Fascist regime highlighted the features the two nations had in common, such as the youthfulness of their people and spirit, as opposed to the obsolete, old, European liberal governments.

Whereas Italy was an underdeveloped country left weakened by the Great War, the United States were a modern nation with a powerful, growing economy that was gaining increasing importance in Europe. In the eyes of Italian Fascism, the United States represented a model of power and a way to elevate Italy's reputation. However, after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 harsh critiques against American society emerged. This shift in the perception of the USA is represented by two books from the time: Margherita Sarfatti's *L'America, ricerca della felicità* [*America, Search for Happiness*] published in 1937; and Emilio Cecchi's *America amara* [*Bitter America*], the collection of a series of articles published in the *Corriere della Sera* between 1938 and 1939 reporting on Cecchi's impressions during his journey across the United States.[22] *Corriere della Sera* had become, in the 1920s, the

21 Benito Mussolini, 'Il primo discorso presidenziale alla Camera dei Deputati', 16 November 1922, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XIX, *Dalla marcia su Roma al viaggio negli Abruzzi (31 ottobre 1922–22 agosto 1923)*, pp. 15–24 (p. 21).

22 Charles Burdett shows how these opposing views on America reflect the conflict between admirers and detractors of American society and culture; and how both authors engaged with Fascism. See Charles Burdett, *Journeys Through*

most-sold newspaper across the Peninsula, with daily sales of 800,000 copies, reaching up to a million on Sundays and thus giving Cecchi's reportage wide visibility.[23] While Sarfatti echoed Mussolini's early statements on Roosevelt's government and the American character, Cecchi focused on the violent and intellectually poor aspects of American society. Depicted as a dangerous degeneracy, a result of modern habits, reckless consumerism and capitalism, the decay of America was revealed by the Wall Street Crash. This idea was echoed by Cecchi's reports, which highlighted the depth of the capitalist imperative that led American society constantly to seek profit to the detriment of morality and ethics.[24]

From that moment onwards the Fascist regime emphasised its own uniqueness as a third way, one that represented the answer to the failure of capitalist society and the only alternative to Socialism: as a new ideology, Fascism was the answer to the uncertainty of the times. As Ben-Ghiat observes, Mussolini presented 'his "third way" as an antidote to political and spiritual decline in Europe', an idea which found space in the anti-American propaganda following the economic crisis of 1929.[25] However, the election as President of the United States of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 changed, once more, the way the Fascist leaders perceived the United States, strengthening the alleged analogies between the two countries. Italy looked to President Roosevelt with a certain admiration, particularly after the first New Deal (1933), many aspects of which recalled Italian corporatism.[26] The affinities between Fascism and the New Deal

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Fascism: Italian Travel-Writing between the Wars, Remapping Cultural History, 7 (New York: Berghahn, 2007), pp. 227–35.

23 Marcucci, *Giornalisti grandi firme*, pp. 15–18.

24 Emilio Cecchi, *America amara* (Padua: Muzzio, 1995; orig. Milan: Sansoni, 1939), esp. pp. 31–41. This take on American society and modernity also had an impact on debates in Italian literary circles and on intellectuals. See Billiani, *National Cultures*, pp. 91–99.

25 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'Italian Fascism and the Aesthetics of the "Third Way"', in *The Aesthetics of Fascism* (= *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31 (1996)), pp. 293–316 (pp. 295–96).

26 These parallelisms were echoed by Sarfatti, who travelled in the USA in 1934. In *L'America, ricerca della felicità* she stresses the similarity between Roosevelt's government and Fascist Italy and particularly the economic policies of the New Deal and Italian corporatism (Burdett, *Journeys Through Fascism*, pp. 228–31). It is worth mentioning Margherita Sarfatti's crucial role in shaping Mussolini's early political vision. She wielded significant influence over Mussolini and was instrumental in the creation of the Fascist movement, also thanks to her cultural

were stressed by Mussolini himself: '[L']appello ai giovani, questo affrontare la battaglia con decisione e pessimismo virile, appartiene a quello stile, a quel "modo di vita" cui il fascismo ha educato e intende sempre più educare il popolo italiano' [[The] appeal to the young, this facing of the battle with decisiveness and virile pessimism, belongs to that style, that 'way of life' to which Fascism has educated and intends increasingly to educate the Italian people].[27] In particular, the National Recovery Administration Agency (1933) revealed, according to Mussolini, the same Fascist idea that saw the State oversee the economy. In 1935 Roosevelt's economic policies were seen as an expression of Italian corporatism, 'un corporativismo senza corporazioni' [a corporatism without corporations], as defined by *Gerarchia*.[28] However, the aggressive Italian policies in Africa and Mussolini's declaration of the Italian Empire on 9 May 1936 changed the relationship between Fascist Italy and the United States, marking the beginning of a second phase, one characterised by the increasing anti-American propaganda carried out by Mussolini's government. After Roosevelt's 'Quarantine Speech' on 5 October 1937 the regime took an anti-American position,[29] which became open opposition

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sophistication and connections, which attracted intellectuals and artists to the movement. Sarfatti's wealth, ideas and personal support helped to consolidate Mussolini's power. In the 1930s, as Mussolini's regime hardened and grew closer to Hitler and the latter's anti-Semitic policies, Sarfatti's role diminished and her Jewish heritage and opposition to the alliance with Nazi Germany alienated her within Fascist ranks, until she was forced to flee Italy after the approval of Italy's racial laws in 1938. Her trajectory within the Fascist regime illustrates how, under Mussolini's authoritarian rule, anyone could become a target of his power and demands for unwavering loyalty. On Margherita Sarfatti see Philip V. Cannistraro and Brian R. Sullivan, *Il Duce's Other Woman* (New York: Morrow, 1993).

27 Benito Mussolini's review of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's book *Looking Forward* (1933), translated into Italian as *Guardando nel futuro* (Milan: Bompiani, 1933): 'Roosevelt e il sistema', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 7 July 1933, p. 1; originally published in *The Universal Service*. On the Fascist regime's view of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, see Marco Sedda, 'Il New Deal nella pubblicistica politica italiana dal 1933 al 1938', *Il Politico*, 64 (1991), 241–75; and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany 1933–1939* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

28 See Giovanni Selvi, 'Fermentazione fascista nel mondo', *Gerarchia*, 15 (1935), 567–82 (esp. pp. 576–77).

29 The speech marked a shift away from American isolationism and signalled a stronger stance against aggressor nations, positioning the USA as more actively engaged in pursuing peace. Roosevelt called for an international 'quarantine' of nations which violated treaties and invaded foreign lands – like Italy's invasion of Ethiopia.

from 1938 onwards and reached its peak during the war; its effects are clearly reflected in the censorship of American cultural products.

In the ambiguities and contradictions that characterised Italy's anti-Americanism during the *Ventennio*, recurrent themes can be identified. The first, strictly connected to the Fascist approach to modernisation, depicted and condemned American society as a 'mechanical civilisation' in which machines were increasingly present in everyday life – a frantic life constantly focused on efficiency. In its reliance on machines rather than on the human spirit, American society was seen as decadent and mechanical. The second recurrent theme were the negative aspects of the youthfulness of America and its obsolescence. As a relatively new, independent nation, the United States did not have the deep historical roots or long-standing traditions of European countries, which in Fascist propaganda translated into a lack of past and hence history; however, at the same time it was an old society because of its European origins: 'vecchia perché in realtà era una prosecuzione dell'Europa, ma anche perché quando pure avesse trionfato, la sua barbarie avrebbe comportato automaticamente la fine di ogni civiltà' [old because it was actually a continuation of Europe, but also because if it had triumphed, its barbarism would automatically have meant the end of all civilization].[30] Connected to these two main themes were also two popular stereotypes that defined American civilisation as materialistic (made up of people focused only on 'lavorare, consumare e chiedere "quanto costa?"' [work, consumption and asking, 'How much is it?']) and barbarian ('la mancanza di storia della breve vita dell'America si traduceva automaticamente in mancanza di cultura, cattivo gusto, assenza di tradizioni' [the lack of history of America's short life automatically translated into lack of culture, bad taste, absence of traditions]).[31] All these themes were strictly connected to modernity, a crucial and recurrent topic in the contradictory, ambivalent relationship of the Fascist regime to American culture.

Modernity

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Fascist Italy had to face the increasing social and material expectations of the Italian people. However, the problems posed by the demographic and economic crises the country was facing made it difficult for the regime to satisfy the desires of

30 Michela Nacci, 'Antiamericanismo', *Dizionario Del Fascismo*, ed. by Victoria de Grazia and Sergio Luzzatto, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), I, 63–65 (p. 63).

31 Nacci', 'Antiamericanismo', p. 63.

Italians. These new consumer expectations were fostered by American products: through films and advertisements the American way of life was exported to Italy, causing negative reactions among the Fascist rulers. While Italian people preferred American products over Italian or other European brands, the Fascist ideologues accused American culture of corrupting the Italian spirit. Their main worry was the spreading of an American snobbery that was contaminating Italy's morals, challenging one of the most prominent features of the Fascist 'new man': tradition. In the Fascist view, American products were disseminating a new model of living that was conditioning and changing the habits and tastes of Italian society, endangering the national traditions. The Fascist moralists:

> condemned American society as a modern Sodom where sexual freedom, the disintegration of the family, the practice of contraception, the search for material well-being, the cult of wealth, ruthless capitalism, dehumanising technology, urban neurosis, corrupt politics, racial discrimination, and organised crime were rampant.[32]

In spite of this negative perception, on 14 December 1926, in his first speech to the American people, Mussolini claimed he felt 'la più cordiale amicizia per gli Stati Uniti' [the most pleasant friendship with the United States], declared Italy a modern nation and expressed his confidence that the two countries had common values: 'L'Italia d'oggi, come l'America, è sana, semplice e piena di fiducia in se [*sic*] stessa'. [Today's Italy, like America, is healthy, simple and full of self-confidence].[33] In opposition to the most common anti-American stereotype, which defined American civilisation as led by machines, Mussolini affirmed that:

> la civiltà americana è stata accusata di essere dominata esclusivamente da fattori meccanici e materiali e di trovare i propri impulsi solo nel desiderio del guadagno. Nulla potrebbe essere più falso. La civiltà nord-americana ha dato un notevole contributo all'attività spirituale del mondo. Essa produrrà ancora più in avvenire.[34]

32 Emilio Gentile, 'Impending Modernity: Fascism and the Ambivalent Image of the United States', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28 (1993), 7–29 (p. 10).

33 Benito Mussolini, 'Il vibrante messaggio di Mussolini "agli Americani e agli Italiani d'America"', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 16 December 1926, p. 1; also reported in Benito Mussolini, 'Primo messaggio al popolo americano', *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XXII, *Dall'attentato Zaniboni al discorso dell'Ascensione (5 novembre 1925–26 maggio 1927)*, pp. 290–91 (p. 290).

34 Mussolini, 'Il vibrante messaggio di Mussolini'.

> [American civilisation has been accused of being dominated solely by mechanical and material factors and of finding its motivations only in the desire for profit. Nothing could be more false. North American civilisation has made a considerable contribution to the spiritual activity of the world. It will produce even more in the future.]

This view contrasted with the Fascist ideology that sought to fight the dehumanising effects of technology and:

> ristabili[re] nel mondo contemporaneo gli equilibri necessari, ivi compreso quello fra uomo e macchina: questa può soggiogare l'individuo, ma sarà piegata dallo Stato, il quale la ricondurrà al servizio dell'uomo e della collettività come strumento di liberazione, non come accumulatrice di miserie.[35]

> [re-establish in the contemporary world the necessary balances, including that between man and machine: the latter may subjugate the individual, but it will be bent by the State, which will restore it to the service of man and the community as an instrument of liberation, not as an accumulator of misery.]

This contradiction is not only a clear example of ambivalence in the image of the United States in Italy during the Fascist era, but also of the regime's relationship with progress. Mussolini presented Fascism as a political expression of modernity that sought to renovate Italy and its society without changing social structures, a process which resulted in a contradictory innovation anchored to traditional values. As Ben-Ghiat puts it, Mussolini aimed for 'the creation of a "national" version of modernity that would permit the retention of spirituality and specificity'.[36] Spirituality was indeed the key word of Fascist modernity: against the annihilation of the individual carried out by Socialism and the degeneration and standardisation of man embodied by the United States, Mussolini's modern Italy represented an alternative that combined modernity and spirituality. To support this view of Fascism as a third way, the regime disseminated negative images of the United States – the modern nation par excellence – and their heavy industrialisation and mass production. At the other end of the spectrum, Mussolini's system of power defended Italians from standardisation and spiritual impoverishment by affirming strong moral values.

35 Benito Mussolini, 'Sintesi del regime', 18 March 1934, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XXVI, *Dal patto a quattro all'inaugurazione della provincia di Littoria (18 giugno 1933–18 dicembre 1934)*, pp. 185–93 (p. 186).

36 Ben-Ghiat, 'Italian Fascism', p. 297.

After the crisis in 1929 the Fascist government placed more emphasis on the idea of Italian modernity as an autonomous model. In particular, it was a reaction to the American way of life, which Fascist ideologues viewed as a threat to the Italian lifestyle and, more importantly, to its spirit. Because Italian consumers identified American products with elegance and freedom, the Fascist regime sought to propagate anti-American messages to counterbalance American cultural invasion:

> Non c'è bisogno d'essere in trincea e di averlo davanti armato per accorgersi che c'è un nemico. Oggi il nemico vero è disarmato, […] entra in casa nostra coi giornali, colle fotografie, coi libri che ne diffondono la mentalità. Guardati intorno, italiano: scorgerai l'americanismo davanti, a destra, a sinistra, dietro di te: lo scoprirai nella fanciulla mascolinizzata, nell'abito del giovane elegante, nella facciata di una costruzione, nella pagina di una rivista. […] Altro che emigrare in America! È l'America che emigra in Italia! […] [S]orridiamo con compiacenza, talvolta esaltandoli e coprendoli d'onori, a coloro che si sforzano di introdurre fra noi i principi dissolvitori della nostra salute spirituale.[37]
>
> [There is no need to be in the trenches and have him armed in front of you to realise that there is an enemy. Today the real enemy is unarmed, […] he enters our house with newspapers, with photographs, with books that spread their mentality. Look around you, Italian: you will spot Americanism in front of you, to the right, to the left, behind you: you will discover it in the masculinised young woman, in the attire of the elegant young man, in the façade of a building, in the pages of a magazine. […] Rather than emigrating to America, it is America that is emigrating to Italy! […] [W]e smile complacently, sometimes exalting them and covering them with honours, at those who strive to introduce among us the dissolving principles of our spiritual health.]

Harsh critiques also came from intellectuals and non-Fascist militants such as Mario Soldati, whose book *America primo amore* (1935) portrays a barbarian, insensitive and violent civilisation. In modern American society individuals put themselves at the centre, pursuing their own interests above anything else because of America's uncontrolled capitalism. According to Mario Soldati, only the 'new American race' could bear the levelling of its neurotic society, whose happiness was frustrated and soul drained by countless comforts.[38] Similarly,

37 Orco Bisorco [Mino Maccari], 'Gazzettino ufficiale del Strapaese', *Il Selvaggio*, 30 March 1928, p. 21.

38 Mario Soldati, *America primo amore*, Oscar, 650 (Milan: Mondadori, 1976 [1935]), especially pp. 43–250. In the book Soldati describes his experience as an emigrant to the United States, from admiration for the American lifestyle and

Alberto Moravia describes the United States in his correspondence with Giuseppe Prezzolini as a place where:

> la mentalità è rimasta schiavistica e sfruttatrice: di qui la inumanità razionalizzata e il nessun amore […] per tutti i valori che non possano essere tradotti in moneta. […] [S]i è continuamente tentati; violentati dalle cose da mangiare da comprare da godere e tutte queste cose si possono ottenere senza sforzo personale, […] soltanto che si abbia denaro – è un po' la tentazione del bazar e […] del bordello.[39]
>
> [the mentality has remained one of slavery and exploitation: hence the rationalized inhumanity and the total lack of love […] for all values that cannot be translated into money. […] [O]ne is constantly tempted; assaulted by the things to eat to buy to enjoy and all these things can be obtained without personal effort […] as long as one has money – it is somewhat the temptation of the bazaar and […] of the brothel.]

Consumerism, a modern trait derived from capitalism, was levelling American society and depriving American people of their own identity:

> La mentalità 'standard' è come un'enorme piovra che stende i suoi tentacoli su tutta la vita esteriore, imprigiona l'anima e la mente, e costringe le idee e gli atteggiamenti a uniformarsi a un tipo unico, allo stesso modo con cui i grandi stabilimenti meccanici producono i diversi pezzi di un'automobile secondo una sagoma unitaria.[40]
>
> [The 'standard' mentality is like a huge octopus that spreads its tentacles over all outer life, that imprisons the soul and the mind and forces ideas and attitudes to conform to a single type, in the same way that large mechanical factories produce the different parts of an automobile according to a unified outline.]

In a process started in the 1920s, the urbanisation, mass production, constant economic growth and subsequently increased spending

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wealth to disappointment in a reality far from the American myth. See Ambra Meda, 'L'Italianità "naufragata". Rappresentazioni letterarie dell'emigrato italiano in America nell'odeporica del Ventennio', *Italica*, 90 (2013), 210–26 (pp. 211–13); and Ruth Ben-Ghiat, 'Misurarsi col moderno: italiani all'estero, 1929–34', *La cultura fascista*, Biblioteca storica (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), pp. 61–73.

39 Letter from Alberto Moravia to Giuseppe Prezzolini, 'In viaggio dall'America in Italia sul "Conte di Savoia", 1936', in Alberto Moravia and Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Lettere* (Milan: Rusconi, 1982), pp. 19–23 (pp. 20–21).

40 Valentino Piccoli, 'Babbit o l'uomo standard', *Critica fascista*, 1 December 1932, pp. 456–57 (p. 457).

power of Americans turned American citizens into consumers. This evolution particularly affected the role of women within the family, whose active role in the workforce increased, as well as their participation in the new mass consumer culture. The Fascist regime saw this emancipation as further evidence of the degeneration of modern American society and used it in its anti-American propaganda as a model of all the negative consequences of modernisation.

Women

In the 1920s and 1930s there were mainly three factors that defined modern American women, or their image, at least: their presence in the workforce, not only as secretaries but also in skilled jobs; their sexual emancipation, influenced by growing public discourse on female desire, the birth control movement and changing views on marriage;[41] and their participation in mass production, mainly as the object of advertising campaigns. Whereas Mussolini's project aimed to bring women back into the home as mothers and wives, in the United States they were emancipated, modern consumers, identifiable with the 'flapper', a fashionable, independent new woman, and with the modern housewife.

Thanks to electric domestic appliances, ready-to-eat meals and innovative methods for the education of children, like John Dewey's progressive education and the Montessori method, American housewives had free time to pursue activities outside the house. They performed a traditional role with modern means and became the main target of advertising campaigns and mail-order shopping. Modern housewives were thus both the subject and the object of modern marketing strategies, representing the consumer par excellence, because the majority of the shopping was done by women and modern methods of education and management of the house were performed through consumption. American housewives, freed from domestic chores by their appliances, soon became one of the main symbols of the American way of life, a model exported abroad as representative of a new consumerism that was becoming an original American social model.

41 Public discourse on women's independence and sexuality was influenced, for example, by Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) theory on sexuality, which included discussions of female desire; by activists like Margaret Sanger (1879–1966), who campaigned for birth control access; and by figures like Judge Ben Lindsey (1869–1943), author of *Companionate Marriage* (1927), which challenged traditional notions of marriage and reflected a more individualistic and consumer-oriented society.

An iconic symbol of modern America, the flapper represented financial independence and sexual freedom. Aesthetically, the flapper was identified by a tomboyish appearance, short hair, a trim body and clothes that would hide her figure but expose the legs. This model of a woman overturned the model of femininity that had dominated the nineteenth century (embodied by the 'Gibson girl') and represented the sexual, political and financial emancipation of women in the 1920s.[42] The flapper personified the liberation of women from the household, a working woman who knew how to enjoy her free time; she was a product of the wealth of the Roaring Twenties. In the 1930s, however, in the United States the flapper was perceived as a superficial woman more interested in fashion and sexuality than in politics, thereby advancing the idea that women had rejected political emancipation for sexual freedom.[43] The flapper was also identified with premarital sex, birth control, masculine behaviour such as smoking and drinking in public and a general disdain for traditional values and morals. As a result, in the United States the emancipation of women began to be associated with moral decay and family decline. In Europe, the echoes of American women's emancipation created the stereotype of the 'modern woman', harshly criticised by the Fascist regime. According to Italian reporters of the time, such as Arnaldo Cipolla, sexual freedom in the United States was one of the main consequences of women's emancipation, which was a product of the materialistic, mechanical American civilisation. At the end of the 1930s this negative view became part of a more generalised critique of the American way of life, which was seen as the decadence of its youth and the demonstration of the failure of American society.[44]

42 The 'Gibson girl' was an idealised representation of the modern American woman at the turn of the 20th century, created by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson (1867–1944). She was characterised by a slender waist and an hourglass figure, her curves accentuated by corsetry. More than just an ideal of beauty, the Gibson girl embodied an aspirational standard of elegance, social status and a sense of individuality and independence.

43 The American Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in June 1919 (and ratified it in August 1920), granting the right to vote for (white) women. African-American women (and men) gained the right to vote with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

44 The only exception to this rhetoric is Margherita Sarfatti's view of American women. In her book on America she describes them as determined and strong, with an attitude and spirit that recalled those of the Fascist woman (Burdett, *Journeys Through Fascism*, p. 231). The opposite opinion is advanced in Cecchi's analysis of the American woman, whom he depicts as a victim of America's reckless economy and describes as sad and humiliated; he also describes the

The Fascist State sought to oppose emancipation by suggesting a traditional model of femininity that both took advantage of and prevented modernisation. Fascist organisations for young women insisted on the virtues of domestic life, but at the same time involved their members in activities outside the home, undermining the authority of their parents and indirectly emancipating them. Against the model of the liberated American woman, Mussolini's regime created the model of the *donna-crisi* [crisis-woman], identifiable with the flapper and contrasted to an opposite model of femininity: a curvaceous woman focused on her family and the education of her children.[45] This contrast is exemplified by Mino Maccari in a comic vignette published in *Il Selvaggio*, in which he portrays a skinny woman drinking alone in a bar, representing the decadence of modernity.[46]

The ambivalent attitude of the regime to American culture and modernity is also evident in its rejection of the American model of beauty. Up until the establishment of the dictatorship (marked by Mussolini's speech after the murdering of Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti on 3 January 1925), American standards of beauty were not only tolerated but even accepted. The very first uniform of the *Giovani italiane* (the Fascist organisation for adolescent girls), for example, was initially modelled to imitate the American tomboy style, following the American fashion models who were dominating Europe, the blouse shaped to minimise the young women's figure. With the beginning of the Fascistisation of society, new models of beauty were imposed which opposed the American flapper: a generous female figure was praised and curves glorified as a sign of fertility and hence of womanhood.

Whereas Mussolini's regime began to propagate its own standards of beauty through various media, illustrated magazines included, the fascination exerted over Italian women by the American model, mainly disseminated by films and adverts, challenged the Fascist ideal of curvaceous femininity. Despite the deterioration in the relationship between the two countries during the Second

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woman in cities like New York as 'senza anche e senza seni' [with no hips and no bosom] (Cecchi, *America amara*, pp. 118–25, 202).

45 The *donna-crisi* embodied the figure of the emancipated woman whose pursuit of independence and economic autonomy, along with her rejection of traditional roles as a mother and wife, was perceived as a threat to social stability and national strength. She was seen as a symbol of moral and ideological crisis, undermining both the family unit and the State.

46 See Mino Maccari, 'Cocktail', *Il Selvaggio*, 15 June 1932, p. 30.

World War and despite Fascist censorship forbidding any foreign, and particularly American, influence, Italian women continued to follow the American model of beauty, keeping their weight in check and in some instances bleaching their dark hair to imitate the predominantly blonde Hollywood stars.[47] These ambivalent attitudes towards America were clearly and repeatedly mirrored and shaped by the Italian magazines of the time.[48] Not only did they reflect models coming from America, but *rotocalchi* were also influenced by American culture in their layout, content and structure, challenging the regime's aim of creating an autarchic culture.

The Illustrated Popular Press: A Model from America?

Between 1890 and 1905 American magazines tripled their circulation and became the first national mass medium, informing, entertaining and shaping American public opinion. Thanks to the lower cost of paper, increased advertising and the introduction of the innovative printing technique of the halftone, publishers were able to produce magazines inexpensively and sell them for as little as ten cents a copy. Similar to the Sunday supplements put out by newspapers, these magazines were characterised by extensive use of illustrations, addressed contemporary issues and informed readers on new technological advancements and, in general, on world events. As William Archer describes them, 'there [was] nothing quite like [the American cheap magazines] in the literature of the world – no periodicals which combine[d] such width of popular appeal with such seriousness of aim and thoroughness of workmanship'.[49]

47 Forgacs and Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society*, p. 75. See also Stephen Gundle, *Bellissima: Feminine Beauty and the Idea of Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), esp. p. 84.

48 It is worth highlighting that ambivalent feelings towards American culture were also part of Italian culture before and after the Fascist regime. See *L'antiamericanismo in Italia e in Europa nel secondo dopoguerra*, ed. by Piero Craveri and Gaetano Quagliariello (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2004); and Romano Vulpitta, *L'antiamericanismo in Italia. Un problema di identità nazionale*, Saggi, 127 (Rome: Settimo Sigillo, 2012).

49 William Archer, 'The Cheap American Magazine', *Fortnightly Review*, 93 (1910), pp. 922–32 (p. 922); also quoted in Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1791–1930*, 5 vols (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap, 1959–68), IV, *1885–1905*, p. 6.

As far as the expansion of the readership was concerned, the American revolution of inexpensive magazines in the 1890s can be compared to the Italian *rotocalchi* innovation of the 1930s. In Italy, the rotogravure technique revolutionised the periodical-publication sector as much as the halftone had done in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The presence of well-printed illustrations, advertisements, literature, comments on current events and lighter topics such as the cinema and other forms of arts and entertainment make these revolutionary publications comparable. As had been the case at the beginning of the century, the Italian *rotocalchi* revolution followed the development of photojournalism in Europe, where countries such as France and Germany, also influenced by the American model, were already ahead of Italy as far as popular illustrated magazines and the expansion of their readership were concerned.[50]

Although the Italian and American paths to modern magazines can be compared, the two publishing systems were far from similar. On the one hand, there was the American mass production model, with circulation numbers that easily reached hundreds of thousands of copies per month: a popular magazine such as the *Ladies' Home Journal* (New York: Meredith, 1883–2016), for example, reached one million copies in 1900. By the beginning of the twentieth century, in the United States magazines were a mass product, both in their production methods and their readership. They were based on advertising and conceived of readers as consumers. Consistent with the transformations in American society at the turn of the century, magazines were standardised and a mass production process was used to reach as many readers as possible, mainly by offering the same format that had attracted them in the first place.

On the other hand, as already discussed, in Italy the development of a modern template for the creation of popular illustrated magazines started only in the second half of the 1920s, fully realising its potential in the 1930s. In the interwar years the Italian publishing sector was far from the system of mass production and distribution already

50 In France, for example, the years between 1840 and 1914 mark the 'golden age' of the French press, whereas in Germany the 1920s are the decade in which the illustrated press flourished. On the development of the European press and the distinctive features of each country, see Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Communication, Society and Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. pp. 92–99 on the French press; pp. 155–58 on the German press; and pp. 198–248 'The North Atlantic or Liberal Model' on the Anglo-American model of mass media.

in place in the United States. In Italy, the low literacy rate limited the demand for the products of publishing and left Italy behind the United States and other European countries such as France, which at the beginning of the twentieth century had already reached high levels of literacy – and consequently higher numbers of customers and greater distribution of printed publications. This difference not only affected distribution numbers in Italy but also the organisation of publishing companies.[51]

Due to the inaccessibility of first-hand documentation, particularly as far as the Nerbini publishing company is concerned, it is hard to retrace practical aspects of the production of magazines in Italy in the 1930s. An examination of the publications themselves, editors' biographies and other secondary sources have made it possible to outline the organisation of magazine production by Mondadori, Rizzoli and Nerbini. These publishers relied on a small group of people who worked in various roles – as editors, columnists, authors, translators and even layout artists – in different magazines, creating a network of people whose names recur in many major publications. This represents a distinctive feature of Italian production, particularly compared to the United States: whereas in Italy a small group of people produced the magazine, in the United States every title had a well-organised editorial staff, often divided into sections focusing on one specific aspect of production – advertising, research, etc. – and dominated by the figure of the editor, who supervised the work. Once a magazine had gained the distinctive, unique features that made it recognisable, the figure of the editor lost relevance and the publication would remain consistent in spite of a change in its staff, highlighting the standardisation of the creation and production of American magazines. More importantly, publishers adopted a marketing strategy and developed a formula to target a specific sector of consumers with their magazines.

In Italy, production appears less standardised and organised until the *rotocalchi* revolution. The editorial staffs at Nerbini, Rizzoli and Mondadori were dominated by the figure of the owner of the company and/or a few collaborators, as is the case with Leo Longanesi, who edited and took final decisions on every aspect of *Omnibus* before printing any issue, or the abovementioned Mario Nerbini. In the 1930s these companies employed journalists, writers and intellectuals who

51 Gianfranco Pedullà, 'Gli anni del fascismo: imprenditoria privata e intervento statale', in *Storia dell'editoria nell'Italia contemporanea*, ed. by Gabriele Turi (Florence: Giunti, 1997), pp. 341–82.

marked the history of Italy's post-Second World War press, such as Arrigo Benedetti, Mario Pannunzio, Mario Soldati, Indro Montanelli, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Dino Buzzati, Giorgio Scerbanenco, Irene Brin, Corrado Alvaro, Cesare Zavattini, Wanda Bontà, Elio Vittorini and Paolo Lorenzini, to mention only a few.

Finally, another characteristic that distinguished *rotocalchi* from other periodicals was advertising, which became particularly relevant in publications targeting a specific readership, such as women's titles. The development of a modern methodology of advertising based on Taylorism and the American example made advertisements part of the features of a magazine and consumption part of its message.[52] This sector represents another example of how the American model influenced Italy's modernisation of the popular press, which in the 1930s reproduced and reinterpreted American features to produce mass-circulation magazines that left a long-lasting mark.

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What makes Italian popular illustrated magazines a particularly compelling source for the study of the development of modern Italian culture and society is that they were shaped by other models coming from Western Europe and the United States. Within this complex cultural dialogue, which involved different countries, the fascination with American culture was deeper than any other in the *Ventennio*, cutting across different sectors of society. Some intellectuals perceived 'America' as a myth and contributed to the creation and dissemination of the American myth; women followed Hollywood standards of beauty and were inspired by the look of the famous film stars they could admire in magazines; and Italian children grew up reading American comics while being educated by the Fascist system. American magazines had a greater influence on Italian *rotocalchi* than did French and German models, something which can be linked in part to the delay in the modernisation of the

52 Named after Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915), Taylorism is a scientific approach to industrial management designed to maximise output by standardising work processes and optimising efficiency through systematic methods. On advertising in Italy see Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under Fascism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Adam Arvidsson, *Marketing Modernity: Italian Advertising from Fascism to Postmodernity*, Studies in Consumption and Markets (London: Routledge, 2003); and Bianca Gaudenzi, *Fascismi in vetrina. Pubblicità e modelli di consumo nel Ventennio e nel Terzo Reich* (Rome: Viella, 2023).

Italian publishing sector and in part to the increasing popularity of American culture disseminated through other popular media.

The ambivalent attitude of Fascism to modernity complicated the relationship with American culture, often seen as an example of the negative effects of modernisation and identified with standardisation and mass consumption. The regime presented itself as a different model, one which would create an Italian way of mass consumption that would have preserved national traditions and identity. After 1935, and particularly after 1937, the campaign for autarchy complicated the relationship of the Fascist State to American culture still further, a change that was reflected in and partly shaped by magazines, which for their part confirmed the presence of both the American model and the dialogue with American culture. For this reason, *rotocalchi* represent a privileged source for the examination of the modernisation of Italian society and mass press, its distinctive features and its relationship with the United States and other countries. What is more, each publishing field reflected and re-elaborated in its own distinctive way this complex cultural dialogue, which saw in the censorship of foreign words and products the apotheosis of the control the regime wanted to exercise over the masses – all visible in the *rotocalchi* published by Nerbini, Mondadori and Rizzoli.

3. Creating a New Imagination: *L'Avventuroso* (1934–43)

Ci rendevamo perfettamente conto delle nostre responsabilità riguardo all'influenza che quelle storie potevano avere nel processo di maturità dei nostri giovani lettori.[1]

[We were fully aware of our responsibilities regarding the influence those stories could have on the maturation process of our young readers.]

The second half of the 1930s marks the beginning of the Golden Age of comics in the United States and a key moment in the development of modern Italian comics. Like other fields in publishing, children's periodicals went through a phase of modernisation in the interwar years when American comics arrived in Europe.[2] Especially in Italy the second half of the 1930s was characterised by a craze for comics that led

1 Mario Nerbini, Interview with Franco De Giacomo, 'Nerbini/Firenze', *Linus*, March 1966, pp. 29–30 (p. 30).

2 In the mid-1930s the comics industry in France, Spain and Italy boomed thanks to the success of American comics, whereas the UK was mainly exporting titles to Europe (see, e.g., the case of *Rob the Rover* mentioned below) and Germany developed one only in the 1950s. See Federico Zanettin, 'Translation, Censorship and the Development of European Comics Cultures', *Perspectives*, 26 (2018), 868–84. On the British scene, a peculiar case in Europe due to its role in exporting comics, Zanettin remarks: 'In the 1930s, British comics were also exported to other European countries […]. While imported and reprinted to some extent, American comics did not have the revolutionary impact they had in continental Europe in the 1930s, and the comics industry remained primarily based on national production' (p. 873).

to a sudden growth in production of comics magazines, expanding the readership to young adults and modernising the children's press.

According to the conventional view, modern comics were born in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, when they appeared as strips in mass-circulation newspapers and became a mass-market product. These early comic strips were aimed at adults, used crude language and often ridiculed the average American family and middle-class social habits. When American comics arrived in Europe, they were altered and their satirical meaning removed. This is particularly true in Italy, where adapted forms of American comics were relegated to children's periodicals and their meaning transformed. American comics exercised a key influence on the development of modern Italian comics, so a study of how comics originated and were imported to Italy is crucial, not only in order to understand comics as a new medium but also – and particularly – for their impact on and importance in influencing Italian culture: comic strip heroes, situations and characters originate from within a country's culture and society, the values of which become part of, and in turn are developed by, those comics. Hence comics are revealing primary sources for the investigation of a society's culture and its people's imaginary.

Italian comics magazines published in the 1930s and into the early part of 1943 offer an exceptional insight into the spread of American models and morals despite the Fascist idea of a popular Italian culture deprived of any foreign influence. These magazines, saturated with American culture, serve as a significant resource for analysing the effects and consequences of the effort at creating self-sufficient Italian cultural production. More specifically, the analysis of comics published in Italy during the 1930s can be used as a mirror of the prevailing morals, values and cultural practices of that time, as well as a gauge of the impact and weaknesses of Fascist censorship.

Before analysing the content and significance of comics published in the *Ventennio*, it is important to understand how comics developed in the United States, since what Nerbini introduced into Italy with the publication of *L'Avventuroso* in 1934 were not only American superheroes as characters, but a set of values and cultural models created in a foreign country. In both their original form and their Italian adaptation, American heroes changed Italian comics and challenged the control of the Fascist State over the education of Italian children, ultimately also changing the readership of comics from children to adolescents. Due to the cultural significance of comics and their political implications during the campaign for cultural autarchy, American comics were targeted by the regime from 1936 onwards and accused of contaminating the moral values

of Italian youth. Because they were spreading models of behaviour and morals that were not Italian, in 1938 the authorities banned those American heroes that children had started to love, such as Flash Gordon and The Phantom. The case study, *L'Avventuroso*, one of the most important and widely circulated comics magazines of the time, allows a close examination of all these elements, from the impact of American comics to the reaction of the Fascist establishment and its consequences for the publishing sector. A detailed study of the comics published in the magazine also brings to light elements which show how American adventure comics were Italianised and Italian comics Americanised in a two-way process that changed the popular imagination and brought Italian modern comics to life.

American Comics

It would not be possible to offer here a complete history of American comics, but it is useful to highlight some key factors in their development, ones which are fundamental to the comprehension of the history of Italian comics and the differences between them. First, American comics began to be published in the 1890s as comic strips in newspapers, either as daily strips or pull-out supplements in Sunday papers, meaning they were aimed at an adult readership. The scholar of comics Ian Gordon summarises the main difference between European and American comics at the time, highlighting that the publication of comics as strips in 'mass-circulated newspapers […] set American comic strips apart from the earlier European forms [of illustrations and caricatures] and made them mass market products'.[3] This publication format made comic strips highly successful, so much so that by the 1930s the comic strip page was, according to a series of newspaper surveys conducted by George Gallup, 'the most popular and frequently read part of a newspaper'.[4] It was from daily and Sunday comic strips that in 1929 the very first comics magazine was published: *The Funnies* (New York: Dell, 1929–30).[5] In these origins of American comics

3 Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture 1890–1945* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), pp. 8–9.

4 Gordon, *Comic Strips*, p. 81. The surveys to which Gordon refers are probably the Gallup newspaper readership surveys he carried out for his doctoral dissertation, 'An Objective Method for Determining Reader Interest in the Content of a Newspaper' (University of Iowa, 1928).

5 Due to its cost, too high to guarantee a regular readership, *The Funnies* ceased publication after the thirty-sixth issue. This publication represents a crucial step towards the modern formula of the comic book.

magazines lies the first crucial difference from the history of Italian comics: in Italy, comics began to be published in children's periodicals at the beginning of the twentieth century, excluding adults from their readership. For example, the *Corriere dei Piccoli*, widely regarded as the first Italian comics magazine, was distributed as a supplement of the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* and to be sold separately, highlighting the difference in the readership targeted.

Second, modern American comics magazines developed from a marketing experiment carried out by companies such as Gulf Oil and Procter and Gamble. In 1933 Gulf Oil published its own comic weekly, *Gulf Comic Weekly*, which only featured original strips and was given away at their service stations. The weekly was so successful that it soon reached three million copies and led Procter and Gamble to start publishing their own magazine, *Funnies on Parade*. *Gulf Comic Weekly* contained already-published comic strips and was 'the first stapled half-tabloid-size pamphlet of comics of the kind that would later be known in the realm of American popular publishing as "comic books"'.[6] The process of creation of comic weeklies represents another key difference from modern Italian comics magazines, one which also influenced the readership targeted: they were created in the United States as a give-away to attract customers, while in Italy they were born as a profitable product to be sold on news-stands and specifically aimed at children. Italian comics magazines were created by publishing companies already active in the periodical press, whereas in the United States they were the result of commercial practices enacted by companies outside the publishing industry.

Third, although American comics magazines derived from newspaper strips, they were influenced strongly by film animation and pulp magazines. Above all, the latter seem to have played a crucial role in the development of the modern comics magazine. According to Paul Lopes, 'the field of pulp magazines […] had the greatest direct

6 Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), pp. 8–9, 17; orig.: *Des Comics et des hommes: Histoire culturelle des* comic books *aux États-Unis* (Nantes: Editions du Temps, 2005). *Funnies on Parade* set the format for modern comics and was a model for other publications, such as *Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics*, published in 100,000 copies by Eastern Color, starting in 1933. One year later and after a few more comic publications of reprinted material, the same Eastern Color published a sixty-eight-page journal to be sold in chain stores for ten cents: *Famous Funnies*, considered the first modern comic journal (Henry Andrews, 'Famous Funnies', in *Comics Through Time: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideas*, ed. by M. Keith Booker, 4 vols (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014), I, *1800–1960*, pp. 133–35).

influence on the structure and rules of art in the new field of comic books'.[7] This was due to the involvement of the most successful comic-book publishers in the pulp industry and to the nature of the pulp product itself, which aimed to be a low-budget, low-commitment entertainment product. During the Depression American readers favoured purely escapist literature. Pulp magazines, as well as daily comic strips and comics magazines, offered to the public adventures and light stories that could distract them from the grim daily news. Historian Mike Benton highlights that, in 1940, the comics field saw a boom in the publication of superhero comics, leading some pulp magazine publishers to join the race. As Lopes summarises it, 'the early comic book field was fundamentally shaped by the formulas, genres, and commercial practices of the pulp field', from which 'comic book producers borrowed narrative and illustrations'.[8] The illustrations in pulp magazines exercised considerable influence on both the style of comic book illustrations and the fascination they produced in their readers. Pulp artists created covers characterised by realistic drawings, the style of which was later reproduced by comic artists (Fig. 2).[9] Moreover, pulp magazines had created an imaginary world made up of powerful men fighting villains and saving beautiful women, something that found further expression and success first in comic series and later in the new genre of the superhero adventure. The influence of pulp magazines is a specifically American feature that cannot be found in Italian comics, highlighting how comics reflect specific cultural backgrounds and respond to the taste of the readership. If one were to compare the two, the illustrations in pulp magazines, their role in the development of artist's styles and their influence on readers' tastes are similar to the role of the illustrations in popular *romanzi d'appendice* in Italy in the 1920s.

In the United States of the Great Depression comics were deeply rooted in American culture and superheroes not only embodied what young Americans dreamt of being but, more importantly, also

7 Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), p. 9.

8 Mike Benton, *Comic Book in America* (Dallas, TX: Taylor, 1989) pp. 30–31; Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, p. 4.

9 Pulp artists such as Henry Cruse Murphy and Alex Redmond created illustrations for the covers of pulp magazines with the same realism as can be found in comic-book artists such as Siegel and Shuster (the creators of Superman) and Alex Raymond (creator of Flash Gordon), for example. See Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci, *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero Literature* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2013), esp. pp. 6–14 and pp. 61–62.

the morals of American society and the Manichean dichotomy that characterised its culture. Characters like Mandrake the Magician (1934), Flash Gordon (1934), The Phantom (1936) and Superman (1938) were all an expression of American values and morals that were subsequently exported to Italy through successful comics magazines such as *L'Avventuroso* and *Jumbo*.

In spite of all the differences noted above, in the 1930s American and Italian educators reacted in a similar manner to the growth of comics. From 1936 onwards comics were perceived, both in Italy and the United States, as a threat to the education of young children. John A. Ryan analyses the effects of comics on children and on American society in general, asking the question: 'Are the comics moral?'.[10] In Italy educators and pedagogues accused comics of immorality, judging them unsuitable particularly for children, thereby highlighting the fact that in Italy comics were still considered a children's product.



Figure 2 [Left] Cover of the September 1929 issue of *Black Mask* magazine, artwork by H.C. Murphy (via Wikimedia Commons/public domain). [Right] Cover of the August 1930 issue of *Amazing Detective Tales*, artwork by Earle K. Bergey (via Wikimedia Commons/public domain).

10 John K. Ryan, 'Are the Comics Moral?', *Forum and Century*, 95 (May 1936), 301–04.

The Development of a Modern Italian *fumetto* and the Fascist Regime[11]

The origin of modern comics has been identified by historiography with the first publication of the 'Yellow Kid', illustrated by Richard F. Outcault, in the *New York World* in 1895.[12] In Italy the start of the comic era is conventionally dated to thirteen years later, 27 December 1908, the day the first issue of the *Corriere dei Piccoli* appeared on the news-stands. In its first year of publication *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* – often called simply *Il Corrierino* – featured many American comic strips, including 'Buster Brown' by Outcault (translated as 'Mimmo, Mammola e Medoro'), 'Happy Hooligan' by Frederick Burr Opper (published with the name 'Fortunello') and 'Katzenjammer Kids' by Rudolph Dirks (called 'Bibì e Bibò'). Before *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*, other Italian children's magazines such as *Il Novellino* (1898–1927) and *Il Giornalino della Domenica* (1906–27) had featured American comics, but the extensive use of American comics and the generally superior number of comics published set *Il Corrierino* apart from the others.[13]

Foreign comics were also imitated, with Italian versions of American comics such as 'Schizzo' by Attilio Mussino, reproducing 'Little Nemo' by Winsor McCay. Moreover, Italian authors were

11 Part of the research in this chapter has been published in 'From Funnies to Adventures: Translation, Censorship, and Adaptation of American Comics in Fascist Italy', *Inks* 7.2 (Summer 2023), 107–28 <https://doi.org/10.1353/ink.2023.a908589> [accessed 10 July 2025].

12 The exact date of the publication of the 'Yellow Kid' varies according to what is considered to be its first appearance. On 5 May 1895 there was the very first panel featuring a prototype of what would become the iconic bald Kid with big ears, at first wearing a bluish-grey gown. On 24 November 1895 the Kid wore a yellow gown, the colour of which changed again until 5 January 1896, when the portrayal of the Kid became consistent. Finally, on 25 October 1896 we find the first sequential art featuring the Yellow Kid ('The Yellow Kid and His New Phonograph' in the *New York Journal*). The 'Yellow Kid' has been considered the first example of modern comic strips thanks to Coulton Waugh's *The Comics* (New York: Macmillan, 1947). According to Gabilliet, this 'obscured the foreign origins of American comics', particularly the translation of Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer's works during the Jacksonian period, 1829–1837 (Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, pp. 293–95). Töpffer's illustrated stories, published in the 1830s, blended text and sequential imagery in a way that prefigured the modern comic strip, making them widely recognised as European proto-comics.

13 *Il Novellino* was the only Italian magazine of the time to publish a strip of the *Yellow Kid* in 1901: 'The Yellow Kid and His New Phonograph', translated as 'Il fonografo di Bebè' (the strip was re-coloured and the speech bubbles eliminated).

encouraged to create *Italian* protagonists, such as the popular 'Signor Bonaventura' (1917), created by Sergio Tofano in response to the popular strips of the unlucky 'Happy Hooligan' drawn by Burr Opper. Therefore, in the field of comics we can identify a process of Italianisation at the very beginning of the creation of modern Italian comics – or, more generally, the 'domestication' of American comics in Italy, to use the term coined by Brienza to describe the process of the cultural adaptation of foreign comics to align with the norms, tastes and expectations of the receiving readership.[14]

There was also a crucial difference in the relationship between images and words, one of the main features that affected the readership. In American comics, words and images were on the same level and co-existed in harmony to narrate a story and convey a message. In Europe, on the other hand, and especially in Italy, words were considered to be more important, a 'nobler' means of communication, and hence images were relegated to the status of a visual support to the message conveyed by the text. This imbalance in Italian comics is visible in the long captions added under the illustrations, a characteristic of early Italian comics. Leonardo Becciu, one of the first to retrace the history of Italian comics, interpreted this European attitude of adding written text and thereby altering the appearance of American comics as a consequence of Europe's Humanist tradition: '[L]'Europa "umanista" non voleva e non poteva neppure accettare l'idea che la "sacra" parola si riducesse al rango di ancella del disegno' ['Humanist' Europe did not want and could not even accept the idea that the 'sacred' word was reduced to the rank of maidservant to the drawing].[15] This attitude caused Italian comics to be considered a product for children, which meant they needed to use language appropriate for a young readership and have a primarily educational purpose. As a result, speech bubbles, the iconic features of modern comics, were replaced by captions placed under each panel and containing new text in the form of nursery rhymes. The narrative was then completely changed, creating a new meaning from the original American comics and often with the effect of separating the visual and textual narratives. In other words, in Italy comics as a new medium were altered in their main characteristic, with words dominating over images: American comics strips were adapted to the Italian tradition that saw illustrated stories as children's literature. Things changed in the 1930s, when both the readership of comics and

14 Brienza, *Manga in America*, pp. 15–40.

15 Leonardo Becciu, *Il fumetto in Italia*, Saggi, 15 (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), p. 30.

the balance between words and images changed. The evolution of Italian comics was, however, influenced by Fascist rule, just like the rest of the popular press.

Comics During the Fascist Regime (1925–38)

Mussolini's regime had a particular interest in the education of young Italians, who were considered the future of the nation. In February 1925 a meeting of the Gran Consiglio stressed the importance of educating Italian youth,[16] 'affinché braccio, cuore e mente dei giovani siano preparati a nuove conquiste' [so that the arms, hearts and minds of young people are prepared for new achievements].[17] As historian Antonio Gibelli notes, 'le pratiche politiche e culturali di conquista dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza possono essere considerate per molti aspetti come un modello di quelle di manipolazione delle masse. È la nazionalizzazione dell'infanzia come un fattore decisivo della nazionalizzazione delle masse' [political and cultural practices for the conquest of childhood and adolescence can in many ways be seen as a model for those for manipulating the masses. It is the nationalisation of childhood as a decisive factor in the nationalisation of the masses].[18] From this perspective it is clear that the education of children was crucial to the idea of creating a new Italian nation and people. Through the moulding of Italian children according to Fascist ideals, the foundation for the future Fascist nation and its people would be set. This interest in Italian children's education found expression in the centrality of school reform and youth organisations, but also in the publication of the first Fascist children's periodical, *Il Giornale dei Balilla*, published for the first time on 18 February 1923, just weeks

16 Established on 15 December 1922, the Gran Consiglio del Fascismo [Grand Council of Fascism] was the highest governing body of the Fascist regime in Italy. The first convening of the Gran Consiglio was on 12 January 1923. See Camera dei Deputati, Legislatura XXVII, 'Il Gran Consiglio del Fascismo', in *La legislazione Fascista. 1922–1928 (I–VII)*, I (Rome: Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati, 1929), 111–17.

17 Benito Mussolini, '60ª Riunione del Gran Consiglio del Fascismo', 14 February 1925, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, XXI, *Dal delitto Matteotti all'attentato Zaniboni (14 giugno 1924–4 novembre 1925)*, pp. 257–58 (p. 257).

18 Antonio Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino. Infanzia e nazione dalla grande guerra a Salò*, Einaudi storia, 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), p. 4.

after the March on Rome. The magazine had the same structure as *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* and included comics with rhymed captions alongside educational columns. However, it had a clear political aim that resulted in comics delivering socio-political messages, such as 'Mimmo Piangimai', a child who fights against undisciplined children, or 'Fasciolino', a *balilla* committed to the Fascist faith. The political aim is also clearly expressed by Dino Grandi's editorial opening to the first issue:

> Il nostro giornale è dedicato ai fanciulli italiani. Questi viventi fiori della nostra razza, educati al ricordo degli eroismi compiuti da quegli altri fanciulli che andarono alla guerra cantando e fermarono l'invasore sul Piave, e all'esempio di quelli che per la seconda volta salvarono l'Italia […], i nostri Balilla, […] troveranno in queste pagine *l'alimento della loro intelligenza e del loro cuore*. Non si conquista per sempre l'anima della Nazione, se non si cura *l'educazione intellettuale e morale dei fanciulli e dei giovinetti* […]. Per questo, o fanciulli d'Italia, *il Fascismo vi predilige*.[19]
>
> [Our journal is dedicated to Italian children. These living flowers of our race, educated to the memory of the heroic acts performed by those other children who went to war singing and stopped the invader on the Piave, and to the example of those who for the second time saved Italy, […] our Balilla […] will find in these pages *the nourishment of their intelligence and their hearts*. It is not possible to conquer the soul of the Nation forever, unless *the intellectual and moral education of children and youth is taken care of* […]. For this reason, oh children of Italy, *Fascism favours you*.]

The interest of the regime in using the press for children to educate young Italians in the values and ideology of Fascism is further demonstrated by the publication in 1927 of a comics periodical for young girls, *La Piccola Italiana* (1927–43). The creation of these magazines steeped in Fascist ideology is another expression of the process of the Fascistisation of the press started by the regime soon after coming to power. Just as in the daily press, children's periodicals had to adopt Fascist rhetoric, so magazines like *Il Corrierino*

19 Dino Grandi and Francesco Meriano, 'Saluto', *Il Giornale dei Balilla*, 12 February 1923, p. 1 (emphasis mine). The editorial is also quoted in Claudio Carabba, *Il fascismo a fumetti* (Rimini-Florence: Guaraldi, 1973), p. 19. It refers to the young Italian soldiers who died in the Great War and specifically those who fought in the Second Battle of the River Piave, at which the Italians defeated German and Austro-Hungarian forces in June 1918 ('who […] stopped the invader on the Piave').

or *Il Giornalino della Domenica* introduced Fascist protagonists and symbolism.[20]

If in the first years of Mussolini's rule the main impact on children's periodicals was the inclusion of Fascist precepts, the 1930s brought far more significant changes. In this decade American adventure comics were introduced and met with such previously unseen success that they pressured the regime into paying more attention to comics and taking measures to 'protect' Italian culture. The innovation brought by American comics was not limited to publishing, but also exercised an impact on the Italians' exotic imagination, which had previously been shaped by novelist Emilio Salgari, leaving a lasting mark.[21] The first to publish Adventure comics was the weekly *Jumbo*, launched on 17 December 1932 by Lotario Vecchi, who had founded the publishing house SAEV (Società Anonima Editrice Vecchi) in Milan in 1923. *Jumbo* distanced itself from the model set by *Il Corrierino* and marked the beginning of a new era for comics periodicals. The main novelty of the magazine was the publication of adventure comics that expanded the readership from children to young adolescents. Comics coming from overseas kept the traditional captions, but for the first time in Italy speech bubbles were also included as they appeared in the original versions. While the presence of speech bubbles may not seem

20 *Il Giornalino della Domenica* offers a clear example of the educational purpose of children's periodicals well before Fascism. In its first issue on 24 June 1906 it is stated that the journal aims to 'dare tutte le domeniche al suo giovine pubblico una *lettura che sia istruttiva* senza stancarne l'attenzione; che sia *educatrice* senza essere noiosa' [give every Sunday to its young readership a reading that is *informative* without tiring their attention; that is *educational* without being boring] (emphasis mine). *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* resisted the pressure of the Fascist regime until 1931, when after the death of Silvio Spaventa Filippi the editorship was taken over by Franco Bianchi. American comic strips disappeared in favour of such Fascist characters as Romolino e Romoletto, Venturino, Brio, Dado – 'piccoli soldati, devoti e ubbidienti, pronti a incarnare […] i valori della Fede' [little soldiers, devoted and obedient, ready to embody […] the values of the [Fascist] Faith] (Juri Meda, *Stelle e Strips. La stampa a fumetti italiana tra americanismo e antiamericanismo (1935–1955)* (Macerata: Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2007), p. 25).

