

Bianco su Nero.
Iconografia della razza e della guerra d’Etiopia

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Bianco su Nero is an archival exploration of the visual narratives adopted by the Italian fascist regime before and during the occupation of Ethiopia, specifically from the autumn of 1934 to the autumn of 1936. The central theme of the volume is the analysis of the images deployed by the regime through its propaganda to represent Benito Mussolini’s expansionist projects, and the strategic necessity of a coherent communication plan to win public support. The array of images analysed in the fascist context and ideologies are explored within the international political panorama from the Geneva Conference in 1932 onwards, as well as the visual popular context of the period.

Methodologically speaking, the primary focus of this archival research lies on visual sources from Italian journals and periodicals of the 1930s, along with occasional references to the international press. Worth noting is the extensive use of *veline*—notes from the fascist government to the press intended to provide specific indications, such as titles, contents, and tones, for delivering news. The corpus also comprises Italian and international advertising, pictures, and paintings, aimed to further compare and elucidate the visual suggestions that influenced the collective imagination of the Italian population during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

Spanning five chapters, an introduction, and Federica Rovati’s foreword, this work engages in a chronological analysis of the use of images in the Italian press to argue that issues of race, gender, and European imperialist dynamics were strategically shaped to garner support from public opinion in favour of the colonial agenda. Overall, the work identifies three different temporal stages of Ethiopia’s invasion—the preparation, the offensive, and the initial occupation—to show the reader the key role of visual communication.

The first chapter provides an overview of the international political landscape in early 1935 and the visual and communication means that the Italian press deployed to accelerate the preparation of public opinion for the invasion of Ethiopia. Beginning with accurate references to the complex colonial negotiations that had involved

France, the United Kingdom, and Italy since the Tripartite Treaty of 1906, the author focuses on the political debate aimed at delegitimising the United Kingdom and Haile Selassie in the eyes of the Italian population. Furthermore, a wide use of racialised and stereotyped iconographic representations (particularly from Ennio de Rosa, Gobbo, and Walter Molino) showcases the narrative deployed to justify the invasion of Ethiopia. This narrative extensively refers to concepts such as enslavement, tribal brutality, and cannibalism, thereby adhering to the established imaginary set by European colonial powers. While discussing the role played by the various international actors that might have had an interest in Ethiopia, the author identifies the core of the fascist propaganda's communication strategy as a 'civilising mission' aimed at the 'savage,' the 'primitive,' and the 'barbarian,' and as a war of liberation in favour of the same subjects against other 'corrupt' and 'immoral' foreign forces.

The second chapter compares various visual sources and pinpoints a connection in the representation of sensuality and contamination from a racialised perspective. Starting with an examination of the Italian press reaction to the League of Nations' sanctions after Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, the author introduces a brief case study focused on the character of Josephine Baker, the 'Black Venus.' This case study serves to showcase the exotifying approach that the Italian press used to tangle colonial and erotic components and make 'the overseas adventure itself' (66) increasingly appear as a sexual experience. Righettoni shows that the communication choice of juxtaposing the conquest of the feminine body and colonial territories was so effective in visual and popular culture that it became an issue in 1936 when racial laws were implemented to discourage 'miscegenation' in Italian East Africa.

The third chapter revolves around the legacy of the First Italo-Ethiopian War, with emphasis on the battle of Adwa in 1896. In an attempt to link the memory of the fallen during the first colonial invasion with the values of the fascist campaign, this narrative elevated the native Ascaris soldiers as a symbol of Italian revenge in the colonial context. The author does not fall short in exploring the ambivalence within this narration, which needed the Ethiopian Italian soldier to be the bearer and narrator of Italian nostalgic memory while also embodying a racially, culturally, and cognitively inferior alterity. Therefore, the Italian press shaped the representation of the Ascaris as living proof of the success of the 'civilising' intervention inherent in the fascist expansionist project.