21 Emilio Salgari created the popular character Sandokan, protagonist of many adventure novels such as *Le tigri di Mompracem* (Genoa: Donath, 1900), which started the Malaysian saga. Also famous for his corsair adventures – the Antilles saga that started with *Il Corsaro Nero* (Genoa: Donath, 1904) – Salgari created an exotic world made up of fantastic adventures that influenced entire generations and shaped the Italian adventure genre. On Salgari's exoticism in general see Giuseppe Bevilacqua and others, *L'isola non-trovata. Il libro d'avventure nel grande e nel piccolo Ottocento*, L'asino d'oro, 11 (Milan: Emme, 1982).

revolutionary per se, their importance lies in the characterisation of the text as part of the message conveyed by images. As such, the narrative followed the plot and turned the stories into entertainment rather than an educational moment. This marked the first shift in the Italian comics press from a purely informative use of comics to their originally intended scope of entertaining the readers. Vecchi's move granted him a jump in sales and soon made *Jumbo* more popular than *Il Corrierino*.[22]

Jumbo can be seen as a key representation of the British phase in Italian comics pinpointed by Becciu, who divides the development of Italian comics in the 1930s into three stages: the 'British', the 'American' and the 'autarchic' phase.[23] *Jumbo* imported many British comic strips, among them the popular 'Little Snow Drop' by Frank Jennens, published with the title 'Il segreto del nonno' [The Grandfather's Secret]. It also featured one of the most interesting comic strips, representative of the practices of that era when it came to the production of comics: the Italian adaptation of another British comic, 'Rob the Rover' by Walter H. Booth, given a new Fascist identity as 'Lucio l'avanguardista' [Lucio the Avantgardist], from the name of the Fascist organisation for boys between thirteen and eighteen. 'Lucio' is an example of how foreign comics were incorporated into Italian culture, in this case by adopting Fascist symbolism: Lucio is a member of the Fascist Youth Organisation, wears its uniform with the characteristic black shirt and flies a bi-plane named 'Dux'. His allegiance to Mussolini's system of power is echoed in his adventure set in Africa in 1936 with a Fascist woman at his side named 'Romana', a homage to the myth of the Italians' Roman spirit. 'Lucio l'avanguardista' follows the same pattern and adventurous plot as its original British version, transformed into a representation of Fascist values (Fig. 3).[24]

22 *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* was selling about 200,000 copies per week, whereas *Jumbo* reached 350,000. See Oreste Del Buono, *Sul fumetto*, ed. by Daniele Brolli (Bologna: Bonelli, 2014), pp. 98–108. On *Jumbo*, see Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, pp. 21–26; Leonardo Gori, 'Jumbo, finalmente (1932)', in *Fumetticlassici* <http://annitrenta.blogspot.com/2010/01/jumbo-finalmente-1932.html> [accessed 2 April 2025]; and 'Jumbo – seconda parte', in *Fumetticlassici* <http://annitrenta.blogspot.com/2010/01/jumbo-seconda-parte.html> [accessed 2 April 2025].

23 Becciu, *Il fumetto*, pp. 72–73.

24 On 'Lucio l'avanguardista' and the role of Romana see Sara Zanatta, Samanta Zaghini and Eleonora Guzzetta, *Le donne del fumetto. L'altra metà dei comics italiani. Temi, autrici, eroine al femminile*, Lapilli, 17 (Latina: Tunué, 2009), pp. 37–38. It is not clear who the authors of 'Lucio l'avanguardista' were, but Federico Pedrocchi and Enwer Bongrani have been suggested (Leonardo Gori, 'L'editore vecchi e la culla del fumetto italiano', *Giornale Pop*, 4 July 2019 <https://www.giornalepop.com/editore-vecchi/> [accessed 29 January 2025]).

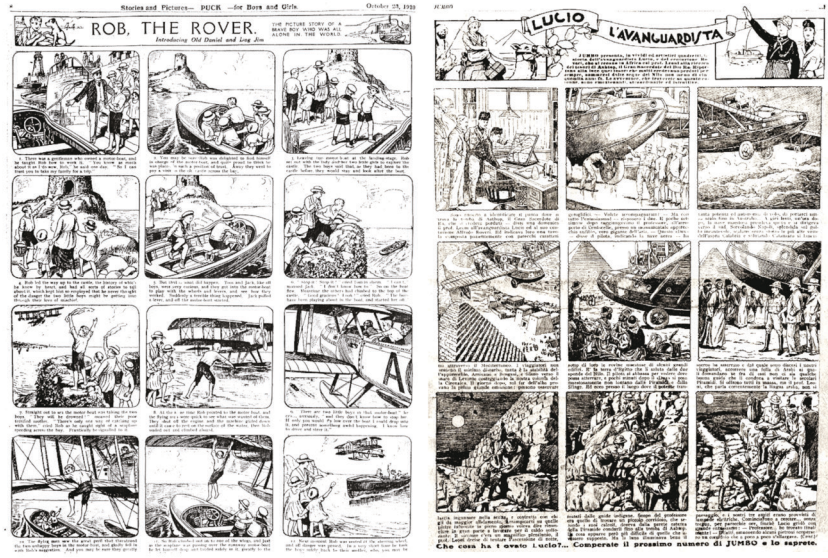


Figure 3 [Left] 'Rob the Rover', first published in *Pluck*, 29 October 1940. Premission to reproduce this image granted by Rebellion Publishing Ltd. [Right] 'Lucio l'avanguardista' from *Jumbo*, 17 December 1932. It has not proved possible to trace the creator(s) of the Italian translation/adaptation (the publisher of which died in 1985); the image is now presumed to be in the public domain.

Whereas *Jumbo* stood out for its innovative features, the presence of captions continued to align the magazine with the Italian tradition that emphasised words over images, not to mention its reinforcement of the regime's notion of comics as a means for disseminating its ideology. *Jumbo* was nonetheless a pioneering magazine, the first to conceive of comics as entertainment, even though it was an entertainment meant to educate children and please the Fascist rulers:

> JUMBO vuol divertire i propri lettori ed insegnare loro tante belle cose! Le storielle […] avranno sempre un *fine altamente morale*: saranno una esaltazione delle virtù civili che ogni bimbo italiano deve avere o prepararsi ad avere nell'*esempio fulgidissimo del Re Vittorioso, e sotto la guida del Duce*.[25]
>
> [JUMBO wants to entertain its readers and teach them many good things! The little stories […] will always have a *highly moral scope*: they will be an exaltation of the civic virtues that every Italian child must

25 L'editore, 'A tutti i lettori, piccoli e grandi di JUMBO', *Jumbo*, 17 December 1932, p. 2 (emphasis mine).

> have or prepare to have in the *most shining example of the Victorious King, and under the guidance of the Duce*.]

In 1932, just a few months after *Jumbo*, Nerbini published *Topolino*, a children's magazine that marked a turning point in the history of Italian comics. Compared to the other magazines featuring comics, *Topolino* had more stories written for children and only two of its eight pages were dedicated to comic strips. Its importance and success stem from the presence of the eponymous character, Walt Disney's famous Mickey Mouse, at the time a very popular film character. The anthropomorphous mouse appeared on the cover page in an original comic strip created by artist Giove Toppi, with no speech bubbles but with the traditional captions in rhyming couplets (Fig. 4). *Topolino* signifies a step forward in the modernisation of Italian comics and is the first magazine created with the sole purpose of entertaining its readers:

> Questo giornalino non ti promette altro che di farti passare qualche lieto momento, di svagarti un poco, e *non ha la benché minima idea di fare il saputone con te*. Se imparerai qualche cosa, tanto meglio, vuol dire che il giornalino ti avrà insegnato senza farsene accorgere. D'altronde dei maestri ne hai abbastanza.[26]
>
> [This magazine promises you nothing more than to give you a few happy moments, to amuse you a little and *it has no intention of being a know-it-all towards you*. If you learn something, so much the better, it means that the magazine will have taught you without being noticed. After all, you have enough teachers.]

The early history of *Topolino* has been retraced in detail by Leonardo Gori, Fabio Gadducci and Sergio Lama in *Eccetto Topolino*, but it is important to highlight here how its publication was fundamental for the development of modern comics magazines in Italy. It was because of *Topolino* that Nerbini connected with Guglielmo Emanuel, the Italian agent for King Features Syndicate, and bought the rights to several American comic strips, such as 'Tim Tyler's Luck' by Lyman Young ('Cino e Franco').[27] Already in its first year *Topolino* started featuring more comics and soon the text became less relevant,

26 [Anon.], 'Due paroline di Topolino ai suoi lettori', *Topolino*, 31 December 1932, p. 2 (emphasis mine).

27 'Cino e Franco' was introduced on 30 December 1933. All the other American comic strips published by Nerbini came from King Features Syndicate, including Alex Raymond's 'Jungle Jim' and 'Flash Gordon'.



Figure 4 The first issue of *Topolino*, artwork by Giove Toppi, 31 December 1932. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

another step towards the modern predominance of images over words in children's magazines. The change was openly addressed by the editor-in-chief of *Topolino*, Collodi Nipote (the pseudonym of Paolo Lorenzini), and linked to the new taste of the young readers:

> Dai primi numeri di questo giornalino al presente, ultimo dell'annata, troverete parecchia differenza poiché l'Editore, nell'intendimento di *conformarsi ai gusti dei ragazzi d'oggi* e rendere loro sempre più gradito 'Topolino', lo è andato ricolmando, ognor di più, di vignette e storielle figurate.[28]
>
> [From the first issues of this magazine to the present, the last of the year, you will find a great deal of difference because the publisher, in order *to conform to the tastes of today's children* and make them appreciate 'Topolino' more, has increasingly been filling it with cartoons and illustrated stories.]

In Nerbini's view, images were the key to the new medium, which soon became the core of his most successful creation: *L'Avventuroso*, published in 1934. Nerbini was not the only publisher to have understood the potential of comics: Lotario Vecchi was also working at another magazine, *L'Audace*, which he launched following the success of *Jumbo*.

The story of *L'Audace* can be taken as a clear example of the evolution of the modern Italian comics magazine, embodying the British and American phases in Italian comics, plus an early stage that can be defined as a 'traditional' phase, when speech bubbles were eliminated and words dominated the scene. In January 1934 *L'Audace* appeared on the news-stands as a 'traditional' children's magazine in its format and content, publishing only stories in text with no images. This feature made *L'Audace* look obsolete when compared to *Topolino* and *Jumbo*. In August, to keep up with the increasing number of comics magazines appearing on the news-stands, Vecchi transformed *L'Audace* by introducing comic strips, mainly British material from the Amalgamated Press. Text, however, still predominated over images and the differences between British comics and the increasingly popular American adventure comics published in other periodicals still made *L'Audace* look outdated.[29] From October 1934 onwards the publication of *L'Avventuroso* pushed Vecchi to change once again the format and content of *L'Audace*: from February 1935 captions were removed and the original speech bubbles reintroduced, with images finally prevailing over words. What is more, *L'Audace* began to offer to its

28 Collodi Nipote, 'Ai lettori', *Topolino*, 30 December 1933, p. 2 (emphasis mine).

29 According to Becciu, British comics were 'troppo lenti e manierati, ed insistevano eccessivamente sulle descrizioni minuziose dei particolari, a scapito dell'azione' [too slow and mannered and insisted excessively on minute descriptions of details, to the detriment of action] (Becciu, *Il fumetto in Italia*, p. 78).

readers unpublished strips of already famous comic strips such as 'Guido Ventura' [Brick Bradford] by Clarence Gray and William Ritt, 'L'intrepido Bill' [Broncho Bill] by Harry F. O'Neill and 'La Pattuglia Volante' [Radio Patrol] by Eddie Sullivan and Charlie Schmidt. All these titles had already been published in *I Tre Porcellini* (Milan: Mondadori, 1935–37), *Jumbo* and *L'Avventuroso* respectively, but the existence of daily strips and Sunday pages in the United States allowed the Italian representative of King Features Syndicate to sell them separately to different publishers, allowing Vecchi to publish original material in *L'Audace*. Vecchi did not rely only on King Features Syndicate material to modernise his comics magazine, but also used material from the United Features Syndicate, securing the first original strips of an unpublished hero 'Tarzan'.[30] In spite of all these efforts, however, *L'Audace* was never able to compete with *L'Avventuroso* and *Topolino*, so by 1938 Vecchi abandoned the project and the magazine ceased publication.

The parabola of *L'Audace* is representative of the dynamism of the Italian comic book industry in the mid-1930s. Comics were becoming so popular that by 1937 the main publishers in the field (Vecchi, Del Duca, Nerbini and Mondadori) were publishing eighteen different comics magazines overall; if we include the smaller publishing companies, the total rises to thirty-five weeklies.[31] A clear dividing line can be set with the advent of *L'Avventuroso*, after which many comic weeklies were issued as an attempt at either joining a successful market or competing with Nerbini's periodical. Among the latter, *Il Vittorioso*, published by Azione Cattolica, represents possibly the most effective attempt to challenge Nerbini's success, particularly for its continuity after the ban on foreign comics in 1938. It was a magazine that published only Italian-made comic strips, which means ones written and drawn by Italian artists with no translations or adaptations of foreign material. *Il Vittorioso* was, in general, aligned to the establishment and garnered a faithful readership, which found in the saga of its original and most popular hero, 'Romano' [Roman],

30 It is also interesting to note that Vecchi published the strips without altering their appearance, in contrast to Nerbini's previous practice. On *L'Audace* and the Società Anonima Editrice Vecchi, see Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, pp. 51–85.

31 SAEV published seven different comic books, followed by Nerbini and Del Duca – Casa Editrice Moderna – (four publications each) and Mondadori (three).

an echo of Fascist ideology, particularly in its patriotism.[32] Appearing between 1938 and 1943, 'Romano' is the result of the re-elaboration of the popular American comics that its creator, the Italian Kurt Caesar, placed in the setting of the Fascist regime and its wars: the Spanish Civil War, Italian East Africa, the Mediterranean. Leaving ideology aside, 'Romano' is the epitome of the Italianisation of American comics: the drawing style, the rhythm of the adventures, the dynamism of the illustrations and the integrity of the hero are all drawn from the American model, to which the values of Fascism and Roman Catholicism are added in perfect synthesis. The choice of exclusively publishing Italian comics, and the Fascist alignment embodied by 'Romano', ensured the continued publication of *Il Vittorioso* and protected it from censorship, which from 1938 onwards specifically targeted comics. While other publications were struggling to sell, *Il Vittorioso* gained more popularity, becoming the longest running comics magazine of its kind created in the 1930s.[33]

The creation of a character like Romano reflects the importance of comic characters in challenging the boundaries between realism and fantasy. As products created to be consumed mainly by children – whose perspectives are still forming – the essence or identity of such characters becomes crucial for fostering identification with the protagonist and therefore with the values he embodies. Fictional characters exist in a liminal space between reality and fiction, inviting readers to engage with them as both imaginary figures and tangible entities within their cultural framework. A figure like Romano exemplifies how characters function as psychological and ideological vessels which readers actively construct through their engagement with the text and visuals. The inherent gaps and indeterminacies in the construction of comics characters allowed young readers unconsciously to fill these spaces with Fascist ideals, making the process of internalisation more effective precisely because it relied on active engagement rather than mere passive reception. In short, the indeterminacies in character-construction typical of the comic medium are crucial for engaging

32 The comic is widely known as 'Romano il legionario' from the title of its first adventure published in 1938. The hero has been defined as the Fascist version of the American comics *à la* Flash Gordon: a 'Gordon in a black shirt' (Becciu, *Il fumetto*, p. 115).

33 The magazine ceased publication in 1970. Another attempt at counterbalancing the predominance of American heroes was made by the short-lived magazine *Argentovivo!* (Rome: SAER), launched in December 1936 and discontinued after only fifty-five issues. Like *Il Vittorioso*, *Argentovivo!* only published stories written and drawn by Italian authors and artists and made this feature its point of strength.

readers' imagination.[34] Furthermore, the visual component of comics adds another layer to Romano's function as an ideological vessel. The visual design, including his facial expressions, actions and setting, works in conjunction with textual cues to guide reader interpretation. However, the indeterminate aspects – what is left unsaid or unseen in the empty space between panels delineated by gutters – create openings for ideological projection. This sort of identification of the character with a set of values was soon perceived by the regime as a threat to the education of Italian children, leading to strict legislation to control the production of comics.

Fascist Censorship against American Adventure Comics (1938–43)

The Fascist regime's first step towards the control of comics was taken in March 1937, when Dino Alfieri declared that the aim of its Ministry of Popular Culture was to ensure that any cultural production aimed at the Italian people followed a Fascist 'spirit'. As a result, new legislation was introduced to increase State control over the periodical press, including comics magazines. Given the predominantly American or American-inspired content of comics, they needed to be overhauled and should instead 'svolgere soggetti italiani ispirati alla vita e alle vicende dei nostri esploratori, navigatori, aviatori, agli eroi della nostra guerra' [[have] developed Italian subjects inspired by the life and events of our explorers, navigators, aviators, of the heroes of our war].[35] Targeted action against comics was taken on 19 July 1938, when Alfieri ordered publishers to 'far scomparire entro tre mesi ogni soggetto o vignetta d'importazione o d'imitazione americana' [make any subject or panel of American import or imitation disappear within three months].[36]

34 For a discussion of the ontological and interpretative complexity of literary characters and their engagement with readers, see Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, 'Character', in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2004 [1995]), pp. 60–67.

35 'Relazione di Dino Alfieri al Senato del 1937', in ACS, MCP, b. 113, f. 2; [Anon.], 'La cultura popolare nel discorso di S. E. Alfieri al Senato', *La Stampa*, 22 May 1937, p. 1.

36 Letter from the Ministry of Popular Culture Dino Alfieri to publisher Mario Nerbini ('Alfieri a Nerbini', Fondazione Franco Fossati, Milan, Archivio Guglielmo Emanuel, 17 July 1938; first quoted in Giuseppe Pazienti and Rinaldo Traini, *Fumetto alalà. I comics italiani d'avventura durante il fascismo* (Rome: Comic Art, 1986), p. 54; reproduced in its entirety in Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, p. 167).

Comics were not the only victim of a stricter control over cultural production. Mussolini's government took action on the whole of the children's periodical press and literature with a campaign against foreign influences that were allegedly contaminating the morals of Fascist youth. Such a view was summarised at the convention on children's literature (Convegno nazionale per la letteratura infantile e giovanile) held in Bologna in 1938 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Professor Guido Mancini (official representative of the Secretary of the Fascist Party): '[L]a letteratura italiana infantile e giovanile [deve essere] dominata dai seguenti principi: esclusione assoluta di ogni importazione straniera, sia nel materiale scritto e illustrato, sia nello spirito; ispirazione schiettamente italiana' [[I]talian children's and youth literature [must be] governed by the following principles: the absolute exclusion of any foreign import, whether in written or illustrated material or in spirit; a genuinely Italian inspiration].[37] From a legislative point of view, the 'decontamination' of children's publishing meant the:

> abolizione completa di tutto il materiale d'importazione straniera, […] soppressione di quelle storie e illustrazioni che si ispirano alla produzione straniera. Riduzione a metà delle pagine della parte dedicata alla pura illustrazione con conseguente aumento del testo finora quasi totalmente sacrificato. La stampa per ragazzi dovrà essenzialmente assolvere una funzione educativa, esaltando l'eroismo italiano, soprattutto militare, la razza italiana, la storia passata e presente d'Italia. L'avventura avrà la sua parte, purché sia audace e sana, ripudiando tutto ciò che vi è nelle storie criminali, paradossali, tenebrose e moralmente equivoche che inquinano tanta parte della stampa per ragazzi. […] Tali direttive che hanno […] un'ispirazione razziale e *autarchica*, dovranno essere attuate completamente entro il mese di dicembre.[38]
>
> [complete abolition of all foreign imported material, […] suppression of those stories and illustrations inspired by foreign production. Reduction to half the pages of the part devoted to pure illustration with consequent increase of the text hitherto almost totally sacrificed. The children's press will essentially have to fulfil an educational function, exalting Italian heroism, especially military, the Italian race, the past and present history of Italy. Adventure will have its share, as long as it is bold and wholesome, repudiating all that there is in

37 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Guido Mancini, 'Il Convegno per la letteratura infantile e giovanile (Bologna 9–10 novembre)', *Giornale della libreria*, 19 November 1938, pp. 325–27 (p. 327). Marinetti later summarised this view in 'Prefazione-Manifesto della letteratura giovanile', in *Convegno nazionale per la letteratura infantile e giovanile* (Rome, [n. pub.]: 1939), pp. 7–10.

38 [Anon.], 'La stampa per i ragazzi', *La Stampa*, 18 November 1938, p. 2 (emphasis mine).

> the criminal, paradoxical, gloomy and morally equivocal stories that pollute so much of the children's press. […] These directives, which have […] a racial and *autarchic* inspiration, are to be fully implemented by December.]

A particularly revealing insight into Fascist perceptions of comics at this time can be gleaned from an article in *La Stampa* from December 1938. According to journalist Giorgio Vecchietti, five of the thirty comics magazines published at the time were selling over 100,000 copies, followed by another ten that were printing between fifty thousand and eighty thousand copies, for:

> una tiratura complessiva di circa due milioni e una vendita di un milione e mezzo di copie. Se si calcola che ogni numero passa per le mani di almeno tre ragazzi, se ne conclude che ogni settimana più di tre milioni di piccoli lettori si appassionano, fanno il 'tifo' più appassionato […] per i loro eroi, di forme e di spiriti non italiani se non addirittura antiitaliani.[39]
>
> [a total circulation of about two million and sales of one and a half million copies. If one calculates that each issue passes through the hands of at least three children, it can be concluded that every week more than three million young readers are excited, do the most passionate 'cheering' […] for their heroes, of non-Italian, if not even anti-Italian, shapes and spirits.]

The popularity of American comics was, therefore, cause for concern on account of their wide dissemination among the younger generation, who, instead of growing up following the ideals for becoming the 'new men' envisioned by the Fascist revolution, were being manipulated into adopting an American mindset and morals and even exposed to anti-Italian values:

> Tengono il cartello infatti una settantina di storie in continuazione di genere poliziesco e avventuroso, di pura marca americana, e una quarantina di non meglio accertata derivazione o imitazione 'yankee'. […] Disegnatori e soggettisti impongono così all'attenzione, anzi alla ammirazione del fanciullo italiano un modo di vivere, di pensare, di agire rigidamente americano. Mai propaganda fu operata con tanta ampiezza di mezzi e garanzia di successo. […] [T]utto ciò, di grande o minuscolo, su cui il nostro ragazzo posa l'occhio è infallantemente, spietatamente americano.[40]

39 Giorgio Vecchietti, 'La rivincita di Pinocchio', *La Stampa*, 28 December 1938, p. 3.

40 Vecchietti, 'La rivincita di Pinocchio', p. 3.

> [About seventy stories of the detective and adventure genres, pure American in brand, constantly hold the stage and about forty of no better ascertained 'Yankee' derivation or imitation. […] Artists and scriptwriters thus impose on the attention, or rather for the admiration of the Italian child a rigidly American way of living, thinking and acting. Never was propaganda operated with such breadth of means and guarantee of success. […] [E]verything, large or tiny, on which our boy lays his eyes is infallibly, ruthlessly American.]

Even Italian comics that imitated American products were, allegedly, contaminating the minds of the young by contributing to the spread of foreign values that often went against Fascist Italy and, in general, Italians:

> Biondo, slanciato, di tipo anglosassone, razzialmente puro è sempre l'eroe, l'invitto; bruno, basso, tozzo, meridionalmente acceso, violento e subdolo è sempre l'antagonista, in tutto simile a quella figura di emigrante latino, o meglio italiano, i cui cineasti di Hollywood amano riservare le parti mortificanti del *villain*.[41]

> [The hero, the unconquered, is always blond, slender, Anglo-Saxon, racially pure; the antagonist is always dark, short, stocky, lit from below, violent and devious, in every way similar to that figure of the Latin, or rather Italian, emigrant for whom Hollywood filmmakers like to reserve the mortifying role of the *villain*.]

This view reveals the complex emotional and psychological mechanisms through which young readers engaged with comic characters, making them an important element in propaganda and indoctrination. As Bennett and Royle argue, the hero is 'the person with whom we "identify", with whom we sympathise or empathise,

41 Vecchietti, 'La rivincita di Pinocchio', p. 3 (emphasis in the original). It is interesting to note that in 1937, in the literary magazine *L'Orto*, Vecchietti had already denounced the American influence in comics: 'I giornalini d'oggi, dalle grandi tirature, non sono scritti ma composti di storie e vignette alla maniera cinematografica americana. Sono, anzi, disegni ritagliati pari pari dai supplementi illustrati dei grandi giornali di Nuova [*sic*] York, di Chicago o di Boston, spediti a Milano e a Firenze, ricolorati rozzamente, appena tradotti nei "fumetti"' [Today's children's magazines, with their large print runs, are not written but made up of stories and cartoons in the style of American cinema. In fact, they are drawings cut out exactly as they appear in the illustrated supplements of the major newspapers of New York, Chicago, or Boston, sent to Milan and Florence, crudely recoloured and barely translated in the 'speech balloons']. He proposed using them to the advantage of the education of children rather than abolishing them: 'Il ragazzo non vuole sfilate settimanali di scolari modello, di uomini modello; si annoia e ha ragione. Bisogna piuttosto che Gordon diventi da americano italiano, da biondo bruno, conservando intatti i suoi attributi di uomo ardito e fiero, […] che quel tanto

or whose position or role we imaginatively inhabit'.[42] This process of identification, operating on both the conscious and the unconscious level, explains the regime's concern about Italian youth's consumption of and engagement with Anglo-Saxon heroes. Given that character identification is not merely passive reception but an active process of identity construction – whereby readers fill in the psychological and ideological gaps in fictional figures – the hostile response by the Ministry of Popular Culture to American comics aligns with its broader project of forging a new Italian (and Fascist) identity. The regime recognised that the ontological ambiguity of fictional characters made them particularly powerful vehicles for transmitting cultural values and shaping young readers' developing sense of self. It is not surprising, then, that the final attack on comics took the form of an official directive from the Ministry of Popular Culture which banned both foreign comics and any Italian imitation. Comics were to return to being purely Italian, as Vecchietti reports:

> All'alba del 1° gennaio [1939] […] i giornali per ragazzi, per ordine del Ministro della Cultura popolare, appariranno in veste totalmente, italianamente rinnovata: cadranno le innumerevoli vignette straniere, le pagine scritte equilibreranno quelle di pura illustrazione, le avventure, gli ardimenti, i giochi avranno una marca, un'ispirazione, uno stile finalmente italiani.[43]
>
> [By order of the Minister of Popular Culture, at dawn on 1 January [1939] […] children's journals will appear in a totally renewed, Italianised guise: the innumerable foreign cartoons will fall by the wayside, the written pages will balance those of pure illustration, the adventures, the feats, the games will have a brand, an inspiration, a style that is finally Italian.]

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di buono che è nella stampa americana o americanizzata di oggi, i suoi insegnamenti ed esperienze, non vadano perduti ma convogliati, orientati in senso del tutto italiano, senza preoccupazione di propaganda' [The boy does not want weekly parades of model schoolboys, of model men; [he] is bored – and he is right. Rather, it is necessary for Gordon to go from American to Italian, from blond to brunette, keeping intact his attributes as a bold and proud man, […] so that what good there is in today's American or Americanised press, its teachings and experiences, should not be lost but channelled, oriented in a wholly Italian sense, without concern for propaganda] (Calabrone [Vecchietti], 'Avventuroso', *L'Orto*, 4 April 1937, pp. 36–39 (pp. 37, 39). *L'Orto* can be consulted online thanks to the database digitised by the University of Trento: CIRCE, Catalogo Informatico Riviste Culturali Europee <https://catalogocirce.lettere.unitn.it> [accessed 10 July 2025].

42 Bennett and Royle, 'Character', p. 67.

43 Vecchietti, 'La rivincita di Pinocchio', p. 3. The Decree also aimed at rebalancing the content of the magazines in favour of written texts.

Vecchietti echoed the view of the Fascist regime on American comics, considered a corrupting influence from which Italian children should be protected. In the view of the Ministry of Popular Culture, Italian comics magazines had to return to being culturally Italian, which meant the traditional predominance of textual narrative over visuals. Exalting the decision made by Mussolini's government, Vecchietti welcomed the resurgence of traditional Italian children's periodicals as a novelty that would transform children's publishing for the better. His view appears perfectly in line not only with the latest directives against comics, but also with the Fascist relationship with the past as well as with its ambivalence towards modernity.

Italian publishers of comics had to comply with the new directives, so American comics disappeared, but not entirely at first. Conscious of their popularity, which meant high sales figures, in some instances publishers hid the American origin of comics by Italianising names and settings, or by publishing Italian copies of American stories.[44] In response to the action by the Ministry of Popular Culture against American comics, and in order to try to please the new generation of readers who had moved on from Salgari's exotic adventures, comics magazines included comic strips that were formally Italian but imitated the original American heroes and incorporated the new collective imaginary. The ploy worked for a few months and between June 1940 and December 1941, when the attention of the regime was diverted by the war effort and propaganda, the American heroes returned under Italian names, for example, Jungle Jim (Geo) and Superman (Ciclone). Once Italy and the United States were officially at war, however, American comics had to disappear fully, leading to a plunge in sales for comics magazines.

Adventure Comics and Entertainment: *L'Avventuroso*

By the 1920s Giuseppe Nerbini was publishing popular characters who were part of the collective imagination, such as Buffalo Bill, Lord

44 See, for example, Ferdinando Vichi's 'Selvaggi della Guiana' [Sauvages of Guiana] and 'Evasi dalla Guiana' [Escaped from Guiana], an Italian version of Raymond's 'Jungle Jim' published in *Giungla!*. Another example is Carlo Cossio's 'Dick Fulmine', published in *Albi dell'Audacia* (Milan: Vittoria, 1938–39), whose eponymous Italian-American character had to have his physical features changed, from his jumper to his face, because the jumper was judged too American-looking. The hero's features, with the inclusion of a car crash and plastic surgery in the plot, went from recalling the American actor Gary Cooper to Mussolini's highly recognisable jawline.

Lister and Nick Carter, with circulation figures of up to fifty thousand copies.[45] These publications highlight both Nerbini's role as a publisher of popular characters and stories and his early interest in overseas productions. In 1922 Giuseppe Nerbini and his son Mario – who worked at the publishing company, mainly supervising the periodical section – joined the Fascist movement and used their political affiliation to protect their business and enjoy a certain freedom. The letters sent by Mario Nerbini to the Segreteria particolare del Duce (the Private Secretariat of the Duce) in the 1930s, along with his direct discussions with Mussolini about his magazines, raise the possibility that his political alignment may have been, at least in part, a pragmatic business strategy. Similarly, the publication of American comics was a business choice and cannot be interpreted as a form of resistance.[46] Like other publishers in the 1930s in all fields of the periodical press, Nerbini published the content that allowed him to sell more copies than any other comics magazine: American comics heroes.

Nerbini had been active in the children's periodical press since the beginning, publishing magazines such as *Il Giornale di Fortunello* (1920–22), *Monella* (1925–36) and *L'Avventuriero* (1926); in the 1930s his comics magazines played a key role in the shaping of the modern Italian comics press. After the success of *Topolino*, Mario Nerbini – head of the company from 1933 – decided to launch a new project focused on American adventure comics: *L'Avventuroso*. Interviews and historical accounts show that Mario Nerbini himself played a central role in its shaping and production. According to an interview he granted to journalist Franco De Giacomo in 1966, Nerbini supervised the work of artists and writers and, above all, organised the layout of the magazine and approved the translations: '[V]olevo fare tutto da me […]. Poi guardavo tutti i giornali, davo i soggetti… insomma, facevo tutto da me. […] [Anche] l'impaginazione, […] andavo nelle tipografie a impaginare, tutto [facevo tutto]' [[I] wanted to do everything myself […]. Then I would look at all the journals,

45 Listri, *Il mondo di Nerbini*, pp. 113–23. Nick Carter first appeared in Italy in 1908 (*Nick Carter. Il grande poliziotto americano* (Milan: Casa Editrice Americana, 1908)) and was published by Nerbini from 1919. Among the illustrators of these book series was Giove Toppi, who later played a central role in *L'Avventuroso*.

46 In an interview with De Giacomo, Mario Nerbini also claimed he had known Mussolini personally: 'Conoscevo molto bene Mussolini, […] potevo andare quando volevo, da Mussolini' [I knew Mussolini very well, […] I could go to see him, Mussolini, any time I wanted] (Franco De Giacomo, 'Intervista a Mario Nerbini', in Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, pp. 448–51 (p. 448); an abridged form of the interview was published in *Linus*, March 1966, pp. 30–31).

the topics…in short, I would do everything by myself. […] [Even] the layout, […], I would go to the printer shops and did the layout, everything [I did everything]].[47]

There is not much information on how the publishing company and editorial staff of *L'Avventuroso* were organised; however, when looking at Nerbini's collaborators a certain continuity can be noticed: artists such as Corrado Sarri, Tancredi Scarpelli, Guido Moroni-Celsi, Giorgio Scudellari and Giove Toppi had worked with Nerbini, illustrating his popular novels. In *L'Avventuroso*, together with other regular illustrators such as Roberto Lemmi, Rudy Coghei, Ferdinando Vichi, Guido and Mario Fantoni and Carlo Cossio, they created American-style comics. Among the regular collaborators there were also writers, including Paolo Lorenzini (Collodi Nipote), Enrico Novelli (Yambo), Emilio Fancelli and Luigi Motta. These writers were all active across different popular publications: Lorenzini had edited *Topolino*; Yambo had worked for *Il Novellino* at the beginning of the century and also wrote stories for *Topolino*; Fancelli was the literary heir to adventure writer Emilio Salgari; and Luigi Motta also collaborated with *Omnibus*. As in other popular publishing sectors, it is possible to highlight a network of recurrent names in comics publishing. The role of the publisher, Mario Nerbini, seems to have played a key part in the success of *L'Avventuroso*, which changed Italian comics and established record sales figures of 300,000 copies on average every week, outpacing even *Topolino*, which had established itself on 250,000 copies.[48] The story of *L'Avventuroso* offers a glimpse into how the field evolved and radically changed, paving the way for modern Italian comics as we know them today.

The Golden Age of American Comics in *L'Avventuroso* and Fascist Censorship, 1934–42

The golden age of Nerbini was brief, but between 1934 and 1938 it produced several radical innovations in Italian comics, with *L'Avventuroso* at the centre of this moment. After 1938 new constraints meant that the impact of his comics was reduced, so much so that in

47 De Giacomo, 'Intervista a Mario Nerbini'. It is not clear who translated the American comics but, as Gori points out, the translations were influenced by the Florentine dialect (Leonardo Gori, 'L'Avventuroso – 12, 1936', in *Fumetticlassici* <http://annitrenta.blogspot.it/2011/05/lavventuroso-12-1936-quinta-parte.html> [accessed 02 April 2025]).

48 De Giacomo, 'Nerbini/Firenze', p. 30.

1942 *L'Avventuroso* passed to Mondadori before being discontinued in 1943. As Gadducci, Gori and Lama put it: '*L'Avventuroso* di Mario Nerbini […] è un fenomeno che travalica l'editoria per ragazzi e assume anzi le proporzioni di un autentico fatto di costume' [Mario Nerbini's *L'Avventuroso* […] was a phenomenon that transcended the children's press and acquired the proportions of an authentic fact of custom].[49] For Juri Meda, 'inaugura un nuovo modo di intrattenere i giovani lettori, niente più monelli e comicità ma eroi coraggiosi e invincibili' [it inaugurates a new way of entertaining young readers, no more pests and comedy but brave and invincible heroes].[50] Journalist Giuseppe Trevisani identifies the revolutionary impact of *L'Avventuroso* in its entertaining nature:

> I ragazzi […] si buttarono avidamente su quel foglio che era diverso da quanto era stato fino a quel momento consentito e consigliato loro di leggere. Tutti i loro giornaletti […] erano stati fino a quel momento edificanti e istruttivi. Questo giornalaccio tutto figure finalmente non insegnava niente […]. Era soltanto divertente, nella sua sciaguratagine, nel suo italiano a volte persino sconnesso.[51]
>
> [Kids […] threw themselves eagerly onto that paper, so different from what they had been allowed and advised to read up to that point. Up to that point all their magazines […] had been edifying and instructive. Ultimately, this rag, composed entirely of pictures, did not teach anything […]. It was only amusing, in its wretchedness, in its sometimes even disconnected Italian.]

For its success and innovation, *L'Avventuroso* is the key to the 'American revolution' in Italian comics. As already noted, much research has been carried out on this magazine; however, these studies are mainly limited to the innovation that was the introduction of American heroes, with little attention paid to whether and how these comics were adapted to an Italian readership. Here *L'Avventuroso* is analysed with a particular focus on how the magazine changed over the years of its production, highlighting the presence of American models, their genres, style, changes in Italian comics and the impact of censorship.

49 Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, p. 68.

50 Meda, *Stelle e strips*, p. 33.

51 Giuseppe Trevisani, 'Nota sull'autore', in Alex Raymond, *Flash Gordon* (Milan: Garzanti, 1974), pp. 13–16 (p. 13); now also available online quoted in Leonardo Gori, 'Con L'Avventuroso arriva il vero fumetto', *Giornale Pop*, 14 February 2019 <https://www.giornalepop.it/avventuroso-il-vero-fumetto/> [accessed 31 January 2025].

Nerbini published *L'Avventuroso* from 14 October 1934 to 28 February 1943, a total of 439 issues, before ceding the magazine to Mondadori (February–March 1943). *L'Avventuroso* usually consisted of eight pages, but the number changed over the years: six in 1936; ten in 1938; twelve in 1939; and up to sixteen in 1943. Until 1937 the price remained stable at thirty cents (in Italian lira); then from issue 131 it started to rise: forty cents in 1937; fifty cents in 1938; sixty cents in 1940; reaching a peak of 120 cents in 1942 and then dropping to sixty cents again in 1943.[52] Its format followed the size and layout of a large newspaper: it measured 31x43cm, slightly larger than *Topolino* (35x25cm), *Il Corrierino* (*c*. 22x29cm) and *L'Intrepido* (23x30cm). While other Italian comics magazines such as *Jumbo*, *L'Intrepido* and *Il Vittorioso* came out on Saturdays, *L'Avventuroso* came out on Sundays, the same day as *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* and *American Funnies*.

The launch of *L'Avventuroso* was advertised on the last page of Nerbini's earlier magazine *Topolino* on 14 October 1934. The advertisement claimed that the new weekly was 'il più grande settimanale illustrato di avventure' [the greatest illustrated adventure weekly] and announced it would publish the first strip of the American science-fiction hero Flash Gordon. For the very first time adventure comic strips such as 'Secret Agent X-9' ('Emozionante storia d'audacia e spionaggio' [Thrilling tale of audacity and espionage]), 'Radio Patrol' ('ardimento, imprese fantastiche ed eroiche' [bravery, fantastic and heroic deeds]) and 'Jungle Jim' ('Storia di viaggi ed esplorazione nella Jungla [*sic*] misteriosa' [A tale of travel and exploration in the mysterious Jungle]) were to be introduced in Italy (Fig. 5). The advertisement also highlighted the

52 Using the latest coefficients released by Istat in 2024, the price of the magazine in Euros, adjusted for currency value, would be as follows: €0.42 (1934); €0.35 (1937); then increased to €0.46 (1937); €0.54 (1938); €0.80 (1942); and €0.24 (1943). To put these figures into perspective, the average annual salary for civil servants ranged from 43,356 lire (Director General) to 6,685 lire (custodian) in 1937 (corresponding to €50,786 and €7,830 respectively in 2024) and reached a range between 56,809 and 11,385 in 1943 (which translates to €22,625 and €4,528). See Istat, Coefficienti annuali 1861–2024 <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/coefficienti_annuali1861_2024_per-sito.pdf> [accessed 4 December 2025]. Based on the average salary for 2024 provided by Istat, the relative cost of *L'Avventuroso* for someone earning the lowest civil-servant's salary in 1938 would be comparable to spending €2.80 in terms of relative purchasing power. See Istat, 'Condizioni di vita e reddito delle famiglia. Anni 2023–2024', published 26 March 2025 <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/REPORT-REDDITO-CONDIZIONI-DI-VITA_Anno-2024.pdf>, p. 2 [accessed 4 December 2025].



Figure 5 First advertisement for *L'Avventuroso* in *Topolino*, 14 October 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

presence of three hundred illustrations, a figure which confirms Nerbini's commercial focus on images. Right from the very first issue of *L'Avventuroso* one can see a radical change from the established organisation of the children's periodical as set by *Il Corrierino*: almost the entire magazine was dedicated to comic strips, to the detriment of other sections, games and written stories.

On the same day it was advertised, *L'Avventuroso* appeared on the news-stands, its first page showing 'Flash Gordon', who soon became the star feature of the magazine. The novelty of the magazine was immediately clear from the introduction of a science-fiction fantasy hero, who offered the readers a new exotic imaginary.

As Leonardo Gori notes, starting with its title *L'Avventuroso* offered its readers a different imaginary world, stimulating the same exotic collective imagination powerfully promoted by Salgari's novels and influenced by Hollywood films:

> La testata […] è un vero e proprio editoriale: sulla sinistra, un nero, un giallo, un indiano, interpretazioni dei tipi contemporanei proposti da Hollywood. Rappresentano l'alterità minacciosa ma anche affascinante, non sono semplici 'cattivi' ma incarnazioni dell'esotico ammaliatore. Sulla destra, al posto di un intrepido 'avanguardista' o di un eroico balilla, c'è niente meno che un poliziotto americano! Il 'buono' è dunque anch'esso esotico, diverso.[53]

> [The masthead […] is a true editorial: on the left, a black [man], a yellow [man, i.e., an Asian], an Indian, interpretations of contemporary models proposed by Hollywood. They represent the threatening but also fascinating otherness; they are not mere 'villains' but incarnations of the exotic charmer. On the right, instead of an intrepid 'avantgardist' or a heroic 'balilla', there is none other than an American policeman! The 'good guy' is therefore also exotic, different.]

On the second page there was a serialised novel by Emilio Fancelli, 'Filibustieri del gran golfo – grande romanzo d'avventure' [Pirates of the Grand Gulf – Great Adventure Novel], the only page on which words dominated. However, even here the presence of two large, elaborate illustrations by Giove Toppi capture the readers' attention, modernising a traditional feature and drawing attention away from the words (Fig. 6).

53 Leonardo Gori, 'L'Avventuroso 1 (1934)', in *Fumetticlassici* <http://annitrenta.blogspot.com/2010/04/lavventuroso-1-1934.html> [accessed 10 February 2025].



Figure 6 Emilio Fancelli's 'Filibustieri del gran golfo', illustrated by Giove Toppi, in *L'Avventuroso,* 14 October 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

On page 3 was the first strip of 'Radio Patrol' (published in the United States from 1933 onwards as a daily strip and as a Sunday strip from 1934), the first detective comic strip to be published in *L'Avventuroso*. As far as translation is concerned, 'Radio Patrol' is an interesting example which reveals two contradictory approaches to the original American version. It is the first comic strip whose title was not translated in *L'Avventuroso*, suggesting an accurate reproduction of the original comics. However, we can clearly identify a process of Italianisation in the translation of the dialogues, from names to the use of the traditional Italian polite form of address, the second person plural 'voi'. In particular, the names of the two protagonists were slightly changed: policewoman Milly Day became Molli Dal; and the main character's name went from Pinky to Pinki – the English 'y' changed to the Italian 'i'. Like other American comics adapted for the magazine, it became a long running series: it was regularly published in *L'Avventuroso* until issue 62 – when it was moved to Nerbini's other successful comics magazine, *Il giornale di Cino e Franco* [*The Journal of Cino and Franco*] – and again from issues 89 to 206, when the series was suspended.[54] The story, set in Boston, features the adventures of a team comprising Sergeant Pat and policewoman Milly Day, who fight crime in a police patrol car (hence the title of the series), helped by a child named Pinkerton Jr (known as Pinky). Written by crime reporter Ed Sullivan and illustrated by Charlie Schmidt, 'Radio Patrol' was characterised by the realism of the look and events, which contrasted with the science-fiction and fantasy heroes in *L'Avventuroso*, such as Flash Gordon: the investigative team fight crime by using their intelligence and the innovative two-way radio-car system, not by relying on any superhuman physical strength. The sequence of illustrations has a cinematic look: events move fast and the sequence of events is intense.

'Radio Patrol' was not the only crime comic strip published in *L'Avventuroso*: it was followed by 'Agente Segreto X-9', illustrated by Alex Raymond and written by Dashiell Hammett.[55] According to Carlo Della Corte, 'Agente Segreto X-9' was a straightforward

54 *Il giornale di Cino e Franco* (Florence: Nerbini, 1935–38) was named after the popular comic strip 'Cino e Franco' ('Tim Tyler's Luck' by Lyman Young), first published in *Topolino* on 19 July 1935. The magazine reached a peak of 250,000 copies sold weekly (De Giacomo, 'Firenze/Nerbini', p. 30).

55 Dashiell Hammett was already known to the Italian public and was one of the most popular American authors translated and published in Leo Longanesi's *Omnibus*.

representation of the United States in the Roaring Twenties in the look of its protagonist:

> Nella prima vignetta […] indossa una sontuosa vestaglia tipo Grand Hotel, e riceve una telefonata con aria assai poco formale, in una posa spavalda alla Clark Gable. […] Alex Raymond crea il suo eroe prestandogli tutti gli attributi di 'bello e dannato', del personaggio duro e avventuroso, con un fondo di puritana onestà, simile a quella che lega i protagonisti dei coevi racconti di Scott Fitzgerald.[56]
>
> [In the first panel […] he wears a sumptuous Grand Hotel-type dressing gown and receives a phone call in a very informal manner, in a Clark Gable-like swaggering pose. […] Alex Raymond creates his hero by lending him all the attributes of the 'beautiful and damned', of the tough and adventurous character, with a puritanical honesty, similar to that which binds the protagonists of Scott Fitzgerald's contemporary stories.]

'Agente Segreto X-9' also offers a clear example of the process of adaptation to more Italian-sounding names. In particular, it is worth highlighting that names were often not translated but adapted, keeping an exotic hint, as the case of 'Secret Agent X-9' shows: the name Dan given to the FBI secret agent does not sound as foreign as the original name, Dexter, but it is still not an Italian name, highlighting the exotic appeal of *L'Avventuroso*. 'Radio Patrol' and 'Agente Segreto X-9' are characterised by similarly realistic stories inspired by crime news, although the latter is focused on the adventure of a secret agent whose real identity remains unknown. The secrecy of the protagonist's identity and his charm make 'Agente Segreto X-9' similar to a Hollywood crime film boasting gangsters with no scruples and beautiful women portrayed as damsels in distress or villains. Like other American comic strips in *L'Avventuroso*, these detective stories faithfully reproduced the original format and included speech bubbles.

Following these two American crime comics, which also offer a realistic look at American cities, the following two pages were occupied by two Italian comic strips that still used captions with no trace of speech bubbles: 'Dal deserto alla jungla' [*sic*] [From the Desert to the Jungle], an illustrated version of Henrik Sienkiewicz's novel

56 Carlo Della Corte, 'Introduzione', in Alex Raymond, *Agente Segreto X-9* (Rome: Spada, 1967), pp. 7–12 (p. 8). The features of Alex Raymond's hero as described by Della Corte parallel those of Anthony Patch, the protagonist in Scott Fitzgerland's *The Beautiful and Damned* (New York: Scribner, 1922), particularly in the tension between moral integrity and self-indulgence.

adapted by Paolo Lorenzini and drawn by Giorgio Scudellari; and 'Il cacciatore di serpenti' [The Serpent Hunter], written and illustrated by Corrado Sarri. Compared to the American comics, the two stories are static and the illustrations are merely decorative, as the action is all in the captions: without reading them, the reader would have only a vague sense of the story. This is especially true for 'Il cacciatore di serpenti', which more than a comic strip resembles a short story divided into captions (Fig. 7).[57] The tale follows the adventure of two students in Vienna – Franco and Agide – who spend more time drinking, smoking and having fun than studying for their exams, borrowing money from a Jewish money-lender, Isaac. To pay their debts, Franco sells Isaac a gold watch that his grandfather, a famous naval captain, had given him before passing away. Franco soon finds out that to inherit his grandfather's assets he needs to follow the instructions engraved inside the watch. It is the beginning of an adventure because Isaac has sold the watch to a German hunter who has already left the country for India. The two students and Isaac follow the steps of the hunter, from India to Brazil, among rich women and bandits, until the trio find the watch. The engraving finally reveals the treasure left by the old captain to his nephew: the secret of life, 'Lavoro – Oro – Risparmio' [Work – Gold – Savings]. The moral of the story is for children to follow righteous values and not to waste time by indulging in bad habits (like smoking, drinking and selling valuables).

In its content, style and illustrations the story brings to mind the traditional Italian adventure novels of the nineteenth century and forms a contrast to the dynamism and cinematic illustrations of the American comics that preceded it. The same can be said of 'Dal deserto alla jungla', although its illustrations are simpler and closer to the modern comic style. The story follows the adventures of two children of engineers working in Suez. The boy and girl

57 Talking about the first issue of *L'Avventuroso*, Del Buono writes: 'Uscì in formato 31x43 e constava di otto pagine: una a colori […] dedicata alle avventure di Flash Gordon […], tre pagine in rosa […], una pagina a colori, l'ottava […], più quattro pagine in bianco e nero di cui una contenente la prima puntata del romanzo […] di Emilio Fancelli, i fumetti di Radio Patrol di Charlie Schmidt e *due altre ingombrate da prove di fumetti italiani da dimenticare*' [It came out in 31x43 format and consisted of eight pages: one in colour […] dedicated to the adventures of Flash Gordon […], three pages in pink […], one page in colour, the eighth […], plus four pages in black and white, one of which contained the first instalment of the novel […] by Emilio Fancelli, Charlie Schmidt's Radio Patrol comics and *two others cluttered with forgettable attempts at Italian comics*] (Del Buono, *Sul fumetto*, p. 111) (emphasis mine).

are kidnapped by 'ribelli maomettiani' [Mohammedan rebels], who offer them their freedom on condition that they repudiate Catholicism. The children refuse, manage to escape and live through a series of adventures while finding their way back home from the desert to the jungle. Like 'Il cacciatore di serpenti', the story develops in the captions, although the presence of dynamic illustrations makes it closer to a modern comic than Scudellari's story. Captions are, however, still crucial for understanding the plot. In its content the story is anchored in Italian traditional values, echoing Roman Catholic virtues and showing that being faithful Catholics leads to salvation. The plot can be seen as very instructive, teaching young Italians the importance of believing in the Church and depicting other faiths – in this case Islam – as the 'villain'. The two Italian stories are traditional not simply in their style and use of the illustrations, but also in their scope: both contain a moral and teach children to behave well, since well-behaved children are rewarded, just like in the early comic strips published in the *Corriere dei Piccoli*.

The first issue of *L'Avventuroso* ends with another American hero, 'Jim, l'uomo della jungla' [The Man of the Jungle], a comic strip launched in the United States simultaneously with 'Flash Gordon' and illustrated and written by the same authors, Alex Raymond and Don Moore. Set in South-East Asia, Jim Bradley's story represents the classic adventure hero and white hunter, the good man fighting against evil, which in the strips is embodied by wild aggressive animals, slave traders, or reckless hunters. 'Jungle Jim' has all the elements common to other American comic strips published in *L'Avventuroso*: there is a hero fighting villains, helped by a partner in adventure and, ultimately, in love with a woman whom he saves from dangerous men and/or situations.[58] 'Jungle Jim' could not have been further in style from the two Italian comics that preceded it. From an attack by a tiger to a fight with a puma and a threatening villain, the readers are caught up in the action of a typically dynamic American adventure comic, in contrast to the static illustrations and predominance of words in Scudellari and Sarri's stories. 'Jungle Jim' was printed in the same three-colour printing as 'Agente Segreto X-9' and 'Flash Gordon': the three comic strips illustrated by Raymond

58 As in 'Mandrake the Magician', the hero is helped by a native, the Hindu Kolu, who despite being crucial to the survival and success of the hero, is a non-white, subservient character – like Mandrake's Lothar.


L'AVVENTUROSO

IL CACCIATORE DI SERPENTI

Avventure sensazionali di un audace esploratore.

Figure 7 Corrado Sarri's 'Il cacciatore di serpenti' in *L'Avventuroso,* 14 October 1934. Reproduced *c*ourtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

were the only pages in colour, whereas all the other stories were in black and white.[59]

Overall, in the first twelve issues published in 1934 there were three Italian stories and four American comic strips. This balance and the organisation of the magazine remained the same until March 1935. The first noticeable change comes in issue 21 (3 March 1935), in which 'Jim, l'uomo della jungla' is moved to an inside page as Flash Gordon, the most popular hero, occupies both the first and the last page. From issue 25 (31 March) the title of Gordon's story also changed from 'La distruzione del mondo' to 'Le avventure di Gordon nell'impero di Min' – 'On the Planet Mongo' in its original version. The subtitle of the magazine was also modified in July 1935 from 'Grande settimanale d'avventure' to 'Grande settimanale *per tutti*' [Great weekly *for everyone*], thereby expanding the targeted readership.[60] The change in subtitle highlighted that *L'Avventuroso* was not a journal aimed at children, protecting Nerbini from the potential accusation of publishing comics morally harmful to the education of children.[61] This was in contrast to earlier publications that explicitly targeted young children: *La Piccola Italiana*, for example, carried the subtitle 'settimanale della giovinetta del Littorio' [weekly for the young Fascist girl], whereas *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* was clearly aimed at children and *Jumbo* was subtitled 'settimanale illustrato per ragazzi' [illustrated weekly for boys].

The year 1935 was also characterised by two important innovations. First, there was the introduction of 'Mandrake the Magician' ('Mandrake l'uomo del mistero'), which was substituted for 'Dal deserto alla jungla' on page 6. The publication of Mandrake in 1935 was characterised by the usual, minor alteration of names: Detective Sheldon and Mandrake's companion Lothar each lose an 'h', becoming

59 The use of three-colour printing, a cheap method to reproduce colours, was introduced by Nerbini and made *L'Avventuroso* easily recognisable. A technical analysis of the colour printing of *L'Avventuroso* can be found in Giacomo Fiocco and others, 'L'Avventuroso 1936 project: the first analytical approach to printed historic Italian comics', in *2020 IMEKO TC-4 International Conference on Metrology for Archaeology and Cultural Heritage (MetroArchaeo 2020): Proceedings*, pp. 481–85 <https://www.imeko.org/publications/tc4-Archaeo-2020/IMEKO-TC4-MetroArchaeo2020-091.pdf> [accessed 8 August 2023].

60 *L'Avventuroso*, 28 July 1935, p. 1 (emphasis mine).

61 Nerbini had already refuted these accusations in various notes sent between April and May 1935 to Sebastiani, especially in a note sent on 30 April 1935, in which the publisher claimed that his magazines were not aimed at children (Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, pp. 129–30).