The fourth chapter joins the dots of the ambivalent imaginaries of East Africa produced by the Italian press between January and May 1936, and retraces how fascist propaganda celebrated the Italian colonialist project and its values. Through the analysis of a wide array of pictures and illustrations, the author recovers the parallelism drawn between the United Kingdom and Ethiopia on one side, and the Italian mission on the other, resulting in a contrast between barbarity and civilisation that served to further boost public support for the fascist expansionist project. The chapter resumes the discussion of concepts of liberation and civilisation and further explores the manipulation and adaptation of visual material performed by the press to convey these

concepts.

The fifth and last chapter broadens the analysis to include other sources of visual information, such as cinema and architecture. It marks the beginning of a new debate concerning the production of audio-video material for shaping public opinion in Italian East Africa. The author discusses Roberto Chiarini and Telesio Interlandi's ideas of producing politicised visual and educational content, displaying the fear of racial contamination that influenced the selection of audio-video material for the occupied territories, as well as the ambivalent 'civilising' aims of the regime in East Africa. Additionally, Righettoni traces the beginning of colonial architecture in Italian East Africa, illustrating the now-established ambivalence between purity and contamination: on the one hand, the rationalist controversy of the pure stereometry of the Roman fascist architectural style, and on the other, the need of contamination with indigenous and European settlements, as well as research on the environmental and weather conditions in East Africa.

The first thematic thread that ties all the chapters together is the implications of the racial discourse in the Italian regime, intended to draw and strengthen the dichotomy between coloniser and colonised. The author describes different visual strategies implemented to depict Ethiopians with dehumanised parodies. The exaggerated stereotypes of 'negritude' were corroborated by a large amount of material (anthropometric data, detailed anthropological and ethnographic accounts) collected by colonial explorers and anthropologists with the clear intent of promoting a racist perception of Ethiopia. This work does not shy away from addressing the use of anthropology during colonialism and the role anthropologists played in supporting racial theories. Emphasis is placed on the work of Lidio Cipriani, a supporter of the regime and the colonial agenda, who produced a relevant number of documents and materials meant to scientifically prove the intrinsic inferiority of the colonised person and classify categories of different phenotypes connected to specific cognitive abilities. In the press, such a message was also conveyed through the extensive use and manipulation of images produced by European colonisers throughout the entire African continent.

The gendered representation of the colonised is the second significant theme of this work. Indeed, the descriptions and depictions of masculine and feminine East African bodies played a vital and malleable role in the regime's propaganda: the masculine presence was portrayed as disempowered and submissive to promote the early stages of the colonisers' migrations in East Africa, powerful yet subjectable during the armed conflict, and domesticable as living proof of the 'civilising' intervention implemented by the regime. Similarly, the feminine essence was depicted as sensual and captivating, objectified and conquerable, repulsive and impure; her body symbolically fulfilled the fantasies of land to occupy, colonise, and own. Righettoni successfully highlights the juxtaposition of the Ethiopian land with the Ethiopian woman in the idea of occupation conveyed by the Italian press. Retracing this obsession with colours and shapes offers theoretical grounds to conceptualise the fascist idea of racial purity and

strongly reminds the reader of another 'Venus' in literature, Saartje Baartman, whose body was obsessed over, misused, and constantly reinvented in Europe, including during fascism.

Bianco su Nero offers a compelling analysis of the political, social, and popular layers in the Italian scenario of the fascist regime and effectively encases the narrative of the Italian press in both national and international representations of racialised imaginaries. The volume also highlights the ambivalent representation of the Italian colonial projects and their cause-and-effect connection with the Italian press. Furthermore, it pays commendable attention to the entanglement of political and popular visual culture and their reciprocal influence. The anthropological domain, explored through the lens of Lidio Cipriani and with a fleeting citation of Marcel Griaule, could have been more extensively represented to further contextualise topics covered in this work, like 'human zoos' (which persisted in itinerant and permanent exhibitions in Europe until the late 1950s), racial discourses connected to purity of race and miscegenation, or the occupation and the colonial question. Nevertheless, Righettoni's work offers a wealth of interdisciplinary suggestions and merits recognition for contributing to reigniting the often-silenced debate on Italian colonialism, its propaganda, and its legacy.