'Seldon' and 'Lotar'; whereas in the second story, 'The Hawk' ('Il mistero della casa da giuoco'), the villain Hawk becomes Rawak and Princess Narda becomes Daran. The protagonist, Mandrake, is the only one to maintain his original name, at least until 1937, when it was also Italianised to 'Mandrache' and then appeared as the improbable name of 'Mandracke' in 1941. Second, both 'Dal deserto alla jungla' and 'Il cacciatore di serpenti' adopted speech bubbles, abolishing the captions and marking the end of the 'traditional' Italian comic style in *L'Avventuroso* – at least until 1938, when the Fascist regime banned American comics and their features, speech bubbles included. Many other Italian comic strips found space in *L'Avventuroso* in 1935, increasing the number of Italian authors:

- 'Lo spettro di Stoccolma' [The Ghost of Stockholm] by Sarri
- 'Il richiamo della Jungla' [The Call of the Jungle], illustrated by Scudellari and written by Fancelli
- 'I naufraghi dell'Anna Maria' [The Castaways of the Anna Maria] by Scudellari
- 'Il Leone Bianco' [The White Lion] by Scudellari, clearly inspired by Jungle Jim
- 'Il Negriero' [The Slaver], the debut story of Moroni-Celsi in *L'Avventuroso* – a Western comic that recalls the stories of Emilio Salgari
- 'La prigioniera del Ras' [The Prisoner of the Ras], illustrated by Moroni-Celsi and written by Fancelli – the first propaganda comic ever published in *L'Avventuroso*[62]
- 'La regina dei pirati' [The Queen of the Pirates] by Toppi
- 'Una donna a bordo' [A Woman On Board] by Toppi
- 'Il dramma del sottomarino H-47' [The Drama of Submarine H-47] by Toppi
- 'La strana fine di Eddie Parker' [The Strange End of Eddie Parker] by Gaetano Vitelli
- 'La fede degli Avi' [The Ancestors' Faith] by Vitelli
- 'La valigia dei diamanti' [The Suitcase of Diamonds] by Carlo Cossio

A few features from this list stand out. First, the number of Italian comics published in 1935 increased; second, considering the overall number of Italian stories published throughout the year compared to the number of American strips, the Italian comics are shorter;

62 The Fascist regime launched its war against Ethiopia on 3 October 1935; 'La prigionia del Ras' was published from issue 49, 15 September 1935, onwards.

third, from 1935 onwards war enters *L'Avventuroso* ('La prigioniera del Ras'; 'Il dramma del sottomarino H-47') and with it Fascist rhetoric: 'La prigioniera del Ras' constitutes clear propaganda against the Ethiopians. The story follows the adventure of two fourteen-year-old Italian boys in Africa – 'figli di ingegneri […] amici per la pelle' [sons of engineers […] best friends] – captured by Ethiopians.[63] Both the story and the language used show that *L'Avventuroso* had partially adapted to the directive of the regime; particularly striking are the comments by one of the protagonists about an Ethiopian, 'quest'*animale* c'ha fatto smarrire' [this *animal* got us lost],[64] and the iconographic image of the white woman captured, her life threatened by Ethiopians (Fig. 8). What is more, the two young protagonists resemble classic Fascist characters, protagonists of comic stories like those published after 1931 in *Il Corriere dei Piccoli*: young, brave *balilla* who glorify Fascism and its values.

Alongside the adoption in some comics of Fascist rhetoric and ideology, other Italian productions such as 'Il dramma del sottomarino H-47' remained anchored to the established American model and its author, Toppi, used foreign names for his protagonists, such as James Watson, Cherie, Karl and Marton, to maintain the signature exotic appeal of *L'Avventuroso*. Toppi's submarine story ends on 12 January 1936 (issue 66) and is followed by 'I naufragatori misteriosi' [The Mysterious Castaways], written by Fancelli and again illustrated by Toppi (19 January 1936, issue 67), another sea-based adventure story with Anglo-Saxon protagonists. More importantly, from issue 69 onwards (2 February 1936) Jungle Jim – the title slightly changed into 'Le avventure di Jim – L'idolo della Jungla' [The Adventures



Figure 8 The white woman, captured and surrounded by villains (native Ethiopians), illustrated by Guido Moroni-Celsi in *L'Avventuroso*, 15 September 1935. Available online at http://annitrenta.blogspot.com/2010/05/lavventuroso-7-1935-quarta-parte-gli.html [28 April 2025] and reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

63 Guido Moroni-Celsi and Emilio Fancelli, 'La prigioniera del Ras', *L'Avventuroso*, 15 September 1935, p. 8.

64 Moroni-Celsi and Fancelli, 'La prigioniera del Ras' (emphasis mine).

of Jim – The Idol of the Jungle] – moves to page 5, leaving the last page of *L'Avventuroso* to Toppi's comic, a page as important as the first one, since these pages were exposed on the news-stands and worked as advertisements. The fact that there was now an Italian story concluding the issues of *L'Avventuroso* did not create any discontinuity in the style of the magazine. Toppi's protagonists are mostly American or British, like 'capitano Hearny della polizia americana' [Captain Heanry of the American police], 'comandante Simon' [Commander Simon] and 'il celebre Land di Scotland Yard e già agente dell'Intelligence service' [the famous Land of Scotland Yard, previously an agent of the Intelligence Service].[65] What is more, the style of the illustrations and the sequence of the actions, particularly their dynamism, make this comic strip closer to an American one than any other Italian comics that preceded it. Toppi's following story, 'La regina d'Atalanta' [The Queen of Atalanta], confirms the adoption of the American style by the Italian illustrator.

Toppi was not the only Italian author inspired by an American imaginary. Among the other Italian comics it is worth mentioning Vichi's 'Uragano di fuoco' [Hurricane of Fire], a Western-inspired story; Moroni-Celsi's 'Il tesoro degli indiani Lupai' [The Treasure of the Lupai Indians], which had the same Western setting but, like his other stories, still used captions more than speech bubbles; and, finally, 'I demoni del West' [The Demons of the West] by Raffaello Donati, set in North America in 1862 and based on the violent revolt of Cheyenne, Apache and Sioux subdued by American volunteers, among whom is the hero of the comic 'cacciatore Sure Shot, colpo di fucile sicuro' [Hunter Sure Shot, a sure rifle shot].[66] In the second year of publication of *L'Avventuroso*, a progressive Americanisation of Italian comics can clearly be seen in the adoption of the American model in illustrations, the dynamism, the setting of the stories and the protagonists.[67]

65 Giove Toppi, 'I naufragatori misteriosi', *L'Avventuroso*, 19 January 1936, p. 5.

66 Raffaello Donati, 'I demoni del West', *L'Avventuroso*, 10 May 1936, p. 2.

67 In these stories the authors provide precise settings. In 'Il tesoro degli indiani Lupai', for example, in the second instalment (26 January 1936) the three protagonists – Lucker (a professor) and his son and daughter Harry and Ellen – embark from 'S. Francisco' on an adventure to find hidden treasure located in 'Gran Cañon' [*sic*]. The three of them take the trans-Pacific train directed to 'Peach Springs', where they find Mexicans, cowboys and Indians, among whom Harry finds 'Kid West', who becomes another protagonist in the search for the treasure. Although characters and settings are American, the drawing style of Moroni-Celsi is still static and less dynamic compared to, for example, Toppi's style.

The year 1936 is especially significant also for the appearance of two new comics: 'Red Barry' by Will Gould and, more importantly, 'The Phantom' by Lee Falk. 'Red Barry' was already known to the Italian public under the name 'Jim il Rosso' [Jim the Red], as its daily strips were published in *La Risata* (Milan: Casa Editrice Moderna, 1934–37). Mario Nerbini was able to buy from King Features Syndicate the rights to the Sunday strips and published them under a new name: 'Bob Star, poliziotto dai capelli rossi' [Bob Star, the Red-Head Policeman]. 'Bob Star' is an undercover policeman who often infiltrates criminal organisations to fight gangsters and solve crimes, such as the kidnapping of a boy – Ouchy Mugouchy, Italianised to Occi-Mucci – who helps Red Barry and assumes a role similar to Pinky in 'Radio Patrol'. Unlike the other popular detective comics published in *L'Avventuroso*, such as 'Radio Patrol' and 'Agente Segreto X-9', 'Bob Star' does not have realistic illustrations and the rhythm of the stories is intense and full of twists. Red Barry's task as an infiltrator keeps the tension high throughout the story, whereas the prominent role of children, such as Ouchy Mugouchy, makes it possible for young readers to identify with the characters. Another important difference between 'Bob Star' and the other crime comics published in *L'Avventuroso* is the role of women, completely absent in the first instalment of the saga and marginal in the following instalment, 'Un terzetto eccezionale' [An Exceptional Trio], published from 23 May 1937 onwards (issue 137).[68]

The major novelty of 1936 appears in issue 101 (13 September): 'The Phantom'. The colouring of the hero's costume, red, offers an interesting example of Nerbini's manipulation of the original strips. It has been suggested that Nerbini changed the colour of The Phantom's costume to red because it was a 'colore più mediterraneamente adatto alla fantasia italiana' [Mediterranean colour, more appropriate for the Italian fantasy].[69] However, not only is there no evidence in support of this claim, but in 1936 'The Phantom' was published in the United States as a daily strip and,

68 In 1936, when 'Bob Star' appeared for the first time in *L'Avventuroso*, the signature of the author Will Gould appeared in the corner of the panels as in the original version. However, in 1937, when Nerbini published the instalment 'Un terzetto eccezionale', the signature and any other copyright information disappeared, as it did in the other American comics. The year 1937 is also when Mandrake is Italianised to Mandrache; and the alterations to Bob Star seem to confirm Nerbini's trend of toning down the American origins of the comics published.

69 Listri, *Il mondo di Nerbini*, p. 200.



Figure 9 The first strip of 'The Phantom' by Lee Falk in *L'Avventuroso*, 13 September 1936. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

as such, was printed in black and white. It seems more likely that the choice of the colour red came about because red was the colour of Flash Gordon's suit and could therefore easily associate the new hero with the most successful protagonist in *L'Avventuroso*.[70] After a few issues, on 6 December 1936 'The Phantom' began to occupy the last page. This comic, in its content and language, demonstrates once more how *L'Avventuroso* targeted a wider range of readers than other comics magazines such as *Il Corrierino*, *Il Vittorioso* and *L'Intrepido*: the romance between the two protagonists, Diana and The Phantom, is explicit and an important part of the plot; and Diana herself is introduced as one of the main characters, making it appealing also for a female readership. At the same time, both the language and some scenes are quite strong, making the comic unsuitable for young children. In the first instalment, for example, the first strip shows Diana boxing against a man (Fig. 9). In the following instalment she meets the villains and shows her strength by punching in the face one who wanted to take her away. While she fails and is ultimately captured, Diana is one of the very few female protagonists published in *L'Avventuroso* to show such physical strength and to be portrayed physically fighting men, initially subverting the standard ideal of the damsel in distress – even though only for a few strips. The romance between the hero and Diana is made explicit by showing them kissing, but what makes the comic even more interesting is that Diana is also shown being kissed by another man. Not only is a female character depicted in an intimate relationship with a man, but the romance is further complicated by a love triangle, although Diana's love for The Phantom is never questioned. The language used by the villains, who call her 'kitty' due to her attitude and beauty and hint at their desire for her, is another element which shows 'The

70 'The Phantom' was published in colour for the first time in the United States in May 1939, when the first Sunday series came out. The colour of his costume was purple-grey.

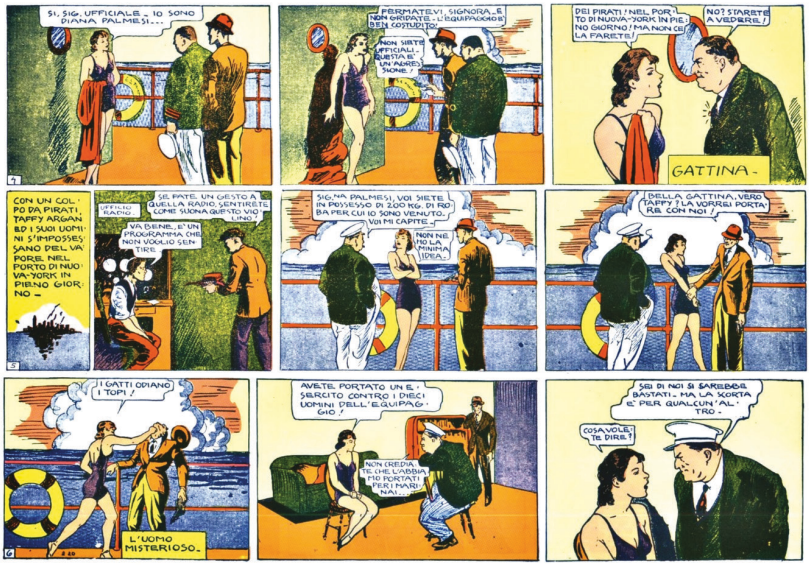


Figure 10 Second episode of 'L'uomo mascherato', in which Diana Palmesi meets the villains. She is named 'gattina' for her attitude and beauty. In this strip there is the first reference to the hero: 'la scorta è per qualcun'altro' [the bodyguard is for someone else]. From *L'Avventuroso*, 20 September 1936. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

Phantom' was not appropriate for children, especially considering that the Fascist authorities had not abandoned the idea of comics as a means of education and that the targeted readership included young adults, both men and women (Figs. 10–13). As far as translation is concerned, 'The Phantom' was Italianised as 'L'uomo mascherato' [The Masked Man]; and his girlfriend's name changed from Diana Palmer to Diana Palmesi, eliminating any hint at American names. Overall, the publication of 'The Phantom' demonstrates how the success of American comics, confirmed by the increasing popularity of *L'Avventuroso*, led Mario Nerbini to buy the rights to new adventure comics in spite of the Fascist campaign for cultural autarchy and the traditional role reserved by the regime for Italian women.

In 1936 the publication of written short stories was reintroduced on page 2, from issue 90 onwards (28 June). However, unlike in 1934 the stories are short and self-contained, ending in the same issue; the genre varies from a detective story ('Un'avventura dell'ispettore Clark' [An Adventure of Inspector Clark] by Gino Francia) to an 'Oriental novella' by Luigi Motta (5 July). From issue 105 onwards

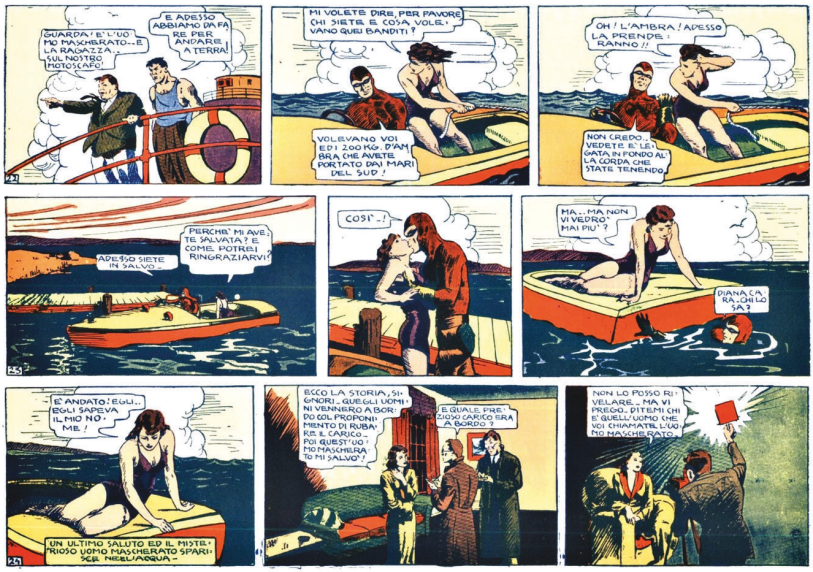


Figure 11 The Phantom rescues Diana. Their kiss in the strip is possibly the first published in a children's comics magazine in Italy. In *L'Avventuroso*, 1 November 1936. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

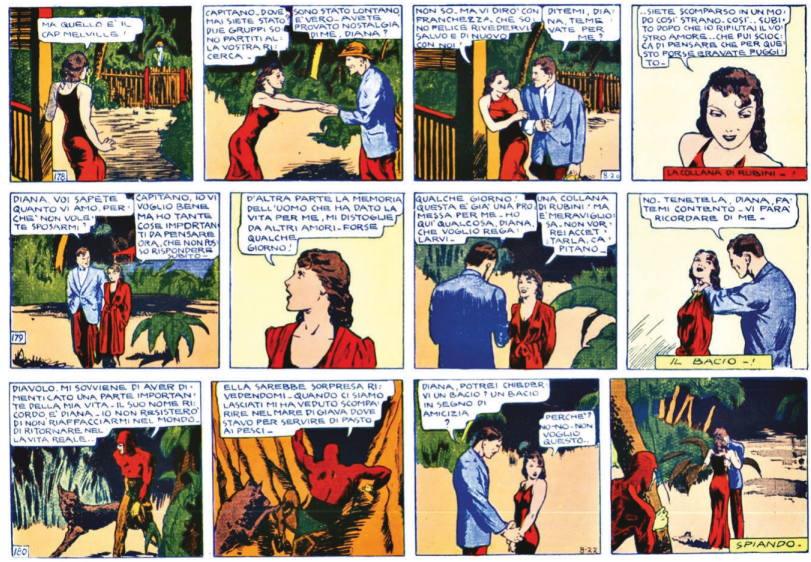


Figure 12 A possible love triangle. *L'Avventuroso*, 9 May 1937. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.



Figure 13 Another panel showing the romance between Diana and the hero. In *L'Avventuroso*, 6 December 1937. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

(11 October) page 2 is again dedicated to a serialised story, a science-fiction novel by Paolo Lorenzini, each instalment accompanied by one or two illustrations by Ferdinando Vichi. By the end of 1936 *L'Avventuroso* looked more like its first issue in 1934. The look and content of the magazine remained consistent throughout the following year, although in 1937 Mandrake was Italianised to 'Mandrache' and Nerbini, for the first time, published a statement defending his magazine and arguing that it was not aimed at children. On 24 January (issue 120, the third of the year), framed on the top right of page 2, Nerbini declared that *L'Avventuroso*:

> non è un giornale per bambini ma per tutti e *in special modo per giovanetti e signorine*. La nostra Casa ha dedicato ai piccoli lettori 'Il piccolo avventuroso' e 'Il giornale di Cino e Franco'. Non ci stancheremo di ripeterlo finché ci saranno sordi in giro.[71]

71 [Mario Nerbini], [Editor's Statement], *L'Avventuroso*, 24 January 1937, p. 2 (emphasis in the original).

> [is not a magazine for children but for everyone and *especially for young men and women*. Our [publishing] House has dedicated 'Il piccolo Avventuroso' and 'Il giornale di Cino e Franco' to younger readers. We shall not grow tired of repeating this as long as there are deaf people around.]

The statement is not signed, but it is plausible that the author is Mario Nerbini himself – the author talks of '*our* [publishing] House' – defending his magazine from the accusation that, as emerges implicitly, *L'Avventuroso* was publishing material unsuitable for children.

From the first issue of 1937 onwards *L'Avventuroso* had ten pages and American stories took up even more space than before. Two new stories featuring Flash Gordon appeared ('Verso l'ignoto' [Towards the Unknown]; and, from 20 June, 'Il re della foresta' [The King of the Forest]); and two pages each were dedicated to 'L'uomo mascherato – Nel regno dei Singh' [The Masked Man – In the Kingdom of the Singhs], 'Radio Pattuglia', 'Agente segreto X-9', 'Bob Star – Un terzetto eccezionale' and Mandrake (now 'Mandrache il mago benefico' [Mandrake the Benevolent Wizard]). In short, seven pages out of ten were taken up by American comics. The remaining three pages contained Italian stories, one serialised novel and two comics. As before, the Italian comics boasted an exotic setting and included Marco Spada and Giove Toppi's 'Gente Nostra' [Our People], set in South America and following the adventures of 'Lola Ardito puro sangue sardo figlia di due emigranti italiani residenti nel Sud del Messico' [Lola Ardito, of pure Sardinian blood, the daughter of two Italian emigrants living in southern Mexico].[72] A similar story had been published in April, 'Pionieri italiani "sentieri di guerra" del Grand-Ovest' [Italian Pioneers' 'warpaths' of the Grand West], which followed the adventures of Giulio Santoro, an Italian immigrant in Nebraska.

Through the theme of emigration Italian artists Italianised exotic scenarios and put Italian protagonists among cowboys and Indians. Rather than altering the American stories by adding Italian features, Italian comics were adapted to the new Americanised imaginary of young adults.[73] In these Italian comics it is possible to find different myths in one single story: the myth of the Italian immigrant in America; and the myth of America itself, with its adventures, frontier

72 Giove Toppi, 'Gente Nostra', *L'Avventuroso*, 30 May 1937, p. 9.

73 The success of the American formula is confirmed by the creation of characters such as Dick Fulmine by Carlo Cossio (*L'Audace*, 1938) and, earlier, Kit Carson by Rino Albertarelli (*Topolino*, 1936).

and promised land and fortune. The setting of these stories is also consistent with the censorship of crime news: Italy had to look peaceful and ordered, while crime and violence were a characteristic of American cities and confirmed the anti-American idea that linked American society with violence (see Chapters 1 and 4). Thus, the American setting of Italian comics satisfied both the readers' expectations and Fascist propaganda.[74]

Showing the violence of American society did not, however, protect the Italian comics industry. The first effect on *L'Avventuroso* of the new legislation against comics can be dated to February 1938, when Mario Nerbini rejected a new King Features Syndicate comic, 'Inspector Wade' by Lyman Anderson. A letter written by Nerbini to Guglielmo Emanuel, the agent for King Features Syndicate in Italy, illustrates the consequences of the Fascist campaign against American comics: 'Per l'Ispettore Wade, lo prenderei, ma purtroppo è stata ripresa una forte campagna contro la merce americana' [As for Inspector Wade, I would take it, but unfortunately a strong campaign against American goods has been resumed].[75] From March 1938 onwards Nerbini was forced to send all translations of American comics to the Prefecture in Rome to obtain its approval for publication. During the first six months of the year, until issue 205, there were few visible changes in the magazine. Flash Gordon still appeared on the first page with the instalment 'Verso l'ignoto' [Towards the Unknown] (started in 1937), followed by three more stories: 'Il re della foresta' [The King of the Forest], 'La setta degli straccioni' [The Ragtag Sect] and 'Gordon prigioniero di Ming' [Gordon a Prisoner of Ming], his last adventure ever to be published in *L'Avventuroso*. As anticipated, the series was abruptly terminated on 11 September 1938 (issue 206), a date that marks the greatest change in the history of *L'Avventuroso*: from a modern publication steeped in American comics it shifted towards a more traditional Italian magazine in which, gradually, words started to prevail over images. This change is aesthetically preceded and marked by an important remodelling of the masthead, where, on the right, the

74 An example of this idea of American society as violent can be found in Cecchi, *America amara*, esp. pp. 125–31, 143–46. See also Burdett, *Journeys Through Fascism*, pp. 234–35.

75 Mario Nerbini to Guglielmo Emanuel, 5 February 1938, Fondazione Franco Fossati, Milan, Archivio Guglielmo Emanuel, first discovered and published by Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, p. 162. On the campaign against foreign translations see Billiani, *National Cultures*, esp. Chapter 4, 'The 1930s: The Spaces of Culture (1932–1938)' (pp. 119–51).



Figure 14 [Top] *L'Avventuroso* masthead for the 4 September 1938 issue; and [below] for the 11 September 1938 issue. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

figure of an American policeman is replaced by a Fascist policeman from Italian East Africa (Fig. 14).

The new focus on Italian conquests in Africa was confirmed in issue 207 (25 September) – the first without Flash Gordon – when the first page was taken up by Toppi's 'I tre di Macallè' [The Three of Macallè], a colonial adventure based on Edilio Napoli's novel about the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895–96). A banner at the end of the page gives readers the hope that Gordon will make an imminent return: 'Riuscirà lo scienziato italiano Zarro a rendere la vita a Gordon? Lo saprete tra breve' [Will the Italian scientist Zarro manage to restore Gordon's life? You will find out soon].[76] The same banner appeared at the end of issue 209, demonstrating not only that Nerbini still hoped to be able to publish Gordon's adventures in the

76 *L'Avventuroso*, 25 November 1938, p. 1. In the Italian version published in *L'Avventuroso*, Zarro – Zarkov in the original strips – is Italian; this is an important detail which demonstrates how the American comics were adapted to the Italian readership, making it possible for readers to identify themselves with the characters.

future, but also that he knew the importance of American comics for the success of his magazine. Two issues later, on 23 October 1938, another banner advertised the forthcoming publication of 'Il miracolo di Zarro' [Zarro's Miracle], which never happened. The three-month deadline given in July by the Ministry of Popular Culture to the publishers of comics had passed and *L'Avventuroso* had to comply with the new legislation:

> Il nostro periodico ha eliminato gradualmente dalle sue pagine quasi tutte le illustrazioni di produzione americana: attualmente solo due pagine su dodici sono occupate da opere di artisti non italiani, MA ANCHE QUESTE SCOMPARIRANNO AL TERMINE DEGLI EPISODI IN CORSO.
>
> Siamo sicuri che i nostri lettori apprezzeranno questa nostra innovazione a favore della battaglia autarchica nel campo dei periodici di letteratura ricreativa e che l'accoglieranno con la maggior simpatia senza nostalgie per autori e personaggi scomparsi o destinati a scomparire. […] GIORNALI ITALIANI A LETTORI ITALIANI, ecco quello che dobbiamo realizzare in pieno! Per nostro conto rispondiamo PRESENTE e, ripetiamo, al termine degli episodi in corso sospenderemo anche la pubblicazione delle due ultime storie d'importazione, e cioè 'Tra i pirati cinesi' e 'I fuori-legge dell'Oceano'.[77]
>
> [Our periodical has gradually eliminated almost all American-produced illustrations from its pages: currently only two pages out of twelve are occupied by works by non-Italian artists, BUT THESE WILL ALSO DISAPPEAR AT THE END OF THE CURRENT INSTALMENTS.
>
> We are confident that our readers will appreciate this innovation in support of the autarchic battle in the field of recreational literature and that they will welcome it with the greatest sympathy without nostalgia for authors and characters who have disappeared or are destined to disappear. […] ITALIAN JOURNALS TO ITALIAN READERS, that is what we must fully realise! For our part we respond PRESENT and, we repeat, at the end of the current instalments we shall also suspend the publication of the last two imported stories, namely 'Among the Chinese Pirates' [Terry and the Pirates] and 'The Outlaws of the Ocean' [The Phantom].]

77 L'Editore, 'Ai lettori', *L'Avventuroso*, 20 November 1938, p. 2. The statement is clearly both a justification to the readers ('innovation in favour of the autarchic battle') and a reiteration of Fascist faith ('we respond PRESENT', echoing the Fascist ritual of 'l'appello', the roll call for fallen Fascists).

Right from its first issue the success of *L'Avventuroso* was linked to the presence of American comics, so their disappearance was not welcomed by its readers. Not only did readers not appreciate the 'innovation in favour of the autarchic battle', but they complained to Nerbini to such an extent that only four issues later (issue 219, 18 December 1938) the publisher openly responded with another letter:

> Ai nostri lettori. In risposta alle molte lettere, non sempre…cortesi che riceviamo da qualche tempo, in seguito a modificazioni, variazioni, soppressioni verificate nei nostri periodici, riportiamo qui sotto le norme emanate dal Ministero della Cultura Popolare, norme a cui devono uniformarsi tutti i giornali dedicati alla gioventù italiana.
>
> *Abolizione completa di tutto il materiale di importazione straniera…. Soppressione di quelle storie e illustrazioni che si ispirano alla produzione straniera; Riduzione alla metà delle pagine per la parte dedicata alla pura illustrazione con conseguente aumento del testo, finora quasi totalmente sacrificato….* Questo per nostra giustificazione. Altre ne seguono che in special modo ci riguardano, e alle quali ci atterremo con scrupolo e con disciplina fascista, nella piena certezza di poter riuscire in miglior modo a soddisfare i nostri lettori che ci serberanno la loro cara amicizia.[78]
>
> [To our readers. In response to the many letters, not always… courteous, that we have been receiving for some time, following changes, variations and suppressions that have taken place in our periodicals, we reproduce below the norms issued by the Ministry of Popular Culture, norms to which all magazines aimed at Italian youth must conform.
>
> *Complete abolition of all foreign imported material… Suppression of those stories and illustrations inspired by foreign production; Reduction to half the pages of the part devoted to pure illustration with consequent increase of the text hitherto almost totally sacrificed….* This is our justification. Other [norms] follow which especially concern us and to which we shall adhere with scrupulousness and Fascist discipline, in the full certainty that we shall be able better to satisfy our readers who keep their dear friendship with us.]

The transformation of *L'Avventuroso* in line with the new Fascist directives was complete: comic strips were surrounded by text, which now occupied most of the space. Compared to the first years

78 Mario Nerbini, Open Letter, *L'Avventuroso*, 18 December 1938, p. 3 (emphasis in the original). The same notice was published in *Jungla!* on 11 December 1938, p. 2.

of the magazine, the only element in the final issues of 1938 that makes *L'Avventuroso* recognisable is the three-colour printing. Issue 219 marks the beginning of the 'Fascist phase' of the magazine and analysis of it shows the profound changes in its content and format. A banner at the end of page 1 advertises 'interessanti, divertenti e *istruttive rubriche*' [interesting, entertaining and *informative columns*].[79] The new columns, which surround the comic strips, are focused mainly on Italian greatness, as demonstrated by the beginning of the first new section on page 3, entitled 'Scoperte e Invenzioni' [Discoveries and Inventions]: 'Una nuova scoperta, che renderà assai facile e alla portata di tutti la guida dell'automobile, è dovuta al *genio italiano*, che mostra la sua bravura anche nel campo strettamente tecnico' [A new discovery, which will make driving a car very easy and affordable for everyone, is due to *Italian genius*, which also shows its prowess in the strictly technical field].[80] With the exception of a column on general knowledge and curiosities – in this issue 'Le foglie hanno gli occhi' [Leaves Have Eyes] on the movement of leaves towards the sunlight (p. 3) – the main focus of these sections was on Fascist heroes, such as in the column 'Eroi dell'Italia Imperiale' [Heroes of Imperial Italy] (in this issue dedicated to Father Reginaldo Giuliani, whose story was told in a column on page 4); and on Italian historical personalities (such as Benvenuto Cellini, whose life and merits were described in a piece occupying the whole of page 5). A column on pages 8 to 9, 'Ludi e Ardimenti' [Games and Daring Deeds], framed two Italian comic strips and was dedicated to sport – in this case a short story about the victory of an Italian team in a motor-racing world championship; whereas on page 10 a column titled 'Il valore italiano' [The Italian Merit] highlighted the heroism of Italian soldiers who died in the First World War and the pride of their mothers. In all, the issue contained a total of twelve pages, only four of which were entirely occupied by comic strips – 'I tre di Macallè' (p. 1); 'La regina di Cipro' [The Queen of Cyprus] (p. 6); 'L'uomo mascherato' (p. 7); 'La capanna del Gran Paradiso' [The Cabin on the Gran Paradiso] (p. 12) – and two by text (a short story on page 2 and the life of Benvenuto Cellini on page 5). The other six pages had adopted the new formula of a comic strip framed by text.

The recurrent columns introduced in this phase were: 'Varietà' [Variety], published for the first time in issue 200 (7 August 1938) and

79 *L'Avventuroso*, 18 December 1938, p. 1 (emphasis mine).

80 Teodosio Da Sepino, 'Invenzioni e scoperte', *L'Avventuroso*, 18 December 1938, p. 3 (emphasis mine).

covering many different topics, from flying mammals (issue 213) to trained fish (issue 220); 'Curiosità scientifiche' [Scientific Curiosities] and 'Avvenimenti curiosi e straordinari' [Curious and Extraordinary Events], both similar to 'Varietà'; and from issue 220 'I grandi avventurosi' [Great Adventurers], which in some issues replaced 'Eroi dell'Italia imperiale'. In December 1938 the only American hero who survived was 'L'uomo mascherato', whose adventures were published for the last time on 31 December 1938 (issue 221).

The Fascist phase of *L'Avventuroso* affected not only the balance between text and image, and between Italian and American comics, but also the content of the Italian comics. In 1938 some were explicitly aligned with Fascist policy, such as 'Jutso il piccolo eroe giapponese' by Gaetano Vitelli [Jutso, the Little Japanese Hero] and 'Agli ordini di Franco' by Mario Tempesti [On the Orders of Franco]. The Fascist re-alignment co-existed with the American influence, visible in some of the Italian comics clearly inspired by the American heroes which preceded them. For example, 'Gaor, il conquistatore del fuoco' [Gaor, Conqueror of Fire] by Guido Fantoni recalls 'Tarzan'; while the series 'L'ispettore Petrosino' [Inspector Petrosino] by Vichi, based on the life of the real Italian-American policeman 'Joe' Petrosino, recalls 'Radio Patrol' in style and setting. 'L'ispettore Petrosino', however, also exemplifies a further alignment with Fascist ideology because, while the illustrations are Americanised, its contents reflect the racial laws (approved in 1938) in the villain, Monk Eastman, a Jewish criminal the portrayal of whom – dark clothes and a prominent, hooked nose – echoes the iconography of Fascist anti-Semitic propaganda (Fig. 15).

The new format remained consistent throughout the following years. In 1939 text and image were divided, with pages entirely dedicated either to comic strips or to written sections. Text was no longer used to frame comics and the magazine was now harmoniously divided into six pages dedicated to comics and six to written sections. The regular columns consistently followed the pattern set by issue 219, with a historical Italian personality introduced in each issue and many sections celebrating Italian – and Fascist – achievements. Moreover, from issue 233 onwards (26 March 1939) the description of the magazine changed once again: from 'Grande settimanale per tutti' to 'Grande settimanale a colori' [Great weekly in colour]. Although the new layout remained consistent throughout the final years of *L'Avventuroso*, in 1940 a series of events momentarily distracted the attention of the authorities away from comics magazines. In May Alfieri declared that the purification of children's publishing



Figure 15 Ferdinando Vichi's villain Monk Eastman in *L'Avventuroso*, 30 January 1938. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

from any foreign contamination had been concluded; in June Italy entered the war; and in October Alfieri was replaced as Minister of Popular Culture by Alessandro Pavolini. These events resulted in a relative freedom for *L'Avventuroso*, so much so that, after June, Nerbini reintroduced some American heroes: the abovementioned Italian versions of 'The Phantom' illustrated by Lemmi ('Giustiziere Mascherato' [Masked Avenger], issues 271–332 (1940); and 'Uomo Misterioso' [Mysterious Man], issues 378–88 (1942)); 'Jungle Jim' by Toppi and Rudy Coghei ('Geo', issues 291–349 (1940–41)); 'Brick Bradford' ('Marco Spada', issues 351–79 (1941); then 'La corona d'oro' [The Golden Crown], issues 380–82 (1942)); and 'Lone Ranger' ('Il solitario della foresta' [The Loner of the Jungle], issues 259–300 (1940)). More importantly, one of the iconic figures in *L'Avventuroso* was reintroduced: Mandrake, who appeared in a story titled 'Il mago

'900' [Magician 900] from issue 301 until issue 375 (31 December 1941). In February 1941 even 'The Phantom' reappeared in its original version by Falk and Moore (issues 333–77). Nonetheless, the number of copies sold never reached the heights of the golden age: in 1940 *L'Avventuroso* sold a maximum of 100,000 copies.

It has been suggested that among the reasons for the poor sales of *L'Avventuroso* in 1940 and 1941, despite the reintroduction of some American heroes, are the absence of Flash Gordon, the star of the magazine, and the predictable plots of comics that were not a novelty anymore.[81] Although this interpretation seems valid, one needs also to take into account the impact of the war on Italian families and everyday life, which seems a solid reason for the drop in number of copies sold. Moreover, Mario Nerbini was more cautious in the choice and publication of American strips; and although he considered republishing Gordon under the name of 'Astro', he decided not to, given the tight control of the Ministry of Popular Culture, as a letter to Guglielmo Emanuel dated 8 February 1941 shows:

> Dalla lettura delle didascalie [di Gordon] mi sono convinto che il lavoro non è adatto per un giornale per ragazzi. Manca la trama avvincente e si ha una successione di fatti che interessano soltanto per una figurazione sensuale in cui si rappresenta una continua lotta fra esseri umani e non umani per il possesso di belle femmine più o meno vestite. Anche a ricoprirle con maglie figurate e allungamento di veli le forme restano sempre di apparenti nudità. È impossibile poi cambiare certe situazioni che appaiono scabrose. Data la vigilanza che esercita sul nostro giornale il Ministero, ritengo che questo Gordon anche modificato […] non sia accettato. Mi dispiace perché ci contavo molto per una maggiore vendita dell'*Avventuroso*, ma non voglio rischiare troppo.[82]
>
> [In reading [Gordon's] captions, I am convinced that the work is not suitable for a magazine for young men. It lacks a compelling plot and has a succession of facts that are interesting only because of a sensual figuration depicting a continuous struggle between humans and non-humans for the possession of beautiful, more-or-less clothed females. Even by covering them with figurative meshes and lengthening the veils, their shape always remains apparently nude. It is then impossible to change certain situations that appear obscene. Given the Ministry's supervision of our magazine, I believe that this

81 Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, pp. 238–48, 252.

82 Mario Nerbini to Guglielmo Emanuel, 8 February 1941, Fondazione Franco Fossati, Milan, Archivio Guglielmo Emanuel, quoted in Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, p. 252.

> Gordon, even if modified […] will not be accepted. I am sorry because I was really counting on it to increase the sales of *L'Avventuroso*, but I do not want to risk too much.]

The letter also reveals that the Fascist regime was still monitoring comics magazines and was particularly interested in keeping the balance between images and words in favour of the latter, as shown by a letter from the Ministry of Popular Culture that Nerbini forwarded to Emanuel: '[Q]uesto Ministero segnala a codesta Casa Editrice l'opportunità di aumentare – gradualmente – le pagine di testo del giornale per ragazzi "Avventuroso"' [[T]his Ministry informs this Publishing House of the need to increase – gradually – the text pages in the magazine for young men 'Avventuroso'].[83]

With the help of Emanuel, Nerbini altered the American heroes and their adventures to avoid censorship. For example, in Brick Bradford's comic strips, published in 1941 as 'Marco Spada', the villain, originally from Tripoli, was planned to be 'di Tunisi o del Marocco per ragioni di opportunità' [from Tunis or Morocco for reasons of appropriateness].[84] A similar change touched Mandrake, who in the instalment 'Nel covo delle belve' [In the Den of Beasts] (issues 355–75, July–December 1941), rather than fighting Nazi spies in the United States finds himself in Germany working with the Gestapo against Anglo-Saxon spies.

At the end of 1941 the Ministry of Popular Culture reaffirmed its commitment against the Americanisation of comics and, more generally, illustrations and on 15 October imposed on publishers of comics magazines the requirement for authorisation by the Prefecture before they distributed their magazines: 'Poiché alcuni editori di albi per ragazzi […] pubblicano ugualmente quegli albi alla cui diffusione il Ministero ha negato l'autorizzazione, prima di procedere alla distribuzione […] dovranno ottenere […] il visto della rispettiva Prefettura' [Since some publishers […] also publish those comic books whose distribution the Ministry has refused to authorise, before proceeding with distribution they must obtain […] the approval of the[ir] respective Prefecture].[85] It was the beginning

83 Mario Nerbini to Guglielmo Emanuel, 'Direzione Generale per il Servizio della Stampa italiana, protocollo no. 1948/B', 7 February 1941, quoted in Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, p. 252 (emphasis in the original).

84 Mario Nerbini to Guglielmo Emanuel, 13 June 1941, quoted in Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, p. 256.

85 *Circolare Ministero della Cultura Popolare n. 3042/B*, 15 October 1941, reproduced in Gadducci, Gori and Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, p. 469.

of a new phase of stricter control that reached its peak in 1942, when the Ministry of Popular Culture once again banned American heroes and, in general, American models. Speech bubbles disappeared and the format of the comic strip divided into panels was also abolished. The golden age of American comics in Italy, which reached its zenith in the years from 1934 to 1938, had come to an end. Modern Italian comics based on the American model would reappear only after the end of the war.

As for *L'Avventuroso*, the reintroduction of American comics did not alter the structure of the magazine introduced in 1939, which remained consistent until the beginning of 1943, when Nerbini sold *L'Avventuroso* to Mondadori, who published eleven more issues before suspending its publication (issue 450).[86] Among the many aspects of comics publishing influenced by *L'Avventuroso*, and an overlooked point worth examining further, is the image of women disseminated through the American and Italian comics published in the magazine. From both a visual and narrative point of view, the female characters which appeared in *L'Avventuroso* had an impact on the models of femininity that contributed to shaping Italian comics culture (and more broadly modern Italy's popular culture). The study of the representation of female characters in comics is also useful for a better understanding of the impact of foreign models on Italian comics, as well as in assessing how American comics and Fascist ideology and censorship conditioned the portrayal of women in *L'Avventuroso*.

L'Avventuroso and the Image of Women

At the beginning of the twentieth century *Il Corrierino* introduced its readers not only to the new model of American comics but also to a model of femininity. Characters like Maggie/Petronilla ('Bringing Up Father') and Lola/Toots ('Toots and Casper') represented women mainly as wives, who had a central role in the comics as protagonists in the domestic sphere. Although Petronilla (Maggie), for example, is a strong character and plays a central role in the comic strip, she is just a wife – perhaps impetuous, but still a wife who runs the household. The role of women as the cornerstone of family life was also reproduced in Italian comics published in children's periodicals,

86 The issues of *L'Avventuroso* published by Mondadori slightly changed the appearance of the magazine: the heading disappeared, but the colour of the title – red on a yellow background – remained consistent. The last seven issues of *L'Avventuroso* were published as part of *Topolino*.

with American-family comic strips characters becoming a model for Italian illustrators. This is yet another aspect of the Americanisation of Italian comics and Italianisation of American models: Petronilla was taken as a model for Italian comic strips such as 'Sor Pampurio' (Carlo Bisi, 1928), a figure who, with his wife Donna Pampuria, represented the typical Italian middle-class family and reproduced the dynamics between American middle-class husband Arcibaldo and his wife Petronilla. However, whereas Arcibaldo and Petronilla strove to improve their social status, Sor Pampurio and Donna Pampuria aimed at stability, highlighting the differences between American and Italian society and confirming the role of comics as a medium that reflects the social and cultural practices of a given society.

At the end of the 1920s and throughout the 1930s Mussolini's apparatus used comics to disseminate the image of the young, brave, good Fascist girl, with comics aimed at young children which highlighted such Fascist values as motherhood, the central role of family and, above all, the full embrace of the Fascist faith. The editorial opening the first issue of *La Piccola Italiana*, for example, states that the magazine strives to educate future Italian women, 'cioè fare di voi oggi "piccole italiane" buone operose ferventi cittadine dell'Italia nuova che, riconsacrata dall'amore dei suoi figli, marcia sicura verso le sue maggiori fortune' [that is, to make you today's 'little Italians' good, hard-working fervent citizens of the new Italy, which, rededicated by the love of its children, marches confidently towards its greater fortunes].[87]

With the publication of adventure comics such as *L'Avventuroso*, both the representation of women and their relationship to male protagonists changed, introducing a different model of femininity. In the American comics published in *L'Avventuroso*, female characters were portrayed as sensual women who had a secondary, yet important role alongside the male hero and whose appearance resembled those of Hollywood stars from the 1930s. These female characters offer significant examples of the models of femininity that counterbalanced the negative image of women disseminated by Nerbini's other publications, such as *Il 420*, and diverged from the Fascist model found in women's magazines such as *Grazia*. *Il 420* was a satirical journal founded by Giuseppe Nerbini in 1914 that became aligned with Mussolini's system of power. The image of women in the magazine follows Fascist rhetoric: foreign women are the main

87 [Anon.], 'Fanciulle e giovinette d'Italia', *La Piccola Italiana*, 27 June 1927, p. 1.

subject of illustrations aimed at highlighting the superficiality and inconsistency of the female character, while the Italian women, portrayed as mothers, are often used to underline the negative features of foreign women and highlight the superiority of the Italian race. Ethiopian women were, for their part, often the target of satire in *Il 420* and depicted as both sensual and primitive.

By contrast, in the early years of *L'Avventuroso* female characters were important elements of the plot, reliable companions who supported the hero. A clear example of this is Dale Arden, Flash Gordon's partner, who emanated an erotic femininity and displayed an emancipation that were unfamiliar in Italian comics until then. Dale participated in adventures alongside Gordon, boldly facing dangerous situations. However, Dale Arden's courage and audacity were counterbalanced by her vanity and her need to be saved by the hero, thus showing the contradictions inherent in women's emancipation in the United States (see Chapter 1) by portraying an independent woman who ultimately needs to be saved by a man. Dale Arden is a classic example of the (sensual) damsel in distress in comics from the 1930s: she is a supporting character whose main role is to add sensuality and romance to the plotline. Other female characters such as Princess Aura, daughter of Ming the Merciless in 'Flash Gordon', or Princess Narda in 'Mandrake the Magician', not to mention the policewoman Molli Dal from 'Radio Patrol' and Diana Palmesi in 'The Phantom', have stronger personalities and offer a model of femininity which could not be further from the exemplary Fascist mother and wife. Princess Aura, for example, tries to seduce Flash Gordon and goes against her father to help the hero. However, all these female characters, no matter how relevant to the storyline, still operate in the shadow of the male protagonists. Although often at the centre of the action and an essential part of the adventure, female characters in American comics were, then, still dependent on the hero, whose virility was ultimately at the core of the storyline. Looking at the publication timeline, one can note some changes in the publication of female characters in *L'Avventuroso*, from the alteration of the original strips to a faithful reproduction of women's original features and clothing.

In the early years of *L'Avventuroso* (1934–36) American comics were republished in Italy with little or no alteration; and the model of women disseminated throughout the magazine was characterised by an explicit eroticism that contrasted with the Fascist ideal image of the mother (Figs. 16 and 17). More importantly, the eroticism of female characters, especially in a magazine read by adolescents, went



Figure 16 Panels showing Dale Arden's sensuality in 'La distruzione del mondo' in *L'Avventuroso*, 9 December 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

against the common sense of decency in Italy, conditioned by both the Fascist conservative ideals surrounding womanhood and the Roman Catholic Church. To avoid any reaction against *L'Avventuroso*, Mario Nerbini intervened to alter some panels, especially those showing too much female nudity – a form of self-protective censorship that shielded the magazine from Fascist State censorship. The eroticism of female characters in American strips was hidden by covering their bodies with layers of clothing (Figs. 18–19).[88]

From 1938 onwards a shift in the portrayal of female characters in Italian comics can be noticed. In Ferdinando Vichi's 'La metropoli distrutta' [The Destroyed Metropolis] (January 1938) and 'Le

88 All images from the original Sunday strips by Alex Raymond are taken from the Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/flash-gordon-sunday-newspaper-strips-1934-1935-76-weeks> [accessed 10 December 2024].



Figure 17 'Agente Segreto X-9' in *L'Avventuroso*, 9 December 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

avventure di Petrosino' [Petrosino's Adventures] (December 1938), for example, women had a clearly subordinate role. In 'La metropoli distrutta' in particular the female protagonist, Marisa, embodies the Fascist ideal woman: she is a reliable companion who supports the hero, serves the Motherland and is focused on her role as a mother even in adverse conditions. Apart from being a mother and wife, she is also a 'studentessa di medicina e praticante nelle sale chirurgiche della sua città' [medical student and intern in her city's operating theatres],[89] reflecting the Fascist emphasis on the role of women in nursing. Mario Tempesti's 'Agli ordini di Franco' (October–November 1938) offers another example of a Fascist woman with a subordinate

89 Ferdinando Vichi, 'La metropoli distrutta', *L'Avventuroso*, 27 February 1938, p. 7.



Figure 18 The manipulated version of Alex Raymond's 'Flash Gordon', which appeared in *L'Avventuroso*, 13 January 1935. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

role: Gianna, the only female character, is portrayed as a faithful companion to the hero and the Motherland; she is in love with Mario because of his Fascist courage and *italianità*. Finally, in Toppi's 'I tre di Maccallè' all the characters are men, leaving women completely out of the action. Overall, from 1938 onwards female characters no longer play a leading role, with the exception of the American comics reintroduced briefly between 1940 and 1941.

In general, female characters in *L'Avventuroso* are portrayed as sensual and adventurous women, revolutionising the image of women in comics, although they are ultimately subordinated to the heroes. After the intervention by the Fascist regime in the



Figure 19 In the Italian version Princess Narda's ('Daran') appearance has been altered by Nerbini's self-imposed censorship: covering the nudity of her upper body with a corset-like design. Image from the 11 August 1935 issue. Reproduced here from the comic book published in February 1936, courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

field of comics, women figures reflect Fascist rhetoric and its inner contradictions, portraying submissive women whose main role is that of mothers, wives, or good Fascists, but who are nonetheless active in the action, even using weapons and leading when needed. This offers further proof of the profound impact of American adventure comics, which gave women active roles outside the household, contrary to the predominant Fascist model of femininity that was disseminated in early comics magazines. At the same time, the portrayal of female characters joining the fight of the hero and embracing arms, while it may at first appear opposed to Fascist precepts, can be seen as a reflection of the mobilisation by the dictatorship for war, which required women to do their part to support the (Fascist) Motherland.

Italian and American Comics in *L'Avventuroso*

During its nine years of publication *L'Avventuroso* published more than a hundred comic stories. The overall number of the Italian-created comics was higher than that of American comics, highlighting one of the main differences between the two styles: American comics were long-running series which lasted years, divided into instalments characterised by a specific event or adventure featuring the same protagonists, whereas Italian comics were shorter, self-contained and featured different characters. For example, a series like 'Flash Gordon' was published over 205 issues, while an Italian story such as Toppi's 'I naufragatori misteriosi' lasted only seven issues (67–73, from 19 January 1936 to 1 March 1936). It would not be possible to analyse here all the stories that appeared in the 439 issues of *L'Avventuroso* published by Nerbini. However, four stories – the American 'Flash Gordon' and 'Mandrake'; and the Italian 'Il dramma del sottomarino H-47' and 'La regina d'Atalanta' – can be taken as key examples in the analysis of form, content and the impact and influence of American models on the Italian production of the time, which later influenced the development of post-war Italian comics.

Flash Gordon (Alex Raymond – Don Moore)

Flash Gordon was created by illustrator Alex Raymond and writer Don Moore and first appeared in the United States in January 1934 as a Sunday comic strip, which became a daily in 1940. 'Flash Gordon' appeared alongside 'Jungle Jim' and was created to compete against the popular science-fiction hero 'Buck Rogers' by Philip Francis Nowlan (1929). The hero, Flash Gordon, fights against his arch-enemy Ming the Merciless, dictator of the planet Mongo, with the help of Dr. Zarkov and Gordon's partner Dale Arden. In spite of a potentially controversial story for an Italian readership – a hero fighting against a dictatorship – Flash Gordon soon became the most successful and recognisable feature of *L'Avventuroso*. Set in a non-identifiable future, Flash Gordon's adventure begins with a mysterious planet colliding with the Earth, threatening its very existence. In these circumstances Gordon meets Dale Arden and Dr Zarkov. In an attempt to save Earth, the three protagonists find themselves on planet Mongo. From the very first strip, Gordon begins a series of adventures on Mongo, first to save Dale, whom Ming decides to marry against her will, and

finally to overthrow the evil dictator. His adventures are a mixture of science-fiction and fantasy settings, as well as more traditional combat, and always see the hero almost defeated before finally succeeding thanks to the help of 'good' characters, including Ming's own daughter Aura.

According to Becciu, Flash Gordon's success in Italy was due to the fact that Italians could find in the undefeatable hero the kind of virile man exalted by Fascist rhetoric, while the Fascists did not like him only because he was an American.[90] This thesis is supported by the hero's main characteristics: he is a charismatic leader, fighting for the greater good, successful with women and invincible. Other views, like those of Carlo Della Corte, explain Flash Gordon's success in his fight for freedom and democracy: what attracted the young readers was a set of values that stood in contrast to those imposed by the Fascist regime.[91] Although this interpretation offers an interesting reflection and adds political value to the reading of American comics in the Fascist era, *L'Avventuroso* was read mainly by adolescents who were too young to be politically aware: 'Gli amici di Gordon in Italia sono tutti del 1923 e del 1924' [The friends of Gordon in Italy are all born in 1923 and 1924], Oreste Del Buono recalls.[92] It is undeniable that for the generation born in the mid-1920s *L'Avventuroso* and American comics represented a form of split from the generations that preceded them. Del Buono again offers a useful insight into what the magazine meant for young adolescents: 'Quel foglio di carta colorata li divise non solo dai genitori e gli educatori [che non ne autorizzavano la lettura], ma anche dai ragazzi che avevano pochi anni più di loro' [That coloured sheet of paper separated them not only from their parents and teachers [who did not allow them to read it], but also from the boys who were a few years older than them].[93] Only after 1943 and the start of the Resistance did American comics became an explicit symbol of anti-Fascist resistance, identifiable in the names chosen by many partisans that were inspired by or directly taken from American heroes, such as the *nom de guerre* 'Tarzan' adopted by the partisan Dario Scaglione.[94]

90 Becciu, *Il fumetto*, p. 86.

91 Becciu, *Il fumetto*, p. 86.

92 Del Buono, *Sul fumetto*, p. 112.

93 Del Buono, *Sul fumetto*, p. 112.

94 Dario Scaglione's fight in the Resistance is remembered in Beppe Fenoglio, *Il partigiano Johnny* (Milan: Einaudi, 1968).

Aside from any political meaning which can be inferred from the impact of 'Flash Gordon' on Italian society, and particularly on the young people who fought in the Resistance, the impact of the American comic on Italian popular culture is undeniable. What is more, the publication of 'Flash Gordon' provides insights into early practices in the publication of American comics. When it first appeared in *L'Avventuroso* in 1934, Nerbini reproduced the Flash Gordon comic strips faithfully, so much so that their reproduction can be considered a translated reprinting, as the strips even maintained the small 'to be continued' caption on what originally constituted the last panel of the Sunday strip (Fig. 20).

In the process of translation the original dialogues were also Italianised, reflecting specific features of the Italian language, such as the use of the polite form of address. Both Gordon and 'L'uomo mascherato' use the polite form 'voi' (second person plural) when talking to their partners, reflecting an Italian habit and the Fascist campaign against *lei* (third person singular), officially abolished by the Fascist government in 1938. Interestingly, in some cases the polite form is not used, as in the interaction between Princess Aura and Flash Gordon. Unlike Dale, Aura uses the informal 'tu' (second

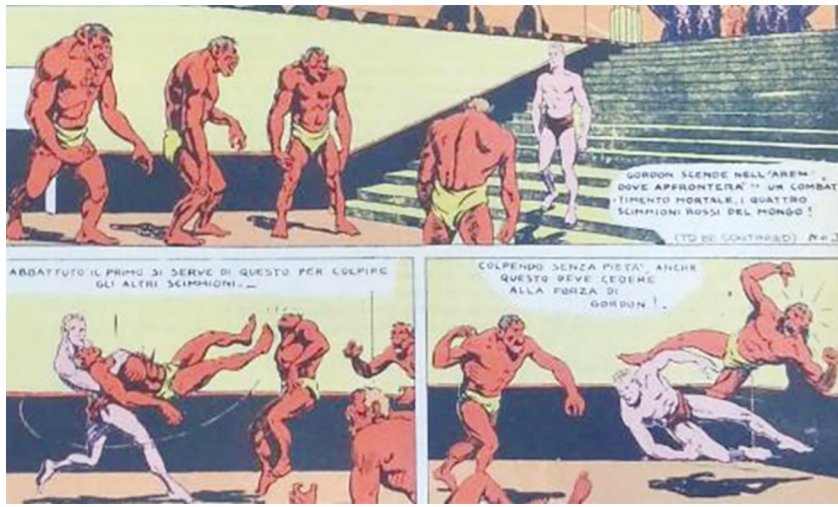


Figure 20 The ending of the third episode as reproduced in *L'Avventuroso*, 28 October 1934. In the original 'to be continued' appears in the last panel; in the Italian version, it appears in the centre of the page (first panel of the image as it appears here). Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

person singular) (Fig. 21), a form of address conventionally reserved for intimacy.

Until the ban on American comics, 'Flash Gordon' consistently remained the comic strip on the cover of *L'Avventuroso*, always in colour and a guarantee of sales that demonstrate a faithful readership. The success of 'Flash Gordon' shows the younger generation's attraction to a new exotic, fantasy world,



Figure 21 'Flash Gordon' as depicted in the 18 November 1934 and 30 December 1934 issues of *L'Avventuroso:* Princess Aura [above] and Dale Arden [below]. Note the use of the informal 'tu' in the bottom panel. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

introducing science fiction into Italian comics magazines and the dynamic action of the adventure that Italian comics authors soon emulated.

Il dramma del sottomarino H-47 (Giove Toppi)

As we have seen, in 1935 Fascist rhetoric entered *L'Avventuroso*, influencing the subjects and settings of Italian-produced comics. Nonetheless, many of them maintained the use of foreign, and often Anglo-Saxon, names for their protagonists – probably a move to align Italian productions with popular American comics to meet their readers' expectations. In 'Il dramma del sottomarino H-47' Toppi uses foreign names for his protagonists: James Watson, Cherie, Karl and Marton. The story revolves around a military submarine, but no details are provided on who is fighting whom; and the only information given about the setting of the story is of a battle in the North Sea: the 'enemy' is not identified. Engineer Watson equips the submarine with invincible torpedoes that the spy Marton, together with her husband Karl, tries to sabotage. Both sides have their own victories: the spies succeed in sinking the submarine, while Cherie avenges the killing of her fiancé Watson by sinking the enemy's submarines. The ending of the story is particularly interesting since the two women bemoan the death of their men:

> Due case lontane … due donne che pregano davanti a un ritratto. – Karl, moristi per il tuo paese [says Marton], – Watson, moristi per la tua patria! [says Cherie]. E in fondo al mare gli eroi oscuri giacciono accanto, amici e nemici…nella pace eterna della morte![95]
>
> [Two distant homes … two women praying in front of a portrait. – Karl, you died for your country [says Marton]; – Watson, you died for your Motherland! [says Cherie]. And at the bottom of the sea the obscure heroes lie side by side, friend and foe…in the eternal peace of death!]

In these sentences is one of the recurrent themes in Fascist rhetoric: the men sacrifice themselves for the Motherland and are glorified by death. Moreover, despite the fact that the two women are active protagonists in the story as a spy and a captain of a warship respectively, in the

95 Giove Toppi, 'Il dramma del sottomarino H-47', *L'Avventuroso*, 12 January 1936, p. 2.

end they embody the Fascist woman, praying at home and praising the fate of their men. The Fascist elements presented throughout the story can be seen as yet another example of the adaptation of the American model to Italian, predominantly Fascist culture. Although some similarities can be seen between Toppi's female characters and those in American comics, in Toppi's story women play a central role. Cherie and Marton are the real protagonists: they are active characters with a prominent role in the action. Unlike the female characters in most American comics, Cherie and Marton are not subordinated to the male protagonist; on the contrary, they successfully avenge their respective partner's death – Cherie even leading an attack and commanding a warship. Cherie and Marton both take a leading role and succeed in their missions, thus offering a model of femininity more audacious than the one established by American figures like Dale Arden or Diana Palmer, suggesting a further reinterpretation of the American model and substituting courage for sensuality. Instead, the influence of American comics emerges clearly in Toppi's style in the illustrations and the fast-paced rhythm of the adventure, which is very much on par with those of the American heroes in *L'Avventuroso*.

La regina d'Atalanta (Paolo Lorenzini – Giove Toppi)

Toppi was among the most prolific illustrators of *L'Avventuroso*. His style shows the strong influence of American comics artists, especially Alex Raymond's combination of realistic style and fantasy. Toppi's stories are, in a way, a perfect combination of the Italian tradition of the feuilleton with the adventures and themes introduced by American comics. This can be seen especially in the exotic settings, the disdainful heroes and the sensuality of the women, as well as in the drawing style and visual dynamism. An excellent example of this mixture is 'La regina d'Atalanta', published in 1936. The story begins aboard a cruise ship, on which the American Arabel French 'con venti anni e altrattanti milioni di dollari' [with twenty years and just as many millions of dollars], accompanied by a French waitress called Betty and the 'fedele negro' [faithful negro] Mango, meets billionaire Teddy Fulton during a voyage circumnavigating the globe. She also meets a Chinese man and a Brahman, who engage in an intense conversation about metempsychosis with Teddy. Attracted by her wealth, the Chinese man and the Brahman convince Arabel to stop in Calcutta, where the adventure begins. After a few

days in Calcutta, Arabel and Teddy meet Detective Bob Haller, who informs them that the Chinese man they met on the cruise ship is in fact the 'infamous Fo–Ki', who uses opium to rob people of anything they possess. Detective Haller reveals Fo–Ki's plan to rob Teddy and Arabel and, with the assistance of Betty and Sergeant Smith, Haller's partner, helps the American couple. All seems to end for the best, but Fo–Ki tricks the Americans and stuns them using opium. Alarmed by the disappearance of her lady, Betty alerts Detective Haller, who begins to investigate the couple's kidnapping. Two parallel stories then develop: a detective story that follows Haller's investigation and a fantasy story that sees Teddy travelling into the deep ocean to save Arabel, turned into a statue in a forgotten city under the sea, Atalanta. The rhythm of the narration speeds up and within five instalments the two stories draw to an end: Teddy saves Arabel, and they are both saved by detective Haller. It is only at the end of the comic that the readers realise that the story of the Queen of Atalanta, Arabel, saved by Teddy, was a dream induced by Fo–Ki's opium. The ending is a classic happy ending: Arabel and Teddy marry and start travelling together, followed by the faithful Mango, while Betty and Bob Haller fall in love.

What is most evident in the story are the dynamism of the action and the complexity of the plot. The comic strip mixes different genres: a detective, an adventure and a fantasy story. It can also be divided into two different parts: the first introducing characters and plot, set aboard the cruise ship; the second following the adventures in Calcutta. In the second part the plot becomes more complicated, and the comic strip is transformed from a pure detective story into an adventure and fantasy story. Many similarities with American comics can be noted, particularly with 'Flash Gordon'. One is the undersea adventure when, by trying to save Arabel, Teddy discovers an underwater city, a plot twist which recalls Flash Gordon's first adventure on the planet Mongo and a scene from the second instalment of 'Mandrake the Magician', 'The Hawk', as Figs. 22–24 show. Moreover, Arabel's features and sensuality resemble those of the American-style illustrations (Fig. 25).

Finally, the dynamism of the action also resembles that in American adventure comics, with specific scenes which share many similarities. One particular panel, that showing Arabel's kidnapping, is similar to one from 'The Phantom' in which the hero saves his girlfriend (Fig. 26). In both images, the couples are intertwined in a dramatic landscape and the female is presented as a damsel in

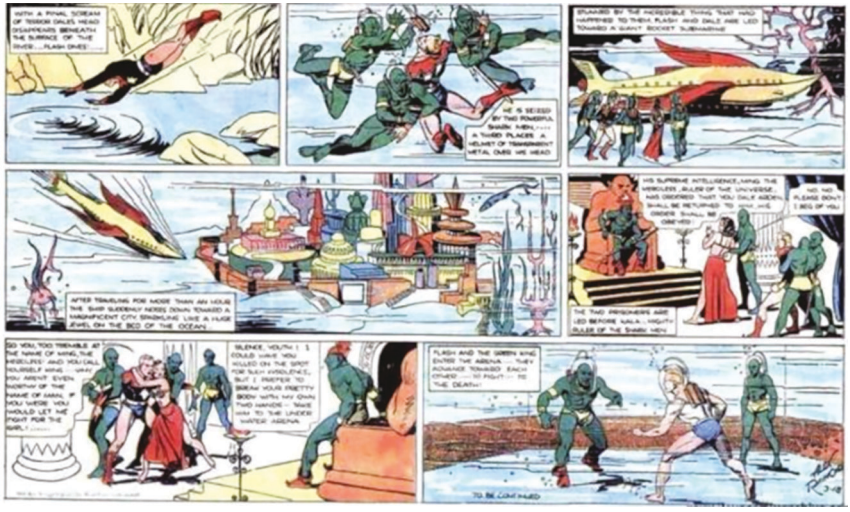


Figure 22 Flash Gordon in a submarine adventure on Planet Mongo in this original strip dating to 1934. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

distress saved by the male protagonist. However, in the American comic Diana is sexualised, not only by her wearing of a red dress but also in the way the hero holds onto her. Although clearly in a passive role, Diana is the focus of the scene. By contrast, in Toppi's illustration the male figure is in the centre and catches the reader's eye, whereas Arabel, fully clothed, is only half visible. Toppi's story was published in 1936, while the instalment of 'The Phantom' came out one year later, in 1937. This shows the extent of the impact of the American model on Toppi's style, which had fully adopted the visual model coming from the United States.

'La regina di Atalanta' offers a clear example of the presence of American models from the perspective of form and content: his protagonists are American and his style is inspired by American comics. At the same time, the choice of an exotic setting such as Calcutta recalls the traditional Italian adventure novel, such those by Salgari. In 'La regina d'Atalanta' the pre-existent exotic imaginary merges with the new one brought by American adventure comics, creating a modern Italian comic that is the result of the Americanisation of Italian comics and of the Italianisation of American models.

Mandrake the Magician (Lee Falk – Phil Davis)

Among all the heroes whose adventures were published in *L'Avventuroso*, Mandrake is arguably the only one with superhuman



Figure 23 Giove Toppi's 'La regina d'Atalanta' undersea scene, featuring the attack of a giant octopus from *L'Avventuroso*, 14 June 1936. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

powers. His characteristic feature is not his extraordinary physical strength, like Flash Gordon, but instead his ability to use illusion and hypnotism to defeat his enemies. Mandrake's lack of a particular physical strength is balanced by the constant presence of Lothar, his giant Nubian servant. Mandrake is an elegant white man who always wears a tuxedo and who, like Flash Gordon, fascinates women. Princess Narda – who appears in the second instalment of the saga, 'The Hawk', published in *L'Avventuroso* in 1935 – starts off as the antagonist, a primary character with her own storyline independent of the hero. In agreement with the villain, Hawk, she had planned to seduce Mandrake and then poison him. However, she soon falls in love with Mandrake and, rather than carrying out her plan, convinces Hawk to throw him, chained, into the sea.

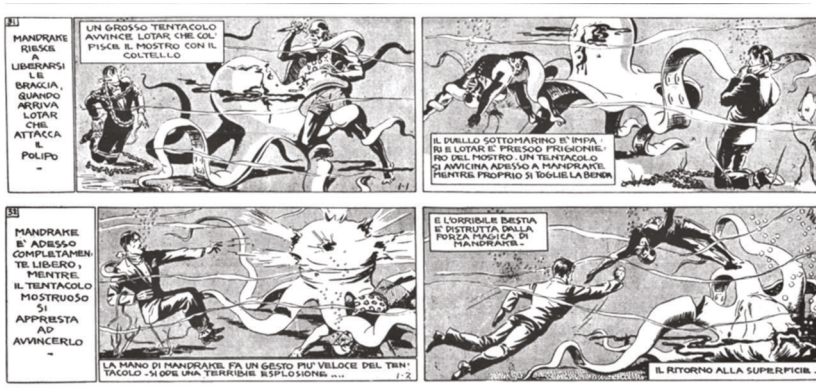


Figure 24 Mandrake is attacked by a giant octopus and saved by his servant Lothar in 'Il mistero della casa da giuoco', 6 February 1936 (6 October 1935; published in the States as 'The Hawk', 6 December 1934). Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.



Figure 25 Arabel French in 'La regina d'Atalanta' in *L'Avventuroso,* 8 March 1938. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

Thanks to his powers, Mandrake is able to communicate with Lothar, who rescues him. Mandrake, who has realised that Princess Narda is being blackmailed by Hawk, decides to rescue her. From this point on Narda loses her independence and becomes a subordinate character at the mercy of events, a pretty woman to be saved by the hero. Until then she had represented a strong character with her own personality, a woman who misled both the hero and the



Figure 26 The Phantom with Diana in 'L'uomo mascherato' (*L'Avventuroso*, 11 April 1937); and the kidnapping of Arabel in 'La regina d'Atalanta' (*L'Avventuroso*, 12 April 1936). Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

villain. In the fourth instalment, 'Il cammello d'argilla' [The Clay Camel], published in *L'Avventuroso* in 1937, Narda reappears as an independent character with her own storyline and mission, joining Mandrake to fight against the same enemy. Despite the evolution of their relationship in this instalment, Narda is not a regular presence in the comic and in the following two instalments, 'Il fenomeno del circo' [The Circus Phenomenon] (1937) and 'L'enigmatico Davos' [The Enigmatic Davos] (1938), two other female characters appear, both fragile women whom Mandrake saves.

Another significant element is Lothar's role in the story. Lothar is introduced as an African-born prince who nonetheless decides to serve the hero: though a nobleman, he becomes a servant who refers to Mandrake as his master. Lothar's role is that of a loyal aid whose remarkable strength saves Mandrake in many critical situations. Although there is no explicit racism, in his clothing and language Lothar is a clear representation of the subordination of the black population. In the Italian translation, the few times he speaks he uses short, simple sentences, without articles or the conjugation of verbs. His subordination is emphasised by the use of 'voi', the polite form of address, when speaking to Mandrake, who in turn uses the informal 'tu' when talking to him (Fig. 27). Such representation matches the Fascist rhetoric against Ethiopians that increased from 1935 onwards, reaching its peak in 1938 with the approval of the racial laws that enhanced discrimination against the



Figure 27 Mandrake in 'Il cammello di argilla', 1 November 1936, reproduced as a stand-alone album in March 1937, from which the image is taken. Reproduced courtesy of Edizioni Nerbini.

native populations in Italian East Africa.[96] Mandrake The Magician is, among the American comics published regularly in *L'Avventuroso*, the one which most closely adheres to Fascist ideals: a dark-haired hero, who is highly successful with women, the majority of whom are in a passive and subordinate role, and in a dominant position with respect to his black servant.

The four stories show how both Italian and American comics followed an established, and very successful, pattern: there is the fight of the hero, affected by the presence of a woman with whom the hero falls in love (or vice versa), and the hero is helped by subordinate, less brilliant characters. Only one story among those analysed here goes against this pattern: Toppi's 'Il dramma del sottomarino H-47', in which the Fascist myth of the man sacrificing himself for the Motherland prevails, although it is counterbalanced by a very modern, emancipated depiction of the role of women which is probably a direct result of American examples like Dale Arden, Princess Aura and Princess Narda.

96 On the Italian policies in Africa see David Forgacs, *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861*, Cambridge Social and Cultural Histories, 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 67–138; *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. by Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), esp. Giulia Barrera, 'The Construction of Racial Hierarchies in Colonial Eritrea: The Liberal and Early Fascist Period (1897–1934)', pp. 81–115; and Angelo Del Boca, 'Le leggi razziali nell'impero di Mussolini', in *Il regime fascista. Storia e storiografia*, ed. by Angelo Del Boca, Massimo Legnani and Mario Rossi (Rome: Laterza, 1995), pp. 329–51.

The publication of 'Flash Gordon', 'Mandrake', 'Radio Patrol', 'The Phantom' and other American comics changed the course of Italian comics and *L'Avventuroso* had a key role in modernising them – in all their aspects. While *L'Avventuroso* was not the only Italian comics magazine in the 1930s to publish American comics or Italian interpretations of them, it certainly was the only one to base its success overwhelmingly on its American heroes. This was the reason for both its popularity and its demise. Of all the comics magazines it was the one that more than any other suffered from the interdiction on foreign material in 1938. Its evolution demonstrates the extent of the influence and creative impact of the American model on Italian comics, evident in the comics illustrated by Toppi, Vichi and Lemmi, who adapted their style to American models and began to produce modern Italian comics shaped by the example set by American adventure comics. This impact emerges clearly in the analysis of *L'Avventuroso*, particularly of its issues from 1934 to 1938, which reveals how Italian comics started to emulate American dynamism of action, style of drawing, narrative and settings. The presence of traditionally Italian exotic settings, reflected in stories such as 'Il cacciatore di Serpenti' (1934) or 'Il Negriero' (1935) and even the Americanised 'La regina d'Atalanta' (1936), shows that the two cultures merged to create hybrid forms, highly Americanised but at the same time specifically Italian.[97]

The translation of names is a particularly revealing example of this: Italian comics tended to use mostly foreign names and often reflected the American origins of the protagonists, as shown in the analysis of Toppi's stories, whereas in the American comics names were Italianised. The use of the language is thus another element that demonstrates the dual process of the Italianisation of American comics and Americanisation of Italian comics – a process which characterises both the history of Italian comics and their modernisation in the Fascist era. Therefore, *L'Avventuroso* represents a crucial case study not only for the spreading of American culture, but also for the development of modern Italian comics, a development which deeply changed their production and creation.

97 The transnational aspect of Italian culture and, more broadly, the ways in which cultural products (and productions) engage with Italian culture within and beyond national boundaries have been explored in *Transnational Italian Studies*, ed. by Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi, Transnational Modern Languages, 4 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020). See also *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook*, ed. by Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022).

It is worth highlighting that the Italianisation of American comics survived the war and became, if anything, even more visible in post-war Italy. A clear example of this is Carl Bark's character Scrooge McDuck, translated into Italian as 'Paperon de' Paperoni', completely changing the meaning of the original name and its subtle criticism of capitalism. Paperon de' Paperoni first appeared in Italy in 1947 and demonstrates that the process of Italianisation had become common practice, one which later led to the creation of such Italian Disney characters as Brigitta (1960), Paperinik (1969) and Indiana Pipps (1988). The popularity of *Topolino* in Italy offers a unique case study of the nationalisation of a foreign culture, exemplified by the establishment of an Italian branch of Disney as early as 1938, which created original stories and characters and also developed existing personae which are widely familiar in Italy and barely known in other countries, including the United States. Disney's Italian production also offers an example of how modern American culture merged with Italian traditions to create a unique, culturally hybrid product, the epitome of which are the parodies of Italian literary classics such as 'I promessi paperi' [The Betrothed Ducks], the Disney version of Alessandro Manzoni's famous novel *I promessi sposi* (1840) [*The Betrothed*].[98]

Another clear illustration of the Italianisation of American models is the series 'Tex Willer', created by Sergio Bonelli in 1948, the longest running of all Italian comic book series. In its setting and storyline 'Tex Willer' shows how Italian comics (*fumetti*) developed following the American example: Tex is a ranger in the American West, conveying the American myth and engaging the reader in the typically American genre-story featuring Indians, cowboys and the frontier. The long-lasting success of 'Tex' demonstrates the impact of American adventure comics on Italian popular culture, a genre brought to popularity in Italy by Nerbini and his *Avventuroso*. The many other Italian comics launched in post-war Italy, from *Pantera Bionda* [*Blond Panther*] (Milan: A.R.C., 1948–50) to *Zagor* (Milan: Bonelli, 1961–) show that adventure comics based on the American model had become part of Italian culture and had influenced the readers' preferences (and demands). *L'Avventuroso* marks the first steps in

98 On the origins of Disney Italia, see Leonardo Gori, 'I Disney di casa nostra', *LG Argomenti*, 23.1–2 (1987), 53–54; and Luca Boschi, Leonardo Gori and Andrea Sani, *I Disney italiani: dal 1930 al 1990, la storia dei fumetti di Topolino e Paperino realizzati in Italia*, Cartoonia (Bologna: Granata Press, 1990); on the history of Disney Italian comics see Alberto Becattini and others, *I Disney italiani*, 2 vols (Rome: Nicola Pesce Editore, 2012).

this process of cultural reinterpretation and assimilation, which was embedded in the complexities of the Fascist period but nevertheless worked deeply to transform both Italian comics and the tastes of Italian readers.

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The analysis of popular comics in the Italy of the 1930s, their evolution and the changes imposed by the Fascist State demonstrates that American comics exercised a profound influence on the newly expanding and widely popular field of Italian comics, in many respects comparable in depth and scope to the influence of Hollywood on Italian film production. At the same time, the case of *L'Avventuroso* also clearly illustrates the peculiarity of comics magazines and their development compared to other fields of popular print media. Popular magazines in Europe and the United States developed in dialogue, sharing features such as layout, the organisation of content and the content itself, but also creating their own localised styles and models. The comics of the interwar years represent a unique field, one in which American models were heavily prevalent, unlike in other fields such as women's periodicals and weeklies, which focused on current events and were strongly influenced by European models.

The study of the development of modern comics offers insights not only into how comics transformed our consumption of and engagement with entertainment, but also into their role as a significant element in contemporary society. The Italian experience illustrates the profound integration of comics into national popular culture, as documented by the everyday use of names of characters from comics. For instance, 'Mandrake' (pronounced the Italian way) refers to someone with superpowers, while 'Paperone' is used to describe someone who is stingy. Today, comics continue to serve as a powerful tool for critiquing societies, governments, national habits and cultures, placing them at the heart of political and cultural discourse – much as they did in the 1930s. Like the interwar period, the new millennium has witnessed a shift in cultural consumption, now fuelled by the rise of social media and the pervasive use of the internet. Despite these changes comics have preserved their role as an immediate form of communication and remain an effective medium for commenting on current events.[99]

99 See, for example, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991); Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1993); Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000); and Zerocalcare's *Kobane Calling* (2016).

4. The First Italian *Rotocalco*: *Omnibus* (1937–39)

'Sono riuscito a fare un giornale italiano cioè assai diverso da quelli francesi e americani'.[1]

[I was able to do an Italian journal, that is to say, one quite different from the French and American ones.]

Omnibus – settimanale di attualità politica e letteraria [political and literary weekly] had a brief life lasting only twenty-two months, from April 1937 to the end of January 1939. It was published by the Milanese publisher Rizzoli and created by Leo Longanesi, a figure already known to both a wider Italian readership and the regime for his weekly, then fortnightly, publication *L'Italiano* (Bologna: [n. pub.], 1926–42). As we shall see, despite its brief life *Omnibus* played a crucial role in the development of the modern popular press in Italy. Before the publication of *Omnibus* only women's magazines were printed using rotogravure. For its significant role in modernising the Italian periodical press, its innovative layout, its challenging content and its complex relationship with the Fascist apparatus, *Omnibus* can serve as a case study for the field of popular press with a general content.

Longanesi had been developing the idea of a new magazine at least since the autumn of 1930, as demonstrated by a letter he wrote to his friend, the intellectual and Fascist ideologue Camillo

1 Leo Longanesi to Giovanni Ansaldo, 11 February 1936, 11 February 1936, ACS, MCP, b. 119, f. 735 'Leo Longanesi'; quoted in Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, pp. 231–32 (p. 231). This section is a revised, expanded version of material already published in 'American Culture and Fascist Italy: The Case of *Omnibus* (1937–1939)', in *Italy and the USA: Cultural Change Through Language and Narrative*, ed. by Guido Bonsaver, Alessandro Carlucci and Matthew Reza, Italian Perspectives, 44 (Oxford: Legenda, 2019), pp. 123–39.

Pellizzi: '[F]ui a Roma, tempo fa, e parlai col Duce per la rivista che sembra si faccia: speriamo' [I was in Rome, some time ago, and spoke with the Duce about the magazine, which seems will be done: let's hope so].[2] It took almost seven years for that magazine finally to be published: *Omnibus*. Realising that the project was not easy, at the beginning of 1931 Longanesi temporarily abandoned the idea, possibly because of the difficulties in obtaining authorisation from the authorities to publish a new periodical: '[O]gni speranza di mettere insieme quella famosa rivista è scomparsa' [[E]very hope of putting together that famous magazine has vanished], he wrote to artist and writer Ardengo Soffici on 13 January 1931.[3] It was only at the end of 1933 or beginning of 1934 that Longanesi finally obtained the authorisation from Mussolini 'per "studiare" un grande settimanale popolare, *Omnibus*' [to 'look into' [the possibility of] a great popular weekly, *Omnibus*].[4] Two years later, in 1935, the Duce approved the publication of the magazine: 'La faccenda Rizzoli è ormai alla fine: il Duce mi ha dato il consenso: ora, se non se lo mangia il Ministero [della Stampa e la Propaganda], potrò finalmente dirigere questo settimanale' [The Rizzoli affair is now at an end: the Duce has given me his consent: now, if the

2 The letter is undated, but it was sent in September or October 1930 (Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, p. 168). Camillo Pellizzi (1896–1979) was a Fascist intellectual who contributed to the theoretical and political definition of 'Fascism', following Giovanni Gentile's ideas. His intellectual work focused particularly on corporatism. Between 1920 and 1939, while teaching at University College London, he co-founded the London *Fascio* – one of the first branches of the Italian Fascist Party established abroad (1921) – and served as Mussolini's correspondent for *Il Popolo d'Italia* (1922–29). As State Delegate for the Fasci in Great Britain and Ireland from 1922, he established branches across major British cities. He also wrote for *Critica fascista*, *Gerarchia* and later *Corriere della Sera* (1929–43). After the fall of Mussolini's regime, he worked as a sociologist, becoming one of the key figures in the development of sociology in Italy.

3 Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, p. 169. Ardengo Soffici (1879–1964) was a painter and writer, as well as critic, known as a key figure in Italian art and culture during the early twentieth century. He contributed to Futurism and, more broadly, to the Modernist movement. In the 1920s he joined the Novecento group, a cultural and artistic movement that sought to revive classical traditions and figurative arts and rejected avant-garde experimentation. Soffici published on art, culture and literature and contributed to various magazines.

4 Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, p. 203. The steps in the creation of *Omnibus* are also traced by Ivano Granata, *L''Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi. Politica e cultura (aprile 1937–gennaio 1939)* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2016), pp. 11–14.

Ministry [of the Press and Propaganda] doesn't chew it up, I shall finally be able to manage this weekly], Longanesi wrote to Ansaldo on 23 December 1935.[5] Nonetheless, it took a further two years and more meetings between Longanesi and Mussolini before the magazine was finally published, reflecting the difficulties posed by Fascist censorship, or at least by its control over the periodical press in the 1930s.[6]

The Fascist regulation of the periodical press (see Chapter 3) not only delayed the authorisation to produce and publish *Omnibus*, but also the organisation of its editorial team, as another letter dated 11 February 1936 from Longanesi to Ansaldo attests: 'In questi giorni sto organizzando la redazione, ma purtroppo senza redattori perché il Rizzoli non vuole redattori per via del contratto giornalistico' [These days I am organising the newsroom, but unfortunately without writers because Rizzoli does not want writers because of the journalist contract].[7] As a result, Longanesi was the only official editor of *Omnibus* on Rizzoli's payroll and had to rely on regular collaborators 'pagati a settimana secondo gli articoli' [paid weekly depending on the articles].[8] During its brief life, the magazine did not change its layout, main columns and features. Some sections

5 Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, p. 220.

6 Before authorising the creation of *Omnibus*, Mussolini had asked for a dossier on Longanesi. See ACS, MI, DGPS, Divisione Polizia politica, Divisione Polizia politica, b. 730, f. 'Longanesi Leo'. The date of the request seems to match the period in which Longanesi started to shape the new magazine.

7 Longanesi to Ansaldo, quoted in Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, pp. 231–32 (p. 231). The effort by the regime to render the press Fascist included moulding journalists to serve the needs of the Fascist State. Journalists obtained a national contract on 5 May 1928, which granted them some protection against termination, illness and unemployment. Two years later, the approval of the Rocco Code exposed managing editors to increased risk by holding them accountable, alongside the author, for any crime committed through the press (R.D. 19 October 1930, no. 1398, 'Approvazione del testo definitivo del Codice Penale', art. 57). See Mauro Forno, *Informazione e potere. Storia del giornalismo italiano*, Storia e società (Rome: Laterza, 2012), pp. 89–107; Paolo Murialdi, *Storia del giornalismo italiano*, Le vie della civiltà (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000 [1996]), pp. 141–57; Ermanno Amicucci, *La stampa della rivoluzione e del regime*, Panorami di vita fascista (Milan: Mondadori, 1938), particularly pp. 47–66.

8 Testimony of Gino Visentini quoted in Corrado Pizzinelli, *Parliamo di Longanesi* (Rome: Grafica San Giovanni, 1988), p. 79.

were dedicated to domestic and international politics, with exclusive reports and editorials; and there were entire pages on culture. The regular columns were:

- 'Guerra e pace' [War and Peace], on current affairs, anonymously signed by 'Omnibus' in 1937 and later by 'Ricciardetto', the pseudonym of Augusto Guerriero
- 'Il sofà delle muse' [The Muse's Sofa], written mainly by Arrigo Benedetti, Emilio Cecchi and Mario Praz, dedicated to literature and with a particular focus on Italian writers
- 'Giorno e notte' [Day and Night], a page on cinema with film reviews, interviews and gossip, created by Mario Pannunzio and Antonietta Drago
- 'Giallo e rosso' [Yellow and Red], which contained theatre reviews by Alberto Savinio; 'Palchetti romani' [Roman Small Stages]; and music reviews by Bruno Barilli, 'Il sorcio nel violino' [The Rat in the Violin]

There were also occasional columns, such as 'Il mercurio – cronache finanziarie' [The Mercury – Financial Chronicles] on economic issues, unsigned; 'Il Ventaglio' [The Fan], which published comments and pictures on fashion and style; and 'La fiera della vanità' [Vanity Fair], a gossip column, both edited by Irene Brin; and 'Campoaperto' [Open Field], dedicated to sports and written by different authors. As can be seen by the range of topics, *Omnibus* was a combination of current-affairs magazine and cultural periodical, consistent with, and even a little broader than, its own definition in its subtitle: *settimanale di attualità politica e letteraria* [political and literary weekly].

In addition to the (unofficial) regular staff, such as the authors of these regular features, many other occasional contributors wrote for the magazine, among them some of the most prominent figures in Italian journalism and literature: Corrado Alvaro, Dino Buzzati, Emilio Cecchi, Ennio Flaiano, Indro Montanelli, Alberto Moravia, Aldo Palazzeschi, Giaime Pintor, Mario Praz, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Mario Soldati, Tito Spagnol and Elio Vittorini. Illustrators Mino Maccari, Novello, Bernardo Leporini and Amerigo Baroli, not to mention Longanesi himself, also contributed to *Omnibus* with satirical illustrations and comic strips. Moreover, together with Primo Zeglio, who focused on the layout, Arrigo Benedetti and Mario Pannunzio, Longanesi practically created and composed the magazine himself, assembling articles and pictures to form the distinctive and now famous look of *Omnibus*. In spite of having a conspicuous number of collaborators, Longanesi maintained a central role in the production of the magazine, supervising and

intervening in every article before publishing it. As Indro Montanelli and Marcello Staglieno, Longanesi's friends and biographers, write: '[L]e sue mani […] si limitavano ufficialmente a firmare il foglio come direttore responsabile; ma nella realtà si calavano negli scritti altrui per uniformarli, snellirli, renderli tesi nel procedere, aggiungendo qua un aggettivo, là tagliando un paragrafo, per rimaneggiarli' [[H]is hands […] officially limited themselves to signing the paper as editor-in-chief; but in reality they delved deeply into what others wrote to standardise the texts, streamline them, tighten up their flow, adding an adjective here, cutting a paragraph there, to rework them].[9]

Omnibus aimed at a broadly popular but also cultured readership. On 17 February 1937, in another letter to his friend Pellizzi, Longanesi states that he wants to create a *popular* magazine: '[*Omnibus*] non sarà un organo letterario ma un giornale popolare' [[*Omnibus*] will not be a literary entity, but a popular journal].[10] However, he also focused on the quality of the writing and on creating a product that was popular and sophisticated at the same time. Serious attention was paid to the writing style, but without losing sight of potential readers, an objective achieved through the wide offer of columns aimed at different readerships, particularly visible in the pages dedicated to women, politics and art lovers. According to Mauro Lombardo and Fabrizio Pignatel, authors of one of the key studies on the modern Italian periodical press, *Omnibus* was a magazine clearly addressed to a very limited, élite readership, ultimately the kind of cultured reader who came from the middle-upper class.[11] The first issue of *Omnibus*, published on 28 March 1937 but dated 3 April, sold forty-two thousand copies. According to one source, before being shut down at the end of January 1939 the magazine reached a circulation record of seventy thousand to 100,000 copies per week.[12]

The content of the regular columns seems to reflect Longanesi's aim to create 'a great popular weekly'; and a close analysis of their cultural content demonstrates that, in spite of not being a 'popular' magazine as conceived nowadays, *Omnibus* targeted a broad readership, one beyond the middle-upper class, offering a carefully judged combination of serious analysis and entertainment. What makes the magazine

9 Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, p. 235.

10 Quoted in Appella, 'Leo Longanesi', p. 266.

11 Lombardo and Pignatel, *La stampa periodica*, pp. 5, 46.

12 There is no official documentation on circulation records. These figures are taken from Tranfaglia and Vittoria, *Storia degli editori italiani*, p. 322; Montanelli and Staglieno affirm it reached 100,000 copies (*Leo Longanesi*, p. 239).

appear like an élite product is the fact that Longanesi wanted to make *Omnibus* a high-quality magazine, so he put particular emphasis on the stylistic quality of the articles. The development of the *rotocalco* thus reflected and contributed to the dissemination of popular culture in contrast to, but also in combination with, high culture, with exponents of the latter shaping the popular content of the former.[13] Printed using rotogravure, *Omnibus* played a crucial role in the transformation of the Italian periodical press in both format and production and has been widely recognised as the first Italian *rotocalco*. It set a model for many future magazine publications by making photos the main focus of the page and arranging the text to wrap around the images, reflecting the spread of photojournalism worldwide.[14]

Although many studies on *Omnibus* have been published, no focused examination has explored how and why it was formally and culturally innovative, particularly in terms of foreign influences. Instead, previous analyses have concentrated on Longanesi's political stance and the general impact of *Omnibus*, with the claims of former collaborators regarding foreign influence acknowledged but never rigorously verified. In particular, whilst the attitude of *Omnibus* towards American culture has been extensively addressed by Michel Beynet in an influential study of the image of the United States in Fascist Italy and recently again by Ivano Granata, both do so under the perspective of anti-Americanism.[15] Both Beynet and Granata define *Omnibus* as an anti-American magazine aligned with the regime, pointing out that in its pages American society and culture are consistently depicted as barbaric and immoral. Montanelli and Staglieno, in their biography of Longanesi, suggest instead that the magazine was an expression of anti-conformism and dissent.[16] Our aim is not to assess the attitude of *Omnibus* or Longanesi towards the Fascist government, nor to label aspects of it 'Fascist' or 'anti-Fascist',

13 Similarly, Arnoldo Mondadori availed himself of intellectuals for his women's magazine *Grazia*, e.g., Giorgio Scerbanenco and Zavattini, as discussed in the next chapter.

14 This is particularly true of the Italian periodical press. Looking at the cover of the first issue of *Omnibus* (1 May 1937) and the cover page of *L'Espresso* (2 October 1955), for instance, the similarities are so striking that one could swap the titles of the magazines.

15 Beynet, *L'image de l'Amérique*, pp. 119–67; Granata, *L''Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi*.

16 Beynet, *L'image de l'Amérique,* pp. 119–97. He claims: 'Presque tous les articles […] qu'*Omnibus* consacre à l'Amérique sont antiaméricains' [Almost all articles […] that *Omnibus* devotes to the United States are anti-American] (p. 162); Granata, *L''Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi*, pp. 126–31; Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, pp. 231–53.

but rather to answer the question of how and why *Omnibus* was innovative in the magazine sector and how it fitted into the broad context of Italian illustrated magazines in the interwar years.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, in the interwar years a new product had attained popularity with a mass readership in Europe and the United States: the pictorial magazine. Like *Vu* in France and the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* in Germany, in Italy *Omnibus* became one of the first and most popular modern Italian cultural magazines to make widespread use of illustrations and photo-images, either in support of articles or as independent means of information. *Omnibus* offers a striking example of the appropriation and adaptation of American and European models to Italian culture despite the Fascist policy of cultural autarchy, one that is in many ways comparable to *L'Avventuroso*, which also influenced the modernisation of the Italian periodical press.

A Wide Network: *Omnibus* and the Influence of French, German and American Magazines

When *Omnibus* appeared on the news-stands, the first elements to capture its readers' attention would have been its size and visual aspect. Unlike other periodicals, *Omnibus* was the same size as a daily newspaper – the so-called *formato lenzuolo* (broadsheet), 55.5 cm x 40 cm – but its pages were occupied mainly by pictures. It cost one lira, usually had twelve pages and, as already mentioned, its first issue sold up to forty-two thousand copies.[17] Longanesi's aim was to produce a popular Italian weekly that distinguished itself from French and American products circulating in Italy at that time.[18] Despite Longanesi's intentions, however, *Omnibus*

17 The prices in Euros, compared to the value of the currency calculated on the latest coefficients released by Istat in 2024, would be €1.17. Adjusting for relative purchasing power based on the Istat 2024 average net annual salary in Italy (€37,511), the cost of the magazine would correspond to approximately €5.60.

18 See Longanesi's letter to Giovanni Ansaldo dated 11 February 1937, in which he states that he managed 'a fare un giornale italiano cioè assai diverso da quelli francesi e americani' [to do an Italian journal, that is to say, one quite different from the French and American ones] (Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, p. 231). This reveals his attention to the foreign press and confirms that foreign magazines were circulating in Italy during those years. See also De Berti, 'Il nuovo periodico'. Gigliola Gori notes that in 1938 'a ban was placed on imports of *Vogue, Harper's Bazaar* and *Marie-Claire*' (Gigliola Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women and Strong Mothers*, Sport in the Global Society (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 174). See also ACS, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, f. 4, b. 54 'Life'.

had many aspects in common with other European and American magazines. As Montanelli and Staglieno point out, 'Leo tenne d'occhio certamente i raffinati modelli mitteleuropei da *Querschnitt* a *Huhu* [*sic*], e, insieme, l'americana *Life* e la francese *Marianne*' [Leo certainly kept an eye on the refined Central European models from *Querschnitt* to *Uhu* and, together, the American *Life* and the French *Marianne*].[19] The latter in particular, according to Longanesi's collaborator Gino Visentini, was the main point of reference in the creation of the weekly: '*Omnibus* non aveva precedenti cui rifarsi: il solo giornale che potevamo tener presente come rotocalco o modello era una rivista francese che si chiamava *Marianne*. La leggevamo sempre' [*Omnibus* had no precedent to refer to: the only journal we could think of as a magazine or model was a French magazine called *Marianne*. We used to read it all the time].[20] Looking at *Marianne*, many similarities with *Omnibus* can indeed be noted. First, the subtitles of the magazines are almost identical: *Marianne* defined itself as a '[g]rand hebdomadaire politique et littéraire illustré', while *Omnibus* was a 'settimanale di attualità politica e letteraria'. Both, then, defined themselves as a 'political and literary weekly', the only difference being the absence of the term 'illustré' in *Omnibus*. Second, a remarkable similarity can also be found in the organisation of the pages and the balance between images and words: in both magazines the text is organised in columns which surround and frame the pictures.

As far as German magazines are concerned, it is worth noting that both *Querschnitt* and *Uhu*, mentioned by Montanelli and Staglieno, boast a similar layout to another well-known magazine of the time, *The New Yorker* (New York: Condé Nast, 1925–), with which they share the predominance of text over illustrations and the use of a neat, elegant font – a feature that can also be found in *Omnibus*. American magazines also played a significant role in the shaping of *Omnibus*. According to Arrigo Benedetti, Italian journalist and Longanesi's collaborator, in *Omnibus* there was:

19 Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, p. 235. *Querschnitt* was published in Berlin by Ullstein-Propyläen between 1921 and 1936.

20 Testimony of Gino Visentini, quoted in Pizzinelli, *Parliamo di Longanesi*, p. 79. On *Marianne*, see Catherine Helbert, 'La vie de Marianne: monographie de l'hebdomadaire Marianne (1932–1936)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sorbonne, 2001).

> [l]'apporto notevole dell'espressionismo tedesco, […] della cultura francese, […] della *Nouvelle Revue Française*, di *Le Crapouillot* e del dadaismo; e c'era l'apporto del giornalismo anglosassone: s'intravedeva cioè una grande ammirazione per la stampa inglese, e soprattutto una commozione per gli elementi che derivavano dal grande giornalismo illustrato americano: da *Life*, […] *Look*, da *Time*, al *New Yorker*, per quanto riguardava lo stile letterario.[21]
>
> [[t]he notable contribution of German Expressionism, […] of French culture […] of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, of *Le Crapouillot* and Dadaism; and there was the contribution of Anglo-Saxon journalism: that is, one glimpsed a great admiration for the English press and above all a fondness for the elements derived from the great American illustrated journalism: from *Life*, […] to *Look*, from *Time* to *The New Yorker*, as far as literary style was concerned.]

Benedetti's testimony not only confirms the influence of foreign models on *Omnibus* but, more importantly, highlights the cultural exchange between European and American cultures and Italy's reception of foreign models in the 1930s in a diverse, open-minded mix. *Omnibus* was part of a broad, connected cultural context, embodied in the emergence of international photo agencies that distributed images used across different types of magazines worldwide.[22] An example is offered by a famous photo, nowadays known as *Toffs and Toughs*, taken on 9 July 1937 by Jimmy Sime at the cricket match between Eton and Harrow. The photo portrays Britain's class distinctions by showing boys wearing a fancy boarding-school uniform right next to working-class boys. The photo first appeared in the *News Chronicle* on the next day, 10 July, and was reproduced by *Omnibus* a week later, on 17 July 1937. The same photo was featured in a completely

21 Arrigo Benedetti, 'Diario italiano. Omnibus', *L'Espresso*, 6 October 1957, p. 13 (also quoted in Granata, *L''Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi'*, pp. 131–32). The literary content of *Omnibus* is discussed further below.

22 The most notable international photo agencies developed in the United States and France, notably the Black Star, Rapho, Alliance-Photo and Wide World News Photo Service. On the role of news agencies in the interwar years see Kent Cooper, *Barriers Down: The Story of the News Agency Epoch* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1942); Terhi Rantanen, 'Foreign Dependence and Domestic Monopoly: The European News Cartel and U.S. Associated Presses, 1861–1932', *Media History*, 12 (2006), 19–35; Jonathan Silberstein-Loeb, *The International Distribution of News: The Associated Press, Press Association, and Reuters, 1848–1947*, Cambridge Studies in the Emergence of Global Enterprise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), esp. Chapter 7, 'Cartel or Free Trade: Supplying the World's News, 1856–1947' (pp. 196–225).

different context by *Life* magazine on 2 August 1937. In *Omnibus* the photo accompanies an article on the Spanish Civil War attacking the European democracies and praising Fascism and Nazism as the only forces fighting against Bolshevism, whereas in *Life* the photo is part of a photographic report on the Eton-Harrow cricket match. It was not just the context that changed, but also the scope of the photo. In *Omnibus* it was used sarcastically to attack the inequalities of British democracy, its caption reading: '"Le grandi democrazie" – contrasti (Inghilterra 1937)' ['The Great Democracies' – Contrasts (England 1937)]; while in *Life* it is simply part of a neutral commentary on a sporting event, its caption reading: 'Young Etonians wore black top hats with the same tailless Eton Jackets and Eton collars worn by the young Harrow boys. These two outside the Lord's gate ignored village boys'.[23] The use of the same image in such different ways shows the international role of news agencies and the importance of the photographic means to deliver news and/or political messages. Longanesi's sarcastic use of Sime's photo proves both the former's international outlook and his understanding of the impact of images in storytelling.

The role of *Omnibus* as part of the global network of illustrated magazines was not limited to its outsourcing of images to international news agencies. On 20 September 1937 *Life* published an article on *Omnibus* outlining the content of the Italian weekly and reproducing the pictures from an article published in issue 18 (31 July 1937), 'Le tedesche' [The German Women]. According to *Life*, '*Omnibus* charged [that] German women, [portrayed] doing calisthenic dancing, are ugly and flirtatious' and 'printed [an] old picture of German women bowling, to show their fat legs'.[24] The piece summarised the article, originally written by Paolo Monelli, as follows:

> The *Omnibus* article […] explained that Nazism insults the German woman by rating her solely as a childbearer in a Superior society of males and resents the idea that the State is the result of 'a common thought between a man and a woman'. The docile Nazi woman, said *Omnibus*, has red swollen hands, pimples, straight hair, no make-up and smells of laundry and cheap toothpaste. 'But tomorrow she will be the most effective force of revolution'.[25]

23 *Omnibus*, 17 July 1937, p. 1; *Life*, 2 August 1937, p. 55.

24 [Anon.], 'The Camera Overseas: An Italian magazine insults German Women, throwing sand once again in the unpopular Rome-Berlin Axis', *Life*, 20 September 1937, p. 97.

25 [Anon.], 'The Camera Overseas', p. 97.

In the original article Monelli indeed describes German women as conscript soldiers:

> [S]ulla pelle strigliata violentemente con l'acqua fredda e lo spazzolino avevano i rossori e le durezze e i foruncoletti dei *coscritti*, […] i piedi nel fango calzati di scarpe grosse, allineate in parate, con occhi limpidi e duri […] trasumanate quasi dal voto.[26]
>
> [On the skin violently scrubbed with cold water and a brush, they had the redness and hardness and pimples of *conscripts*, […] the feet in the mud were shod with big shoes, they were lined up as in parade, with clear and hard eyes […] made almost inhumane by the vow.]

However, he also highlights the point that, despite being considered 'inferiore all'uomo sotto ogni punto di vista, […] anzi, meglio che inferiore, è un essere diverso e accessorio' [inferior to man in every respect, […] indeed, better than inferior, she is a different being and an accessory], the German woman appears to be 'più intelligente dell'uomo tedesco, o diciamo più geniale' [more intelligent than the German man, or let us say more brilliant].[27] This was not the only case of a direct, explicit link between *Omnibus* and an American magazine. On many occasions *Omnibus* translated and published articles or interviews that had appeared previously in the periodical press in America, sometimes putting together different pieces and summarising them to fit its own purpose; in such instances it is not always possible to establish with certainty the original source of the articles. This is the case for an article by Eustis Morton on Fred Astaire published in issue 9 of *Omnibus* (29 May 1937), which is very probably the précis of an interview which appeared in *Players at Work*; or, on 4 September 1937, for an article on Charlie Chaplin by Jim Tully translated by C. E. – possibly Emilio Cecchi or Emilio Ceretti –, the original of which had appeared in *The New Movie Magazine* in 1930.[28]

26 Paolo Monelli, 'Le tedesche', *Omnibus*, 31 July 1937, pp. 1–2 (emphasis mine).

27 Monelli, 'Le tedesche', p. 1.

28 See Eustis Morton, 'Intermezzo con Fred Astaire', *Omnibus*, 29 May 1937, p. 9. This piece is probably a translation and précis of original articles and interviews with Fred Astaire published in Eustis Morton, *Players at Work* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1937), pp. 100–17; Jim Tully, 'Charlot segreto (traduzione e riduzione C. E.)', *Omnibus*, 4 September 1937, p. 9; for the original article see Jim Tully, 'The Unknown Chaplin', *The New Movie Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 1, July 1930, pp. 24–26, 125; and vol. 2, no. 2, August 1930, pp. 50–51, 114, 118, 121. Other European magazines also translated American articles. See, for example, Frank Waldo, 'Charles Chaplin: A Portrait', *Scribner's Magazine*, September 1929, pp. 237–44, which appeared as 'Der weiche und der harte Charlie Chaplin', *Der Querschnitt*,

Again, on 13 November 1937 Jim Marshall's article 'La morte dal cielo' [Death from the Sky], an accurate translation from *Collier's Weekly*, occupied the whole of page 3.[29] A slightly different case is a piece signed by Amelia Earhart, 'Le donne e il coraggio' [Women and Courage], published on 17 July 1937, for which no plausible original magazine source is available; it does, however, closely follow pages of her autobiography published in 1932.[30] American articles were also translated as part of the foreign affairs section in *Omnibus*: pieces written by authors such as Blair Bolles, Channing Pollock and Fletcher Pratt appeared on the first two pages, dedicated to foreign affairs and political analyses, offering first-hand criticism of Roosevelt's New Deal and aggressive American foreign policy.[31]

American culture was also present through comic strips. In particular, from issue 3 (17 April 1937) onwards *Omnibus* introduced Italian readers to 'Little King', a comic strip by Otto Soglow that had made its first appearance in *The New Yorker* in 1931 and was regularly published in *Omnibus* until the magazine ceased publication.[32] As these examples demonstrate, Longanesi kept a close eye on and drew significantly on the American press. The use of images was also a key channel for American and other foreign influences. The better to

4 April 1931 pp. 233–37; and Mack Sennett, 'Les débuts de Charlot', *Vu*, 1 April 1931, pp. 462–63, of which it was not possible to find the original article.

29 Jim Marshall, 'La morte dal cielo', *Omnibus*, 13 November 1937, p. 3; a translation of Jim Marshall, 'Death from the Sky', *Collier's Weekly*, 16 October 1937, pp. 9–10 (translator unknown).

30 Amelia Earhart, 'Le donne e il coraggio. L'ultimo articolo di Amelia Earhart', *Omnibus*, 17 July 1937, p. 5 (unknown translator), possibly taken from Earhart's autobiography, *The Fun of It: Random Records of My Own Flying and of Women in Aviation* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932).

31 Blair Bolles, 'Quanto costa Roosevelt', *Omnibus*, 26 March 1938, pp. 1–2, possibly a translation of 'The Sweetheart of the Regimenters', *The American Mercury*, September 1936, pp. 77–86; Channing Pollock, 'La paura americana', *Omnibus*, 19 November 1938, pp. 1–2, a translation of 'The Survival of the Unfittest', *The American Mercury*, August 1936, pp. 385–93; and Fletcher Pratt, 'USA stato aggressivo', *Omnibus*, 24 December 1938, pp. 1–2, a translation of 'U.S.A.: The Aggressor Nation', *The American Mercury*, December 1938, pp. 394–403.

32 When 'Little King' was published in *Omnibus*, *The New Yorker* no longer owned the copyright; rather, it belonged to King Features Syndicate, from which Longanesi bought many of the American articles. See Otto Soglow, 'Little King', in *Gulp! 100 anni a fumetti. Un secolo di disegni, aventure, fantasia*, ed. by Ferruccio Giromini (Milan: Electa, 1996), p. 119. In *Omnibus* it appeared with a disclaimer in the corner that read: 'Copyright King Feature Syndicate e, per l'Italia, di Omnibus' [Copyright King Feature Syndicate and, for Italy, Omnibus].

understand how *Omnibus* was an innovator in the Italian magazine market, a close analysis of the role of pictures in the magazine is necessary.

'Time for Images – È l'ora delle immagini'

As already signalled, one of the main innovative features in *Omnibus* was its use of images of various kinds. Photographs, photocollages and comic strips were used to create a visually striking product. Thanks to the size of the magazine and the use of rotogravure, Longanesi was able to play with pictures and combine traditional articles with modern techniques: '*Omnibus* era un miscuglio raffinato di classicità e novità' [*Omnibus* was a refined mixture of classicism and novelty], recalls Oreste Del Buono; moreover, 'la grande forza di *Omnibus* si precisò nell'antagonismo e nella fusione di letteratura e fotografia: il giornale […] già al primo colpo d'occhio agganciava l'attenzione, attraeva ad assaporare immagini e parole' [the great strength of *Omnibus* was crystallised specifically in the antagonism and fusion of literature and photography: the journal […] already grabbed attention at the first glance, attracted people to savour images and words].[33] Longanesi's conception of images as capable of capturing reality without judgement was transformed in *Omnibus* into a new form of journalism that used images as a means of information equal to text. As he wrote in 1937:

> È l'ora dell'attualità. È l'ora delle immagini. Il nostro nuovo Plutarco è l'obiettivo Kodak, che uccide la realtà con un processo ottico e lo fissa come lo spillo fissa la farfalla sul cartoncino. Oggetti e persone, fuori dal tempo, dallo spazio e dalle leggi di casualità divengono una visione. La fotografia coglie il mondo in flagrante.[34]
>
> [It is the time of modernity. It is the time of images. Our new Plutarch is the Kodak lens, which kills reality with an optical process and fixes it like the pin fixes the butterfly on cardboard. Objects and people, outside time, space and the laws of chance become a vision. Photography catches the world in the act.]

33 Oreste Del Buono, 'La foto di Léon Blum che turbò Mussolini', *La Stampa-Tuttolibri*, 1 May 1993, p. 5.

34 Leo Longanesi to Giovanni Ansaldo, quoted in Staglieno, 'Obiettivo all'arsenico', p. 3; also quoted in Appella, 'Leo Longanesi', in *Leo Longanesi*, p. 267.

Photos added meaning and provided support to articles but, at the same time, they could be independent. In a feature published in 'Giorno e notte', for example, two pictures portraying Mae West had no connection to the content of the column: they stood alone, the captions respectively reading 'Mae West com'è' and 'Mae West come appare' [Mae West as she is; Mae West as she appears].[35] By highlighting the differences between the 'real' woman and the actress, they provide an example of how, in *Omnibus*, photographs were used to communicate as much as words.

Unlike in other European and American, generally cultural, illustrated magazines, in *Omnibus* pictures were used sarcastically. Thus, in two pieces from 1937 a photograph of two fat women became a representation of the United States and the United Kingdom; and the English army was mocked and portrayed against the background of a photograph of a flock of sheep, titled 'Truppe inglesi' [English Troops].[36] Sarcastic captions were used to express harsh judgements against democracies, as in the case of the abovementioned photograph of Eton boys published on 17 July 1937; or of a large photo at the centre of the first page of issue 2 (17 April 1937), the top half portraying the crown of the King of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the bottom half portraying a poor Indian woman carrying two heavy bags. Its caption implicitly criticises British colonialism and hints at the impoverishment it supposedly caused: 'Le Indie sotto la corona imperiale' [The Indies under the imperial crown].[37]

Photographs were further used in other ways to express and stimulate criticism. By publishing images focused on what appear to be small details, *Omnibus* commented on current affairs in a subtle way to stimulate the readers to approach and interpret visual elements critically. On 23 October 1937, for example, on the cover page, the caption under a big photograph of old women outdoors with prayer books reads: 'Gli ebrei di Londra, all'inizio del loro anno, contano i propri peccati e fanno penitenza sull'acqua del Tamigi, a Tower Bridge. Ecco alcune peccatrici che quest'anno, per colpa della Palestina, dovranno scontare pene maggiori' [The Jews of London,

35 The photos were published in the centre of the page, surrounded by the columns of two articles on cinema: one about the Soviet filmmaker 'Michele' [*sic*] Eisenstein, the other reviewing the Italian film *La fossa degli angeli* (Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, 1937) (Mario Pannunzio, 'La fossa degli angeli', *Omnibus*, 4 December 1937, p. 9).

36 *Omnibus*, 16 October 1937, p.1; *Omnibus*, 11 December 1937, p. 1.

37 *Omnibus*, 10 April 1937, p. 1.

at the beginning of their year, count their sins and do penance on the water of the Thames at Tower Bridge. Here are some of the sinners who will have to suffer greater penalties this year because of Palestine].[38] Once more, a photograph with no connection to the articles published on the page, a piece praising Mussolini's eloquence and a critique of France's political parties, stands alone and delivers an independent message. In a short caption, the image denounces and negatively judges British policies in Palestine and the Jews' support of British rule. On 18 December 1937 *Omnibus* mocked the League of Nations with a photograph of a memorial in Geneva dedicated to Woodrow Wilson, entitled 'angolo morto' [dead corner]. The photo represents a perfect example of the subtle irony found in *Omnibus*: at a first sight, the image could be seen as a simple photograph of a memorial, but the short caption adds an oblique meaning; without being explicit, the photo highlights the uselessness of the League of Nations.

Democracies were not the only target of the use of pictures for criticism by *Omnibus*. On 12 June 1937, for example, a photo of a dog wandering alone in Guernica, the Spanish town destroyed by the Luftwaffe with the help of the Fascist Air Force, denounced the violence of the bombing, the caption reading 'Il sopravvissuto di Guernica capitale basca' [The survivor of Guernica, Basque capital].[39] This critique of Germany and Italy can be taken as an example of why *Omnibus* cannot simply be defined as a 'Fascist' – or 'non-Fascist' – magazine because political and cultural ambivalence, and a general irony directed towards current politics, seem to prevail over any political allegiance.

All these examples show that, in *Omnibus*, images were often used to criticise governments and societies, particularly mocking democracies such as France, Great Britain and the United States and depicting their aggressive attitude and incompetence, but also on occasion mocking Germany and even Italy itself. At the same time, they were one of the main vehicles for humour and entertainment in *Omnibus*, making it accessible also to a broad readership and, more importantly, making it an enjoyable *rotocalco* rather than an exclusively serious, literary journal: 'Il giornale non è letterario, deve dare ai lettori qualcosa di semplice, e in cui esista una ossatura di verità' [The magazine is not literary, it has to give the readers

38 *Omnibus*, 23 October 1937, p. 1.

39 *Omnibus*, 12 June 1937, p. 5.

something simple in which there is a framework of truth], wrote Longanesi to Guglielmo Petroni in 1937.[40]

Like photographs, cartoons were also used to amuse readers and as an ironic critique of political regimes and societies. For example, on 19 June 1937 a drawing of Stalin shooting a man served to denounce Stalin's bloody dictatorship,[41] whereas on 2 October 1937 two cartoons wittily accused French women of being unfaithful and promiscuous.[42] Subtle messages were also directed towards criticising or mocking aspects of Italian society: on 29 May 1937, while the Fascist government was putting considerable effort into the demographic campaign, a pro-natalist policy to increase Italy's birth rate, *Omnibus* exalted a life without children, showing a peaceful image of a man and his wife taking a nap and enjoying a quiet Sunday afternoon, the caption reading 'domenica senza figli' [Sunday without children].[43] On the same page, another cartoon denounced the fact that going to the cinema had become an asset more valuable than a degree, highlighting the superficiality of modern Italian society: 'Sì, è vero, non ho una laurea, ma ho una tessera per entrare gratis al cinema Orfeo' [Yes, it's true, I don't have a degree, but I do have a ticket for free admission to the Orpheus Cinema], says a man to a woman.[44] Yet another cartoon, published on 3 July 1937, exposes the promiscuous habits of Italian society: an old woman, comforting a young lady while she

40 Appella, 'Leo Longanesi', p. 269.

41 *Omnibus*, 19 June 1937, p. 2. The drawing accompanies a long article by Giulio Venturi on Stalin's execution of the most prominent captain in the Red Army, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, together with other high-ranking generals (Giulio Venturi, 'Guerra e pace', *Omnibus*, 19 June 1937, pp. 1–2).

42 *Omnibus*, 2 October 1937, p. 12. The captions read: 'Cose di Francia – "Adesso fatemi un neo nuovo. Quello sulla coscia sinistra, ormai, lo sanno tutti a memoria"' [French Things – 'Now add a new mole. By now everyone knows the one on my left thigh by heart']; 'Cose di Francia – "Ehi giovanotto, non mi avrete mica preso per uno scemo! Piantatela di fare l'occhiolino a mia figlia!" – "Scusate: credevo che foste suo marito…"' [French Things – 'Hey young man, don't take me for a fool! Stop winking at my daughter!' – 'Sorry: I thought you were her husband…'].

43 *Omnibus*, 29 May 1937, p. 12. On the Fascist 'battle for births' see Lesley Caldwell, 'Reproducers of the Nation: Women and the Family in Fascist Policy', in *Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism and Culture*, ed. by David Forgacs (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986), pp. 110–41; and Lauren E. Forcucci, 'Battle for Births: The Fascist Pronatalist Campaign in Italy 1925 to 1938', *Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe*, 10 (2010), 4–13.

44 *Omnibus*, 29 May 1937, p. 12.

puts on her make-up, says: 'Ma smettila di perdere il tuo tempo con quello sbarbatello di Giovannino! Dà retta a me, attaccati al commendatore: quello sì che ha intenzioni, serie, mica vuole sposarti' [Stop wasting your time with that greenhorn Giovannino! Listen to me, stick to the *commendatore*: he has serious intentions, he doesn't want to marry you].[45] Women were the dominant subject of the cartoons in *Omnibus*, particularly their alleged promiscuity, as confirmed by a cartoon from 31 July 1937 portraying two half-naked women talking to each other: 'Lui m'ha detto che mi vuole amare platonicamente. Cosa vuol dire?' [He told me that he wants to love me platonically. What does that mean?], asks the first. 'Non lo so: in ogni caso è meglio che ti cambi di biancheria' [I don't know: in any case, you'd better change your underwear], answers the second.[46] These cartoons were mostly published on the last page, page 12, and usually occupied the entire page, although from issue 20 onwards (14 August 1937) they appeared next to, or were replaced by, photo-stories, that is to say photomontages focused on a single event.[47]

Consistent with the models set by *Life* and European photojournalism, photomontages were another key feature of *Omnibus* and it was possibly the first Italian magazine to use this technique to deliver a story.[48] Photomontages were used sarcastically in *Omnibus*, much as the single photographs discussed earlier and as is the case in a series of pictures mocking the American President Franklin D. Roosevelt, portrayed in unflattering poses.[49] However, they were mainly used to deliver a story.[50] On 9 October 1937, for example, a series of photos illustrated the Spanish Civil War, whereas on 1 January 1938 the entire page was dedicated to photos of Kaiser Wilhelm II at different stages in his life. Many of these

45 *Omnibus*, 3 July 1937, p. 12.

46 *Omnibus*, 31 July 1937, p. 12.

47 Tellingly, the French *Marianne* also dedicated the last page to comic vignettes: 'une page pour rire'. See, for example, *Marianne*, 5 April 1933, p. 13.

48 As analysed in the next chapter, *Grazia* also used series of photographs connected to one another that can be acknowledged as photocollages. However, they were not used to convey a message but merely to illustrate and explain the text, for example, as instructions for training in correct posture.

49 'L'allegro Signor Roosevelt', *Omnibus*, 8 January 1938, p. 12.

50 The same feature can be observed in French and German magazines. See, for example, *Vu*, 6 February 1929, pp. 90–91; *Uhu*, July 1931, pp. 28–33.

photomontages, then, focused on the lives of important figures, such as royalty or famous artists. On 15 January 1938 the focus was on the last Tsar and his family, while on 26 February the protagonist was the Royal House of Orange-Nassau. Photo-stories were also dedicated to Italian personalities, such as Mussolini's son Bruno (29 January 1938) and Gabriele D'Annunzio (5 March 1938). All these photo-stories followed the same biographical pattern, portraying the protagonists at various stages in their lives and/or with different members of their families. In rare cases, for example, the issue featuring the House of Orange-Nassau or the Spanish Civil War, the photos were accompanied by a column on their subject, but the page was most often exclusively dedicated to pictures.

Photo-stories were also used to share oddities and 'fun facts', such as the story of a man who looked like Napoleon I and spent his life dressed as the Emperor (11 December 1937); or of a noble woman from New York whose daily life was 'riprodotta con un manichino' [reproduced with a mannequin] on 12 March 1938. The photographs in this last case were taken from the issue of *Life* published almost one year earlier, on 12 July 1937, in a feature called 'Grace the Dummy' and represent another example of both the manipulation by *Omnibus* of foreign photo-shoots and news and the attention paid to American magazines – specifically *Life*. In short, photomontages could variously and creatively either inform and entertain, or be used as a form of sarcastic critique, and placed *Omnibus* in the midst of the global trend of illustrated weeklies.

Finally, it is striking how many of these photo-stories were dedicated to the United States. On 16 October 1937, for example, a series of photographs of famous American women occupied an entire page, from the first policewoman to a theatre actress, from journalists to politicians, whereas in the following issue (23 October) photos of the first mall to abolish shop assistants is titled 'Un "paradiso delle signore" a New York' [A 'women's heaven' in New York]. On 13 November 1937 two photos of a man and a woman being tattooed and a photo of a man whose body had been completely tattooed are presented with the title 'Arte americana' [American Art]; while on 4 December the protagonist is the Far West, featuring photos of running horses in Texas and California and a portrait of Buffalo Bill. Although neither the photos of American women nor those of tattooed men and women are flattering, the strong presence of photos of American subjects reveals the particular attention paid by *Omnibus* to American culture, an interest reflected in the literary content and particularly the section on cinema.

Literature and Cinema in *Omnibus*

As its subtitle suggests, *Omnibus* contained a mixture of political and cultural features that, together with an extensive use of photographs and other images, created a heterogeneous, innovative magazine. This innovativeness is especially visible in the cultural sections: here *Omnibus* showed an irreverence and originality that made it stand out from other weeklies of general content and made these pages possibly the most remarkable in the magazine. For this reason the following section analyses the presence and treatment of literature and cinema in *Omnibus*, two sectors which reflect more than others the influence of foreign cultures and particularly demonstrate the prevalent position of American models. Their analysis also offers an opportunity to address the contradiction in the reception by *Omnibus* of the United States, its society and culture.

Between pages 6 and 10 of the standard-issue format *Omnibus* presented its readers with new films and book releases, commenting on the latest news from Hollywood and publishing novels serialised in instalments and covering various genres, from crime fiction to tales concerned with the moral and personal growth of their protagonists. Translations of Anglo-Saxon, and particularly American, literature and the publication of original Italian novels inspired by American models offer a compelling set of case studies for Italian-American synergies in *Omnibus* and show that *Omnibus* looked beyond Italy, and especially towards the United States, in spite of the dictatorship's policy of cultural autarchy.[51] The presence of this foreign literature in *Omnibus* revealed the cracks in the campaign for autarchy and the censorship in support of it; more importantly, perhaps, it also reflected and helped to shape the taste of Italian readers for cosmopolitan forms of culture.

Page 10, Serialised Novels and Short Stories

Literature played an important role in *Omnibus*.[52] Every issue included several short stories, usually an original piece written by

51 The literary criticism in 'Il sofà delle muse' has been left aside. This choice is based on the fact that, as far as foreign influence is concerned, the novels serialised in *Omnibus* seem to be more revealing than the reviews published in 'Il sofà delle muse'.

52 Literature was one of the key elements in *Marianne*, the foreign magazine whose structure and content deeply influenced the shaping of *Omnibus*. In *Vu* it is also possible to find serialised American novels, such as Mac Culley [*sic*], 'Le

one of the magazine's regular collaborators or a translation from a foreign author, in addition to an instalment of a novel, which usually appeared on page 10. Between April 1937 and January 1939 *Omnibus* published sixteen novels, serialised throughout the ninety-five issues published; of those novels, six were by Italian authors and the remaining ten were translations: one from German, nine from English (all by American authors). The analysis of the novels, especially their genre and original language, acquires an added value if the State's policies on censorship and the debate around translations are taken into account. The presence of American novels in particular, and of translations from English in general, is of striking significance in the context of an increasing concern on the part of the dictatorship with print media in general and its growing attention to the periodical press. As pointed out in Chapter 1, after the Italo-Ethiopian War and the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations that followed, the Fascist government started to exercise stricter controls on the media and looked to Nazi Germany as an example. The presence of translations from a foreign culture in a popular magazine can be seen as a sign both of a strong presence of that culture in the popular imagination and of a breach of the censorship system which the regime was trying to impose on the periodical press.

The three novels serialised on page 10 in 1937 are examined here as a sample of the serialised literature published in *Omnibus*. The first, published from 3 April to 19 June 1937, was *Tutta la verità sul caso Motta* [*The Whole Truth about the Motta Case*] by Mario Soldati, who had already written a book on his experience in the United States in 1935, *America primo amore* [*America First Love*].[53] *Tutta la verità sul caso Motta* provides a clear example of the influence of foreign, specifically American, literature. Soldati's style as a writer appears to have been influenced by William Faulkner: as Silvia Zangrandi notes, 'la lettura di Faulkner influenzò Soldati tanto che le analogie tra *La verità* [*sul caso Motta*] e il racconto *Black Music* sono evidenti; in entrambi compaiono lettere, cronache di giornali, il lavoro investigativo della polizia' [reading Faulkner influenced Soldati so much that the similarities between *Tutta la verità* [*sul caso Motta*] and the short story *Black Music* are obvious; letters, newspaper reports, police investigation work

clown écarlate – Grand roman policier', *Vu*, 9 January–6 February 1929 (Johnston McCulley, *The Crimson Clown* (New York: Smith & Street, 1927)).

53 Mario Soldati, *La verità sul caso Motta. Romanzo seguito da cinque racconti* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1941).

appear in both].[54] In the first serialised novel published in *Omnibus* we can thus find strong connections to popular, experimental American literature, respectively in the structure of the novel as crime fiction and in its writing style.

The second novel to be serialised was Dashiell Hammet's crime story *The Girl with the Silver Eyes* (translated as *La ragazza dagli occhi d'argento – romanzo poliziesco*), published between 26 June and 31 July 1937 (and originally distributed in June 1924 in the pulp magazine *Black Mask*).[55] It is the first translation of an American novel in *Omnibus* and the translator is unidentifiable. The next novel to be serialised is again a crime story and this time the link to American influence is, if anything, even more striking, not because it is a translation, but because we have an Italian journalist writing a detective novel set in the United States: *L'ombrellino viola* [*The Purple Parasol*] by Tito A. Spagnol, published between 14 August and 6 November 1937. The novel seems to be a direct product of American culture, even if the writing style is still traditional, meaning that the author does not experiment with new uses of the Italian language. Spagnol had lived in the United States while working as a screenwriter, an experience that is constantly recalled in the first-hand knowledge of the country in his novels and contributed to vivid, detailed descriptions of American life and places.[56] Spagnol also contributed to the magazine with other articles focused on the United States, becoming one of the most recurrent signatures in *Omnibus*.[57] The next novel to be serialised was one of the two non-crime novels published in 1937 and

54 Silvia Zangrandi, '"Una caverna di delizie in una solitudine di orrore": pluralità di mondi, di linguaggi, di generi in "Tutta la verità sul caso Motta" di Mario Soldati', *Sincronie* 23 (2008), 165–79 (p. 174).

55 Other popular American short stories were later translated and included in Elio Vittorini's anthology *Americana*, published by Bompiani in 1942. The book contained translations by renowned literary figures of the time such as Cesare Pavese, Eugenio Montale and Alberto Moravia, as well as illustrations and critical notes. The literary criticism that accompanied the translations, written by Vittorini, caused the seizure of the anthology before its original release in 1940; it was then published in 1942 without Vittorini's commentaries and with an introduction by Emilio Cecchi instead. See *Americana. Raccolta di racconti*, ed. by Elio Vittorini (Milan: Bompiani, 2023).

56 Jane Dunnett, 'The Emergence of a New Literary Genre in Interwar Italy', in *Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. by Giuliana Pieri, European Crime Fictions (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 6–26 (esp. pp. 13–19).

57 See, e.g., Tito A. Spagnol, 'Avventura americana', *Omnibus*, 17 April 1937, p. 9; 'Chiamata notturna', *Omnibus*, 12 June 1937, p. 7; 'L'emigrante', *Omnibus*, 24 July 1937, p. 5; 'La città dell'oro', *Omnibus*, 11 December 1937, p. 8.

the only translation from a language other than English: a novella by Austrian author Joseph Roth, *Stationschef Fallmerayer* (1933), which appeared under the title *Il capostazione Fallmerayer* [*Fallmerayer the Stationmaster*] and was published from 13 November to 11 December 1937. It was followed by a novel written by the military editor of the *New York Times*, Hanson W. Baldwin. The short work appeared in two instalments on 4 and 11 December, translated by Anna Cassina; it was based on documents of 'il più orribile naufragio che la storia della navigazione ricordi' [the most horrific shipwreck in the recorded history of sailing].[58] Finally, 1937 ended with the opening instalment of another work of crime fiction, with further instalments appearing until March 1938: *L'ispettore Bonaparte – romanzo poliziesco* [*Inspector Bonaparte – Detective Novel*] by Italian writer Carlo Marengo. The novel is set abroad, in France and Spain, and its protagonists are all foreigners, the only exception being the detective Luciano Paoli, born in Ajaccio (Corsica) and known as Bonaparte because of his link to the Emperor's family, whose ancient Italian roots ultimately make both Napoleon and the inspector of Italian origin. *L'ispettore Bonaparte* is a novel which reflects the regime's regulation of crime fiction, in that the 'good guy' is the only character with a link to Italy, in this case Bonaparte's Italian heritage – a reflection of the Fascist immanence of the Italian spirit, which would make anyone with any Italian lineage fully Italian. Furthermore, it represents another example of the 'contamination' of Italian literature by a foreign literary genre. From this brief survey of serialised novels published on page 10 in 1937, it can be noted that out of a total of six, four of them were crime fiction (if we include Soldati) and three were translations (two from English; one from German). This is particularly noteworthy considering that in the second half of the 1930s the dictatorship was committed to limiting the circulation of crime fiction. Starting in 1937, the Ministry of Popular Culture approved a series of restrictions on the genre, from ordering that the culprit must not be Italian to finally banning crime fiction in 1943.[59]

58 Hanson W. Baldwin, 'Il naufragio della Medusa', *Omnibus*, 4 December 1937, p. 10; and 11 December 1937, p. 10.

59 In July 1941 all serialised or periodical crime fiction was banned. See Circolare no. 7286, dated 5 July 1941, which forbade 'la pubblicazione dei libri gialli sia sotto forma di periodici che di dispense' [the publication of crime fiction in the form of both periodicals and handouts] (Christopher Rundle, *Publishing Translations in Fascist Italy*, Italian Modernities, 6 (Oxford: Lang, 2010), pp. 191–93).

Between January 1938 and January 1939 most novels serialised were again by foreign authors, with a prominent presence of American writers. There were only three novels by Italian authors, all three key figures in this generation of Italian literature: *I nemici* [*The Enemies*] by Corrado Alvaro; *Gli anni perduti* [*The Lost Years*] by Vitaliano Brancati; and *Lo strano viaggio di Domenico Molo* [*The Strange Journey of Domenico Molo*] by Dino Buzzati (who wrote in *Omnibus* using the pseudonym Giovanni Drogo). The other seven novels published before the closure of the magazine were all by American authors: *La spilla* [*The Brooch*] by William Faulkner; three crime novels by Ben Hecht – *Delitto senza passione* [*Crime Without Passion*], *Il fantasma del vecchio albergo* [*The Ghost of the Old Hotel*] and *Sangue di attore* [*Actor's Blood*]; *Il campione* [*The Champion*] by Ring Lardner; *Le orecchie dell'orso* [*The Ears of Johnny Bear*] by John Steinbeck; and *I coniugi* [*The Spouses*] by James T. Farrell.[60] Nevertheless, in 1938 crime fiction was not the predominant genre anymore: only Marengo and Hecht's novels are detective novels, whereas the others can be categorised as examples of the *Bildungsroman*. However, the presence and impact of crime fiction as an Anglo-Saxon literary genre which deeply influenced Italian culture still allow an insightful analysis. Its popularity is demonstrated by the sheer number of detective novels which circulated in popular magazines, *Omnibus* representing an emblematic example of this trend in its distribution and its heterogeneity of style and content, as was Mondadori's book series 'I gialli', which was entirely dedicated to the genre. Moreover, Italian authors clearly adapted to the genre, sometimes emulating foreign authors or using an Anglo-Saxon structure or setting. This was the case with the abovementioned *Tutta la verità sul caso Motta* by Soldati, a novel that challenged censorship and autarchy not only because of its debt to Faulkner, but also because it starts as a detective novel, a genre for which the Fascists' tolerance was decreasing.[61] Despite the fact that the authorities considered crime novels to be morally

60 William Faulkner, *The Brooch* (1936); Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *Crime Without Passion* (screenplay, 1934); Ben Hecht, *Actor's Blood* (1934); Ring Lardner, *The Champion* (1916); John Steinbeck, *The Ears of Johnny Bear* (1937). It was not possible to retrace the original title for Hecht's *Il fantasma del vecchio albergo*, nor for Farrell's *I coniugi*, although the latter is possibly taken from the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy written between 1932 and 1935. The novels published in *Omnibus* are also listed in Granata, *L''Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi*, p. 130.

61 The campaign against translations began to have an impact on periodical publications at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, when the regime directly attacked translations through the ban on crime fiction.

harmful, the majority of novels serialised in *Omnibus* were detective stories or, like Soldati's, contained elements of the genre, further pointing to a liking for it among the readers.[62]

Writing after the war, writer and former contributor to *Omnibus* Alberto Savinio provides an explanation for both the use of American or British settings for Italian crime novels and the identification of the genre with these countries:

> Il romanzo poliziesco è essenzialmente anglosassone. La metropoli inglese o americana, con i suoi bassifondi sinistri e popolati come gli abissi marini di mostri ciechi, le sue squadre di delinquenti disciplinati e militarizzati, le sue folle nere come l'acqua delle fogne, l'aspetto spettrale delle sue architetture, offre il quadro più favorevole, la messinscena più adatta al quadro del delitto. S'immagina male un romanzo poliziesco dentro la cinta daziaria di Valenza o di Mantova, di Avignone o di Reggio Emilia.[63]
>
> [The detective novel is essentially Anglo-Saxon. The English or American metropolis, with its sinister slums populated like the abysses of the sea by blind monsters, its squads of disciplined and militarised delinquents, its mobs as black as sewer water, the spectral aspect of its architecture, offers the most favourable setting, the most suitable staging for the crime scene. It is hard to imagine a detective novel inside the city walls of Valencia or Mantua, Avignon or Reggio Emilia.]

In his novel *La bambola insanguinata* [*The Bloodstained Doll*] (1977), Tito Spagnol expresses a similar position, asserting that:

> è solo merito della procedura penale anglo-sassone se esiste il romanzo poliziesco, specialità inglese e americana. Con la nostra procedura, i romanzieri avrebbero poco da esercitare la loro fantasia, giacché da noi, appena si sospetta qualcuno, lo si mette in prigione e allora addio intreccio romanzesco![64]

62 On 'giallo' as a genre and its development in Italy, see Marco Sangiorgi, 'Il fascismo e il giallo italiano', in *Giallo Italiano come nuovo romanzo sociale*, ed. by Luca Telò, Il Portico, 133 (Ravenna: Longo, 2004), pp. 118–54; *Differences, Deceits and Desires: Murder and Mayhem in Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. by Mirna Cicioni and Nicoletta Di Ciolla, Monash Romance Studies (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2008); and *Il romanzo poliziesco, la storia, la memoria. Italia*, ed. by Claudio Milanesi (Bologna: Astraea, 2009).

63 Alberto Savinio, 'Romanzo poliziesco', in *Souvenirs* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1976), pp. 193–99 (p. 196); also quoted in Jane Dunnett, 'The Appraisal of Detective Novels in 1930s Italy', *Modern Language Review*, 106 (2011), 745–64 (p. 754).

64 Tito Spagnol, *La bambola insanguinata*, Gialli italiani Mondadori, 7 (Milan: Mondadori, 1977), p. 140. On the American novel and the links between American society and modern writers, see Cecchi, *America amara*, pp. 107–13.

> [it is only thanks to Anglo-Saxon criminal procedure that the detective novel, an English and American speciality, exists. With our procedure, novelists would have little to exercise their imagination with, since here, as soon as someone is suspected, they are put in prison and then goodbye, novel plot!]

More than the influence of Anglo-Saxon crime fiction on Italian literature, the general presence of American authors in *Omnibus*, and thus also of Americanised language and even values, is striking.[65] Short stories by American authors were commonly published both on page 10 and elsewhere: a survey of the thirty-nine issues published in 1937 reveals the presence of twenty-five novels and short stories. William Saroyan leads with three short stories, followed by James Cain and Richard Hughes with two short stories each, translated by different collaborators such as Emilio Ceretti, Elio Vittorini and Giulia Bragiotti. In general, the magazine seems to pay most attention to American and British writers, publishing authors such as D. H. Lawrence and other lesser-known figures such as James Hilton, Manuel Komroff and Albert Halper. Other languages were also present in the magazine. At least three short stories were translated from Chinese and signed by Alberto Moravia; and one Russian novel appeared translated by an elusive 'A. M.', perhaps Moravia again.[66]

Omnibus introduced not only foreign authors to its readers but also emerging Italian writers, some of whom published their very first works in this magazine. The most relevant examples are the short stories signed by Giovanni Drogo, a name that became famous in the 1940s as the protagonist of *Il deserto dei Tartari* [*The Tartar Steppe*]. Using this pseudonym, Dino Buzzati signed the abovementioned *Lo strano viaggio di Domenico Molo* and two short stories published in 1937: 'Notizie false' [False News] and 'Il dolore notturno' [Night Pain].[67]

Besides page 10, other literary features also appear in *Omnibus*. The popularity and importance of literature for *Omnibus* are underlined by a contest launched in issue 23 (4 September 1937) that

65 See Billiani, *National Cultures*, p. 81

66 See Tien Ciun, 'A bordo del Dairen Maru – Racconto di Tien Ciun' and Lin Yu-Tang, 'Il generale Mangia-cane', *Omnibus*, 15 May 1937, p. 6 (both stories are translated by Alberto Moravia); Lu Hsun, 'La medicina – racconto cinese', *Omnibus*, 23 August 1937, p. 4; and M. Zoscenko, 'Protezione', *Omnibus*, 17 July 1937, p. 4.

67 Giovanni Drogo, 'Notizie false', *Omnibus*, 22 May 1937, p. 9; 'Il dolore notturno', *Omnibus*, 2 October 1937, p. 5.

invited readers to send their short stories to the magazine, with the winners to be published on page 6. The first to appear was 'Il collegio femminile 1911' [The Girls' Boarding School 1911], written by Anna Rossi Filangieri, 'il primo scritto prescelto del concorso permanente di *Omnibus*' [the first winning entry in the permanent competition in *Omnibus*]. This initiative can be seen as proof of the multiple literary interests of *Omnibus*, reflecting its aim to be a cultured magazine offering sophisticated, but also popular new literature addressed to a wide range of readers. If, on the one hand, it promoted the work of popular authors such as Saroyan and Cain and encouraged readers to participate and challenge themselves to become writers, on the other hand it published sophisticated literary criticism in the column 'Il sofà delle muse', in which critics such as Mario Praz, Il Tarlo (Emilio Cecchi) and Arrigo Benedetti discussed new books. This is the section that dedicated most space to Italian literature. It did, however, also discuss other European and non-European cultures, from Czech literature to the latest American books, presenting its readers with different writers, styles and genres, including poetry. Throughout the reviews, and the features containing short stories and novels, *Omnibus* introduced Italian readerships to an eclectic variety of new writing styles, Italian writers and authors from overseas (especially from the United States), contributing to the dissemination of both well-known and new literary works. The presence of literature in *Omnibus* confirms its wide scope but also its intense interest in American culture, which is even more evident in the regular feature on cinema, 'Giorno e notte'.

'Giorno e notte'

The Italian film industry of the 1930s focused on producing commercial films that followed the entertainment appeal of Hollywood productions. In 1937, our sample year, across the Kingdom of Italy on average 730.1 tickets were sold for every 100 residents, confirming the popularity of cinema as a leisure time activity across the Italian population.[68] It is thus not surprising that a magazine like *Omnibus* regularly dedicated an entire section to cinema: 'Giorno e notte'. Hosted on page 9, it featured a varied content, from gossip

68 The data are based on the SIAE data registered in *Spettacolo in Italia* (Istat, *Annuario statistico Italiano 1939* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1939), p. 321) and the ISTAT census of 1936, which as of 21 April 1936 identified 42,993,602 residents in Italy (Istat, *VIII Censimento Generale della Popolazione* (Rome: Tipografia Ippolito Failli, 1938), p. 25).

to film reviews to analyses of the film industry.[69] It was written mainly by Mario Pannunzio, author of film reviews for the column 'Nuovi film' [New Films], and Antonietta Drago, author of a column focused on film production titled 'Celluloide' [Celluloid].[70] Although 'Giorno e notte' was concerned with cinema in general, a particular focus on American films can be noted. Of the thirty-nine 'Giorno e notte' sections published in 1937, only one issue did not mention Hollywood, while nine were exclusively dedicated to the American film industry and American films.[71]

Consistent with the general format of the magazine, the reader's attention is first caught by pictures. Typically, two photographs, a close-up portrait of a film star and/or a publicity shot from a film, occupy most of the page. The articles are organised in columns, used as a frame, the different features divided to surround the photographs. Usually, the pictures are linked to the subject of the articles, a sort of visual reference that, with a few exceptions, informs the reader of the content of the column. The articles on film stars, the style of which recalls that of an American fan magazine, are largely focused on Hollywood and are the most distinctive feature of 'Giorno e notte'.[72] They contain biographies or interviews that reveal details

69 A similar page can be found in *Marianne*: 'Ouvert la nuit'. The section is divided into two columns, 'La semaine théâtrale' and 'La semaine à l'Écran'.

70 No detailed research on Antonietta Drago has yet been carried out; there is even confusion over her real name. Montanelli and Staglieno consider Nenè Centonze to be her real name and Antonietta Drago her pseudonym (Montanelli and Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi*, p. 324; Granata, *'L''Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi*, p. 130). Patrizia Guida claims the opposite. Her novels are signed with the name Antonietta Drago, as well as her articles written for *Omnibus* (Patrizia Guida, *Scrittrici di Puglia. Percorsi storiografici femminili dal XVI al XX secolo*, Biblioteca di cultura pugliese, 172 (Lecce: Congedo, 2008), pp. 128–33).

71 See, for example, issue 23, in which 'Giorno e Notte' is entirely dedicated to Charlie Chaplin: Tully, 'Charlot segreto'. In this case a long single article occupies page 9, with a large picture portraying Chaplin with Paulette Goddard at a tennis match. As noted earlier, the piece is a translation of Jim Tully's first-hand piece on Chaplin from *The New Movie Magazine* and describes the star in his most human aspects, including his bad character, kindness and the difficulties he had to face in his life.

72 Another possible source for this aspect, alongside American models, were European magazines such as the British *Picturegoer* (London: Odhams, 1921–60); these were, of course, already also influenced by American practice. Other examples include the German *Das Magazin* (see, e.g., 'Premiere in Hollywood' and 'Drei Paar Beine, die die Welt eroberten', 31 November 1930, pp. 5286–87, 5363); and the French *Vu* (1 April 1931, entirely dedicated to Chaplin).

of film stars' private lives or comment on aspects of the filmmaking process. The main characteristic of these articles, one rarely found in other contemporary publications, is the presence of fake reports from Hollywood, apparently written exclusively for *Omnibus* by an American correspondent. These reports were created by the editorial staff of *Omnibus*, including pieces presented as autobiographies of film stars that even include the name of the Italian translator. Longanesi's collaborator Gino Visentini recalls how they used to spend nights in the newsroom:

> a fare interviste, finte, a Greta Garbo nella casa di Hollywood, oppure a Joan Crawford in studio, creando interviste all'americana, ma inventate di sana pianta da noi, con lo stile americano che deducevamo leggendo *Life*, altre riviste americane o francesi.[73]
>
> [writing fake interviews with Greta Garbo in her Hollywood home, or with Joan Crawford in the studio, creating American-like interviews, but completely made up by us, with the style we learnt from reading *Life*, other American or French magazines.]

On 22 May 1937, for example, 'Giorno e notte' published an article signed by Carole Lombard in which the actress talks about her life, how she feels about herself and how she started her career. In another issue, on 12 June 1937, Gary Cooper narrates how he became a famous actor; elsewhere, James W. Bell describes Joan Crawford during a day in the country and Marlene Dietrich's private life, whereas Allen Alien reveals details of Greta Garbo's life out of the spotlight.[74] In May 1937 James W. Bell shares the memory of a winter spent in Dallas in 1935 when he met Jean Harlow's grandfather; he recalls her fondly telling him: 'Se andate nel West, fategli una visita; è un uomo ruvido mio nonno, ma se gli parlate di me, ve ne farete un amico' [If you go out West, go visit him; my grandfather is a gruff man, but if you talk to him about me, you will make him a friend]. The articles signed by Bell specify: 'Copyright by "Hollywood New Inc.", and, in Italy, by "Omnibus"', the same caption as appears at the end of the article on Greta Garbo signed by Allen Alien. A third name, F. James Smith, appears under an article on Gloria Swanson but, although

73 Testimony of Visentini, quoted in Pizzinelli, *Parliamo di Longanesi*, p. 79.

74 Carole Lombard, 'Autobiografia di Carole Lombard', *Omnibus*, 22 May 1937, p. 5; Gary Cooper, 'Autobiografia di Gary Cooper', *Omnibus*, 12 June 1937, p. 9; James W. Bell, 'Joan Crawford in campagna', *Omnibus*, 1 May 1937, p. 9; James W. Bell, 'Marlene Dietrich in casa', *Omnibus*, 17 April 1937, p. 11; Allen Alien, 'Greta Garbo in casa', *Omnibus,* 10 April 1937, p. 6.

it does not have the caption on copyright, the writing style and the structure of the article are consistent with the others, pointing to the same author(s) and fake correspondence with Hollywood.[75]

It is not clear who was behind these articles, or whether they contained any elements of truth, as no research carried out until now has revealed the identity of James W. Bell, Allen Alien or F. James Smith. They were most probably pseudonyms used by the editorial staff to sign their fake reports, as mentioned by Visentini.[76] Apart from questions of authorship and authenticity, it was crucial for the impact of *Omnibus* that the articles on film stars read as if the author were part of the scene and that the impression made on the reader was that the author was a friend of the star (or the star him/herself) and was sharing his privileged, intimate point of view or information with the reader. Not every piece expressed close familiarity with the film star. In the case of an article on Carole Lombard, there is no sign of a close friendship with the actress; James W. Bell describes the scene as if he were part of it, but the piece is shaped more like an interview than a confidential conversation. Another example is provided by two articles, on Marlene Dietrich and Carole Lombard respectively, in which the writer gives the impression of being physically present at the scene being described, although there is no explicit interaction with the actresses.[77] In both cases these articles are remarkably similar to those published in American fan magazines such as *Photoplay* (Chicago: Macfadden, 1911–80) and thus point to the influence on *Omnibus* of American film-fan magazines and the occasional translation of previously published foreign material by the former, as stated by Visentini.

The articles on film stars not only aimed to bring Hollywood stars closer to the readers, but also to reveal that, out of the spotlight, they were not so glamorous as they appeared on screen. Although generally praising Hollywood, *Omnibus* also exposed the differences between Hollywood and reality, thus in some ways demystifying it. An article on Greta Garbo, for example, reveals the flaws in the

75 James W. Bell, 'Il nonno di Jean Harlow', *Omnibus*, 8 May 1937, p. 9; F. James Smith, 'Le idee di Gloria Swanson', *Omnibus*, 10 July 1937, p. 9.

76 One of the main creators of fake reports from Hollywood was Cesare Zavattini, who contributed to *Omnibus* and regularly wrote for *Cinema Illustrazione*, signing his articles with different pseudonyms. Some of the stories he invented on Hollywood stars for *Cinema Illustrazione* are collected in Cesare Zavattini, *Cronache da Hollywood* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996).

77 James W. Bell, 'Marlene Dietrich in casa', p. 11; James W. Bell, 'Carole Lombard in cucina', *Omnibus*, 24 April 1937, p. 6.

popular actress, highlighting the differences between the actress and the woman: Allen Alien discloses what Garbo is like in real life, describing how she spends most of her free time at home reading books and seems to be a lonely, lunatic woman who would benefit from the presence of a man, although, the writer reflects, 'chi delle due amerebbe il suo uomo, l'attrice che lo schermo rende tanto bella e affascinante […] o la donna che essa è veramente, dal fisico sgraziato?' [which of the two would love her man, the actress whom the screen makes so beautiful and charming […] or the woman she really is, with her ungainly physique?].[78] This attitude frequently characterises the pieces on everyday life in Hollywood, which reveal uncommon details about the stars and did not follow the usual exaltation of actresses, suggesting a new side to the star system.

Film stars and details of their lives were not the only element in 'Giorno e Notte'. As already mentioned, two other columns were included in the page dedicated to the film industry: 'Nuovi film' and 'Celluloide'. 'Nuovi film' was dedicated to new releases and written by Mario Pannunzio, who would later become one of the most influential journalists in post-war Italy. In the beginning his column focused only on foreign films and it was only after six months (seventeen issues) that he reviewed an Italian film. The most notable feature of Pannunzio's writing is that it does not limit itself to a mere review of the latest films: writing about a new release is an excuse to make remarks on other, more general and analytical matters. Pannunzio analyses film as a form of artistic expression, looks at the audience attending the cinema, or discusses the impact of a specific genre on the wider society.

A good example is Pannunzio's review of the American film *Public Enemy's Wife* (*La moglie del pericolo pubblico*), directed by Nick Grinde (1936), in which the critic uses the opportunity offered by the latest gangster film to state that the gangster genre has had its day and that people had grown tired of it. He also reflects on cinema in general, noting that '[i]l cinema ha forse, più di ogni altra arte, il potere di far partecipare lo spettatore alla vicenda rappresentata, quasi fosse un vero e proprio personaggio' [cinema has, perhaps more than any other art, the power to make the spectator participate in the story, almost as if he were a real character].[79] In the previous issue, that of 26 June 1937, reviewing *The Lady of Secrets* (*Il peccato di Lilian*

78 Alien, 'Greta Garbo in casa', p. 6.

79 Mario Pannunzio, 'La moglie del pericolo pubblico', *Omnibus*, 3 July 1937, p. 9.

Day), directed by Marion Gering (1936), the writer tears the director apart and 'her' alleged incompetence is a cause for reflection on the (negative) role of women in the Arts.[80] Pannunzio's criticisms were also directed towards Italian national productions. One example is represented by his harsh opinion on the white-telephone genre, Hollywood-influenced comedy films very popular among Italian audiences, which he describes as a botched product: '[C]ome quei giocattoli che poi si vendono a minor prezzo […] ogni opera ripete gli sbagli della precedente e tutte sembrano sortite dalla medesima mano o, meglio ancora, dalla medesima macchina che sembra abbia negli ingranaggi qualche rotella guastata' [[L]ike those toys that are later sold at a lower price […] each work repeats the mistakes of the previous one and they all seem to have come from the same hand or, better still, from the same machine, which seems to have some faulty cogs in its gears].[81]

In a piece dedicated to *La fossa degli angeli* [*The Angels' Pit*], directed by Carlo L. Bragaglia, Pannunzio criticises the poor directing of the film but also describes in detail a night at the cinema. This detailed account of what happened during the screening is functional to his criticism of the director and actors, but at the same time provides the reader with a vivid portrait of the audience of the day and, therefore, possibly also of the readership of the magazine. Pannunzio describes spectators enjoying Walt Disney's short cartoon, annoyed by the advertisements but excited at viewing a trailer; he pictures the scene when the lights came on again, as he sees that more than half the audience had left before the end of the screening. The article ends on a bitter reflection on the emptiness of nights spent at the cinema, watching pointless films that are less exciting than a film trailer. Going back to his review, Pannunzio concludes the piece by criticising the Italian film and director, which could not compete even with Disney's short animation.[82] The Italian audience is also the object of Pannunzio's disapproval in his review of the American film *They Won't Forget* – directed by Mervyn LeRoy and released in Italy

80 '[E]ssendo il regista una donna, e precisamente Marion Goering, il film non poteva non risentire di una direzione minunziosa e sdolcinata' [[S]ince the director was a woman, specifically Marion Goering, the film could not help but reflect a meticulous and corny direction], writes Pannunzio, who was perhaps misled by the director's first name: Marion Goering was, in fact, a man (Mario Pannunzio, 'Il peccato di Lilian Day', *Omnibus*, 26 June 1937, p. 9).

81 Mario Pannunzio, 'I volontari della noia', *Omnibus*, 21 January 1939, p. 9.

82 Pannunzio, 'La fossa degli angeli', p. 9.

under the Italian title *Vendetta* in 1938 – in which he highlights the ignorance and superficiality of Italian audiences, who saw the film as crime fiction, failing to understand the deep meaning of a film that he sees as condemning the racist, cruel reality of America.[83]

A strict limitation on the distribution and screening of American films was approved by the regime in 1938. The role and future of Italian film production were already being debated well before then and Pannunzio contributed to the debate through his articles for 'Nuovi film'. One example is a piece from 1 May 1937. Reviewing a French film directed by Julien Duvivier, *La Belle Équipe* (*La bella compagnia*) (1936), he bitterly highlights the poor quality of European productions and reveals how, even in a good film by an experienced director, 'tiri di solito una cert'aria, un'aria particolarmente irrespirabile, che ha qualche somiglianza, per esempio, con quella che si avvertiva negli stabilimenti della vecchia Cines' [there is usually a certain air, a particularly unbreathable air, that bears some resemblance, for example, to that felt in the factories of the old Cines]. He concludes that:

> quando anche nelle opere migliori […] voi vedete quell'incertezza, quel fare impacciato, quella povertà nelle invenzioni e nel racconto, non potete non provare una specie di malessere e una sfiducia senza limiti per le sorti di questo povero cinema europeo.[84]
>
> [when even in the best works […] you see that uncertainty, that awkwardness, that poverty of invention and storytelling, you cannot help but feel a kind of unease and boundless distrust for the fate of this poor European cinema.]

In Pannunzio's opinion, the decline of Italian cinema is part of the wider decline of European cinema, unable to compete with the professional organisation exemplified by Hollywood.

The number of American films reviewed in 'Nuovi film' is higher than all other national productions and in most of Pannunzio's articles Hollywood emerges as a model to follow.[85]

83 Mario Pannunzio, 'Vendetta', *Omnibus*, 14 May 1938, p. 9.

84 Mario Pannunzio, 'La bella compagnia', *Omnibus*, 1 May 1937, p. 9. Cines was a film production company founded in Rome in 1906 that ceased its activity in 1921. In 1929 it was taken over by Stefano Pittalunga, who took advantage of the investments made by the Fascist regime for the enhancement of national film production.

85 See Francesco Bolzoni, *Sull'Omnibus di Longanesi*, Quaderni di documentazione e ricerca, 5 (Rome: Centro sperimentale per la cinematografia, 1996).

His review of *Luciano Serra pilota* [*Luciano Serra, Pilot*], directed by Goffredo Alessandrini in 1938, confirms this view. *Luciano Serra pilota* was a major film co-authored and supervised by Vittorio Mussolini, the Duce's son, and represents a clear example of the impact of the American model on Italian culture. According to Vittorio Mussolini, in order to flourish the Italian film industry should have followed the example set by Hollywood: '[S]arebbe pericoloso e dannoso per la rinascente industria cinematografica italiana l'accordarsi alla produzione europea, invece di cercar la via e il metodo per eguagliare quella americana' [[I]t would be dangerous and damaging for the resurgent Italian film industry to conform to European production instead of seeking the way and methods to match American production], he declared in 1936.[86] *Luciano Serra pilota* reflects Vittorio Mussolini's aim to imitate Hollywood: 'Ero entusiasta dell'organizzazione del cinema americano e desideravo prestare la mia opera affinché anche in Italia si creasse una industria concepita su solide basi tecnico-finanziare' [I was enthusiastic about the organization of American cinema and wished to do my part so that in Italy, too, an industry conceived on a solid technical and financial basis would be created].[87] Ultimately, Luciano Serra is the classic stereotype of the humble hero who, in the end, chooses to do the 'right thing', turning the film into successful propaganda that made Italians identify with the protagonist and relate to his patriotic choice. Essentially, Serra is crafted to represent an ordinary man who ultimately chooses patriotism and thus Fascism, although there is no explicit connection to the Fascist regime.

86 Vittorio Mussolini, 'Emancipazione del cinema italiano', *Cinema*, 25 September 1936, 213–15 (p. 213). On Vittorio Mussolini's views on film production and, in general, cinema as a form of artistic expression, see also Vittorio Mussolini, 'In cerca della formula', *Cinema*, 10 February 1937, 87–88. Vittorio shared Pannunzio's views on cinema, was involved in film production and in 1937 was trying to form a partnership with the Hollywood producer Hal Roach, a partnership that failed for political reasons. On that topic see Richard Lewis Ward, *A History of the Hal Roach Studios* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), p. 100.

87 Vittorio Mussolini, *Vita con mio padre* (Milan: Mondadori, 1957), p. 71. See also Dario Zanelli, 'Quando Mussolini dirigeva "Cinema"', in *Il neorealismo nel fascismo. Giuseppe De Santis e la critica cinematografica 1941–1943*, ed. by Mariella Furno and Renzo Renzi, Quaderni della Cineteca, 5 (Bologna: Tipografia Compositori, 1984), pp. 103–09.

Propaganda film or not, Pannunzio believed that in its innovative approach to filmmaking, *Luciano Serra pilota* finally showed the direction the Italian film industry should take:

> [U]n film come *Luciano Serra pilota* può insegnare molte cose, essendo un'opera ch'è riuscita non solo a scordare le vecchie strade piene di polvere seguite dai più, ma a segnarne di nuove, che si confanno all'indole del nostro pubblico, annoiato di tante nostre commedie sentimentali e insensate, di tanti capricci in dialetto, di tante avventure modeste di tranquilli eroi.[88]
>
> [[A] film like *Luciano Serra pilota* can teach us many things, it being a work that has succeeded not only in forgetting the old, dusty roads followed by most, but also in marking out new ones that suit the nature of our audience, bored with so many of our sentimental and senseless comedies, so many caprices in dialect, so many modest adventures of quiet heroes.]

For Pannunzio, the film is one of the most successful attempts made by the Italian film industry to imitate Hollywood and this is one of the few positive reviews of Italian films in his column.[89] Furthermore, the film also offers an example of how American models could be Italianised and used to disseminate national (Fascist) values.

The third section of 'Giorno e notte', 'Celluloide', was written by Antonietta Drago and its main focus was also the American film industry. It put together foreign newspaper cuttings that showed readers what was behind the production of a film, from funding to production. The subject was cinema in general, not only American, but also European and Soviet, although Hollywood remained at the centre. The most distinctive characteristic of 'Celluloide' is the attention it paid to practical aspects of the industrial organisation of film production, in some cases presenting short articles on a specific aspect of the process. On 10 July 1937, for example, the article 'Proibito' [Forbidden] explains the problem Hollywood studios had to face because of their own country's censorship practices and the nationalist policies adopted by importing countries that protected national film industries from the massive quantity of American products. The piece highlights specific features of international film industries, from Singapore to Scandinavia, and anticipates the restriction on American imports to Italy approved shortly after.

88 Mario Pannunzio, 'Luciano Serra pilota', *Omnibus*, 1 January 1939, p. 9.

89 See also Mario Pannunzio, 'I condottieri', *Omnibus*, 9 October 1937, p. 9; and 'Scipione', *Omnibus*, 6 November 1937, p. 9.

While the Fascist government was working towards the control of film distribution and screening, which led to the approval of the so-called Alfieri Law (from the name of the Minister of Popular Culture, Dino Alfieri) and the institution of the state monopoly on the import of foreign films, *Omnibus* kept focusing on Hollywood, in contrast to the regime's promotion of Italian productions.[90] As much as in Pannunzio's reviews, for Drago Hollywood seems to have been the principal point of reference for (good) filmmaking. In 1937 there were three articles dedicated to Soviet film production – published on 22 May, 25 September and 4 December respectively – and although they inform the reader of the state of Soviet cinema in general, concentrating on organisation and funding, even in this case Drago refers to the American film industry as a model:

> Se volgiamo lo sguardo agli stabilimenti e ai quadri dell'industria, il panorama è ancora più triste. Circa quattro anni fa, Sciumiatski, di ritorno da un viaggio di studi e di piacere a Hollywood, decisa la costruzione a Jalta, in Crimea, di una Hollywood sovietica. […] Ebbene, sono già due anni che quegli stabilimenti sono in grado di funzionare, e nemmeno un film è uscito ancora da questa caricatura di Hollywood.[91]
>
> [If we look at the industry's establishments and executives, the picture is even sadder. About four years ago, on his return from a study and pleasure trip to Hollywood, [Boris] Šumjackij decided to build a Soviet Hollywood in Yalta, Crimea. […] Well, it is already two years since those edifices have been able to function and not a single film has yet come out of this caricature of Hollywood.]

The attention Drago paid to specific and technical aspects of film production worldwide contributed to making 'Celluloide' a column comparable to material in specialist cinematographic magazines, such as *Cinema* (Milan: Hoepli, 1936–56). However, the tone of

90 See R.D.L. 16 June 1938, no. 1061 ('Provvedimenti a favore dell'industria cinematografica nazionale'); and R.D.L. 4 September 1938, no. 1389 ('Istituzione del Monopolio per l'acquisto, l'importazione e la distribuzione in Italia, Possedimenti e Colonie, dei filmi cinematografici provenienti dall'Estero'). These constitute the 'Alfieri Law', which established State monopoly over the acquisition and distribution of films, leading to a drastic reduction in Hollywood imports. The Law also introduced a series of incentives to support and boost Italian film production, such as prizes awarded on box office success or for the exportations of films abroad.

91 Antonietta Drago, 'Guai Sovietici', *Omnibus*, 25 September 1937, p. 9. See also Antonietta Drago, 'La geografia di Platone Kerzhenstev', *Omnibus*, 22 May 1937, p. 5; and 'Redenzione di Eisenstein', *Omnibus*, 4 December 1937, p. 9.

Drago's articles is consistent with the generally sharp, lively tone used in *Omnibus* and in line with Pannunzio's critical reviews. Some pieces, for example, are used to highlight what is seen as the ridiculous or negative aspects of film production, such as the system of American censorship created by Will H. Hays that led to a controversy between the Hays Office and Warner Bros. about a short film on 'l'arte di indossare le calze' [The Art of Wearing Socks],[92] or the abovementioned failures of Soviet film production to emulate Hollywood.[93] What emerges in 'Celluloide' is a deeply ambivalent attitude towards America: Hollywood is praised and considered a model for film production, therefore challenging censorship, but at the same time it is also ridiculed, echoing the Fascist anti-American rhetoric that was a feature of several other parts of *Omnibus*.

Overall, 'Giorno e Notte' provides a clear example of the sustained, but contradictory fascination with America to be found in *Omnibus*. The articles dedicated to film stars were inspired by American magazines and some of them were, or pretended to be, translations of original American articles and contributed to the spreading of a fascination with the Hollywood star system in Italy. 'Giorno e Notte' also confirms the complexity of perspectives in *Omnibus*: the critical film reviews by Pannunzio and the comment pieces by Drago were consistent with the cultured tone of the magazine, but the strong presence of articles on film stars that read like a gossip column made 'Giorno e Notte' also a popular culture section. Together they created a mixture of a popular side and an aspiration to serious cultural comment in which the American model of the fan magazine co-existed with sophisticated or expert critique, making these two 'cultures' available for everyone. Finally, in 'Giorno e notte' American culture can be found not only as the main subject of the articles, but also as

92 The American film industry, through the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA, established in 1922), implemented a system of self-regulation and censorship to shield itself from potential government intervention. From the early 1920s concerns about Hollywood's alleged role in promoting moral decline had sparked debates about official censorship. In response, the industry appointed former Postmaster General Will Hays to head the MPPDA's self-censorship body, later known as the 'Hays Office', which in 1930 introduced the Production Code to regulate the moral content of films. See Ina Rae Hark, *American Cinema of the 1930s: Themes and Variations*, Screen Decades: American Culture/American Cinema, 4 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

93 Drago, 'Guai Sovietici'; Antonietta Drago, 'Parole tabù' and 'L'arte di infilarsi le calze', *Omnibus*, 1 May 1937, p. 9.

a model for the layout of the column, influenced by the American fan magazines, with photographs of film stars and big, catchy titles attracting the readers' attention.

Through literature and films, translated articles and comics, American culture was thus a constant presence in *Omnibus*. Taken together, the images of America disseminated throughout the magazine reveal a deeply ambivalent attitude to American culture.[94] This is also reflected in the different generations amongst the contributors to *Omnibus*. Authors such as Elio Vittorini, Mario Praz, Alberto Moravia, Giaime Pintor, Mario Soldati and Emilio Cecchi, who collaborated as translators from English and/or writers of original pieces with links to American culture, also contributed to the dissemination of an ambivalent image of the United States in Italy during the late 1930s. These authors were part of two different generations with dissimilar attitudes and ideas as far as American culture was concerned: authors such as Praz and Cecchi were sceptical of prevalent myths of America, whereas Vittorini, Pintor and Soldati perceived the United States and a certain new American literature as a powerful symbolic presence that conditioned their own work.

A comparison between articles about Hollywood and pieces on American society clearly reveals this ambivalence. In the third issue of 1938, for example, Elio Vittorini's translation of a short story by William Saroyan – *L'uomo col cuore negli altopiani* [*The Man With the Heart in the Highlands*] – is published in columns surrounding a photograph entitled 'documenti americani' [American documents] that portrays a woman kissing a dead man in a coffin. The caption reads: 'Elena Wills Love, di anni 31 accusata di avere ucciso il suo amante, mentre bacia la vittima nella bara' [Elena Wills Love, thirty-one-years-old, accused of having killed her lover, kisses the victim in his coffin].[95] Consistent with the use of images in *Omnibus*, the photograph stands alone and delivers an implicit message denouncing the violence and hypocrisy of American women. There is no connection with Saroyan's short story, a tale about the encounter of a poor American family with an old actor travelling across the United States whose heart belongs to Scotland. Instead, it offers a clear example of contradictory images of the United States: the space dedicated to American literature, implicitly approved, is counterbalanced by an image condemning American society, depicted in *Omnibus* as violent, hypocritical and barbarian, clearly echoing the rhetoric of the Fascist regime. Once

94 See Gentile, 'Impending Modernity'.

95 *Omnibus*, 15 January 1938, p. 6.

more, photographs play a crucial role in accusing and revealing hidden aspects of American society, as here or in a photo-story on President Roosevelt, portrayed in grotesque and denigrating poses which undermine his credibility.[96] Throughout *Omnibus*, America is thus presented as two separate, co-existing realities: the sparkling world of Hollywood and its stars, a fake world made of life-changing opportunities that can turn a simple secretary into a wealthy wife, contrasted with the 'real' face of America, greedy and violent.

This ambivalent attitude can be traced even in positive reviews of films such as *Gold Diggers*, in which Pannunzio praises the American actors – 'Gli attori […] giocano su una recitazione esatta, precisa, realistica' [The actors […] play on exact, precise, realistic acting] – but depicts American society in general as immoral: 'Traspare anzi qua e là quella frenetica, angosciosa, brutale sete di danaro, ch'è propria degli americani, e che a malapena è velata da un candore e un'ingenuità superficiali' [On the contrary, here and there transpires that frenetic, anguished, brutal thirst for money that is characteristic of Americans and that is barely veiled by a superficial candour and naivety].[97] Gossip articles on film stars were used to spread negative images of American society, too. An article signed by James W. Bell, for example, reflects on the fact that the majority of Hollywood stars claim to come from poor families and disadvantaged backgrounds: 'Ogni attrice è una Becky Sharp e ogni attore un Oliviero Twist. […] [I] genitori, le madri, i padri e gli zii degli attori, sembrano uscire tutti dalla penna di Zola' [Every actress is a Becky Sharp and every actor an Oliver Twist. […] [T]he actors' parents, mothers, fathers and uncles all seem to come from Zola's pen]. According to Bell, the reason behind the unfortunate events that characterised a star's childhood was the American fascination with 'gli eroi che salgono alla gloria dalla strada' [heroes rising to glory from the streets], a myth that suggested anyone could become famous.[98] Bell explains that, 'ciò ha la sua ragione sociale, il suo segreto commerciale: ed è che agli americani […] piacciono gli eroi *self-made* […] [ed] è un'ambizione postuma di tutti i ricchi, quella di essere stati poveri' [this has its social rationale, its trade secret: and that is that Americans […] like self-made heroes […] [and] it is a posthumous ambition of all rich people to have been poor]. Accordingly, 'la Crawford era una

96 [Anon.], 'L'allegro Signor Roosevelt', *Omnibus*, 8 January 1938, p. 12.

97 Mario Pannunzio, 'Cercatrici d'oro', *Omnibus*, 22 May 1937, p. 5.

98 James W. Bell, 'La rettorica di Hollywood', *Omnibus*, 30 October 1937, p. 9.

dattilografa e viveva in una soffitta' [Crawford was a typist and lived in an attic]; and Marlene Dietrich had to sell her precious violin, a gift from her father who had died in the Great War, in order to save her sick mother.[99] By revealing how Hollywood stars claimed to come from a poor background just to appeal to the public, Bell highlights the hypocrisy of both Hollywood and American society, in which rich people display a false modesty. Consistent in a way with the contradicting views across the Fascist apparatus, *Omnibus* celebrated Hollywood but condemned American society as a whole. Its cultural content mirrored the Fascist stance against the United States, exemplified by legislation banning American influences, and an Italian readership fascinated by it; it replicated the same ambivalence on the part of the Fascist regime, which limited imports but built its own film studios following the Hollywood example.

***

In the final issue of *Omnibus*, published on 28 January 1939, an article on the Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi by the magazine drama critic Alberto Savinio prompted the intervention of the Fascist censors and the closure of the magazine. In the official documents the reason for this decision is clearly stated, as Longanesi admits in a letter to Dino Alfieri dated 2 February: '[M]i è stato comunicato l'ordine di sospensione di *Omnibus* per un articolo a firma Alberto Savinio riguardante Leopardi a Napoli' [I was informed of the order to suspend *Omnibus* on account of an article by Alberto Savinio concerning Leopardi in Naples].[100] However, there are three different theories as to the exact cause. The first states that *Omnibus* was closed because Savinio insulted one of Italy's greatest poets, Giacomo Leopardi.[101] The second version, which is the most corroborated, suggests that Savinio offended the Prefect of Naples and his wife by calling them 'donkeys': Savinio criticised the closure of the famous café Gambrinus, not knowing that it had been decided by the Prefect himself, who expressed his indignation to Mussolini,

99 Bell, 'La rettorica di Hollywood', p. 9.

100 Leo Longanesi to Dino Alfieri, 2 February 1939, ACS, MCP, b. 119, f. 735 'Leo Longanesi'.

101 In the article Savinio, in unflattering words, states that Leopardi died of indigestion caused by ice-cream: 'una leggera colite che i napoletani chiamano *"a cacarella"*' [a slight colitis that Neapolitans call '*the shits*'] (Alberto Savinio, 'Il sorbetto di Leopardi', *Omnibus*, 28 January 1939, p. 3).

who in turn ordered the closure of *Omnibus*.[102] A third interpretation originates from Francesco Bolzoni, who in his study of *Omnibus* suggests that it was, in fact, Savinio's allusion to 'uno sbrindellato reparto di soldati in partenza per la Macedonia […] che, al modo di una dispettosa fotografia, fermava la voracità e la sconsolata miseria di fantaccini che ci si preparava a inviare di nuovo al fronte' [a tattered troop of soldiers departing for Macedonia […] who, like a mischievous photograph, exposed the voraciousness and sorrowful misery of the little puppets being prepared to be sent to the front again] which caused the intervention by the censors.[103] According to this version, the real reason behind the forced closure of *Omnibus* was Savinio's derision of the Italian Navy: 'La maggior divoratrice di gelati è la marina da guerra' [The greatest devourer of ice cream is the Navy].[104] Whichever is the correct version, each one shows that, despite the margin of freedom of expression which the Ministry of Popular Culture allowed periodicals to enjoy as compared to newspapers, it was ready to intervene and suspend a magazine for the smallest insult to Italy's prestige or power.

After being notified of the government's measures against *Omnibus*, Longanesi tried to appeal directly to Mussolini, reminding him of his longstanding service to the Fascist cause and defending Savinio's joke about Leopardi – a figure who, being unheroic, was not at odds with the regime's spirit.[105] On 2 February 1939, however, the final measure against Longanesi was approved in a letter from Alfieri to the Prefect of Milan: 'Prego V. E. disporre che settimanale "Omnibus" edito Rizzoli-Milano sospenda sue pubblicazioni per revoca riconoscimento del gerente responsabile Leo Longanesi causa atteggiamento tenuto dal periodico in questi ultimi tempi' [[I] request [that] Your Excellency order that the weekly magazine 'Omnibus' published by Rizzoli-Milan suspend its publication due to the revocation of the recognition of editor-in-chief Leo Longanesi

102 Massimo Alberini, '"Omnibus". La vita e la morte del famoso settimanale di Longanesi', *La Gazzetta di Parma*, 15 September 1982; republished in Granata, *'L''Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi*, pp. 265–66.

103 Savinio, 'Il sorbetto di Leopardi', p. 3; Bolzoni, *Sull'Omnibus di Longanesi*, pp. 109–10.

104 Savinio, 'Il sorbetto di Leopardi', p. 3.

105 Leo Longanesi to Benito Mussolini, 2 February 1939, ACS, MCP, b. 119, f. 8144 'Leo Longanesi'; reproduced in Granata, *L''Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi*, p. 268.

due to the attitude of the periodical in recent times].[106] Even Angelo Rizzoli tried to intercede to save *Omnibus*: 'L'Editore Rizzoli, che deve rientrare a Milano, insiste per essere ricevuto oggi da Sua Eccellenza Alfieri, cui vorrebbe parlare del cambio della gerenza di "Omnibus", onde evitare a tutti un danno generale' [The Editor Rizzoli, who is to return to Milan, insists on being received today by His Excellency Alfieri, to whom he would like to speak about the change in management of 'Omnibus', in order to avoid general harm to everyone].[107] In spite of these attempts, Mussolini's decision was final and *Omnibus* was never published again.

As early as March 1939 another magazine published by Angelo Rizzoli, *Tutto*, appeared on the news-stands showing a new look clearly inspired by *Omnibus*, so much so that it again moved the Ministry of Popular Culture to intervene:

> È uscito in questi giorni il primo numero della serie interamente rinnovata del settimanale 'Tutto'. 'Tutto' […] è divenuto dopo questa trasformazione una copia sfacciata del soppresso settimanale 'Omnibus': identica è l'impaginazione del nuovo foglio, identico lo stile ottocentesco dei titoli e delle fotografie, identici le rubriche ed i collaboratori (fra i quali è Alberto Moravia, […] e […] Mario Missiroli).
>
> Il direttore responsabile di 'TUTTO' è inoltre […] Andrea Rizzoli, il quale evidentemente ha assunto la gerenza del settimanale per eliminare formalmente il nome del vecchio direttore Leo Longanesi.
>
> 'Tutto' costituisce insomma un'evidentissima seconda edizione di 'Omnibus' e perciò una palese contravvenzione all'ordine di soppressione di questo settimanale dato pochissime settimane or sono dal Ministro della cultura popolare.
>
> Il fatto è stato subito notato ed ampiamente commentato non solo negli ambienti giornalistici e letterari, ma anche dal pubblico il quale vede in esso un segno della sopravvivenza di certi giornalisti sordamente ostili al Fascismo.[108]
>
> [The first issue of the completely revamped series of the weekly 'Tutto' came out these days. 'Tutto' […] has, after this transformation, become a shameless copy of the suppressed weekly 'Omnibus': identical is

106 Dino Alfieri, 'Telegramma N. 16 indirizzato a Prefetto Milano', 2 February 1939, MCP, b. 119, f. 735 'Leo Longanesi'.

107 Note for Alfieri, author and date unknown, ACS, MCP, b. 119, f. 735 'Leo Longanesi'.

108 Note of the MCP to Alfieri dated 14 March 1939, author unknown, ACS, MCP, b. 119, f. 735 'Leo Longanesi'.

> the layout of the new sheet, identical is the nineteenth-century style of the headlines and photographs, identical are the columns and the contributors (among whom are Alberto Moravia, […] and […] Mario Missiroli).
>
> Furthermore, the editor in charge of 'TUTTO' is […] Andrea Rizzoli, who evidently took over the management of the weekly in order formally to eliminate the name of the old editor Leo Longanesi.
>
> In short, 'Tutto' constitutes a very evident second edition of 'Omnibus' and therefore a blatant contravention of the order given a few weeks ago by the Minister of Popular Culture to suppress this weekly.
>
> The fact was immediately noticed and widely commented on not only in journalistic and literary circles, but also by the public, who saw in it a sign of the survival of certain journalists deafly hostile to Fascism.]

After its forced closure *Omnibus* continued to play a role in the Italian periodical press, not only as a model to be emulated, as with *Tutto* and, after the war, *L'Espresso* and *Il Mondo*, founded by Benedetti and Pannunzio respectively, but also as an experience that was profoundly formative for many of the writers and intellectuals who went on to shape post-war Italian journalism. Although foreign elements, both European and American, can be easily traced in *Omnibus*, Longanesi created a magazine that had its own distinctive Italian features and reflected, directly and indirectly, specific aspects of Italian culture: the Fascist regime and its rhetoric; Italians' fascination with Hollywood and American culture; and Italian habits, commented on and interpreted through the sarcastic lens of Longanesi.

This explains why *Omnibus* is often referred to as the first Italian *rotocalco*. Rizzoli had already produced and printed magazines using the rotogravure printer, with *Novella* possibly representing the earliest and most successful example. What made *Omnibus* a prototype of the modern illustrated weekly, then, was not so much, or not only, its use of this new printing technology, but rather its innovative use of photographs and other images, as well as its heterogeneous mix of serious analyses and entertainment, which allowed it to appeal to potentially any kind of reader – from housewives to intellectuals – with cultural or political interests, or just looking for distracting entertainment. Images differentiated *Omnibus* from any other periodical of the time in their range, type and variety of tone. In this sense, *Omnibus* reflects and in many ways shaped the Italian concept of the *rotocalco* as a general magazine for a wide readership covering a broad range of topics from current affairs to culture.

5. An Ideal Magazine for the Ideal Woman: *Grazia* (1938–43)

Nella lista di tali giornali [da sopprimere] è stato erroneamente incluso il settimanale Grazia, *il quale mi sembra si stacchi in modo netto da quel genere di varietà che giustamente si è voluto far scomparire dalla stampa periodica italiana.* Grazia *infatti è nata come una pubblicazione per la donna italiana e per la famiglia, nata anche per fare la concorrenza alle tre riviste francesi similari –* Marie Claire, Votre Bonheur *e* Confidences *– che in Italia vendono migliaia di copie alla settimana.*[1]

[The weekly magazine Grazia *was erroneously included in the list of such journals [to be suppressed], which seems to me to be a clear departure from the kind of variety that was rightly intended to disappear from the Italian periodical press.* Grazia *in fact began as a publication for the Italian woman and family and was also created to compete with the three similar French magazines –* Marie Claire, Votre Bonheur *and* Confidences *– that sell thousands of copies a week in Italy.]*

The Italian Women's *rotocalchi* and the Fascist Regime

The changes brought to the periodical press by rotogravure printing, which we have seen at work in the case of *Omnibus*, also had a profound effect on the sector of women's magazines. As already mentioned, the very first popular magazine to be shaped and published as a *rotocalco*

1 Arnoldo Mondadori, draft letter to Mussolini, undated, quoted in Patrizia Landi, 'I primi passi di "Grazia" tra innovazione e informazione', in *Forme e modelli del rotocalco*, ed. by De Berti and Piazzoni, pp. 235–304 (p. 236).

was Rizzoli's *Novella* in 1927; then, in the 1930s, the women's periodical press experienced a dynamic phase of development. The sector was particularly affected by the use of the rotogravure, which stimulated and, for the first time, differentiated production of magazines offering a varied content according to the diverse kinds of women readers targeted. The new *rotocalchi* expanded the readership, marking the beginning of a mass market in Italy for women's periodicals, itself part of the new mass culture that was emerging during the Fascist era, in some ways shaped by Fascism itself.

In the nineteenth century, and before the advent of the rotogravure, women's periodicals were mainly dedicated to fashion and the Arts and were aimed at the upper classes. From the 1920s onwards a few magazines started to include some more popular content, such as articles on sport and the cinema, albeit maintaining an elegant look and still focusing on the Arts and literature.[2] In the 1930s women's illustrated magazines distinguished themselves from those periodicals in their frequency of publication, number of pages and quality of paper, as well as content: whereas earlier periodicals such as *Lidel* and *Sovrana* used glossy paper, had many pages and were published monthly, *rotocalchi* had fewer pages, used a lower-quality paper and were published weekly. These differences were also reflected in the price: a single issue of a women's *rotocalco* was cheaper than other women's periodicals, so the intended readership for the new magazines was clearly extended to include middle-class, 'ordinary' women.[3] The innovative formula of the *rotocalco* always followed three principles: entertainment, escapism and advice. This approach allowed these kinds of magazine to reach a wide range of readers from different social strata, from the lower middle class to the haute bourgeoisie.

The success of women's illustrated magazines was due not only to the technical and commercial innovations in printing described in Chapter 2, but also to decades of the development and refinement of women's periodicals. If, in the nineteenth century, magazines aimed to shape and give advice to women whose interests and ideas were changing alongside the evolution of society and the organisation of the family, in the 1930s the new weeklies similarly suggested models for a 'new woman' that now reflected Fascist precepts but were not

2 For example, a periodical like *Lidel* (Milan: Lidel, 1919–35) had an elegant appearance, published novels by eminent authors such as Massimo Bontempelli, Grazia Deledda and Luigi Pirandello, focused on fashion and targeted educated, upper-class women.

3 One of the first women's *rotocalchi*, *Eva* (Milan: Vitaliano, later Rusconi, 1933–69), had eleven pages in black and white and cost sixty *centesimi*, while in 1930 a traditional periodical like *Lidel* had 101 pages and cost ten lire.

limited to them. Fascist-era women were experiencing a profound, and in some sense disconcerting, redefinition of their role in society, influenced not just by the regime but also by popular media, especially cinema. On the one hand, Fascist rhetoric aimed to push women back into the house and to institutionalise traditional roles. On the other hand, women were facing a new, stimulating environment which included an extension of their social, cultural and working life that was the result of the spread of capitalist consumerism and the progressive massification of society. It also reflected certain inner contradictions in Mussolini's ideological apparatus, torn between 'past' and 'future'.[4] These contradictions found their expression in women's *rotocalchi*.

Like other periodicals of the time, women's magazines were granted a certain margin of freedom from censorship thanks to their entertaining and ostensibly apolitical nature, making these publications particularly revealing in terms of both the media and the portrayal of women.[5] In particular, women's *rotocalchi* revealed the dissonance between the Fascist regime's idealised construct of womanhood and the forms of feminine identity that resonated with Italian women. For this reason, these magazines offer rich source material not only for the image of women proposed by the Fascist regime, but also for the new, complex models and roles of femininity emerging from within the modern forms of consumerism, which were spreading and which illustrated magazines both reflected and contributed to disseminating. While Fascist rhetoric adopted the Catholic, conservative ideal of the 'exemplary bride and

4 Helga Dittrich-Johansen, 'La "Donna nuova" di Mussolini tra evasione e consumismo', in *Fascismo, antifascismo, democrazia. A cinquant'anni dal 25 aprile*, ed. by Franco De Felice (= *Studi storici*, 36 (1995)), pp. 811–43 (pp. 811–13). See also Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1943* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); and Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy*, Gender and History (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), esp. pp. 24–111.

5 See Elisabetta Mondello, *La nuova italiana. La donna nella stampa e nella cultura del Ventennio*, Nuova Bibliteca di Cultura, 279 (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987), pp. 13–20, in particular: 'Le maglie della censura erano, in effetti, meno strette per i periodici' [The meshes of censorship were, in fact, less tight for periodicals] (p. 14). However, Helga Dittrich-Johansen reminds us that 'l'irregimentazione, l'asservimento e l'ossequio alle direttive del regime erano obbligatori anche per la stampa a carattere periodico, inclusa quella rivolta ad un pubblico esplicitamente femminile' [regimentation, subjugation and deference to the regime's directives were also mandatory for the periodical press, including that aimed at an explicitly female readership] (Helga Dittrich-Johansen, 'Dal privato al pubblico. Maternità e lavoro nelle riviste femminili dell'epoca fascista', *Studi storici*, 35 (1994), 207–43 (p. 223 n. 28)).

mother',[6] women's *rotocalchi* echoed and encouraged the new values and interests that were spreading and taking hold among women at various levels of the urban middle class, thereby holding a mirror to society and its changes. The co-existence of conflicting models of womanhood in women's magazines demonstrates the fact that they gave voice to aspirations diverging from the ideal 'angel of the hearth' proposed by Fascist propaganda and offered instead the model of a woman engaged with the modern world.

One of the ways in which women's *rotocalchi* responded to modern roles for women was by echoing models coming from abroad, which often reflected the popularity of Hollywood lifestyles and images of beauty.[7] As in the case of weeklies aimed at a broad reading public, such as *Omnibus* and *L'Avventuroso*, foreign periodicals, particularly French and American ones, influenced the form and content of Italian women's illustrated weeklies and, in this case, contributed to the spreading of modern models of femininity. Conversely, the presence in the same women's magazines of traditional Italian values, often steeped in Catholic and Fascist rhetoric, shows how the Italian magazines reinterpreted and adapted – Italianised – foreign models. The presence of a multidirectional dialogue between American and European culture and within European countries, and of traditional ideas of gender roles, can be clearly traced in *Grazia*, one of the most successful, dynamic magazines for women. *Grazia* gave a voice to both modern and traditional aspirations, addressing itself to women from all social classes, providing insights into the modernisation of women in Italy and the conflicting forces at play surrounding womanhood. First published in October 1938 by Mondadori, *Grazia* quickly became one of the main players in a wide field of publishing dedicated to women that shows the multifaceted aspects of Italian society at the

6 Since the publication of Piero Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare* (Florence: Guaraldi, 1975), the first comprehensive study on women under the Fascist regime, the expression 'sposa e madre esemplare' [exemplary bride and mother] has become commonly used as a synonym for the Fascist concept of the ideal woman.

7 According to Raffaele De Berti, women's *rotocalchi* of the 1930s 'più o meno esplicitamente, richiama[va]no il mondo della celluloide e la moda incarnata dalle dive sullo schermo' [more or less explicitly recall[ed] the world of celluloid and the fashion embodied by the divas on the screen] (De Berti, *Dallo schermo alla carta*, p. 61). The impact of Hollywood stars on the dominant values of twentieth-century society is discussed by Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 2nd rev. edn (London: British Film Institute, 1998 [1979]). See also Stephen Gundle, 'The Public and the Stars', in *Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), pp. 96–120, particularly pp. 115–17.

end of the 1930s. The impact of the Mondadori magazine is tangible in its popularity – the only one launched before the Second World War that is still published – and in its impact on other magazines, like *Eva*, which in 1939 radically changed its appearance and adopted a look very similar to that of *Grazia*.[8]

Women and the Fascist Regime: The *donna nuova*

Consistent with the Fascist pursuit of an anthropological revolution and the creation of a 'new man', the 'new woman' represented his ideal companion, ready to put her life at the service of the Motherland by bearing children. Victoria de Grazia describes Fascist women as 'prolific mates, dutiful mothers, and ardent patriots', conceived alongside the new Fascist men, who were educated to 'believe, obey, and fight'.[9] Fascism aimed at a rigid separation between the public and the private sphere and hence between men and women, an objective which found a formal expression with the launch of the demographic campaign in 1927, after which women were officially to be the child-bearers of the nation. However, women were expected to be not only mothers but also active Fascists, although in a limited form, only as requested by the establishment and, in any case, subjugated to the male authority.[10] In its contradictory approach, Fascism created a woman focused on motherhood and submissive to male authority, fulfilling her traditional role, but at the same time expected to be an active agent in the totalitarian State – that is to say, to have a modern role in the State, expressing patriotism and participating in the public sphere within Fascist organisations and events.

8 The covers of *Eva* from 1939 seem an exact copy of *Grazia*, the only difference being a short table of contents advertising the topics covered in the issue. Even the adoption of a predominantly orange colour inside the issue matches the iconic look of *Grazia*.

9 de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 116.

10 As Annabella Gioia writes, the 'donna nuova doveva saper coniugare l'abnegazione materna, i valori della domesticità con l'attivismo sociale nelle forme e nei modi stabiliti dal regime; doveva inoltre apparire combattiva ma sottomessa all'autorità maschile' [new woman had to be able to combine maternal self-sacrifice, the values of domesticity with social activism in the forms and ways established by the regime; she also had to appear combative but submissive to male authority] (Annabella Gioia, *Donne senza qualità. Immagini femminili nell'Archivio storico dell'Istituto Luce* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2010), p. 8). On women under Fascism, see also Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *La donna 'nera'. Consenso femminile e fascismo*, I nuovi testi, 108 (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), one of the first studies on the topic.

In spite of widespread Fascist propaganda, the regime's ideal woman was not the only model of womanhood to which Italian women were exposed. Once again, the role of foreign cinema proved crucial. As mentioned with regard to *Omnibus*, Hollywood products, so easily accessible to the masses from large posters on the streets to popular fan magazines on the news-stands, helped to shape the formation of the ideal Italian woman. Hollywood stars in particular played an important role in suggesting new models of behaviour and beauty for Italian women, providing alternative gender roles and disseminating an alternative fantasy and ideal of the modern woman, one which the Fascist regime identified as the 'crisis-woman', exemplified by the figure of the American 'flapper' described in Chapter 1. Embodied by the actress Clara Bow, the typical flapper was 'shameless, selfish, and honest' and looking for 'partners who offered passion and eroticism in marriage'.[11] This model of woman, characterised by, among other traits, a slim body, was perceived as a dangerous ideal which could threaten the survival of the nation, since thinness, according to the Fascist ideologues, was a sign of sterility that would cause a decline in the national birth rate and consequently lead to the end of the nation. This view was clearly expressed by Mussolini in a speech aimed at doctors in 1931: '[S]ono i pregiudizi della moda che finiscono per essere deleteri ai fini della forza. Ve ne cito uno: la moda del dimagramento eccessivo. Questa indebolisce la razza ed ha delle ripercussioni anche d'ordine e di natura economica' [[F]ashion biases are what end up being detrimental to strength. I will mention one of them: the fashion of excessive slimming. This weakens the race and also has repercussions on the economic order and nature].[12]

The modern woman also threatened the traditionally patriarchal social order by subverting established morality: she sought independence, had a job and did not see maternity and marriage as her main goals. To oppose this model, which challenged the traditional patriarchal family and promoted women's emancipation, Fascist propaganda created the 'crisis-woman'. In contrast to this deviant model, and as part of its radical anthropological project, Mussolini's

11 See Natasha V. Chang, *The Crisis Woman: Body Politics and the Modern Woman in Fascist Italy*, Toronto Italian Studies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015). On Hollywood models of femininity see also Sarah Berry, *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood*, Commerce and Mass Culture, 2 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

12 Benito Mussolini, 'Discorso ai medici', 22 November 1931, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, xxv, *Dal patto a quattro all'inaugurazione della provincia di Littoria (18 giugno 1933–18 dicembre 1934)*, pp. 58–62 (p. 60).

government proposed its own ideal of the 'new woman'. She was curvaceous and fertile, her femininity glorified in her biological function and her education aimed at raising healthy children. Motherhood had a central role in the fulfilment of this ideal, as the duty of the Fascist woman was first towards the Motherland and then towards her husband and children. This was linked to Mussolini's idea that the strength of a nation lay in the number of its citizens:

> [S]ono quelle che io chiamo storture della civiltà contemporanea, […] che la maternità attenui la bellezza muliebre; è precisamente vero il contrario come ognuno di voi può constatare. […] Voi sapete quale è la mia teoria: massimo di natalità, minimo di mortalità; ed i due aspetti del fenomeno sono interdipendenti. […] È vero, inoltre, che le Nazioni invecchiano e che, ad un certo momento, la natura imporrà le sue leggi inesorabili. Le Nazioni invecchiate avranno il tracollo formidabile della loro popolazione.[13]

> [[T]hese are what I call the distortions of contemporary civilization, […] that motherhood reduces feminine beauty; precisely the opposite is true, as any of you can see. […] You know what my theory is: maximum birth rate, minimum mortality; and the two aspects of the phenomenon are interdependent. […] It is true, moreover, that Nations age and that, at a certain time, nature will impose its inexorable laws. Aged Nations will experience the impressive collapse of their population.]

The role of women as wives and mothers was traditionally interdependent and was reflected in women's *rotocalchi*. However, due to the modernisation of women's aspirations, in order to sell these illustrated magazines had to include other lifestyle aspirations and modern attitudes, so motherhood came to represent only one aspect of a multi-layered image of womanhood. This is particularly evident in the reception and reflection in women's weeklies of women's employment from the perspective of both the regime and of women's daily reality. Echoing a rhetoric established after the end of the Great War, which saw women as one of the causes of veterans' unemployment, Mussolini took a clear stance against it. In an article on *Il Popolo d'Italia* he argued that female workers had the same negative impact on the economy as machinery: both were taking jobs

13 Mussolini, 'Discorso ai medici', p. 60. On the *donna nuova* see Patrizia Ferrara, 'La "donna nuova" del fascismo e lo sport', in *Sport e fascismo*, ed. by Maria Canella and Sergio Giuntini (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2009), pp. 209–33; Gioia, *Donne senza qualità*; de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*. On the American model of beauty see [Anon.], 'This is Ideal Figure that Modern Women Want', *Life*, 15 August 1938, pp. 38–41.

away from men and consequently hindering a man's drive to create a family and even changing women's biology:

> Nella donna operaia o lavoratrice in genere, interseca oltre la disoccupazione anche la questione demografica. Il lavoro ove non è diretto impedimento distrae dalla generazione, fomenta una indipendenza e conseguenti mode fisiche e morali contrarie al parto. L'uomo, disorientato e soprattutto 'disoccupato' in tutti i sensi, finisce per rinunziare alla famiglia.[14]
>
> [The labourer woman or working woman in general intersects beyond unemployment with the demographic issue. Work, where it is not a direct impediment, distracts from generation, foments an independence and consequent physical and moral fashions contrary to childbirth. The man, disoriented and above all 'unemployed' in every sense, ends up giving up the family.]

If, on the one hand, women's *rotocalchi* echoed this stance and suggested a model of womanhood primarily linked to the traditional, nurturing role of women translated into woman as housewife, on the other hand, in order to ensure high sales figures they had to reflect the reality of Italian society, in which women were part of the workforce. *Grazia* reflected the complex, contradictory aspirations and images of womanhood in the Fascist regime and its popularity makes it a representative example of women's illustrated magazines. Its issues in the years from 1938 to 1943 allow reflection on how the magazine mirrored and illustrated the complex socio-cultural positioning of its female readers during the final years of Mussolini's rule.

Grazia between Marketing, Ideology and Modernity

The first issue of *Grazia* appeared on news-stands on 10 November 1938. Its cost, its look and its length distinguished it from other women's magazines already in publication, such as *Annabella*, *Eva* and *Gioia!*. *Grazia* cost only eighty centesimi and contained thirty-two colour-print pages, making it cheaper and larger than other popular women's publications at the time, which usually cost the same but contained only eight to sixteen pages in black and white.[15] The first cover of

14 Benito Mussolini, 'Macchina e Donna', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 31 August 1934, p. 2.

15 In 1938, for example, *Eva* cost sixty cents and had *c*. sixteen pages; *Lei* cost the same for the same number of pages; *Gioia!* cost fifty to sixty cents and had *c*. twelve pages.

Grazia, an illustration in colour, portrayed two women, one sitting on the arm of a recliner and the other standing beside her, graphically expressing the aim of the magazine to be 'un'amica al vostro fianco' [a friend by your side], as stated in a red subtitle (Fig. 28).

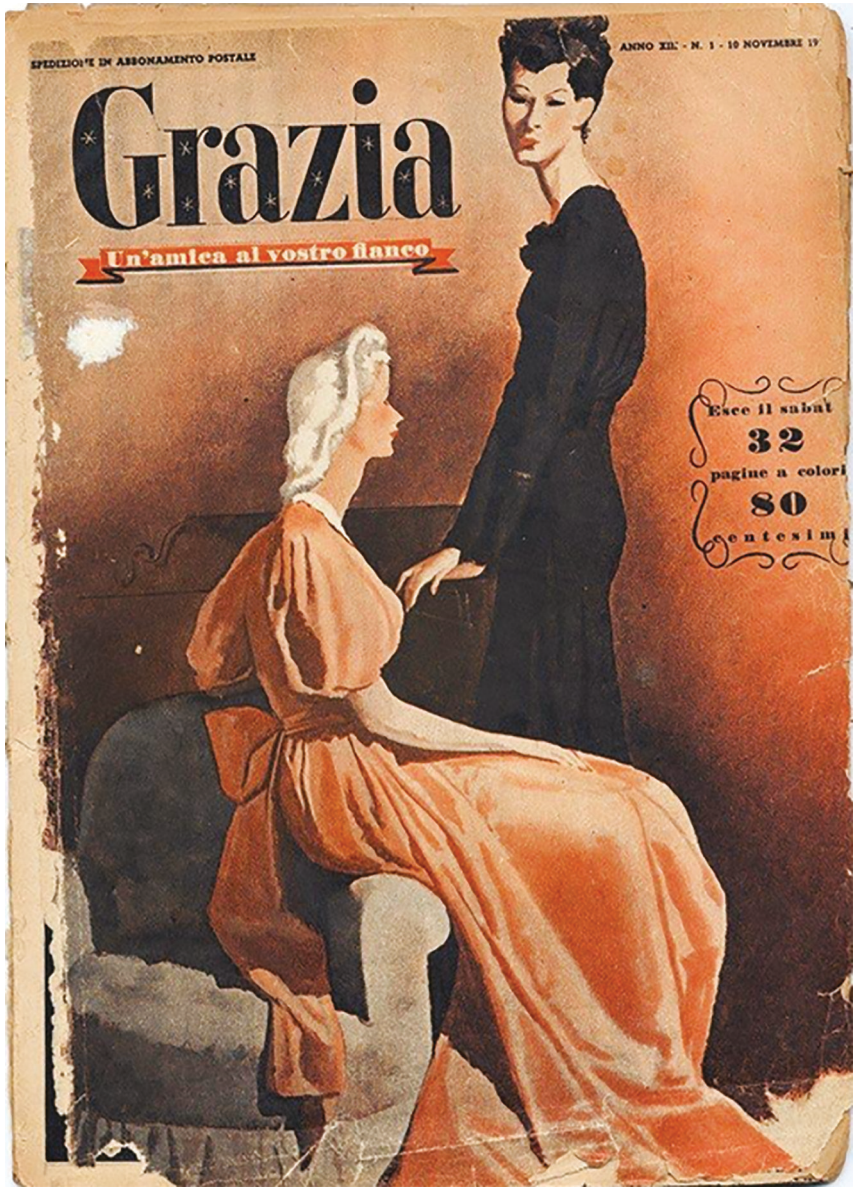


Figure 28 Front cover of first issue of *Grazia*, 10 November 1938. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia.

Although *Grazia* was a new publication, it was the formal continuation of another woman's periodical, *Sovrana*, first published in 1927. *Sovrana* was a monthly magazine published on glossy paper by the Istituto Nazionale per la Propaganda Industriale e Commerciale from February 1927 until November 1938, when Mondadori bought the periodical and transformed it into a popular magazine format. The very first significant change that occurred when *Sovrana* became *Grazia* was in the intended readership. *Sovrana* had been aimed at the upper classes, as stated in the first issue in February 1927: 'Non frivolezze, non plagi, non frasi fatte, ma azioni, riconoscimenti, realtà: sarà la nostra *un'esposizione elegante* di argomenti letterari, artistici, mondani che più interesseranno *la categoria scelta dei nostri lettori*' [Not frivolousness, not plagiarism, not catchphrases, but actions, acknowledgments, realities: ours will be an *elegant exposition* of literary, artistic, sophisticated topics that will most interest the *chosen category of our readers*].[16] Mondadori's intention was instead to reach as many readers as possible, as confirmed by the presentation of *Grazia* in the first issue on 10 November 1938: '*Sovrana*, da questo numero, diventa *Grazia*. La trasformazione è avvenuta perché la rivista si avvicini di più a tutte le lettrici, *di tutti gli strati sociali*' [From this issue onwards *Sovrana* becomes *Grazia*. The transformation has taken place so that the magazine will draw closer to all female readers from *all social classes*].[17] In Mondadori's idea, every woman would find space in *Grazia*, a change expressed by the title of the magazine, which became friendlier: from a noble title to a common name.

According to a series of letters analysed by Patrizia Landi, Arnoldo Mondadori had wanted to create a new women's magazine since 1935; in 1937 he had even considered buying the rights to reproduce and translate a foreign magazine such as the French *Marie-Claire* (Paris: Prouvost, 1937–). Initially, the project had also involved the publisher Valentino Bompiani, who was working on a similar project himself. Bompiani was planning a new women's weekly to be called *Essere bella* [*Being Beautiful*], aimed at the 'donna italiana di media condizione' [Italian middle-class women] and to be sold

16 *Sovrana. Rivista mensile di vita scelta*, 1, February 1927, p. 2, also quoted in [Anon.], 'Sovrana', in *Bibliografia dei periodici femminili*, ed. by Carrarini and Giordano, pp. 361–65 (p. 361) (emphasis mine).

17 Arnoldo Mondadori, 'Voi non dovete dire', *Grazia*, 10 November 1938, p. 3 (emphasis mine).

for fifty cents.[18] The planned layout for this new periodical sought to avoid large illustrations or photomontages, aiming instead for a neat, elegant organisation of columns and few, essential illustrations. Mondadori's and Bompiani's differing views on the proposed style of the weekly ended their collaboration, so Mondadori launched his new *rotocalco*, *Grazia*, in line with his own project of an Italian magazine shaped on the successful models offered by foreign periodicals. Although when it was finally launched *Grazia* did not replicate *Marie-Claire*, the two publications shared similar features and, more importantly, adopted a similar approach to their readership. In the first issue of *Marie-Claire*, launched in March 1937, the editorial stated: 'Vous êtes, toutes, un peu des *Marie-Claire*, ce journal a été conçu pour vous' [You are all a little like *Marie-Claire*, this magazine has been designed for you], highlighting that women – the readers – were its main focus.[19] *Grazia* had the same purpose: to put women at the centre; to provide them with useful tips and guidance; to entertain them; to inform them; and to reflect their concerns – but always with them as the point of reference.

The title of the two magazines, both common names, is also revealing of the intention of the periodicals to be accessible and create a connection with the reader. Between 1937 and 1944, when its publication was also halted because of the war, the main points of focus in *Marie-Claire* were fashion, beauty, housekeeping, cooking, marriage and motherhood, with the explicit aim to '[d]onner à la femme française, en un seul journal, chaque semaine, tout ce qui peut l'intéresser ou lui être utile' [[g]ive French women, in a single journal, every week, everything that might interest or be useful to them].[20] The content and aim were not the only features *Marie-Claire* and *Grazia* had in common. Looking at the covers, important similarities can be noted also at the level of format and design. The covers of both magazines featured a close-up portrait of an elegant woman, with the title of the magazine at the top of the page (Fig. 29). The covers looked neat and elegant, with the date and price on the bottom-right side in both cases.[21]

18 Landi, 'I primi passi di "Grazia"', p. 241.

19 [Anon.], 'Ce que Marie-Claire vous apporte', *Marie-Claire*, 5 March 1937, p. 5.

20 [Anon.], 'Ce que Marie-Claire vous apporte', p. 5.

21 The cover of *Grazia* changed in June 1939, when the illustrations in colour by Gino Boccasile featured in the early issues (Fig. 28) were replaced by elegant photographs of women in colour (generally a close-up portrait).



Figure 29 Front cover of *Grazia,* 5 September 1940. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia,* Reworld Media Italia.

A similar layout can also be found in other French women's magazines, such as *Confidences* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1938–86) and *Votre Bonheur* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1938–39), which also featured close-up portraits of women on their covers, although the women appeared more domesticated and less glamorous than those in *Marie-Claire* and *Grazia*.

The European women's magazines of the second half of the 1930s not only influenced and shaped one another, but were, like other sectors of the popular press, influenced in turn by American women's magazines. *Confidences*, for example, was created on the model of the American confession-magazine *True Story* (New York: True Renditions, 1919–), whereas *Marie-Claire*, according to Nicholas Hewitt, 'presented […] a format which was largely borrowed from American women's magazine journalism', the distinctive feature of which was the suggestion of women as 'young and attractive, half-way between the housewife and the liberated woman'.[22] Both *Marie-Claire* and *Grazia* boasted varied content that included serialised fiction, recipes and entertainment, all typical features found in the American popular women's press. Looking at the covers of American magazines such as *Vogue* (New York: Turnure, 1892–1909; then Condé Nast, 1909–), or the *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1937 and 1938, the similarities with *Grazia* and *Marie-Claire* are striking.[23] Covers consist of a close-up or medium-close-up portrait of women dressed *à la mode* and looking straight at the camera, the focus on their style, and the title of the magazine at the top in elegant characters.

Italian and French magazines for women were not unique in Europe. British and German magazines also shared the same structure and included articles on lifestyle, fashion, cookery, childcare, beauty and fashion. British magazines such as *Woman's Own* (London: IPC Magazines Ltd, now Future Plc, 1932–) and the British edition of *Good Housekeeping* (London: National Magazine, 1922–), for example, were aimed at middle and educated working-class women and offered advice on housekeeping that followed the modern idea of

22 Nicholas Hewitt, 'The Birth of the Glossy Magazines: The Case of *Paris-Match*', in *France and the Mass Media*, ed. by Brian Rigby and Nicholas Hewitt, Warwick Studies in the European Humanities (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), pp. 111–28 (p. 112). On European and American women's magazines, see also Kate Nelson Best, *The History of Fashion Journalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

23 On American women's periodicals see *Women's Periodicals in the United States: Consumer Magazines*, ed. by Kathleen L. Endres and Therese L. Lueck, Historical Guides to the World's Periodicals and Newspapers (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995), esp. Kathleen L. Endres, 'Ladies' Home Journal', pp. 172–80, particularly pp. 172–75; Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792–1995*, Contributions in Women's Studies, 125 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998); and Nancy A. Walker, *Shaping Our Mothers' World: American Women's Magazines*, Studies in Popular Culture (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

a scientific approach to domestic life.[24] A more glamorous edge was instead offered by the German women's magazines of the 1930s, such as *Die Dame* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1912–43) and *Blatt der Hausfrau* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1886–1944; then *Brigitte*, Hamburg: Gruner + Jahr, 1949–), which matched the modern, Hollywood-inspired model of womanhood in spite of efforts by the Nazi regime to disseminate a model of woman focused on child-bearing and -rearing. In other words, *Die Dame* and *Brigitte* offered their readers:

> Luxusgeschöpfchen und Flapper […], die bonbonknabbernd auf der Couch liegen, Launen haben wie die schlimmste der Filmdiven, nebensächlichste Dinge zu Alternativfragen machen, mit freudschen Komplexen behaftet sind, suffragettenhafte Töne anschlagen – und alles andere sind als die vielen tüchtigen, liebenswürdigen und zuverlässigen Frauen und Mädchen, mit denen wir es bei unseren Gattinnen und Müttern, bei unseren Arbeitskameraden [*sic*] und Mitarbeiterinnen zu tun haben, und die wir hochachten und lieben.[25]
>
> [luxury creatures and flappers who lie on the couch nibbling sweets, have whims like the worst of film divas, turn the most trivial matters into dilemmas, are riddled with Freudian complexes, adopt a suffragette tone – and are nothing like the many capable, lovable and reliable women and girls we encounter as our wives and mothers, our colleagues and co-workers and whom we deeply respect and love.]

24 On British women's magazines see Jill Greenfield and Chris Reid, 'Women's Magazines and the Commercial Orchestration of Femininity in the 1930s: Evidence from *Woman's Own*', *Media History*, 4 (1998), 161–74; Fiona Hackney, '"Women are News": British Women's Magazines 1919–1939', in *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880–1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms*, ed. by Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 114–33; and Alice Wood, 'Modernism and the Middlebrow in British Magazines, 1916–1930', in *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890–1945*, ed. by Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter, DQR Studies in Literature, 62 (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), pp. 39–59.

25 *Der Zeitschriften-Verleger*, 12 June 1935, quoted in Norbert Frei and Johannes Schmitz, *Journalismus im Dritten Reich*, Beck'sche Reihe, 376 (Munich: Beck, 1989), p. 71 (no reference given to the original source); also partially translated by Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 325. On German women's magazines see Sylvia Lott-Almstadt, *Brigitte 1886–1986. Die ersten hundert Jahre. Chronik einer Frauenzeitschrift* (Hamburg: Gruner + Jahr, 1986); Nina Sylvester, 'Before Cosmopolitan', *Journalism Studies*, 8 (2007) 550–54; Mila Ganeva, *Women in Weimar Fashion: Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918–1933*, Screen Cultures: German Film and the Visual, 2 (New York: Camden House, 2008).

On the whole, European women's magazines of the 1930s, as much as their American equivalent, offered their readership a similar set of features and were shaped as guides to an efficient, stylish domestic life to meet the modern woman's demands and desires. Publications such as *Marie-Claire* and *Grazia*, then, seemed to offer the glamour of fashion periodicals but at the affordable price of popular magazines, establishing a model of the woman's weekly which would endure after the war and indeed up to the present day. *Grazia* was part of a Europe-wide phenomenon that reflected foreign models in both content and design, but adapted these foreign models to Italian culture, a process of Italianisation of American and French culture that resulted in a hybrid product.

After June 1939 the cover photos for *Grazia* were created by Federico Patellani, who signed only with his surname but no other information. As with *Omnibus*, there is no detailed information on the *Grazia* collaborators; their articles are often unsigned, signed with a pseudonym, or only with the author's initials. However, from a systematic analysis of *Grazia* it is possible to trace some of the key regular or recurrent contributors. Giorgio Scerbanenco and Wanda Bontà are two who, without a doubt, contributed to the magazine from the first to the last known issue (November 1938 to September 1943).[26] They both signed their stories and novels with their real names, but in their regular columns use pseudonyms: Luciano and Clementina respectively.[27] The fashion sections also had regular contributors whose identity is known, such as Brunetta (Bruna Mateldi), (Gino) Boccasile and Emma Calderini, while the artist Alberto Bianchi signed portraits of the readers' children. The graphologist Giovanni Vian, theatre critic Mario Sanvito and columnist Cesare Zavattini (who addressed himself to mothers) were other regulars. Apart from authors of short stories or novels appearing in the magazine – such as Elisa Trapani, Ita Baraldi, Bruno Corra, Adriano Baracco, Annamaria Tedeschi, Claudio Del Mare, Lydia Capece, Carola Prosperi, Raul Radice and Pina Ballario – all the other regular contributors signed only with their first name or initials: Paola, Laura and Ley (fashion

26 Mondadori resumed the publication of *Grazia* in 1945 with an *Almanacco*.

27 For example, Wanda Bontà's novel *L'ombra sul fiore* [*The Shadow on the Flower*] appeared in instalments from issue 87 on 11 July 1927 to issue 121 on 20 January 1941. It is interesting to note that, while Clementina's identity was revealed (see Wanda Bontà, 'Come la pensa Clementina', *Grazia*, 4 March 1943, p. 9), Luciano's remained hidden. It is possible to trace his identity back to Giorgio Scerbanenco thanks to the publication of 'Il romanzo di Luciano', which in *Grazia* appeared as 'Infedeli innamorati' from 13 August 1942.

illustrators); Pupa (cooking column); Vitruvio (interior design); Elisa (etiquette); Vida (general advice); and O. N. (book reviews). From 1940 onwards new regular columnists appeared, such as Piera Ruffini, Giupa, Puntaspilli and Luigi – the latter with a column on men's thoughts. The list of occasional contributors would be very long, but it is noticeable how many articles were simply signed with a female name like Pamela, Barbara, Donata, or Claudia, as if highlighting that *Grazia* was a place where any woman could share thoughts and advice and find a friendly voice. In 1942 another pseudonym appeared, 'la massaia rurale' [the rural housewife], which can be seen as an attempt made by Mondadori to reach country women and thus expand the readership.[28] Rural women were part of the readership excluded by traditional women's magazines, which, as already mentioned, targeted mainly the upper classes, or at best the urban middle class. This was due mainly to the high illiteracy rate among country women, which lowered the percentage of readers from the rural class, but also to the traditional, although declining, isolation of rural communities. The attempt to reach country women with articles written specifically for them and, allegedly, by one of them points to Mondadori's aim of making *Grazia* a magazine of interest for all Italian women in order to reach a mass readership.

From the first issue in November 1938 the general structure and content of the *rotocalco* remained consistent. The only changes were minor and concerned the day of distribution, the price and the style of the contents page. Initially *Grazia* appeared on news-stands on Saturday, changing to Thursday in 1939. The price increased from eighty cents in 1938 to two lire in 1942.[29] The number of pages also changed, from thirty-two in 1938 up to fifty-two in June 1941, dropping again from 21 August 1941 onwards 'in ottemperanza al Decreto Ministeriale per la disciplina del consumo della carta' [in compliance with the Ministerial Decree for the regulation of paper

28 See, e.g., La massaia rurale, 'Amare la campagna: la vendemmia', *Grazia*, 3 September 1942, p. 17. On Italian rural women, see Perry Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali* (London: Routledge, 2002).

29 The prices in Euros, compared to the value of the currency calculated on the latest coefficients released by Istat in 2024, would be €0.87 in 1938 and €1.34 in 1942. To put things into perspective, based on the data provided by Istat on average salaries in 1938 and 2024, considering the lowest civil servant's salary in 1938 and factoring in purchasing power and inflation, that would amount to around €3.30.

consumption].[30] The trend in the number of pages and price can be examined by taking the first issue of each year as a representative sample:

- November 1938: 31 pages, 80 cents
- January 1939: 36 pages, 80 cents
- January 1940: 28 pages, 1 lira
- January 1941: 36 pages, 1.20 lire
- January 1942: 44 pages, 2 lire
- January 1943: 36 pages, 2 lire

The change in price, number of pages and layout did not affect the frequency of publication, which remained weekly throughout the six years, in spite of the war and the difficulties it caused to the press industry in terms of paper supplies, distribution and sales.

Although *Grazia* was conceived and produced as an innovative magazine and distanced itself from traditional periodicals in price, layout, content and intended readership, in the 1930s it was not the only women's *rotocalco* available to middle-class women. In 1933 *Eva* and *Lei* were launched by Vitagliano and Rizzoli respectively, whereas in 1937 the publisher Società Anonima Milanese distributed *Gioia!*. These weeklies had many similarities, such as serialised romance novels and short stories, fashion illustrations and advice columns. Even a graphologist column – where readers sent in their letters to have their handwriting analysed and their character traits inferred – was a common feature of *Grazia*, *Lei* and *Gioia!*, although the latter asked to be paid for the psychological profile of its readers. The most significant innovation introduced by the new formula of the illustrated weekly for women was the advice column, a feature common to all these publications and one which created intimacy and loyalty between the readers and the magazine. A column focused on a man's point of view was another common trait. However, whereas in *Lei* and *Gioia!* the column was structured as an advice column, with a male writer answering the female readers' letters, in *Grazia* it read like a journal through which readers could learn more about the thoughts of men. Structured like a personal diary, the column was first published on 6 August 1942 under the title 'Diario di un uomo che possono leggere anche le donne' [Diary of a man that women can read too] and simply signed by Luigi, whose real identity it has not been possible to uncover.

30 *Grazia*, 21 August 1941, p. 4. The text appears framed next to the index; no author is given. See Decreto Ministeriale 16 July 1941, 'Disciplina della produzione e del consumo della carta', in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 21 July 1941, pp. 2894–95.

Eva and *Lei* published news and features on the Italian royal family as well as Mussolini's family members, while *Gioia!* had a Catholic influence and almost no interest in fashion. *Grazia* distinguished itself by the absence of such news features; and its fashion columns were more practical than those in *Eva* and *Lei* and represented more of a central aspect for the magazine. Other elements that differentiated *Grazia* from other women's weeklies were its friendly, informal language and the structure of the articles; it was not only the message delivered or the layout that made this periodical original, but also its informal approach to the readership. The magazine was organised so that it could be read as a conversation between two friends: *Grazia* and the reader. These elements offer more insights into the readership targeted, confirming the aim of Mondadori to reach a wide group of women across social classes and without any specific connotation, a reflection of the multifaceted models of femininity proposed by the magazine. It has been argued that *Grazia* was a truly innovative product the content of which was not influenced by Fascist ideology. According to this view, it was a magazine that distanced itself from the Fascist regime, suggesting models closer to a modern woman than to the traditional wife and mother.[31] Other studies, however, suggest that *Grazia* was aligned with Fascist precepts, publishing columns that proposed a traditional model of femininity to the detriment of modern models.[32] An in-depth analysis of *Grazia* demonstrates that it was indeed steeped in Fascist rhetoric and that if any kind of implicit resistance was present, it was the result of editorial strategies aimed at selling as many copies as possible.

Grazia was a commercial product and, as such, it responded to the law of markets. Popular magazines reflected societal habits, challenges and changes and by so doing promoted such changes, acting as a force that contributed to the modernisation of society. Therefore, although one could see in the articles dedicated to women in the workforce a proof of *Grazia*'s freedom from any ideological influence, these pieces are more a reflection of the transformations happening in Italian society and of commercial strategies aimed at selling as many copies as possible than a sign of any Fascist ideological belief. Further confirmation is found in the presence of such articles in other popular *rotocalchi* such as *Eva*, *Lei* and *Gioia!*, which engaged in discussions with their readers on women in the workforce, suggesting this was an unavoidable topic for magazines targeting mainly urban, middle-class women. Furthermore, considering the number of women in the workforce in the 1930s, the presence of

31 See Landi, 'I primi passi di "Grazia"'.

32 Salvatici, 'Il rotocalco femminile', pp. 124–25.

articles that pay attention to such a large section of the readership can be explained in terms of marketing: a *rotocalco* that aimed to reach a wide readership could not avoid taking working women into account.[33] At the same time, however, the Fascist ideal model of a woman emerges throughout the magazine with articles on the household, motherhood and traditional women's crafts such as knitting and sewing. For this reason it is also inaccurate to describe *Grazia* as a magazine that had nothing to do with the Fascist regime. This is especially true if we look at articles dedicated to the household. An entire section was devoted to marriage, with the image of a wife as submissive and focused on her husband and children, perfectly matching the Fascist ideal of the angel of the hearth, a model of femininity that began and ended in the household.[34]

As a modern magazine which also wanted to entertain the readers, *Grazia* privileged frivolous topics such as fashion, beauty and festive events, so that it would be equally inaccurate to define it as a Fascist publication. Put differently, the image of women presented by *Grazia* was consistent with the Fascist ideal but not limited to it. The reason for the editorial decision to propose a modern model of woman as well seems to lie in the publishing market, confirming the complex process in the production of popular periodicals during the Fascist era, which cannot be reduced to a merely political or ideological aspect but is, rather, a common feature of the development of the popular press in this period. The spread of *rotocalchi* provided conflicting images of women, including the official and traditional model of mother and wife, and at the same time promoted new habits that reflected and contributed to disseminating modern feminine models, often

33 According to the censuses of 1931 and 1936, 2.4 million and 2.8 million women respectively were recorded as employed in non-agricultural sectors, while 1.5 million and 2.5 were recorded as economically active in agriculture in 1931 and 1936 respectively (Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy*, p. 75; de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, pp. 166–200).

34 The *angelo del focolare* [angel of the hearth] coincides with the description of womanhood given by Fascist philosopher and ideologue Giovanni Gentile: '[L]a donna fu collocata accanto al focolare. […] E in casa resta la donna a cui s'inchina l'uomo moderno, […] poiché essa sta sempre lì […] centro di tutta la vita morale nel suo nucleo primordiale, che si forma dentro le pareti domestiche' [[T]he woman was placed next to the hearth. […] And in the home stays the woman to whom modern man bows […] for she is always there, […] the centre of all moral life in its primordial core, formed within the walls of the home] (Giovanni Gentile, 'La donna nella coscienza moderna', in *La donna e il fanciullo. Due conferenze* (Firenze, Sansoni: 1934), pp. 1–28 (p. 12)).

coming from the United States. Women were attracted by the new femininity and standards of beauty represented by Hollywood stars, a fascination that the popular press, in Italy as much as in other European countries, was keen to offer to its readership in order to sell more copies of their publications.[35] Italian women's periodicals of the time represented a point of intersection between these different models. *Grazia* in particular confirms the complexity of this situation, which reflected both the inner contradictions of the Fascist policies (which were pushing women back into the house and, at the same time, promoting their political involvement) and the conflict between traditional values and the new, modern models of femininity.

The First Issue of *Grazia*: 10 November 1938

The distinctive features and complexity of *Grazia* are evident right from its very first issue. Like *Marie-Claire*, *Grazia* presented itself as a friend to whom every woman could talk:

> Questa rivista – che continua con nuovi propositi la tradizione di un'altra rivista alla quale si sostituisce – deve essere per voi, veramente 'un'amica al vostro fianco'. Voi non siete una nostra lettrice: siete una nostra amica. Noi ci rivolgiamo a voi per esservi amicalmente d'aiuto nelle contingenze più varie della vita: dal consiglio per un pranzo in quattro con trenta lire, alla risposta ad una mamma che aspetta il primo bimbo; dalla favola di Biancaneve per il vostro bambino, al modo come si rimoderna un abito. E voi rivolgetevi a noi.[36]
>
> [This magazine – that continues with new purposes the tradition of another magazine that it replaces – must be for you, truly 'a friend by your side'. You are not our reader: you are our friend. We turn to you to be amicably helpful in life's most varied contingencies: from advice for a meal for four on thirty lira to an answer to a mother expecting her first baby; from a Snow-White fairy tale for your child to how to remodel a dress. And you can turn to us.]

In line with this statement *Grazia* was shaped like a guide to a happier life. Home economics, fitness, personal advice and beauty tips were the core ingredients in a magazine dedicated to the new

35 Even in Nazi Germany the Hollywood model of beauty resisted attacks by the regime and remained a constant feature of German popular women's magazines (Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power, 1933–1939: How the Nazis Won Over the Hearts and Minds of a Nation* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 521–24).

36 [Anon.], 'Un'amica al vostro fianco', *Grazia*, 10 November 1938, p. 4.

Italian woman of the 1930s, struggling with the economic crisis and the campaign for economic self-sufficiency.

The table of contents, published on page 4 (Fig. 30), presents the columns of *Grazia* divided into sections along a series of main



Figure 30 Table of Contents from the first issue of *Grazia*, 10 November 1938. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia.

topics. In the first issue there are eight sections in total. The first is a section on happiness, 'Per essere felice' [To Be Happy], which includes columns such as 'Vivere in due' [Living As a Couple] about married life; 'Essere donna' [Being a Woman] about womanhood; and 'Grazia vi scrive' [Grazia Writes to You], one of the most typical and successful columns, in which *Grazia* replies to readers' letters. The second section, 'Per essere eleganti' [To Be Elegant], is dedicated to fashion and consists of three articles explaining how to make hats, how to give an old dress a modern twist and how to make a pair of gloves. Each article provides practical guidance and tips on homemade fashion and includes illustrations and pictures, sewing models and advice on style. The third, 'Per vivere bene in casa' [To Live Well at Home], gives advice on housekeeping and includes two articles. The first suggests a menu for supper for four people without spending too much, while the second explains how to create one's own lampshades for home décor. Both articles address home economics while also showing how to impress guests with little money. The fourth section, 'Per essere bella' [To Be Beautiful], is one of the shortest sections in this issue with only one article about beauty, which suggests techniques for staying beautiful in spite of having a cold. The fifth section is about children and includes a regular weekly column written by Zavattini, 'I vostri bambini vi guardano' [Your Children Look at You], in which mothers will find 'un pensiero, un'immagine, riguardante i rapporti tra voi e i bambini' [a thought, an image, concerning the relationship between you and your children]. Readers are invited to contribute to the creation of the section, as the page will be edited 'con il vostro aiuto, lettrici, poiché da voi ci aspettiamo domande, suggerimenti, notizie o quant'altro possa contribuire a illuminarci reciprocamente su questo problema' [with your help, readers, as we await from you questions, suggestions, news, or anything else that can help us to enlighten one another on this issue].[37] Consistent with the attention paid to sports by Mussolini's ideological project, as well as by film stars, the sixth section is devoted to fitness. In 'Per essere sana' [To Be Healthy] one article explains how, in order to be beautiful, women needed to exercise daily, because make-up is not enough. A series of pictures shows different training routines with detailed explanation in the captions, encouraging women to exercise at

37 Cesare Zavattini, 'I vostri bambini vi guardano', *Grazia*, 10 November 1938, p. 20.

home.[38] The seventh section is dedicated to entertainment, 'Per essere lieta' [To Be Happy], which publishes the first chapter of a novel by Raul Radice, 'Tre sorelle' [Three Sisters]. At the end of the issue two pages are dedicated to current events but are not listed in the table of contents. The section 'In questi sette giorni' [In These Seven Days] informs readers about the latest cultural events, film screenings, book releases and the theatre in order to help them to live their lives to the full: '[per] non rinchiudersi solo nel nostro angusto ed egoistico mondo, nei nostri minimi interessi, ecco un altro importante segreto per vivere interamente la propria vita' [[so as] not to lock ourselves up only in our own narrow, selfish world, in our own minimal interests, here is another important secret to living one's life to the full].[39]

Looking at the contents of the first issue of *Grazia*, it is evident that the magazine sought to cover a wide range of topics and to help women to cope better with everyday life, consistent with the pattern of women's popular periodicals established in Europe and the United States in the 1930s. It is also possible to see how *Grazia* distanced itself from *Sovrana*, targeting middle- and lower-middle-class readers, as demonstrated by articles on how to make the most out of a small income. Such techniques, used by the magazine to appeal to women from different backgrounds, emerge even more clearly in the informal approach used in the columns 'Per essere donna' and 'Vivere in due', both exemplifying the strategies the magazine employed to reach out to the everyday woman.

The Everyday Woman

Next to the statement by the magazine of its aims, a short piece simply signed 'Luciano' seemed to be directed at the reader herself. It was the first article in the regular column 'Essere donna' and reads like an informal letter written to a friend. Two aspects of this piece make it particularly noteworthy. First, it describes a woman with whom every female reader could identify, as it refers to leisure activities, fashion, lifestyle and jobs to which any young lady, whether an upper- or middle-class woman, a typist, maid, or housewife, could relate. The direct, informal language used by Luciano suggests an

38 As already mentioned in Chapter 3, a similar feature can be found in *Vu*. *Marie-Claire* also featured articles explaining simple gymnastic exercises to do at home, with pictures and illustrations (*Marie-Claire*, 31 December 1937, p. 39).

39 [Anon.], 'In questi sette giorni', *Grazia*, 10 November 1938, pp. 18–19.

intimate knowledge of what being a woman meant and appealed to readers with statements exalting womanhood. Second, the piece draws on the rhetoric of the regime, revealing the influence of Fascist ideology in *Grazia*, as shown by two allusions to the role of women which match the Fascist ideal. In the first Luciano refers to women's behaviour during the war: 'Mi hai seguito […] fino all'orlo della trincea: volevi morire per la patria, e per me. Io ti ho detto "Abbi fede". E tu sei tornata indietro, forte e obbediente, col tuo bambino in collo' [You followed me […] to the edge of the trench: you wanted to die for the Motherland, and for me. I said to you, 'Have faith'. And you went back, strong and obedient, with your child in your arms].[40] The second addresses a woman's general place in society:

> Vorrei domandarti se ti è più dolce essere moglie o essere madre: tu mi risponderesti che ti è dolce esser donna, che nel tuo dovere sta il tuo amore, e che misuri l'immenso compito affidato dalla patria al tuo cuore e alla tua volontà.[41]
>
> [I would like to ask you whether it is sweeter for you to be a wife or to be a mother: you would answer that it is sweet for you to be a woman, that in your duty lies your love, and that you measure the immense task entrusted by the Motherland to your heart and will.]

In both cases, being a woman means being an obedient wife and dutiful mother devoted to the Motherland. Luciano's words echo a woman's identity as established by Fascist philosopher and ideologue Giovanni Gentile, that of 'la donna che è del marito, ed è quel che è in quanto è di lui; ecco la donna a realizzare in quella di lui la sua propria individualità' [the woman who is her husband's, and she is that insofar as she is his; here the woman is to realise her own individuality in his]. They also echo Gentile's definition of her nature as that of a mother before anything else:

> La donna idealmente è madre prima di esser tale naturalmente. […] Madre per i figli, per i Fratelli, per gl'infermi, per i piccoli […], per tutti che possano beneficiare del suo amore e attingere a quella sua innata, originaria, essenziale maternità.[42]
>
> [A woman is a mother ideally before being a mother naturally. […] A mother for the children, for the Brothers, for the sick, for the little ones […], for all who can benefit from her love and draw on her inherent, original, essential motherhood.]

40 Luciano, 'Essere Donna', *Grazia*, 10 November 1938, p. 5.

41 Luciano, 'Essere Donna', *Grazia*, 10 November 1938, p. 5.

42 Gentile, 'La donna nella coscienza moderna', pp. 18, 24.

In his articles Luciano, whose real identity was not specified in the magazine but can be traced back to Giorgio Scerbanenco, clearly expresses aspects of Fascist morality and exalted traditional values, indicating how a woman should behave in order to be properly feminine and appreciated. The rigidly gendered ideology and virility of Fascist rhetoric emerge clearly from both statements: the man is the one who takes action, while the woman must obey and take care of children. The reference to a woman's duty towards the Motherland is another clear, strong indicator of Fascist language. These details confirm that the magazine cannot be seen as separate from its contemporary society and Mussolini's ruling system, since from the start it embraced the traditional roles for women proposed by the predominant culture.

At the same time, however, some aspects of a modern and, in some respects, non-traditional approach to women's lives also appear in 'Essere donna'. In January 1940, for example, writing about the ending of the festive season, Luciano refers to his imaginary reader as a woman in the workforce: 'Sei pronta ad esser felice anche per la minima cosa; […] ad accogliere con un sorriso sincero, le giornate di lavoro, il tram che ti porta in ufficio' [You are ready to be happy about even the slightest thing; […] to welcome the work day with a sincere smile, the streetcar that takes you to the office].[43] In the next issue he writes:

> Sei certamente una piccola impiegata perduta tra i cento impiegati di un grande ufficio. Qualche domenica vai a sciare […]. Sabato sera, nel rifugio, avrete fatto un po' di festa, avrete suonato, avrete tentato di ballare nei pochi centimetri quadrati liberi, […]. Poi ecco il lunedì, […]. Aria burrascosa in ufficio […]. Ti vedo alle due, in tram, […] indossi il vecchio abito da lavoro, […] che ora si mostra per quello che veramente è, una povera cosa di poco prezzo. Ti vedo pensare che una lunga settimana di giornate simili ti attende; una settimana senza cinema, perché bisogna fare economia, senza divertimenti.[44]
>
> [You are certainly a little employee lost among a hundred employees in a big office. Some Sundays you go skiing […]. On Saturday night, in the lodge, you were partying, you were playing, you were trying to dance in the few free square inches, […]. Then here comes Monday […]. Stormy air in the office, […]. I see you at two o'clock, in the streetcar, […] you are wearing the old work dress, […] which now shows itself for what it really is, a poor cheap thing. I see you thinking that a long week of similar days awaits you; a week with no films, because you have to economise, no entertainment.]

43 Luciano, 'Dopo le feste', 'Essere donna', *Grazia*, 4 January 1940, p. 7.

44 Luciano, 'Attendere la felicità', 'Essere donna', *Grazia*, 11 January 1940, p. 7.

The woman emerging from Luciano's piece is a young unmarried employee who enjoys modern leisure-time activities such as skiing, dancing and going to the cinema; a woman who cares about fashion and her appearance – Luciano points to 'quel paltoncino rossiccio che faceva un po' di figura quand'era nuovo, e che ora si mostra per quello che veramente è' [that reddish little overcoat that made a bit of a splash when it was new and now shows itself for what it really is] – and has to give up entertaining activities to save money.[45] Having to economise on clothing or leisure time activities was a reality affecting many middle-class women, particularly after the start of the war, when a woman's salary became an important, if not the only, source of income for a family. This is an aspect of Italian women's life on which Luciano reflects in 'Essere donna' on 30 January 1941:

> [Q]uesta ragazza non era certamente una donna di servizio. […] [E]ra forse una che non aveva mai pensato di fare la donna di servizio. Si è trovata costretta a farla, e fa il suo dovere. […] Veste male, non ha un soldo di cipria sul volto. […] [H]a una scrittura elegante, morbida, senza incertezze. Molte signore che io conosco hanno assai meno confidenza con la penna.[46]
>
> [[T]his girl was certainly not a maid. […] [S]he was perhaps one who had never thought of being a maid. She found herself compelled to do it, and she does her duty. […] She dresses badly, she does not have a penny's worth of powder on her face. […] [S]he has elegant, soft handwriting, without uncertainty. Many ladies I know have far less confidence with the pen.]

Either due to the need to support the family financially, or to the lack of skilled jobs, the article portrays a woman who has had to take a humble job despite having an education and, possibly, upper-middle class origins. In 'Essere donna', Luciano mirrors Italian society of the time, echoing Fascist rhetoric but also acknowledging various modern roles and aspects of women, who often had to contribute to the family income, liked modern leisure activities and cared about their looks.

As mentioned earlier, the informal style of the articles, written as if directed specifically at the person reading them, is another of the principal features that made *Grazia* stand out from other magazines and make it such a convincing case study. Informal language had the effect of making it possible for every woman, from whichever

45 Luciano, 'Attendere la felicità', p. 7.

46 Luciano, 'La domestica', 'Essere donna', *Grazia*, 30 January 1941, p. 6.

social class, to feel connected with the magazine. Luciano's style is a compelling example of this informality:

> Quello che hai letto qualche volta nelle novelle, è capitato proprio a te. […] Il tuo incontro col romanzo non sarebbe mai avvenuto. Non puoi e non devi accettare appuntamenti dal primo sconosciuto che ti telefona. Secoli di geloso riserbo femminile pesano sulle tue spalle e ti rendono fiera come sei. […] È un'altra classe la tua, dove non si ascoltano mai le voci ignote, anche se si desidera tanto ascoltarle.[47]
>
> [What you sometimes read in the novellas happened to you. […] Your encounter with the novel would never happen. You cannot and should not accept dates from the first stranger who calls you. Centuries of jealous female discretion weigh on your shoulders and make you as proud as you are. […] Yours is a different class, in which you never listen to unknown voices, even though you long to hear them.]

Luciano addresses the woman using the informal form 'tu' and talks to her as if he knew her intimately: he hints at the woman's romantic view of love encouraged by the novels she reads; and his response delineates a disillusioned woman whom he urges to respond with pride and discretion. It is also worth highlighting Luciano's mention of romantic novels, which suggests the popularity of the genre among women in those years.[48]

Luciano's column exemplifies the patronising tone of Fascist rhetoric, minimising women's role in society and the significance of their feelings and aspirations. This rhetoric is, however, used as an expression of the intimacy sought by *Grazia* with its readers, as well as the dissemination of the Fascist idea – and goal – of motherhood as the scope of a woman's life:

> Care lettrici, […] Mariuccia mi dà del tu, e questo va molto bene, mi saluta 'ciao Luciano' e anche questo va bene perché non mi piacciono i formalismi, ma mi scrive cose che vanno malissimo. […] Io dirò invece a Mariuccia che vi sono moltissime altre donne che hanno provato le sue stesse delusioni, e anche maggiori, eppure continuano a credere nella vita. […] Guarda, Mariuccia, come le madri credono nei loro figli, come sono certe del loro luminoso avvenire, del loro felice destino, anche quando tutto sembra contrario.[49]

47 Luciano, 'Desiderio di Poesia', 'Essere donna', *Grazia*, 19 December 1939, p. 5.

48 Confirmation of the popularity of women's romantic literature can be found in the presence of such a genre in women's weeklies and in the publication by Salani of the book series 'Romanzi della Rosa' from the late 1920s, from which the Italian definition of the genre ('rosa' [rose/pink]) could be derived.

49 Luciano, 'Essere donna', *Grazia*, 1 January 1942, p. 14.

> [Dear readers, […] Mariuccia uses the [informal] 'tu' and that is very good, she greets me with 'hi Luciano' and that is also good because I do not like formality, but she writes to me things that are very bad. […] I will instead tell Mariuccia that there are many other women who have experienced the same disappointments as her, and even greater, and yet they continue to believe in life. […] Look, Mariuccia, how mothers believe in their children, how certain they are of their bright future, of their happy destiny, even when everything seems contrary.]

Comforting a woman who wrote him a letter crying about her unhappiness, Luciano takes the figure of mothers as an example of strength and resilience (although these characteristics only emerge for the sake of their children and husbands) and talks to the readers as if they were having a conversation, sharing intimate thoughts and fears. 'Essere donna' illustrates the use of a friendly voice in *Grazia* that seeks to help women to live a happier life, often one consistent with the morals and values of the Fascist regime, and guides and supports them in difficult times. At the same time, its informal content and acknowledgement of modern aspirations reflect the readers' reality – and hence the demands of the market – that often diverged from the ideal 'new woman'. While not all columns adopted Fascist ideology and rhetoric, the alignment with the ruling power is visible not only in 'Essere donna', but also in other features that aim to guide Italian women to a happy life, like 'Vivere in due', which does so throughout the years of its publication (1938–43).

The Good Wife: 'Vivere in due'

Signed by Clementina, pseudonym of Wanda Bontà, the column 'Vivere in due' is among the most original features that distinguished *Grazia* from other women's weeklies. It is also one of the columns which, more than any other, reads like an intimate chat with a friend, since it is structured as both a wife's journal and a woman-to-woman conversation. In 'Vivere in due' Clementina describes ordinary moments in her married life with Paolo, their everyday problems and joys. In the first issue Clementina introduces her little quarrels with Paolo, using an informal writing style: 'È naturale quindi, che si cerchi di stare un po' più comodi, ognuno a modo suo; lui pretende di avere un pettine pulito ed io una salvietta senza peli di barba' [It is natural, then, that we try to be a little more comfortable, each in his or her own way; he demands to have a clean comb and I a

towel without beard hairs].[50] From the start Clementina shortens the distance to the readers by sharing a private moment from her life with Paolo, a little argument about the annoying habits of the other half to which every couple can relate. In honest, colloquial language, Clementina not only shares details of her married life but, drawing on her own experience, she also gives advice to the reader on how to find happiness in a marriage. Overall, the column delivers the subtle message that the role of a woman is that of a good wife and mother, centred on the well-being of her husband and children: the ideal Fascist woman.

'Vivere in due' was published from 10 November 1938 onwards as a regular column, with very few exceptions (e.g., 17 September 1942 and 17 June 1943). Between 1938 and 1943 very few changes occurred to the column and these did not affect the message delivered or the focus, which remained on the theme of how to be a good wife. The articles on Clementina and Paolo's family life always followed the same pattern: they began with a problem Clementina did not know how to deal with; followed by details about the development of the problem and its impact on the relationship between husband and wife; and finally ended with a positive outcome showing how a wife's effort and sacrifice could bring happiness to the whole family.

On 6 November 1942 the column began to appear with the new title, 'La pagina di Clementina' [Clementina's Page], marking a change in format and reflecting the introduction of articles in which, leaving out her own private life, the author gives detailed accounts of conversations with a friend. In these articles, by giving advice to her friend Clementina comments on different situations that might affect a woman's life, such as her love life or problems in the workplace. These typically start with a call or a meeting with a friend who confides her distress and end with Clementina analysing the situation and providing a solution applicable to any woman experiencing a similar problem. With the exception of the issue published on 4 March 1943, in which two letters written by a wife and a husband respectively replaced Clementina's article, 'Vivere in due' remained consistent throughout the Fascist years of *Grazia*.

Undoubtedly, the woman evoked in 'Vivere in due' conformed to the Fascist ideal of a compassionate angel of the hearth focussed on her husband's needs, but, more importantly, the column connected with readers, expressing the everyday Italian woman's intimate

50 Clementina, 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 10 November 1938, p. 9.

anxieties. An example of this is Clementina's worries regarding the war in her account at Christmas 1940:

> Io non so se il vostro Natale ha festeggiato alla sua mensa l'improvviso arrivo di un amato grigioverde, o ne ha sottolineato con tragico silenzio il posto vuoto. Io so però che ero con voi tutte nella chiesa […]. Il mio Natale, forse, è stato un po' come tutti i vostri riuniti. Mio marito era vicino a me, ma entrambi pensavamo ai lontani, specialmente al marito di mia cognata Dora.[51]
>
> [I do not know whether your Christmas table celebrated the sudden arrival of a beloved grey-green [uniformed soldier] or marked his empty place with tragic silence. I do know, however, that I was with all of you in the church […]. My Christmas was, perhaps, a bit like all of yours gathered together. My husband was close to me, but we both thought of our distant ones, especially my sister-in-law Dora's husband.]

Earlier that year, in issue 87, published on 4 July 1940, less than a month after Italy had declared war on France on 10 June, Clementina wrote her first piece that mentions the war. She adopts a patriotic tone that gives women implicit advice on how to behave in such circumstances. Confessing her struggle to deal with Paolo's new attitude of aggressive command and his excessive precision in implementing the blackout regulations, Clementina seizes the opportunity to tell Italian women to be supportive wives and citizens. After complaining about Paolo's strictness, during an air raid she had had to take control of the situation and realised her husband was right to follow the rules set by the Fascist government. She expresses patriotism in praising the Italian Air Force: '[L]'allarme viene dato per semplice precauzione e una cintura validissima di aviatori italiani sta alla nostra difesa' [[T]he alarm is sounded as a simple precaution and a very effective belt of Italian aviators stands in our defence]. Her role as the wife of a soldier and the mother to his children warrants similar praise: 'È come s'egli fosse diventato un gigante e un arcangelo. Ma anch'io sento sulla mia fronte il riverbero della sua luce: perché custodirò i suoi figli, i figli di un soldato' [It is as if he has become a giant and an archangel. But I, too, feel on my forehead the glare of his light: for I shall guard his children, the

51 Clementina, 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 26 December 1940, p. 28. In this piece Clementina speaks openly about the painful absence of husbands, fathers and brothers who are fighting the war; 'grigioverde' [grey-green] refers to the colour of the Italian Army uniform.

children of a soldier].[52] She emerges from this piece as a strong wife who knows how to behave and assist her husband in support of the nation and the war cause: '[I]n tempo di guerra il meno che possiamo fare noi donne è di rinunciare alle crisi di nervi' [[I]n wartime the least we women can do is to give up our nervous breakdowns].[53] Three aspects make this piece a persuasive example of Fascist influence: first, Clementina uses the religious rhetoric adopted by the dictatorship, with parallelism between archangels and soldiers; second, women become important because they are the mothers of the soldiers' children, once again echoing the idea that a woman's identity is strictly linked to her role as a wife and a mother – even though her first loyalty is towards the Fascist State; third, women are commonly seen as weak and whiny, so the way they can support the war effort is to be strong and to follow the men's lead, echoing the idea of women as emotional creatures whose role in society cannot be the same as men's.

A piece published on 11 July under the significant title 'L'ora della patria' [The Hour of the Motherland] provides further details on what Italian wives were experiencing and the attitude of *Grazia* towards the regime. Here Clementina describes the day Paolo received his conscription letter calling him to serve in the Army. On that day, in the morning her family's new car had been confiscated by the Army and both Paolo and Clementina felt affected by the war for the first time. In spite of their never having talked about Paolo's duties as a soldier, when Paolo told his wife he would be leaving in five days, Clementina was not surprised and did not cry; instead, she pragmatically organised a move to the countryside for herself and their three children, acting as if she had already known Paolo would have to leave. This piece reveals Clementina's unspoken anxiety but also sends an encouraging message to all Italian wives who had to say goodbye to their husbands: '[È] così che bisogna lasciarsi. Con una parola d'amore che suoni piena di promesse come un'alba nuziale. Torniamo ad essere le fidanzate dei nostri sposi; ma con *l'orgogliosa fierezza delle donne di Roma*' [This is how one has to part. With a word of love that sounds as full of promise as a wedding dawn. Let us again be the girlfriends of our grooms; but with *the proud boldness of the women of Rome*].[54] Using Fascist rhetoric and evoking the myth of

52 Clementina, 'Allarme antiaereo', 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 4 July 1940, p. 28.

53 Clementina, 'Allarme antiaereo', p. 28.

54 Clementina, 'L'ora della patria', 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 11 July 1940, p. 28 (emphasis mine).

Rome, Clementina again suggests that her readers should be proud of their nation and behave according to Fascist precepts. Women needed to demonstrate this strength particularly in wartime, when wives had to take care of the family and manage finances on their own, performing many of their husbands' traditional roles in addition to their own. Clementina personifies this model of 'domestic soldier':

> Io non sono una donna d'affari, ho sempre lasciato fare a Paolo […] ma ora provo un gran bisogno di agire, di diventare una donna forte e saggia la quale sappia affrontare le responsabilità di un'ora di Guerra, di un'ora nella quale anche le piccole mogli nate soltanto per amare debbano diventare energiche mogli di soldati.[55]
>
> [I am not a businesswoman, I have always left this to Paolo […] but now I feel a great need to act, to become a strong and wise woman who knows how to face the responsibilities of an hour of War, of an hour in which even little wives born only to love must become energetic wives of soldiers.]

Not surprisingly, this piece relies on the Fascist idea of a woman whose importance is strictly linked to her married status. The idea of women 'born only to love' is another echo of Gentile's theorisation of womanhood, broadly present in Clementina's writings.

These articles on how to be a good woman in wartime are not the only self-evident example of the Fascist 'new woman' provided by 'Vivere in due'. In many articles Clementina also addresses the Fascist model of beauty, whose femininity is expressed by her 'curvy', healthy appearance and whose strength can be found in her practical approach to life, focused on pleasing her husband and providing new children for the Motherland.[56] 'Vivere in due' was exceptional in *Grazia*: it was the only column that in those years

55 Clementina, 'Decisioni per l'anno nuovo', 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 2 January 1941, p. 28.

56 Clementina often mentions the Italian model of beauty. For example, she affirms that being 'curvy' shows good health and is appreciated by men: 'Sono lietissima […] di aver perso quell'aria piuttosto gracilina che avevo a vent'anni' [I am delighted […] to have lost that rather puny look I had in my twenties] (Clementina, 'L'amore e la linea', 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 27 June 1940, p. 28). Giuliana – Clementina's eldest daughter – also praises her mother's curvy appearance: 'Sei meravigliosa! […] [L]a zia […] è come una bambina, […] ha le braccia sottili come le mie. Invece tu, mamma, sei morbida e imbottita come una poltrona e forte come un soldato' [You are wonderful! […] [A]untie […] is like a child, […] she has thin arms like mine. Whereas you, Mum, are soft and cushioned like an armchair and strong like a soldier].

regularly mentioned the war and its difficulties, reflecting real-time events, feelings and fears of Italian women. In its other content *Grazia* remained mainly focused on fashion, literature and general advice even after June 1940 – that is to say, it remained a commercial product for entertainment – whereas Clementina's diary mirrored the hard times through which Italian families were living.

However, after a few articles describing Paolo's difficulty in returning to normal life after fighting in Greece, 'Vivere in due' changes its tone from 5 June 1941 onwards. Clementina's narration resumes a cheerful, light-hearted tone, describing once again everyday occurrences and her petty quarrels with Paolo. The column also starts to publish general advice on how to find a husband and maintain a happy married life, as though the war were only a memory. This new attitude, introduced in June 1941, continues through 1942 and into 1943. During its last year Clementina's page becomes more of a conversation with her readers than a chronicle of her married life. From January to April 1943 many of the articles take the form of conversations with women, friends or female acquaintances with whom Clementina discusses various subjects, from coping with the cruel wife of a supervisor to surviving widowhood. On 4 February 1943, for example, Clementina recalls a conversation with a recently married young woman who misses living with her mother because she preferred her life as a daughter to her new life as a wife.[57] In the following issue, another young wife experiences exactly the opposite feeling: right after the wedding her husband left for South America and the young bride had to move back into her family home, much to her disappointment. The young wife loathes living with her parents again after having experienced the joy of sharing a house with her beloved husband.[58] In both cases, recently married women who felt unhappy about their situation could relate to the problem and find comfort in Clementina's words.

The most notable change in the column came in 1943, when Clementina began to offer specific responses to her readers' letters. On 15 April, for example, she replies to a letter of reproach written by a woman called Marisa, who criticises Clementina for her lack of consideration towards women who had lost their home due to the war: 'Tu che rimpiangi il tuo appartamento di città che sai però di ritrovare, non comprendi di urtare così la suscettibilità di tante donne

57 Clementina, 'Nostalgia della casa materna', 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 4 February 1943, p. 28.

58 Clementina, 'La nostra casa', 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 11 February 1943, p. 28.

che quella casa non l'hanno più' [You regret your city apartment that you know you will find again but you do not understand that you are thereby hurting the susceptibility of so many women who no longer have that home].[59] Clementina replies, informing her readers that just three days earlier her apartment in Milan had been destroyed in an air raid, putting herself in the same position as the reader and sharing the same suffering. She also highlights the fact that she forces herself to write about more cheerful topics in order to distract her readers rather than adding her pain to theirs, confirming the aim of *Grazia* to entertain and distract: 'Marisa, il mio compito è di dipingere sempre un po' più bella la realtà, di ravvivare le vostre speranze, di non accrescere le vostre pene con la narrazione delle mie' [Marisa, my task is always to paint reality a little more beautifully, to revive your hopes, not to increase your sorrows by telling you mine].[60]

As a guide on how to be a good wife, 'Vivere in due' offers vivid testimony to what it meant to be an ordinary Italian woman in the late 1930s in the light of Fascist ideals that were advanced by *Grazia* but were not always possible to attain. Like Luciano's column, Clementina's articles acknowledged the reality of Italian women's lives at the time, addressing the real problems women could experience in the home or the workplace, the need for supporting the family financially in the wartime and everyday marriage problems. Clementina's column is, then, another representative example of the multidimensional nature of Italian women's experience in the last years of Fascist rule and of the different models of femininity to which they were exposed. Although in 'Vivere in due' the predominant message echoes the Fascist ideal of the angel of the hearth, it is possible to find throughout the magazine modern models of femininity complementary to the Fascist ideal, often delivered by a visual subtext. The regular presence of make-up advertisements next to Clementina's column, for example, points to both a modern form of consumption and to the attention paid by women to a model of beauty closer to modern, glamorous, foreign models than to the ideal Fascist woman.[61] The importance of Clementina's column lies also in the interaction between the author and her readers, whose letters are often mentioned and sometimes quoted. Assuming the

59 Clementina, 'Alle mie lettrici', 'Vivere in due', *Grazia*, 15 April 1943, p. 28.

60 Clementina, 'Alle mie lettrici'.

61 Advertisements often proposed new beauty products, particularly make-up and anti-aging moisturisers. They are a clear example of modern consumer consumption and its co-existence with Fascist precepts.

letters Clementina received were genuine and not fictitious, these exchanges offer significant insights into the thoughts and worries of Italian women. Although the letters reflect the views of only a portion of the Italian population, the popularity of *Grazia* and its commercial success make it a relevant indicator of Italian women's thoughts, dreams and social habits in this period. Similarly, the column dedicated to all readers' letters, 'Grazia vi scrive', is another primary source which sheds light on Italian women's experience in the Fascist era and hence provides further evidence of the presence of modern models of womanhood despite the predominant Fascist rhetoric.

Advice in *Grazia*

Like 'Lettere a Mura' [Letters to Mura] in *Lei* (later *Annabella*), 'Solo per te – lettere a Sonia' [Only for You – Letters to Sonia] in *Eva* and 'Risponde lei' [She Answers] in *Gioia!*, *Grazia* had an advice column which responded to readers' letters, providing advice and comments to readers. Although the advice column was part of the evolution in Italian women's periodicals that had started in the nineteenth century, in the 1930s women's illustrated weeklies turned the letters column (*rubriche della posta*) into a fundamental feature of these magazines and a distinctive symbol of the mass readership they targeted.[62] The formula of an advice section was popular in all women's *rotocalchi*, but 'Grazia vi scrive' is unique because it uses colloquial language that highlights the closeness between the reader and the magazine and reads more informally than other advice columns. The use by *Grazia* of a familiar tone, here as elsewhere in the magazine, gives the impression that the magazine's writers knew their readership intimately.

The advice column in Mondadori's *rotocalco* reports only the name, often a pseudonym, of the author of the letter, followed by

62 This change also marks a change in the readership targeted: as Enrica Cantani puts it, glossy magazines such as *La Donna* and *Lidel* featured 'poca posta, perché le donne ricche non hanno problemi di cuore' [little mail, because rich women do not have romantic problems] (Enrica Cantani, 'La stampa femminile tra le due guerre', in *Editoria e cultura a Milano tra le due guerre (1920–1940). Atti del convegno (Milan, 19–21 February 1981)* (Milan: Mondadori, 1983), pp. 102–06 (p. 103), quoted in Dittrich-Johansen, 'La "donna nuova"', p. 837). See also Silvia Franchini, 'Cultura nazionale e prodotti d'importazione: alle origini di un archetipo italiano di "stampa femminile"', in *Donne e giornalismo*, ed. by Soldani and Franchini, pp. 75–109 (esp. pp. 98–109).

the answer given by *Grazia*. The 'Lettere a Mura' in *Lei* has the same structure, with the reader's name in bold preceding Mura's answer and the content of the letter never quoted. The two columns thus look alike. The writing style and approach to the readership are, however, different: Mura writes like an expert, distancing herself from the readers, whereas *Grazia* adopts a friendly tone, answering as someone close to the author of the letter. In December 1939, for example, Mura writes to 'Roma Torino 9222': 'Scrivetemi pure liberamente. Indirizzate presso "Annabella". Vi risponderò al più presto' [Feel free to write to me. Address it to 'Annabella'. I shall answer as soon as possible].[63] A week earlier *Grazia* had provided a similar answer to 'Cilena': 'Aspetto presto la tua lettera, e farò il possibile per aiutarti' [I look forward to receiving your letter soon and I shall do my best to help you].[64] Both advice columnists give the same response, but the tone of the two answers is completely different. Mura uses the polite form *voi* (which replaces the form *lei* abolished by the Fascist regime in 1938) and her answer is professional and detached in tone; *Grazia*'s answer uses the familiar 'tu' form instead, and is colloquial and friendly in tone.[65] Another example further demonstrates this difference:

> **Giovane fascista 1921.** Sì, è bene non far regali, per nessuna ragione. Il regalo più bello che si può fare a una persona alla quale si vuol bene, è una parola d'amore. Ed è già molto nella vostra condizione. Mi auguro che il vostro fidanzato prenda presto il suo diploma, che si metta a lavorare e che subito coroni il vostro comune sogno di gioia. ('Lettere a Mura')

> **Maria Franca 19** Se egli viene spesso nel negozio di tua madre, può trovare da sè [*sic*], se lo vuole, l'occasione di avvicinarsi a te. Altrimenti è inutile che sia tu a prendere iniziative non servirebbero a niente. Come *liquidarlo*? Che brutta parola! E poi non mi sembra il

63 Mura, 'Lettere a Mura', *Lei*, 20 December 1939, p. 2.

64 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 21 December 1939, pp. 2, 26 (p. 26).

65 The campaign against the polite form of address, *lei* (feminine third person singular), started with the article 'Abolizione dei "Lei"' by Bruno Cicognani, published in the *Corriere della Sera*, 15 January 1938, p. 3. Cicognani defined it as a testimony to centuries of submission and an illogical grammatical form brought in by Spain and suggested a return to the Caesarean form of *voi* (second person plural). The Fascist regime supported the idea and officially abolished *lei*: 'È abolito il *lei*; ed è sistemato in modo nuovo l'uso del *voi* e del *tu*. La seconda norma è per ora formulata solo nelle linee generalissime: *tu* = "cameratismo"; *voi* = "superiorità gerarchica"' [*Lei* is abolished; and the use of *voi* and *tu* is set in a new way. The second norm is for now formulated only along very general

> caso di usarla per uno che non ti ha mai dimostrato una sua speciale simpatia. ('Grazia vi scrive')[66]
>
> [**Young Fascist 1921.** Yes, it is good not to give gifts, for any reason. The best gift one can give to a person one cares about is a word of love. And that is already a lot in your [*vostra*] condition. I hope your fiancé will soon obtain his diploma, start to work and immediately fulfil your common dream of joy. ('Letters to Mura')
>
> **Maria Franca 19** If he often comes to your mother's store, he can find for himself, if he wants to, an opportunity to approach you. Otherwise it is useless for you to take initiatives that would serve no purpose. How to *liquidate* him? What an ugly word! Besides, I don't think it's appropriate to use it for someone who has never shown you any special sympathy.] ('Grazia Writes to You')

Although *Lei* and *Grazia* looked very similar, both in content and appearance, there was an important difference between them: Mondadori's aim to make *Grazia* read like a conversation with a friend was translated into friendly, colloquial language that contributed to differentiating his magazine from other women's *rotocalchi*.

In the few issues of 1938 the column 'Grazia vi scrive' occupied two pages in the middle of the magazine. Each answer had a title that summarised the main focus of the advice, followed by the response and the name of the author. One letter, on the right side of the second page, was highlighted in italics (Fig. 31). By December 1938 the appearance of the column had marginally changed and some of the answers to readers' questions were highlighted by a frame or the use of italics (Fig. 32).

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lines: *tu* = 'comradeship'; *voi* = 'hierarchical superiority'] (Bruno Migliorini, 'Il Lei in soffitta', *Critica Fascista*, 36.9 (15 March 1938), p. 136). In August 1938, *Gerarchia*, the official journal of Fascism directed by Mussolini, called for the end of *lei*: 'Educate il vostro linguaggio, italianizzatelo! Vi sentirete orgogliosi di contribuire a questa formazione del nuovo "costume" italiano. […] Il "lei" non è soltanto un errore di grammatica e di senso; […] è soprattutto una ipocrisia sociale. Ipocrisia per ipocrisia e finzione per finzione, fate i sordi con quelli che vi parlano col "lei"' [Refine your language, make it more Italian! You will feel proud to contribute to the shaping of this new Italian 'custom'. […] The use of 'lei' is not only a grammatical and semantic error; […] it is above all a form of social hypocrisy. If it's hypocrisy for hypocrisy's sake, pretence for pretence, then play deaf with those who address you using 'lei'] ([Anon.], 'Fine del "lei"', *Gerarchia*, 18 (August 1938), 568).

66 Mura, 'Lettere a Mura', *Lei*, 20 December 1939, p. 2; [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', 21 December 1939, p. 26 (emphasis in original).



Figure 31 'Grazia vi scrive', from the 10 November 1938 issue of *Grazia*. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia.



Figure 32 'Grazia vi scrive', from the 29 December 1939 issue of *Grazia*. Reproduced courtesy of *Grazia*, Reworld Media Italia.

In the first issue of February 1939 two answers focused on hairstyles are written in italics and put into a frame under the title 'Bellezza' [Beauty]. The first one is particularly interesting, because it is revealing of the predominant hairstyle in Italy in 1939 as suggested by *Grazia*: 'Spazzola molto i tuoi capelli e ammorbidiscili con buone brillantine liquide. Pettinali tesi. […] *Sono assai più di moda le teste lisce* di quelle troppo ondulate. *Non tagliare i capelli, si portano lunghi*' [Brush your hair a lot and soften it with good liquid brilliantine. Comb it taut. […] *Straight hair is far more fashionable* than hair that is too wavy. Do not cut your hair, *it is worn long*].[67] The hairstyle proposed went in the opposite direction to what was fashionable in Hollywood and disseminated through American films and advertisements, in which actresses and models wore their hair short and curled.[68]

In this issue the magazine answered fourteen letters, addressing each reader with the intimacy and honesty of a friend, as the following two examples demonstrate. In the first *Grazia* comments on the nature of a relationship:

> **Col tempo** Cara, il rapporto che mi descrivi, così come s'è svolto finora, mi sembra più un legame di simpatia che altro; una simpatia che poteva cambiar nome se i vostri temperamenti fossero stati fatti apposta per intendersi; ma non mi pare, se bastarono i due futili episodi che mi narri ad offendere la vostra armonia.[69]
>
> **[In time** Dear [friend], the relationship you describe to me, as it has unfolded so far, seems to me more a bond of sympathy than anything else, a sympathy that could have changed its name if your temperaments had been made to understand each other; but I don't think so, if the two futile episodes you narrate to me were enough to offend harmony between you.]

In the second she rebukes:

> **Cambiar metodo** Amica mia, lo sai che con l'orgoglio e ripicchi si guasta tutto? Nel tuo caso io consiglierei di mettervi d'accordo, […] dopo questo proposito, potrai riprendere la tua amicizia e parlare di argomenti un po' più profondi che ti aiuteranno a conoscere gli altri e a legarti per affinità di gusti, per reciproca ammirazione

67 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 9 February 1939, p. 20 (emphasis mine).

68 Actresses like Jean Harlow, Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford wore their hair short and styled in heavy waves. See, for example, *Photoplay*, July–December 1939.

69 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', 9 February 1939, p. 20.

> di certi sentimenti che le scaramucce di ora ti hanno fatto ignorare. Con affetto.[70]
>
> [**Change your method** My friend, do you know that with pride and spitefulness you spoil everything? In your case, I would advise you to come to an agreement, […] after this resolution you will be able to resume your friendship and talk about topics a little more deeply and this will help you get to know others and bond through an affinity of tastes, through mutual admiration of certain feelings that current skirmishes have made you ignore. With affection.]

The absence of any explicit quotation from the letters eased the process of identification discussed earlier because anyone could read an answer as a response to his or her own problems, making the advice given in *Grazia* accessible to anyone experiencing a similar issue.

Throughout 1939 the column went through a number of further changes, so that by the end of the year it looked entirely different. Three pages of the magazine were now devoted to the column: the eye-catching second, third and fourth pages. 'Grazia vi scrive' thus became the very first column a reader would see on opening the magazine. This change also affected the appearance of the column, which now had only the first answer highlighted in italics. Some of the answers were shortened; and the name of the reader who had sent the letter became the title of each response: '**Eti**. Non badare a tante sciocche superstizioni; sono cose che non hanno alcuna importanza. Per le tue pustoline sarà bene che tu faccia una cura interna' [**Eti**. Don't mind so many silly superstitions; these things are of no importance. For your pimples, it will be good for you to take an internal cure].[71] In some cases the response was only one sentence long, making it intelligible only to the author of the letter. However, this change did not affect the number of readers who asked for advice. On the contrary, the published responses grew to more than twenty in each issue, demonstrating the popularity of the section.

The women who wrote to *Grazia* asked for advice on various issues, from fashion style to personal problems, as the following two examples from 18 January 1940 show:

> **Graziella - Roma** Delle contrarietà, per quanto gravi siano, non devono farti dire che odi la vita; le contrarietà si superano, con viso

70 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', 9 February 1939, p. 20.

71 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 14 December 1939, p. 3 (emphasis in original).

> più o meno sorridente, ma non devono indurre in nessun modo ad odiare.[72]
>
> [Setbacks, however serious they may be, must not make you say that you hate life; setbacks can be overcome, with a more or less smiling face, but they must not in any way induce hatred.]
>
> **Fiduciosa - Milano** Quest'anno sono molto di moda, per chi sappia sciare bene, i calzoni a fuso […]. Tessuto gabardine e tinta rosso scuro. Accompagnali con maglioni di colori vivaci.[73]
>
> [This year leggings trousers are very much in fashion, for those who know how to ski well […]. Gabardine fabric and dark red dye. Pair them with brightly coloured jumpers.]

Women were not the only readers who wrote to *Grazia*; men also sent letters asking for advice. It was not common for men to write to women's magazines and those who did were in a minority, but they did write. From the answers given by *Grazia*, it seems that they were mainly young men aiming to be fashion illustrators or novelists: '[I] tuoi scritti sono ancora immaturi per la pubblicazione, […] le poesie poi hanno troppe reminiscenze scolastiche trapiantate di sana pianta' [[Y]our writings are still too immature for publication, […] furthermore, your poems have too many echoes of school readings reused verbatim], wrote *Grazia* to one reader in December 1939.[74] Some of them, a minority within the minority, asked for advice on women and love life: 'Fate bene a farvi vedere un po' sostenuto. Per lo meno in tal modo riuscirete a provocare un po' di sincerità da parte della donna che amate' [You [*voi*] do well to show some reservations. At least that way you [*voi*] will be able to inspire some sincerity from the woman you love], reads an answer published in the same issue.[75] In early 1940 *Grazia* replied to another man as follows: 'Ho passato la tua lettera a Clementina che dedicherà un articolo al tuo caso. All'assidua lettrice di cui parli non sfuggirà certamente. Spero che l'effetto giovi a te, che hai ragione' [I have passed on your letter to Clementina, who will devote an article to your case. The assiduous reader you mention will certainly not miss it. I hope the effect will benefit you, that you are right].[76] It is worth noting that Clementina

72 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 18 January 1940, p. 2.

73 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 18 January 1940, p. 2.

74 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', 14 December 1939, p. 3.

75 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', 14 December 1939, p. 3.

76 [Anon.], 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 29 February 1940, p. 2.

is here mentioned as a real woman, someone who is on the editorial staff and whose advice can be sought through writing to *Grazia*. This reinforces the structure of the magazine as a conversation in which the women who write in the magazine and the readers are all connected, as if they were all in the same room. The fact that some men wrote asking for advice on their talents or love life can be taken as a demonstration of the popularity of weeklies, and particularly of *Grazia*, suggesting the magazine was often read by other members of the family in the household (or at least this was the impression the editors wished to give).[77]

A further important change to 'Grazia vi scrive' occurred on 6 March 1941, when the previously unsigned section started to be signed by 'Ita'.[78] As discussed in the introduction to the magazine, many regular writers signed their contributions only with a pseudonym or with their initials, masking their identity. This is the case with Ita, who, as far as we know, could easily have been the author of the section all along. However, a change in the tone of the answers is noticeable: the responses become more ironic and personal, suggesting a significant change in the editorial staff behind the advice column. One of the new elements in Ita's advice is her references to her own private experience, as seen on 6 March 1941 in her first response to one of the rare letters from men:

> Il guaio è, caro Floc disperato, che probabilmente tu non hai ancora incominciato a raderti. […] Per finire ti dirò quel che mi diceva il nonno quando ero giovinetta. A dieci anni: – Papà è un dio. – A quindici: – Papà non capisce niente. – A venti: – Papà capisce ma è in arretrato. – A trenta: – Papà aveva ragione.
>
> Non dimenticarmi, Floc! … Ti giuro che non sono Socrate. Neanche sua figlia, te lo giuro.[79]
>
> [The trouble, dear desperate Floc, is that you probably have not yet begun to shave. […] To finish, I will tell you what my grandfather used to tell me when I was a young girl. At ten: – Dad is a god. – At fifteen: – Dad doesn't understand anything. – At twenty: – Papa understands but is behind the times. – At thirty: – Dad was right.

77 This makes it even harder to estimate the number of readers of a magazine in the 1930s. See Lombardo and Pignatel, *La stampa periodica*, pp. 93–95.

78 'Ita' was probably Ita Baraldi, whose book *Gli uomini sono importanti* [*Men Are Important*] was advertised in *Grazia* on the same page as Clementina's article 'Ragazze Moderne' [Modern Women] (25 February 1943, p. 27).

79 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 6 March 1941, p. 3.

> Don't forget me, Floc! … I swear I am not Socrates. Nor his daughter, truly.]

Ita's use of memories of her own life increases the connection with the reader, creating a more vivid sense of a conversation between two friends, as the following examples show. The first concerns her family:

> **Una fervente ammiratrice: M. C.** Quando ero bambina avevo una cuginetta di diciott'anni che si disperava di non riuscire a superare il metro e cinquanta di altezza. Il giorno che mio nonno seppe la ragione dei suoi pianti, le tirò gli orecchi e le disse: – Sciocchina, non sai che in piccola botte ci sta buon vino?[80]
>
> [**A fervent admirer: M. C.** When I was a little girl, I had a young cousin of eighteen who despaired that she could not grow taller than five feet. The day my grandfather learned the reason for her tears, he pulled her ears and said, – Silly girl, don't you know that good wine comes in small casks?]

The second relates to the young Ita herself:

> **Ita sposerà un aviatore** […] Mi hai conquistata di colpo. Così vorrei che fossero tutte le ragazze della tua età. Così dovrebbero essere. Ti abbraccio, confidandoti che da bambina io volevo sposare mio Padre.[81]
>
> [**Ita is going to marry an aviator** […] You have suddenly won me over. That's how I wish all girls your age were. This is how they should be. I hug you, confiding to you that as a child I wanted to marry my Father.]

The third concerns Ita's professional ambitions:

> **Maria Luisa Iametti** Anch'io cara amica, ho visto mostri che ingoiano carta e vomitano a migliaia pagine stampate, anch'io ne ho subito il fascino. […] Ero allora poco più che adolescente e già lavoravo di penne di notte e di giorno, in ogni ritaglio di tempo, a scapito degli studi e con grande indignazione della mia famiglia che negava ogni merito al mio lavoro.
>
> Quel giorno nei forni della grande Casa Editrice […] un altro odore mi colpì: sudore umano, terra, olio, sangue, tutte queste cose e altre insieme. E fu tale la mia esaltazione che davanti alla rotativa uscii a dire con slancio: 'Ah, mi ci butterei dentro!' […] 'Il motore dell'Arte è

80 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 13 March 1941, p. 3.

81 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 26 June 1941, p. 2.

> l'audacia', questo è il mio motto. Se ti riesce servilo, cara e impetuosa amica. Ti auguro di non pentirtene un giorno.[82]
>
> [**Maria Luisa Iametti** I too, dear friend, have seen monsters swallowing paper and spewing out printed pages by the thousands, I too have been fascinated by them. […] I was then little more than a teenager and was already working with pens by night and day, in every scrap of time, to the detriment of my studies and to the great indignation of my family, who denied any merit to my work.
>
> That day in the ovens of the great Publishing House […] another smell hit me: human sweat, earth, oil, blood, all these things and others together. And such was my exaltation that in front of the press I went out and said with élan, 'Ah, I'd throw myself into it!' […] 'The engine of Art is audacity', that is my motto. If you can serve it, my dear and impetuous friend. I wish that you may not regret it one day.]

The answer to 'Maria Luisa Iametti' is particularly revealing. Ita talks about her experience as a writer and, more importantly, as an employee. This letter offers two crucial pieces of information. First, it demonstrates that among the readers of *Grazia* there were women in the workforce (or that Mondadori thought so and hence published content that could be relatable to those readers); second, it offers first-hand testimony to women in the publishing sector. Ita describes the difficulties she had to face to become a writer, encouraging the reader to pursue her own dream. In her answer Ita emerges as a modern woman who followed her dreams and challenged convention and traditional expectations, 'to the detriment of my studies and to the great indignation of my family, who denied any merit to my work'.[83] Most importantly, Ita's answer is another example of the modern model of woman offered by *Grazia* in spite of the predominant Fascist rhetoric.

82 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', 26 June 1941, p. 2. It is interesting noting that the reader wrote again to Ita six months later, on 25 December 1941, and from the answer published it can be inferred that she sent a manuscript of a novel. In that correspondence, her name appears written as Maria Luisa Jametti (Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 25 December 1941, p. 6).

83 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', 26 June 1941, p. 2. As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, articles on women in employment were part of *Grazia* from the beginning, demonstrating the relevant role of women in employment as a readership targeted by Mondadori. See, e.g., 'Difesa della dattilografa', *Grazia*, 9 February 1939, p. 15. On women in the publishing sector in the Fascist era, see Elena Mosconi, 'Irene, Luciana, Mura e le altre. La cronaca mondana e di costume', in *Forme e modelli del rotocalco italiano*, ed. by De Berti and Piazzoni, pp. 443–68.

Another change to the column brought by Ita's style is the light-hearted tone of her answers, especially when addressed to young readers, highlighting that *Grazia* became a point of reference for teenage girls as well as young women:

> **Sogni d'oro** Ah, tu sei la frequentatrice della quinta ginnasiale! Congratulazioni. Tutto quello che mi dici è bello salvo lo stile e la scrittura e il resto. Però come vorrei avere i tuoi quindici anni per scrivere letterine simili, cara, piccola pasticciona![84]
>
> [**Sweet dreams** Ah, you are the fifth-year *ginnasio* [first classes of secondary school] attendee! Congratulations! Everything you tell me is nice except the style and the writing and the rest. Though how I wish I were fifteen years old like you so as to write such little letters, my dear little bungler!]

On another occasion, Ita apparently makes fun of her correspondent and herself:

> **Orietta e Francesca.** Eccomi qua, ma senza risposta perché ho dimenticato le domande, e non trovo più la vostra precedente lettera. Cosa volevate vecchie maramalde? Quello scuriccite mi è andato alla testa e non riesco a rimettermi in essere. Bene, se volete per telegrafo domande e risposte. Io aspetto, ma non scuriccita. Oh, no no, niente affatto scuriccita! Anzi allegrissima. C'è il sole e ho l'anima in festa![85]
>
> [**Orietta and Francesca.** Here I am, but without answers because I forgot the questions and I can no longer find your previous letter. What did you old pests want? That [mischief] has gone to my head and I can't get back to myself. Well, if you want, telegraph questions and answers. I'll wait, but no [mischiefs]. Oh, no no, no [mischief] at all! In fact cheerful. It's sunny and my soul is celebrating!]

In response to another reader, she addresses the topic of weight:

> **Sogno d'oro** Ma certo che non 'ti mangio'. Giungi dopo un piatto di spaghetti alle vongole e dopo gli spaghetti alle vongole io non mangio che una pera. Il tuo peso è ben lontano dal segnare il giusto. Se lo tenessero così scarso i bottegai sarebbero tutti in prigione. Ti mancano quindici chili.[86]

84 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', 13 March 1941, p. 4.

85 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', 26 June 1941, p. 2.

86 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 13 November 1941, p. 6.

[**Sweet dream** Of course I won't 'eat you'. You arrive after a plate of spaghetti with clams; and after spaghetti with clams I eat nothing but a pear. Your weight is far from the right mark. If they kept it that low, the shopkeepers would all be in jail. You are fifteen pounds short.]

Finally, she compares herself to canonical figures:

Eva 1941 Cara Eva, studentessa liceale, eccomi ai tuoi ordini. Come Virgilio ha fatto da guida a Dante, Ita farà da guida a te. Mi sia permesso il paragone eccelso. Vorrei condurti difilato in paradiso e senza passare per le terribili stazioni dell'inferno e del purgatorio. Mi ci provo. […] La tua carta è bella. Lo fosse altrettanto la tua scrittura![87]

[**Eva 1941** Dear Eva, high-school student, here I am at your command. As Virgil guided Dante, Ita will guide you. Allow me the lofty comparison. I would like to lead you straight to Heaven and without passing through the terrible stations of Hell and Purgatory. I try myself. […] Your paper is beautiful. If only your prose were so, too!]

Ita engages in jokes with her readers, shortening the distance between them and almost pushing to an extreme the colloquial style that characterises *Grazia* from the start. More importantly, these answers are revealing of the young age of some of the readers – 'Sogni d'oro' and 'Eva 1941', for example, were in high school – thus revealing some of the demographic reached by *Grazia*. The young age of these readers possibly explains Ita's friendly, playful tone.

The answers given by *Grazia* to the many readers who ask for advice on their love life, possibly the most popular topic in the advice column, sound friendly but less ironic and hint at an older age group:

Trieste G. Mia cara, dopo quattro anni una relazione non può essere ancora al punto del mezzo fidanzamento. È un po' tardi ora, per chiarire le situazioni. Rifletti: se quattro anni fa tu avessi messo quel giovine con le spalle al muro, della sua relazione con colei che tu chiami l'intrusa non resterebbe, forse, neppure il ricordo. Nel caso che egli avesse preferito rinunziare a te avresti potuto utilizzare meglio i quattro anni di giovinezza che hai perduto. […] Non aver paura di perderlo. Se ti ama resterà; e se non ti ama, cosa avrai perduto? Un'illusione che poteva divenirti fatale. Spero che la tua

87 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 20 November 1941, p. 4.

> fermezza non ti procuri un grande dolore […]. Se invece il destino ti sarà contrario uscirai da questa passione con la coscienza pulita e ancora nel bel fiore dell'età, per rivolgerti a un uomo più degno che possa darti una felicità sana e duratura. La meriti. Scrivimi presto. Aspetterò con ansia tue notizie.[88]
>
> [**Trieste G.** My dear, after four years a relationship cannot still be at the point of half-engagement. It is a little late now to clear the air. Think about it: if you had cornered that young man four years ago, perhaps there would not even be a memory left of his relationship with the one you call the intruder. In the event he had preferred to give you up, you could have made better use of the four years of youth you lost. […] Do not be afraid of losing him. If he loves you, he will stay; and if he does not love you, what will you have lost? An illusion that could have become fatal for you. I hope that your determination will not bring you great pain […]. If, on the other hand, fate is against you, you will come out of this passion with a clear conscience and still in the prime of life, free to turn to a worthier man who can give you a healthy and lasting happiness. You deserve it. Write to me soon. I look forward to hearing from you.]

In her advice Ita also discusses the nature of love itself:

> **Ho paura di fare il male** L'amore è il sentimento più nobile. Mascherare col suo aspetto qualsiasi altro moto dell'animo è adoperare un vero manto ed un vero scettro per la parte, direi, da commedia. Umili origini e mediocre cultura non escludono dignità e orgoglio. Se l'uomo di cui parli possiede queste due virtù chiariscigli subito il tuo stato d'animo. Comprenderà e si farà forza. In caso contrario adotta il sistema della medicina, da somministrarsi a dosi crescenti. Cioè preparalo poco a poco.[89]
>
> [**I am afraid to do evil** Love is the noblest sentiment. To mask with its appearance any other motion of the soul is to employ a true mantle and sceptre for, I would say, comedy. Humble origins and mediocre culture do not exclude dignity and pride. If the man you speak of possesses these two virtues, make your state of mind clear to him at once. He will understand and gain strength. If not, adopt the system used in medicine, administer the remedy in increasing doses. That is, prepare him little by little.]

Once more, Ita's answers provide insight into readers' thoughts and lifestyles. 'Trieste G.' in particular offers an example of a modern

88 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 10 April 1941, p. 4.

89 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 4 December 1941, p. 4.

attitude, in this case about a person's love life. From a sentence in Ita's answer – 'della sua relazione con colei che tu chiami l'intrusa' [his relationship with the one you call the intruder] – we gather that the reader has been dating a man who was also involved with another woman. Nowadays, this would sound like a familiar and somewhat common situation among young adults, but in Fascist Italy in 1941, where prolific mothers were praised and bachelors discriminated against, such relationships were not accepted and not something about which young women could easily and openly talk.[90]

Another popular topic that emerges is readers' perception of their bodies and worries about their appearance, as important as their request for guidance in their love life. Readers often ask for advice on their figure, sometimes even telling *Grazia* their weight and height:

> **Ninì** Non prendere pillole dimagranti o ti rovinerai la salute. Sei fiorente e fa di rimanervi. Pare impossibile che le bambine della tua età siano affette da simile mania. Floridezza è bellezza, ma nessuna lo vuol capire. Il tuo peso è normale.[91]
>
> [**Ninì** Don't take diet pills or you will ruin your health. You are blooming and should keep doing so. It seems impossible that girls your age should be affected by such an obsession. Beauty is to be plump, but no one wants to understand this. Your weight is normal.]

Ita also provides advice on a healthy diet:

> **Conca di smeraldo** Il tuo peso va d'accordo con la tua statura. Fa di non ingrassare evitando i farinacei, preferendo la verdura cruda, facendo del moto. Basterà. Auguri belli.[92]
>
> [**Emerald Hollow** Your weight goes along with your height. Avoid starches, prefer raw vegetables and exercise so as to make sure you don't gain weight. This will be enough. Best wishes.]

90 The adoption of the *Codice Rocco* in 1930 made adultery a crime. Women in particular were the target of this new legislation, which established a punishment of up to two years in prison for women found guilty of adultery. The *delitto d'onore* was included in the new legislation (Article 587) (Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare*, pp. 114–17; de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, pp. 89–90).

91 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', 13 March 1941, p. 4.

92 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', *Grazia*, 22 May 1941, p. 2.

Her advice often supports the Fascist ideal of a curvaceous female figure:

> **Vera, la noiosa** La tua ossessione è priva di fondamento, e crollerà, spero, se la scalzo con queste parole: 'pesi sei chili meno del giusto'. Goditi i tuoi spuntini ma non rinunciare alla ginnastica.[93]
>
> **[Vera, the Boring** Your obsession is without foundation, and it will collapse, I hope, if I undermine it with these words: 'You weigh six kilos less than you should'. Enjoy your snacks but don't give up gymnastics.]

And again:

> **Licia Carla 1922** Sei piuttosto magra, ma poiché è tanto diffuso il terrore di essere grassi non credo che la mia sentenza ti tolga la gioia di vivere.[94]
>
> **[Licia Carla 1922** You are rather thin, but because the terror of being fat is so widespread I don't think that my judgement will take away your joy in living.]

Despite the Fascist model of feminine beauty promoting the idea of a full-bodied figure, the readers of *Grazia* worried about weighing too much. This can be seen as proof of the limited effects of Fascist propaganda on the concept of ideal models of feminine beauty, as the answer to 'Licia Carla 1922' demonstrates: '[È] tanto diffuso il terrore di essere grasse' [[T]he terror of being fat is so widespread]. The image that emerges from these letters from the average Italian woman during the last years of the Fascist regime is that of a woman who worries about her figure and her weight and seeks advice on how to become trimmer.

This survey of 'Grazia vi scrive' illustrates the personal relationship *Grazia* carefully built up with its readers and the success of the formula adopted in 1938: 'Voi non siete una nostra lettrice: siete una nostra amica. […] rivolgetevi a noi' [You are not our reader: you are our friend […] and you can turn to us].[95] From 1941 onwards Ita's friendly style and use of personal memories helped to create an even more intimate bond with readers, contributing significantly to the column's popularity (and to the magazine's success), to the point that a disclaimer had to be published asking readers to be patient

93 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', 13 November 1941, p. 5.

94 Ita, 'Grazia vi scrive', 20 November 1941, p. 4.

95 [Anon.], 'Un'amica al vostro fianco'.

in light of the overwhelming volume of correspondence.[96] The real importance of 'Grazia vi scrive', however, lies in the image of women which emerges from the letters. As can be surmised from the large array of answers published in the magazine, the women who wrote to *Grazia* expressed a wide range of modern attitudes and anxieties. At the same time, these answers reveal the conflict between the Fascist ideal and the tastes of a more cosmopolitan, modern womanhood: Ita proposed a model of beauty close to the Fascist ideal but at the same time encouraged women in the workforce, demonstrating once more the complex, evolving model of womanhood in Italy in the 1930s. The Italian women who emerge from the readers' letters were looking for advice on how better to deal with the conflicting ideas of femininity disseminated by the Fascist apparatus and thereby to reconcile traditional values with modern expectations and desires.[97]

***

After 1943, and in particular after the repercussions of the Armistice of Cassibile signed by Italy on 3 September, which affected the entire publishing sector, Mondadori was forced to discontinue the publication of its magazines. *Grazia* was reissued as soon as the war was over, with the aim of retaining the bond created over the years with its readers. These days, almost ninety years after the first issue, *Grazia* is still being published. It has become one of the most famous glossy weeklies worldwide. Although the main focus is now fashion, *Grazia* is still a point of reference for women who look for advice on their love life, fitness and beauty.

The examination of the first years of *Grazia* (1938–43) reveals several different aspects of Italian society and how it was experienced by women. Fascist rhetoric, which required them to be flawless mothers and wives, submissive and obedient but also strong and reliable, emerges throughout all issues of the magazine, confirming that *Grazia* was a product of its time and that it reflected the ideological constraints of the age. Nonetheless, alongside the presence of the dominant Fascist culture many elements of modern attitudes and habits surface and co-exist with traditional models, sometimes overcoming Fascist ideals. *Grazia* is thus full of references

96 [Anon.], 'Alle lettrici di "Grazia vi scrive"', *Grazia*, 24 April 1941, p. 4.

97 Italian Fascism had a dual aspect in many spheres, such as architecture, literature, economics, culture and the Arts. On the interaction between modernity and tradition in Fascist Italy see *Modernità totalitaria. Il fascismo italiano*, ed. by Emilio Gentile, Storia e società (Rome: Laterza, 2008).

to women in the workforce, reflecting the reality of women's real lives at the end of the *Ventennio*. Both 'Essere donna' and 'Vivere in due' demonstrate this as well, delivering traditional models and values to their readers, but at the same time acknowledging and supporting modern attitudes, echoed by readers' letters.

The presence of practical advice, together with some guidance on love life and housekeeping, contributed to making *Grazia* appealing to a wide range of readers and reflected Mondadori's aim of shaping a popular magazine accessible to any woman. By writing letters, sending pictures and participating in competitions, readers were not only at the centre of the publication but also contributed to making *Grazia* every woman's friend. Reading *Grazia* was like being in a room with a friend, talking about everyday problems, sharing happiness and worries. Readers were encouraged to take part in the creation of the magazine and be active consumers rather than passive readers, a feature that marked a crucial change in women's magazines. *Grazia* is a key example of how women's periodicals in Italy evolved, following patterns created abroad, disseminating models of beauty proposed by Hollywood or by French magazines and, above all, echoing Italian values and traditions, adapting foreign models to the Italian readership. In other words, *Grazia* helped to shape a multicultural dialogue in the periodical press of the 1930s, while also responding to specific features of Italian culture and society, in particular the duality of women's lives caught between Fascist ideals and the desire for modernity. Taken as a whole, the images of women that appear in the pages of *Grazia* shed light on the dichotomies and contradictions of the cultural models which characterised the development of the modern Italian woman.

Conclusion

By the time the Fascist Gran Consiglio voted out of power its own leader, Mussolini, in July 1943, *L'Avventuroso*, *Omnibus* and *Grazia* had all ceased publication. *Grazia*, like many other women's magazines, including Rizzoli's *Annabella*, Rusconi's *Gioia* and Vitaliano's *Eva*, was relaunched after the war and its successful format was confirmed by its international success down to the present day, making it one of the longest-running magazines in the history of the Italian popular press. The *rotocalco* formula created by *Omnibus* was reproduced in *L'Espresso*, launched in 1955, which became one of the most prominent Italian news weeklies and it is still published today. For its part, *L'Avventuroso*, although it did not survive into the post-war era, imported into Italy an American model which left a visible mark on Italian comics and wider culture, creating an imaginary that conditioned young Italian readers decades after its last issue was printed.

The three case studies present different aspects of the popular press in Italy at a very particular moment in Italian history, one characterised by the creation of a capillary system of control that moulded mindsets, cultural production (and consumption) and societal structure. Together, the magazines analysed here demonstrate a shared model of popular print-media production in Italy, showing strong evidence of the presence of multicultural dialogue and processes of Italianisation of foreign models. They also illustrate the evolution of Italian practices of publication and production, initially centred on individuals (and small groups of editors) who created media enterprises which now control the majority of the Italian print-media industry, like the Mondadori group and the RCS [Rizzoli-Corriere della Sera] Media Group. The pattern established by the *rotocalchi* in the 1930s remained a staple of the illustrated press in the decades that followed. This model, especially visible in *Omnibus* and *Grazia*, used particular techniques to attract and create a loyal readership, such

as actively engaging the readers with competitions and columns. Advice columns became the distinctive feature of women's *rotocalchi*, while letters to the editor established a form of discussion between readers and editorial staff in cultural and political magazines. This form of engagement with the readership moved on to become a feature also in the comic press. *Topolino*, relaunched in 1945 in a new comic book format (called *formato libretto*), included competitions and columns dedicated to correspondence with its young readers. The comic periodical *Linus*, which imported comic strips such as *Peanuts* by Charles M. Schulz and *Andy Capp* by Reg Smythe,[1] was launched in 1964 and gave space to readers' letters that fostered a socio-political debate around comics, establishing itself as a point of reference for discussions on comics to this day. More generally, comics are a dynamic, influential part of modern Italian culture. They have evolved far beyond their origins as simple entertainment or an educational tool for children to address complex social, political and personal themes. Contemporary authors like Michele Rech (known as Zerocalcare), Josephine Yole Signorelli (known as Fumettibrutti), Takoua Ben Mohamed and Giulia Spagnuolo (known as ZUZU) have crafted powerful storytelling comics which engage readers with visual narratives that are accessible yet profound, blending art and literature in a way that appeals to a variety of readerships. These comics address issues such as identity, trauma, history and social justice, making them essential tools for reflecting and challenging societal norms. In our contemporary world comics are not just entertainment – they are a medium for dialogue and cultural exchange. Italy's early exposure to American comics in the 1930s showed this potential, as comics introduced Italian youth to American values and ideals which contrasted with Fascist narratives. Despite efforts to suppress these influences, the appeal of American heroes persisted, illustrating the fact that comics have long acted as a bridge across borders and ideologies. This legacy continues today,

1 *Peanuts* ran as a daily strip from 2 October 1950 (and started as a Sunday strip in colour from 6 January 1952) until 14 December 1999. Andy Capp is a long-running British comic strip created by Reg Smythe in 1957, featuring the life of Andy, an unemployed working-class man living in Hartlepool, a harbour town in north-east England. Known for his ever-present flat cap, Andy spends his days drinking at the pub, gambling, avoiding work and bickering with his sharp-witted wife, Flo. The strip humorously portrays themes of poverty, marital conflict and working-class culture and has become a classic of British popular humour. After the death of its creator in 1998, the comic strip was continued by different artists.

with comics serving as a global platform for exploring shared and diverse human experience. Looking back at *rotocalchi* from the 1930s, the survival of their unique structure in contemporary magazines – alternating entertainment with serious commentary and engaging directly with readers – demonstrates the popularity of illustrated magazines born from a complex, multicultural exchange between Italy and other Western countries.

Another distinctive feature of *rotocalchi* that continued in post-war Italy is the use of photographs to catch readers' attention, contribute to delivering messages and give immediacy to illustrated periodicals. If anything, images acquired an even more relevant role in the post-war popular press, a trend that is still visible today in image-based social media. In the case of Italy, it was in the 1930s that the use of images revolutionised the popular press, as shown by the case studies presented here. The key role of photographs in *rotocalchi* is tangible proof of the cultural dialogue taking place throughout Western Europe and the United States, demonstrated by the similarity in the use of images as well as by the increasing number and significance of international photo agencies. Such cultural exchange is visible in the features and layout which the *rotocalchi* examined here share with other weeklies such as *Marie-Claire*, *Vu*, *Marianne*, *Uhu*, *Life* and *The New Yorker*. Inevitably, the mixed product and format that resulted from this cultural dialogue reflected in intricate ways the general modernisation of Italian culture and society, themselves conditioned as they were by both the Fascist system of power and international models.

The complex co-existence of a multicultural dialogue and Fascist ideology is particularly evident in the case of *Omnibus.* Its history reveals both the dialogue between the popular press and Mussolini's establishment and the direct intervention of censorship in the *rotocalco* sector when the latter was not aligned with the evolving cultural directives of the regime. The case of *L'Avventuroso* demonstrates the striking impact of American comics on Italian print culture, popularising comics as a pure form of entertainment. At the same time, it illustrates how Fascist cultural campaigns and censorship targeting American products could lead indirectly to the closure of a magazine, even without an explicit ban or formal intervention by the regime. Finally, *Grazia*, which echoed Fascist rhetoric more directly and enthusiastically than either *Omnibus* or *L'Avventuroso*, is the only one of the three magazines which did not cease publication because of Fascist cultural policy or intervention: *Grazia* was suspended only because of the impact of the war. However, even in this case the

presence of foreign models and of a modernising, complex attitude to everyday life is visible. Taken together, the three case studies illustrate the uneasy co-existence of traditional and Fascist models with modern aspirations and desires, often imported from foreign countries through popular media.

The analysis of early *rotocalchi* production has shown that the organisation of the publishing companies in the Italian sector was based mainly on a small group of intellectuals, writers or artists who contributed to different magazines and worked for different publishers, often in intersecting networks, something which points to the distinctiveness of the Italian publishing industry in the interwar years when compared to its American and European counterparts, especially in France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Italian magazine production was more localised and less professionalised; the figures of the publisher and of the strong individual editor were typically at the centre of creative as well as commercial processes; and each magazine had its own specificities that contributed to the creation of a varied market. This had consequences also for the readership, the characteristics of which can be deduced from the content and writing style of the magazine. Leaving aside *L'Avventuroso*, it is possible simply by looking at regular columns to assume that the readership of *Omnibus* was on average older than that of *Grazia* and, judging by the different competitions regularly promoted, was also more educated. Many assumptions could be drawn from this observation, especially given that *Grazia* was specifically aimed at women – hence a potentially less educated, less politically and culturally involved readership that that of *Omnibus* – proving once more that the study of *rotocalchi* can provide insights into many aspects of Italian society: from the impact of Fascist ideology and the attraction of foreign models to the interests of literate Italians and their level of education based on their correspondence with the magazines. One could object, saying that the readers' letters, unless otherwise proved, could be fictitious; however, while this is a valid hypothesis, the letters still provide information on what interested readers because these columns needed to address widespread topics and concerns to keep their readership engaged. Whether real or fictional, readers' letters and advice columns point to the predominant desires, expectations and concerns of the readership of the time.

The analysis presented in this volume offers clear indicators of the intersection between transnational spheres in the production (and development) of the modern popular press and shows the hidden dynamics of cultural production under a nationalist,

controlling system of power. The production of *rotocalchi* in Fascist Italy mirrored and contributed to the shift towards mass consumer culture that boomed after the war. This change was fuelled by many factors, including the foreign influences whose impact we have seen in our three case studies. Among the other forces that influenced the emergence of a mass consumer culture and the modernisation of Italian society, one must not forget the massification of Italian society promoted by Mussolini's rule, as well as the idea of a national consumer who promoted private Italian enterprises. Mondadori, Rizzoli and Nerbini made business choices which ultimately prevailed over political allegiance, accounting for another factor in the failure by the Fascist regime's system of control to turn *rotocalchi* into a means of propaganda in support of the creation of the new Italian.

L'Avventuroso, *Omnibus* and *Grazia* are revealing examples of how new forms of attention to new sectors of readership became central to the Italian publishers, who in turn developed commercial strategies to expand their readership and transform it into active consumers, resulting in the multilayered product that is the *rotocalco*. The three magazines were each created with a broad readership in mind, one drawn from different classes or different sectors, such as women or young people, expanding the readership of the popular press and marking a new stage in the history of modern mass-print media in Italy. Because of the control exerted by Fascist power over cultural production and the press, publishers also had to take into account these restrictive policies in order to avoid losing their business to censorship. It is because of the co-existence and equal significance of these two factors – the expansion and modernisation of the readership; and the control exercised by the regime – that by examining the popular press as a mixed, new, national and transnational product we can better understand the practical consequences of the Fascist apparatus and its totalitarian ideology for cultural production. The development of *rotocalchi* demonstrates the uneven process of the nationalisation (and Fascistisation) of the masses, revealing the clear flaws, limits and ambiguous negotiations behind Fascist control over cultural production.

Among the factors that limited the control of the Fascist regime over Italians' consciences, a key role was played by American culture and its myth, more so in readers' imagination than in the practical production of illustrated magazines. The constant presence of American-style articles, references to Hollywood and its stars, American literature and curious facts, not to mention the myth of the

frontier and American comics, proves the fascination with the United States among the readership of different types of *rotocalchi*. Given the widespread attention paid to anything American, regardless of the main readership targeted, one can conclude that the interest in American culture and way of life was shared across Italian society. The ambiguity with which the United States was often presented in *rotocalchi* offered publishers a shield against censorship by suggesting an anti-American sentiment. At the same time, popular magazines mirrored the broad criticism of American society and culture disseminated by Italian writers and intellectuals across different media. Among them, Emilio Cecchi and his *America amara* offer a key example of the echoes in Italy of the extremes of materialism, a theme that pervaded anti-American rhetoric, especially after the Wall Street Crash (1929).

Publishers and editors took inspiration from other countries, too. The similarities between *Marianne* and *Omnibus* and *Marie-Claire* and *Grazia* respectively clearly show that French magazines were a point of reference for the modernisation of the Italian illustrated press. Italian publishers had traditionally looked to other Western European countries, as documented by Pomba's declaration in 1847 of his aim to create an illustrated periodical capable of competing with European publications, and did so again in the 1930s when creating the new *rotocalco*, with American magazines becoming part of the multicultural dialogue. The case studies presented in this book confirm that the development of the popular press was shaped by two main factors: the readers' taste and political strategies – both influenced by Fascist ideology and propaganda as well as by business needs. Publishers sought to shape their magazines according to the desires and expectations of their readership, who were in turn influenced by exposure to foreign cultures through cultural consumption. At the same time, in order to survive Mussolini's system of control and censorship Fascist ideals and policies had to be accommodated, too. Oftentimes these two needs clashed, causing publishers to alter the contents of their magazines even if it meant going against their business strategy (and success). This process affected not only the periodical press, but was, in fact, an ambivalent attitude common to all sectors of cultural production.[2] In this context the *rotocalco* emerges as a modern product whose exposure to foreign models and, more generally, to a multicultural dialogue is the result

2 This has been explored in detailed by Billiani, *National Cultures*; Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature*; and Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*.

of what Gramsci identifies as a lack in Italy of a national-popular culture.[3] By offering a product steeped in foreign cultures, adapted to readership tastes, mediated by Fascist ideology and/or limited by an authoritarian system of control, *rotocalchi* are an expression of the modernisation of Italian culture as well as a modernising force. The co-existence of different cultural products within the same *rotocalco* – such as wordy traditional comics and American adventure comics in *L'Avventuroso*; high literature with gossip columns as in *Omnibus*; or the portrayal of perfect housewives next to a guide on how to behave in the workplace displayed in *Grazia* – mirrors the ambivalence of Fascism not just towards modern culture but towards modernity in general. If the contradictory relationship between (Fascist) Italy and the United States offers a representative example of the regime's conflictive perception of modernity, *rotocalchi* reveal that same attitude in cultural production. This ambivalence was a direct result of Fascist fluid ideology, based on action and a versatile rhetoric that helped Mussolini's system of power to shape itself according to the needs of its totalitarian project. It is not surprising, then, to find contradictory and sometimes antithetical content in *rotocalchi*. In this analysis of Italian popular magazines one can observe how the regime's hyper-nationalist ideology pushed towards a cultural expansion which made Italian (and Fascist) culture transnational despite itself. The success of foreign literature offers an example of the multicultural exchange that marked the modernisation of Italy; its presence across popular magazines proves the limits of the Fascist totalitarian project, which sought to use the press to mould and integrate the masses into the new State. The cultural content of *rotocalchi* confirms the trend established during the liberal period of a predominant consumption of foreign culture over national productions. This tendency persisted throughout the *Ventennio*, despite Mussolini's initiatives for nationalising Italy (and its citizens) encompassed by cultural production and aimed at creating a national popular culture.

Further research in the field is required to highlight the mechanisms of multicultural dialogue between Western Europe and the United States in the 1930s. In spite of the radically different political systems in countries in the interwar years, modern Europe

3 Gramsci writes: 'In Italia è sempre mancata e continua a mancare una letteratura nazionale-popolare, narrativa e d'altro genere' [Italy has always lacked, and continues to lack, a national-popular literature, narrative and otherwise] (Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, III, *Quaderni 12–29*, p. 2118). See also Billiani, *National Cultures*, pp. 4–5.

was shaped by transnational influences, particularly visible in the Italian case of *rotocalchi* production. Understanding the multicultural and transnational forces that contributed to creating modern popular culture can help us to frame and better to understand the current socio-political and cultural public discourse in both Europe and the United States. Today, the terms 'Fascism' and 'Fascist' have become part of the public political debate and are used wildly to comment on current socio-politically destabilising events. The discussion surrounding the international presence and influence of Fascism also involves the academic community, with recent analyses tracing its presence in the United States and addressing its ideological impact and significance today.[4] Such renewed interest in defining Fascism and its ideology not only poses new challenges in terms of methodological approaches to the study of the historical events that shaped Europe in the interwar years – and specifically Italian Fascism – but also makes the understanding of the past all the more relevant to a balanced evaluation of the present.

4 See *Fascism in America: Past and Present*, ed. by Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Janet Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); and Bruce Kuklick, *Fascism Comes to America: A Century of Obsession in Politics and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2022).

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Index

Il 420 139–40

'Agente Segreto X-9' 114–15, 117, 123, 128, *142*
Alessandrini, Goffredo 193
Alfieri, Dino 34 & n. 17, 39–40, 42, 101, 134–35, 195, 199–201
Annabella 13, 46, 49, 210, 237–38, 255
Almanacco letterario 47
Alvaro, Corrado 80, 164, 183
America 10, 64–65, 67
  comics of 16–17, 46, 51–53, 80, 83–85, 89–90, 93, 96, 98, 100–01, 103, 105–09, 114–17, 119–20, 123 n. 68, 125, 128–29, 130 n. 76, 131–32, 134, 136, 138–41, 145–52, 156–59, 256–57, 261
  culture of 15, 17–18, 63–65, 69–74, 76–77, 80–81, 84, 87, 157–58, 166, 169, 172, 178, 181, 186, 189, 197, 202, 259–60
  image of 4, 10, 18, 71, 166, 178, 197–98
  influence of 15, 23, 43, 54, 62–63, 63, 77–78, 80, 84, 93, 100, 104 n. 41, 112, 121–22, 134, 145, 150–52, 157–59, 167–68, 172, 180–81, 185, 187 n. 72, 189, 191, 193–94, 196–97, 199, 206, 215, 241, 255, 256, 257, 259–62
  myth of 10, 64 n. 18, 72 n. 38, 80, 128, 158, 197, 259
  violence of 67, 72, 129, 197–98
  women in 74–77, 178, 197, 208
Americanisation 15–16, 23, 63, 65, 85, 104 n. 41, 122, 128, 134, 137, 139, 152, 157, 185
Ansaldo, Giovanni 47 & n. 41, 163
anti-Americanism 64, 67–70, 72, 74, 129, 166, 196, 260
anti-Fascism 47 n. 41, 48–50, 64 n. 18, 146, 166
L'Audace 98–99, 128
autarchy 2–5, 10, 24, 63, 167, 183
  campaign for 9, 11, 42, 51, 54, 81, 84, 125, 179
L'Avventuroso 3–4, 15–17, 21–23, 25, 42–43, 45 n. 37, 46, 51–53, 83–85, 88, 98–99, 106–50, 152–59, 167, 206, 255, 257–59, 261

balilla 9, 92, 112, 121
Baraldi, Ita 217, 244–52
Baroli, Amerigo 164
beauty, model of 53–54, 75, 76–77, 80, 208, 222, 234, 236, 251–53
behaviour 75, 226
  models of 52, 85, 208

La Belle équipe 192
Bemporad 19, 45
Benedetti, Arrigo 80, 164, 168–69, 186, 202
Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung 59–62, 167
Bertoldo 49
Bianchi, Alberto 217
Bianchi, Franco 93 n. 20
'Bibì e Bibò' *see* 'Katzenjammer Kids'
Blatt der Hausfrau see Brigitte
Boccasile, Gino 213 n. 21, 217
Bontà, Wanda 80, 217, 230
Bontempelli, Massimo 44, 204 n. 2
Bragiotti, Giulia 185
Brancati, Vitaliano 183
Brigitte 216
Brin, Irene 53, 80, 164
'Bringing Up Father' 138
Buffalo Bill 46, 53, 106, 178
business, imperatives of 48–50, 52, 107, 259–60
'Buster Brown' 89
Buzzati, Dino 80, 164, 183, 185

Caesar, Kurt 100
Cain, James 185–86
Calderini, Emma 217
Capa, Robert 61
captions 61 n. 13, 90, 92–93, 95–96, 98, 115–17, 120, 122, 136, 147, 170, 174–76, 188–89, 197, 224
cartoons 98, 104 n. 41, 105, 176–77, 191
Casa Editrice Italia 43
Catholicism 100, 117, 141, 205
Cecchi, Emilio (Il Tarlo) 66–67, 75 n. 44, 129, 164, 171, 181 n. 55, 186, 197, 260
censorship 194, 196
  Fascist 1, 18, 21, 32–34, 40–41, 43, 49, 63, 69, 77, 81, 84, 100, 101, 129, 137–38, 141, *144*, 163, 180, 183, 196 n. 92, 205, 257, 259–60
  impact of 3–4, 16–17, 51–52, 109, 179
Ceretti, Emilio 171, 185
children 80, 176, 207, 209, 224, 229–30, 232–33
  as comic-strip heroes 114, 116–17, 123
  education of 74, 84, 88, 91–94, 95–96, 102–03, 116, 117, 119, 139
  magazines for 14, 37, 42, 46, 83–85, 86, 89, 97–98, 102–06, 112, 119, *126*, 127–28, 138–39
  contamination by 102–06
  language in 90–91, 92–93, 96, 98, 124–25
  as readers 90, 97, 100–101, 104–06, 109
Ciano, Galeazzo 32–33
cinema 17–18, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39, 47, 48 n. 42, 78, 164, 174 n. 35, 176, 178–79, 186–87, 190–91, 194–95, 204–05, 208, 227–28
  American 104 n. 41, 193
  Italian 190, 192–93
Cinema Illustrazione 18 n. 29, 46–47, 49, 189 n. 76
'Cino e Franco' 53 n. 51, 96, 114 n. 54
Cipolla, Arnaldo 75
colour 56, 89 n. 12 & 13, 104 n. 41, 116 n. 57, 117–19 & n. 59, 123–24 & n. 70, 133, 138 n. 86, 148, 207 n. 8, 210–11, 213 n. 21, 256 n. 1

comic strips 11, 17, 46, 84–87, 89, 93 n. 20, 94, 96, 98–99, 106, 110, 112, 114–17, 119–20, 122, 132–34, 137–39, 145, 147, 149, 151, 164, 172–73, 256
comics
  adventure 46, 51, 85, 93–94, 98, 100 n. 32, 101–08, 110, 116–17, 121, 125, 128, 130, 139, 145–46, 151–52, 157–58, 261
  American 16–17, 23, 46, 51–52, 80, 83–86, 89–90, 93, 100, 103, 105–10, 114–17, 119, 120, 123 n. 68, 125, 128–29, 130 n. 76, 131–32, 134, 138–40, 145–52, 156–59, 256–57, 260–61
  Golden Age of 83, 108, 136, 138
  heroes in 53, 84–85, 87–88, 99–101, 104–06 & n. 44, 107, 112, 114, 115 & n. 56, 117 & n. 58, 119, 122, 123–24, 133, 134, 135–36, 137–38, 140, 144–46, 152–53, 156, 157, 256
  Italian 4, 16–17, 23, 44 n. 35, 46, 83–87, 90–91, 94, 96, 98, 100, 104, 108–10, 116 n. 57, 117, 120, 122, 128–29, 134, 138–41, 145, 149, 152, 157–59, 255
  traditional 90, 95, 98, 106, 120, 261
Confidences 203, 214–15
consumerism 12, 43, 54, 67, 73–74, 205
Corriere dei Piccoli 86, 89, 92, 93 n. 20, 94 n. 22, 110, 117, 119, 121
Corriere della Sera 29, 50, 56, 66, 86, 162 n. 2, 238 n. 65, 255
Corrierino see Corriere dei Piccoli
Cossio, Carlo 106 n. 44, 108, 120, 128 n. 73
crime fiction 50 n. 47, 179, 181–83, 185, 192
crisis-woman (*donna-crisi*) 76 & n. 45, 208
culture
  control of 1–2, 4, 14, 34–35, 40, 48, 54, 102, 259
  Fascist 10, 18, 21, 30, 34–35, 37, 39, 41–42, 64 n. 18, 65, 150, 252, 261
  Italian 1–2, 15, 26, 30, 36, 41, 44 n. 35, 50 n. 47, 51, 54, 77 n. 48, 80, 84, 93, 94, 157 n. 97, 158, 167, 183, 193, 202, 217, 253, 256–57, 261
  mass 26, 42, 64, 204
  popular 4–6, 14–15, 23, 26, 34–37, 40, 43, 54, 138, 147, 158–59, 166, 196, 261–62

Die Dame 216
Dandolo, Milly 44
D'Annunzio, Gabriele 44, 178
dialogue, multicultural 16, 23, 253, 255, 257, 260–61
Diana Palmer/Diana Palmesi 124–25, *126*, *127*, 140, 150, 152, *155*
'Dick Fulmine' 106 n. 44, 128 n. 73
La Domenica del Corriere 56
La Donna 13, 43, 47, 237 n. 62
Donna Fascista 50
Drago, Antonietta 164, 187, 194–96
drawings, style of 100, 122 & n. 67, 150–51, 152, 157

emancipation 74–76, 140
Emanuel, Guglielmo 96, 129, 136–37

England 56, 170, 174, 256 n. 1
eroticism 38 n. 26, 136–37, 139–41, *142*, *143*, *144*, 150, 151, 152, 208
Ethiopia 4, 10, 24, 34, 51, 68 n. 29, 120 n. 62
Ethiopians 121, 140, 155
Eva 13, 204 n. 3, 207, 210, 219–20, 237, 255

Falk, Lee 123, *124*, 136, 152
family, the 21, 46, 70, 74–76, 84, 139, 204, 208, 210, 228, 234, 236, 244
  life of 38, 42, 138
Fancelli, Emilio 46, 108, 112, *113*, 116 n. 57, 120–21
Fantoni, Guido 108, 134
Farrell, James T. 183
'Fasciolino' 92
Fascistisation 29, 76, 92, 259
fashion 22, 43, 56, 61, 65, 75–76, 164, 204, 206 n. 7, 208, 213, 215, 217, 219–21, 224–25, 228, 235, 241–43, 252
Faulkner, William 180, 183
femininity, model of 19–20, 75–76, 138–40, 144, 150, 205–06, 220–22, 236
film
  American 12, 187, 190–91
  Italian 174 n. 35, 190–91, 194
film industry 18, 190, 194
  American 18, 187, 194, 195, 196 n. 92
  Italian 63, 186–87, 193–94
First World War *see* Great War, the
Flaiano, Ennio 164
flapper, the 74–76, 208, 216
'Flash Gordon' 85, 88, 96 n. 27, 100 n. 32, 110, 112, 116 n. 57, 117, 119, 124, 128, 129, 130, 136, 140, *143*, 145–49, 151, *152*, 153, 157
'Fortunello' *see* 'Happy Hooligan'
La fossa degli angeli 174 n. 35, 191
France 18, 56, 59, 78–79, 83 n. 2, 167, 169 n. 22, 175, 182, 232, 258
The Funnies 85 & n. 5
Funnies on Parade 86 & n. 6

Gentile, Giovanni 2, 5, 162 n. 2, 221 n. 34, 226, 234
Germany 1, 6 n. 9, 34 n. 17, 49, 51 n. 48, 56, 59–60, 68 n. 26, 78 & n. 50, 83 n. 2, 137, 167, 175, 180, 222 n. 35, 258
Gerarchia 68, 162 n. 2, 238 n. 65
I Gialli crime series 50–51, 182 n. 59, 183
Gioia! 13, 210, 219–20, 237
Il Giornale dei Balilla 91, 92
Il Giornale di Cino e Franco 114, 127–28
Il Giornalino della Domenica 89, 93
Gioventù Sportiva 50
Gold Diggers 198
Good Housekeeping 215–16
Gramsci, Antonio 5, 16 n. 8, 261
Gran Consiglio, il 31, 91, 255
Le Grandi Firme 47
Grazia 3, 13, 15, 18–23, 25, 41, 43, 46, 51–52, 139, 166 n. 13, 177 n. 48, 203, 206–07, 210–15, 217–53, 255, 257–61
Great Britain 162 n. 2, 169–70, 174–75
Great War, the 5–6, 24, 64, 66, 92 n. 19, 133, 199, 204
'Guido Ventura' 99
Gulf Comic Weekly 86
Gulf Oil 86

Halper, Albert 185
'Happy Hooligan' 89, 90
Hecht, Ben 183 & n. 60
Hilton, James 185
Hollywood 18, 22, 53–54, 77, 80, 104, 112, 115, 139, 159, 179, 186–99, 202, 206, 208, 216, 222, 241, 259
housewife 22, 49, 74, 210, 215, 218, 225
Hughes, Richard 185

ideals, Fascist 8–9, 19–20, 36, 43, 51, 76, 91, 100, 103, 140, 143, 156, 221, 226, 231, 236, 251–53, 260
identity, national 24, 26, 41, 64, 81
ideology, Fascist 1–2, 5–10, 31, 35 n. 18, 36, 38–39, 42, 54, 71, 92, 95, 100, 121, 134, 138, 220, 226, 230, 257–58, 259–61
The Illustrated London News 56 n. 3, 59
L'Illustration 56 n. 3, 59, 61
L'Illustrazione Italiana 56
L'Illustrazione popolare 58 n. 5
Die Illustrierte Zeitung 56 n. 3, 59
images 13, 17–18, 38, 44, 46–49, 53, 56, 58–62, 72, 90–91, 94–95, 97–98, 109, 112, 134, 137, 164, 166–70, 172–79, 187 & n. 71, 197–98, 202, 213 n. 21, 224, 225 n. 38, 253, 257
imports 10–11, 26, 102, 167 n. 18, 195, 199
  American 101, 194, 195 n. 90
influence
  American *see* America, influence of
  Catholic 206, 220
  European 17, 23, 59, 62, 159, 187 n. 72, 215
  Fascist 12, 20–23, 41–42, 54, 91, 226, 233, 260, 262
  of foreign culture 1–3, 12, 15, 17–18, 48, 87, 169, 179–80, 206, 260–61
innovation 3, 16, 46, 55, 58, 60, 71, 78, 93, 108–09, 119, 131–32, 204, 219
interwar years 1, 14–15, 18, 24–25, 58, 63, 65, 78, 83, 159, 167, 258, 261–62
Italian East Africa 4 n. 5, 100, 130, 156
Italianisation 15, 17, 21, 23, 90, 100, 114, 139, 152, 157–58, 217, 255
italianità 8, 143
L'Italiano 161
Italo-Ethiopian War 4, 10, 130, 180
Italy 1, 4 n. 5, 6–7, 10, 12–13, 15–17, 21, 23, 32, 34, 36, 43, 49, 50 n. 47, 51, 53 n. 51, 54–56, 58–60, 63–67, 70, 78–80, 83–84, 86–90, 93, 96, 102, 106, 110, *126*, 129, 135, 138, 140–41, 146, 158–59, 161, 167, 169, 175, 176, 179, 182, 186, 190–91, 193–94, 196–97, 204, 206, 222, 232, 241, 252–53, 255–57, 259–61
  Fascist 1–3, 5–6, 15, 25, 26, 30, 51 n. 48, 62–65, 67 n. 26, 68–69, 71, 104, 250, 259, 261
  image of 30, 32, 66
  population of 1, 8, 21, 29, 186, 237
L'Intrepido 110, 124

Jumbo 88, 93–96, 98–99, 110, 119
'Jungle Jim' 96 n. 27, 106, 110, 117, 120–21, 135, 145

'Katzenjammer Kids' 89
King Features Syndicate 96, 99, 123, 129, 172 n. 32
Komroff, Manuel 185

Ladies' Home Journal 78, 215
The Lady of Secrets 190
language 8, 20, 41, 84, 90, 121, 124–25, 147–48, 155, 157, 180, 181, 185, 220, 225–26, 227, 231, 237–39
  register 58 n. 5, 114, 147–48, 155, 228–30, 231, 237, 238–39
Lardner, Ring 183
Laterza publishing house 45
Lawrence, D. H. 185
League of Nations, the 10, 175, 180
Lei see also Annabella 46, 49, 51, 210 n. 15, 219–20, 237–39
Lemmi, Roberto 108, 135, 157
Le Monnier 45
Leopardi, Giacomo 199–200
Leporini, Bernardo 164
Lidel 13, 204, 237
Life 17 n. 28, 62, 168, 169, 170, 177, 178, 188, 257
lifestyle 11, 12, 43, 53, 72–74, 206, 209, 215, 217, 225
'Little Nemo' 89
'Little Snow Drop' 94
Longanesi, Leo 47–48, 50, 52 n. 50, 62, 79, 161–68, 170, 172 & n. 32, 173, 175–76, 199–202
Lorenzini, Paolo (Collodi Nipote) 46, 80, 97–98, 108, 116, 127
Luciano *see* Scerbanenco, Giorgio
Luciano Serra pilota 193–94
'Lucio l'avanguardista' 94, *95*
'L'uomo mascherato' *see* 'The Phantom'
McCay, Winsor 89
Maccari, Mino 76, 164
Das Magazin 59, 187 n. 72
magazines
  American 62, 77, 79–80, 166–68, 171, 178, 215, 260
  British 56, 60–62, 94, 187 n. 72, 215
  children's *see* children, magazines for
  as entertainment 12, 22, 42, 56, 65, 77, 87, 93–94, 95–96, 106–08, 109, 165, 175–77, 202, 204, 205, 215, 221, 225, 235, 236, 256–57
  European 55, 61–62, 168, 171 n. 28, 174, 187 n. 72, 215, 217, 260
  format of 12, 48, 78, 98, 110, 115, 116 n. 57, 133–34, 166, 179, 187, 212–13, 215, 255, 257
  French 7–8, 17 n. 28, 56, 59, 61, 62 n. 15, 78 n. 50, 167–73, 177 n. 50, 187 n. 72, 188, 203, 206, 212, 214–15, 253, 260
  German 7–8, 17 n. 28, 56, 59–62, 78 n. 50, 167–73, 177 n. 50, 187 n. 72, 215–16, 222 n. 35
  price of 38, 77, 85 n. 5, 110, 167, 204, 210, 213, 217–19
  pulp 86–87, 181
  women's 3, 13, 18–20, 22, 42, 44, 49, 51–52, 58, 139, 159, 161, 166 n. 13, 203, 204, 205–06, 209–10, 212, 214–18, 222, 237, 239, 243, 253, 255–56
    advice column 18 n. 29, 20, 215–16, 217, 219, 230–35, 237–52, 256, 258

rapport with reader 44, 52–53, 213, 220, 225, 236, 241, 245
Mancini, Guido 102
'Mandrake the Magician' 88, 117 n. 58, 119–20, 156
'Mandrake, l'uomo del mistero' 119–20, 123 n. 68, 127, 128, 135–36, 137, 140, 145, 152–57, 159
Marianne 17 n. 28, 61, 168, 177 n. 47, 179 n. 52, 187 n. 69, 257, 260
Marie-Claire 212–15, 217, 222, 225 n. 38, 257, 260
Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso 102
Mateldi, Bruna (Brunetta) 217
media, the 76, 180
mass 21, 30, 40
popular 81, 205, 255, 258
social role 26, 35, 205, 257
middle class, the 8, 22, 84, 139, 204, 206, 212, 218–20, 225, 228
'Mimmo, Mammola e Medoro' *see* 'Buster Brown'
'Mimmo Piangimai' 92
Ministry of Popular Culture 14, 35–42, 54, 101, 105–06, 131–32, 136–38, 182, 200–01
Ministero della Cultura Popolare *see* Ministry of Popular Culture
modernisation 3, 10, 12, 14, 43, 52, 55, 64–65, 69, 74, 76, 80–81, 83, 96, 157, 167, 206, 209, 220, 257, 259–61
modernity 12, 20, 40, 64–65, 69, 71–72, 76, 81, 253, 261
Mondadori, Arnoldo 14, 43–45, 48, 50–52, 166 n. 13, 212–13, 218, 220, 239, 246, 253, 259
Mondadori publishing house 3, 14, 43, 46–47, 55, 79, 81, 99, 109–10, 138, 183, 206–07, 212, 237, 252, 255
Il Mondo Illustrato 55, 58–59
Montanelli, Indro 80, 164–66, 168
Moore, Don 117, 136, 145
morality
American 67, 75, 84–85, 88, 103, 196 n. 92, 198–99
Fascist 20, 40, 54, 67, 70, 76 n. 45, 84, 95–96, 102–03, 183–84, 208, 210, 221 n. 34, 227, 230
Moravia, Alberto 73, 164, 181 n. 55, 185, 197, 201–02
Moroni-Celsi, Guido 108, 120, *121*, 122
motherhood 9, 38, 139, 207, 209, 213, 221, 226, 229, 233
Motherland, the
sacrifice for 9, 149, 156
service of 145, 207, 209, 226–27, 234
Motta, Luigi 108, 125
Mura (Maria Assunta Giulia Volpi Nannipieri) 44, 237–39
Mussino, Attilio 89
Mussolini, Benito 1–2, 5–6, 8 n. 15, 9, 29–30, 33, 35, 37–38, 40–41, 48, 50–52, 65–68, 70–71, 106 n. 44, 107, 162–63, 199–201, 208–09, 238 n. 65, 255, 261
regime of 1–2, 4, 7–8, 10–11, 14–15, 18–21, 24, 27, 28 n. 4, 30, 34, 39–40, 48, 51, 53, 63–65, 68, 71, 74, 76, 91, 93–94, 102, 106, 139, 205, 210, 224, 227, 257, 259–61
Mussolini, Vittorio 49, 193 & n. 86

Nazis, the 137, 170, 216
Nazism 170
Nerbini, Giuseppe 15, 45–46, 50–51, 106–07, 139
Nerbini, Mario 16, 41, 46, 50–52, 79, 96, 98, 107–09, 123, 125, 127–30, 132, 136–38, 141, 158, 259
Nerbini publishing house 3, 14, 17 n. 27, 43, 48–49, 52, 55, 79, 81, 84, 96, 99, 108, 110, 112, 114, 119, 135, 139, *144*, 145, 147
New Deal, the 67–68, 172
new man, the 5, 9, 39–41, 70, 207
new woman, the 5, 9, 74, 204–05, 207 & n. 9, 209, 230, 234
New Yorker, The 17 n. 28, 168–69, 172, 257
News Chronicle 169
Novella 43–44, 46–47, 54, 202, 204
Novelli, Enrico (Yambo) 108
Il Novellino 46, 89, 108
Novello 164

Omnibus 3, 13, 15, 17–18, 21–23, 25, 43, 49, 52 n. 50, 53 n. 52, 62, 79, 108, 114 n. 55, 161–81, 183–86, 188–89, 195–203, 206, 208, 217, 255, 257–61
Opper, Burr 89–90

Palazzeschi, Aldo 164
Pannunzio, Mario 80, 164, 187, 190–92, 193 n. 86, 194–96, 198, 202
Passo Romano 50
'La Pattuglia Volante' *see* 'Radio Patrol'
periodicals *see* magazines
Peverelli, Luciana 44
'The Phantom' 85, 88, 123–25, *126*, 128, 131, 133–36, 140, 151–52, *155*, 157
photographs/photography *see* images
photojournalism 59–60, 78, 166, 177
photomontage 48 n. 42, 60, 177–78
Photoplay 189
La Piccola Italiana 92, 119, 139
pictures *see* images
Pintor, Giaime 164, 197
Pirandello, Luigi 44, 204 n. 2
Praz, Mario 164, 186, 197
press, the 1–3, 12, 20, 26–33, 36–41, 47 n. 41, 48, 55, 58, 63, 78 n. 50, 80, 92, 219, 246, 259, 261
  children's 14, 84, 92, 102–04, 109, 124–25
  comics 94, 107, 256
  foreign 169, 171–72
  periodical 1, 10, 12–13, 18, 23, 28, 37–38, 42, 52, 62, 86, 101, 107, 161, 163, 165–67, 180, 202–04, 205 n. 5, 253, 260
  popular 1–4, 8, 12, 14–16, 20, 23–25, 34–35, 42, 45, 50 n. 47, 55–63, 77–80, 91, 161, 215, 221–22, 255, 257–60
  traditional 106, 218–19
Press Office 4, 27–36
Prezzolini, Giuseppe 73, 80, 164
Princess Narda 120, 140, *144*, 153–56
propaganda 7, 19, 32, 34, 36, 41, 69, 103–04 & n. 41, 106, 120–21, 129, 134, 193–94, 206, 208, 251, 260

anti-American 64, 67–68, 74
means of 27, 30, 37, 259
Public Enemy's Wife 190

Querschnitt 167, 168

Radice, Raul 217, 225
'Radio Patrol' 99, 110, 114–15, 116 n. 57, 123, 128, 134, 140, 157
'Radio Pattuglia' *see* 'Radio Patrol'
Raymond, Alex 87 n. 9, 96 n. 27, 106 n. 44, 114–15, 117, *143*, 145, 150
readership 3, 11–14, 16, 18–23, 38, 43–46, 48, 52–55, 58–60, 78, 80, 84–87, 90, 93, 99, 109, 119, 124–25, 130 n. 76, 146, 148, 161, 165, 167, 175, 186, 191, 199, 202, 204, 212–13, 217–22, 237–38, 246 n. 83, 253, 255–56, 258–61
regime, Fascist 1–2, 4, 6–15, 17–20, 22–27, 28 n. 4, 29–40, 42–43, 48–54, 63–69, 71–72, 74–77, 81, 84, 91–93, 95, 100–01, 105–06, 120–21, 125, 137, 143, 146, 161, 163 n. 7, 166, 180, 182, 183 n. 61, 192–93, 194, 197, 199–200, 202, 203–10, 220–21, 230, 233, 238, 251, 257, 259, 261
rhetoric 24, 209
anti-American 75 n. 44, 196–97, 260
Fascist 8, 9, 20, 23, 30, 92, 121, 139, 144, 146, 149, 155, 202, 205–06, 220, 226–30, 233, 237, 246, 252, 257, 261
La Risata 123
Rizzoli, Angelo 14, 43–52, 161–63, 201–02, 259
Rizzoli publishing house 3, 14, 43, 55, 79, 81, 200, 204, 219, 255
'Rob the Rover' 83 n. 2, 94, *95*
Roosevelt, Franklin Delano 67, 68 n. 29, 177, 198
rotocalco/rotocalchi 2–4, 12–26, 38–39, 43–45, 47 n. 41, 48, 54–55, 59, 62–63, 77–81, 166, 168, 175, 202–06, 209–10, 213, 218–21, 237, 239, 255–62

SAEV (Società Anonima Editrice Vecchi) 93, 99 n. 31
Salani 45, 229 n. 48
sales 21–22, 39, 43–44, 52, 60, 67, 78, 86, 94, 103, 106–08, 114 n. 54, 136–37, 149, 165, 167, 203, 210, 219, 222
Salgari, Emilio 93, 106, 108, 112, 120, 152
Sarfatti, Margherita 66–67 & n. 26, 75 n. 44
Saroyan, William 185–86, 197
Sarri, Corrado 108, 116–17, *118*, 120
Savinio, Alberto 164, 184, 199–200
Scerbanenco, Giorgio 46, 80, 166 n. 13, 217 & n. 27, 225–30, 236
'Schizzo' 89
Scudellari, Giorgio 108, 116–17, 120
Il Secolo 50
Il Secolo illustrato 43, 47, 56
Second World War, the 63, 77, 80, 217
Il Selvaggio 76
'Signor Bonaventura' 90

society 5, 26, 40, 43, 58, 64, 84, 159, 204
American 10, 18, 63–67, 69–70, 72–75, 78, 88, 129, 139, 166, 179, 197–99, 260
Fascist 12, 51 n. 48, 227, 233
Italian 1–2, 4, 6, 9, 15–16, 20, 26, 33, 36, 52, 54, 63, 65, 70–71, 80–81, 139, 147, 176, 190, 205–06, 210, 220, 228, 252–53, 257–60
mass 64, 205
modernisation of 12, 81, 220, 257, 259
patriarchal 208, 229, 226
Soldati, Mario 72, 80, 164, 180, 182–84, 197
soldier, Italian 9, 20, 92 n. 19, 93 n. 20, 133, 232–34
'Sor Pampurio' 139
Sottosegretariato di Stato per la stampa e la propaganda *see* Under-Secretariat of State for Press and Propaganda
Sovrana see Grazia
Spagnol, Tito A. 164, 181, 184
Spanish Civil War 61, 100, 170, 177–78
spirit
Fascist 31, 35, 36, 66, 101, 200
Italian 9–10, 39, 63, 70, 72, 182
Roman 41, 94
La Stampa 29, 38 n. 26, 103
State, the
control by 2, 36, 101
Fascist 1, 6, 11–12, 25, 27, 28 n. 4, 36, 37 n. 25, 39, 48, 50–53, 65–66, 68, 71, 76, 81, 84, 141, 159, 163 n. 7, 180, 233
intervention by 11–12, 16, 41, 43, 143, 196 n. 92, 257
totalitarian 2, 4–5, 8–9, 30, 35, 207
Steinbeck, John 183
stereotypes 70, 75, 193

technology 21, 25–26, 55, 58, 60–61, 70–71, 77, 202
Tempo 13, 62 n. 15
They Won't Forget 191
'Tim Tyler's Luck' 96, 114 n. 54
Tofano, Sergio 90
'Toots and Casper' 138
Topolino 14, 46, 96–99, 107–08, 110, *111*, 114 n. 54, 138 n. 86, 158, 256
Toppi, Giove 46, 96, *97*, 107 n. 45, 108, 112, *113*, 120–22, 128, 130, 135, 143, 149–52, *153*, 156–57
tradition 64, 69, 70–71, 90, 95, 98, 106, 112, *113*, 114, 162 n. 3, 208
literary 116–17, 120, 129–30, 150, 152, 158, 181
translation 10, 17, 18, 50 n. 47, 63, 89 n. 12, 99, 104 n. 41, 108 n. 47, 114 & n. 55, 115, 125, 129, 147–48, 155, 157–58, 171–72, 179–82, 183 n. 61, 185, 187 n. 70, 189, 196, 197
transnationalism 5, 18, 24–26, 54, 258–59, 261–62
I Tre Porcellini 99
La Tribuna Illustrata 56, *57*
True Story 215
Tutto 49, 201–02

Ufficio stampa del Capo del governo *see* Press Office
Uhu 17 n. 28, 59, 168, 257
Under-Secretariat of State for Press and Propaganda 4, 32–33

United Features Syndicate 99
United Kingdom, the 174, 258
United States, the *see* America

values, traditional 20, 52, 71, 75–76, 117, 206, 220–22, 227, 252–53, 258
Vecchi, Lotario 93, 98–99
Vecchietti, Giorgio 103, 104 n. 41, 105–06
Ventennio, the 10, 12, 16, 18–19, 26, 63–64, 69, 80, 84, 253, 261
Vian, Giovanni 217
Vichi, Ferdinando 108, 127, 134, 157
Visentini, Gino 168, 188–89
Vittorini, Elio 80, 164, 181 n. 55, 185, 197
Il Vittorioso 14, 99–100, 110, 124
Vogue 167 n. 18, 215
Votre Bonheur 203, 214
Vu 61–62, 167, 179 n. 52, 225 n. 38, 257

Walt Disney 47, 96, 191
Western Europe 5, 15, 48, 80, 257, 260–62
Woman's Own 215
women
  American 72, 74–75, 76
  German 170–71, 216
  image of 19, 43, 49, 74, 138–40, 143–44, 205, 209–10, 221, 252–53
  models of 49, 51, 74, 75–76, 140, 204, 208, 210, 216, 220–21, 234, 246, 253
  as readers 52–53
  rural 218
  traditional role 20, 43, 74, 76 n. 45, 138, 205–10, 220–21, 227, 234, 246

Young, Lyman 96
youth, Italian 68, 85, 132, 146–47, 250, 256
  education of 38 n. 26, 84, 91–93, 94, 139
  as heroes 94, *95*, 121
  as readers 52–53 & n. 51, 90, 93, 100–01, 103–06, 125, 127–28, 247–48, 256
  Fascist 9 n. 17, 94, 102

Zavattini, Cesare 22, 44, 46–47, 50 n. 44, 53, 80, 189 n. 76, 217, 224

In the interwar years, Italy underwent profound social and cultural transformations which shaped the emergence of a modern mass-consumer society. Amidst the Fascist regime's centralised control over cultural production, new forms of popular print culture flourished, most notably the *rotocalco*, the illustrated magazine aimed at a broad readership. This book explores the development and popularity of these magazines in the 1930s and early 1940s, focusing on how they navigated the tensions between authoritarian cultural policies and the powerful appeal of foreign models, especially from the USA. Di Franco analyses three representative magazines, investigating the complex dynamics of cultural exchange defining Italian print culture under Fascism, a field caught between commercial imperatives and ideological pressures; and examines how these magazines served as sites of transnational cultural negotiation, blending entertainment, Fascist influence and the demands of an increasingly modern readership. The *rotocalco* emerges as both a product and a driver of Italy's evolving mass-media landscape, in which nationalist rhetoric co-existed with international influences and the popular press mirrored society's contradictions and transformations.



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