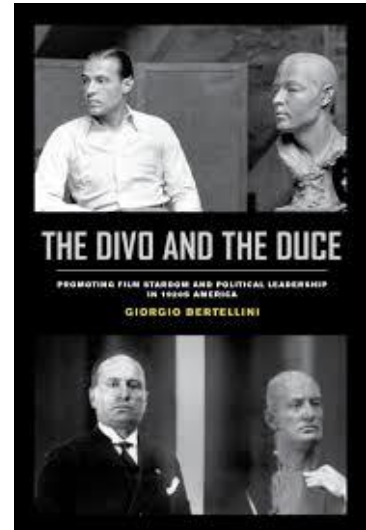


Giorgio Bertellini

# The Divo and the Duce

Promoting Film Stardom and  
Political Leadership in 1920s  
America

Berkeley, University of California Press,  
2019, pp. 352



Review by Rebecca Bauman

**Keywords:** *publicity, politics, Hollywood, stardom, propaganda*

Giorgio Bertellini's book, *The Divo and The Duce*, recounts how the first decades of the 20th century brought significant transformation to American politics and entertainment at a time that witnessed both "the rising political import of celebrity culture and the growing popularity of authoritarian political leadership" (4). Bertellini looks at how publicity became the key force for creating both political and cinematic stars by comparing the American reception of silent film actor Rudolph Valentino and Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. As Bertellini argues, these Italian figures achieved an unlikely but significant degree of fame in the United States not just because they both embodied ideals of dominant Latin masculinity, but also for the way that an extensive structure of public relations disseminated those ideals to eager audiences. Making detailed use of both film history and political theory, Bertellini's study is particularly timely, for it arrives at a moment of heightened awareness of how deeply inflected American life is by the convergence of celebrity, media, and politics.

Valentino's and Mussolini's charisma and performative styles, as well as the social and political environment from which they emerged, are all obvious avenues for this investigation. In his book Bertellini also proposes another model, which is to look at the publicity processes themselves, and to this he dedicates the first section of his three-part book. Entitled "Power and Persuasion," this portion examines the transformation of both politics and entertainment in

America in the first decades of the 20th century, and their increasing reliance on sophisticated publicity structures for shaping opinion and promoting powerful male figures as a means of harnessing consent. In the second section, “The Divo, or the Governance of Romance,” Bertellini focuses on Hollywood and the creation of Rudolph Valentino as a star. Masculine celebrity is then reexamined through the figure of Mussolini, who is the subject of the third section, entitled “The Duce, or the Romance of Undemocratic Governing.” This part details the ways in which stardom and political leadership became analogous through the collaboration of cinema and political propaganda.

Chapter 1 looks at the origins of celebrity-making in politics in early 20th-century political thought, examining in particular the United States presidency and how Woodrow Wilson adopted theories of popular sovereignty. Wilson keenly appreciated the importance of popular opinion, which would be necessary to bolster support for American intervention in the Great War, and founded the country’s first propaganda office, the Committee on Public Information (CPI). This occurred at a time when the fledgling film industry was also becoming aware of its potential role in American political life as well as of its tactical need to create strong alliances with the government. It would soon collaborate with the CPI on various newsreels, and throughout the war Hollywood played a significant role in bolstering Wilson’s image as a leader. This merging of interests signaled acknowledgement of the power the movie industry could wield in helping advance the interests of the government.

Chapter 2 looks more closely at the men and women who were starting to theorize the role of politics and public opinion, examining in particular figures such as Walter Lippman, John Dewey, and Charles E. Merriam. Through such influential publications as the newly-established progressive political journal *New Republic*, discussions regarding crowd thought, public opinion, and the perils of democracy were articulated. Notably, despite the move towards isolationism that followed the end of the Great War, this was also a time of cultural pluralism that helped sanction the attractiveness of foreign personalities to the American public, a phenomenon that, Bonnie Honig notes (2011), enables democratic regimes to import values that they themselves are unable to provide. As Bertellini tells us, this would eventually allow for the creation of mass appeal of foreign entertainment figures such as Valentino and political leaders such as Mussolini.

To demonstrate how the intellectual debates over the role of publicity and its effects on modern democratic governance were put into practice, Chapter 3 examines how the First World War granted the Hollywood film industry opportunities to expand its global reach and attain greater cultural legitimacy. The star system became one way in which the political objectives of the

nation and Hollywood coalesced. In this period the girl-next-door roles of screen idol Mary Pickford enabled her to become a symbol of American fortitude, while her future husband Douglas Fairbanks epitomized new models of American manhood that privileged athleticism and juvenile virtue. These iconic figures were backed by an industry that was benefitting from government economic policies and political strategies, while also leveraging increased investment from big banks and high finance. The power of Hollywood was increasing exponentially and stars such as Pickford and Fairbanks were their spokespersons. Even when the actors' onscreen popularity began to wane, their active involvement in the war bond drives as well as their patriotic film roles helped inaugurate a new era of celebrity ambassadorship.

It is this phenomenon that begs the question of how these all-American screen idols gave way to the decidedly foreign appeal of figures such as Valentino and Mussolini. In his second section of the book, Bertellini focuses upon the Divo, Rudolph Valentino, a figure who came to represent a new masculine ideal that in many ways would pave the way for Mussolini's eventual reception in the United States. Starting in Chapter 4 and continuing in the following one, Bertellini contextualizes Valentino's ethnic and sexual identity within the context of changing mores of gender roles in 1920s America, an epoch in which the figures of the bachelor and the flapper augured a youth culture predicated on greater independence. Taken in association with the prevalence of female spectatorship amongst film audiences, the emphasis on sexual appeal and desirability pivoted Hollywood from the more wholesome virtues epitomized by stars such as Fairbanks and Pickford towards slightly more dangerous figures. Valentino in many ways was an ideal figure for this shift: his foreign origin, exotic roles as Middle Eastern or Latin characters, and his own scandal-inflected biography insinuated possibilities for peril and transgression. At the same time, his film roles themselves always carried with them a reassurance of a white, European identity that helped distinguish the Italian-born actor from the racialized Other that remained a denigrated figure on American screens. Moreover, Valentino's supposedly aristocratic credentials helped setting him apart from the image of the Southern Italian immigrant, a critical distinction that explains the popularity of Valentino at a time when Italians in American motion pictures were generally depicted as degenerate criminals or colorfully backward illiterates (Bondanella 2004). As Bertellini explains, Valentino "was a *Hollywood* Italian, after all, not a New York one" (89, emphasis in the original).

To illustrate the iconography of the Divo Bertellini gives some textual analyses of Valentino's cinematic performances, including in his discussion some of the actor's early roles that have often been overlooked by silent film scholars. Yet, his interests go deeper than film criticism, as he gives significant space to chronicling the development of Valentino's career in conjunction

with the Hollywood machinery of publicity and promotion, citing key players in the production, screenwriting, and design of his films that helped determine the way the Divo figure was disseminated to audiences. In so doing Bertellini moves away from star theory, which is noticeably absent in his discussion, to privilege the historical factors that made Valentino such a recognizable and symbolically significant figure in the American popular consciousness. These chapters make continuous reference to the interplay between publicity and the development of a kind of idealized exotic masculinity that would characterize both the Divo and the Duce in the American press, and in Chapter 6 we see the actual moment in which these two figures brush against one another. Although Mussolini and Valentino never met or corresponded, the presence of American Blackshirts at Valentino's funeral laying a wreath supposedly sent by the Italian dictator displays an overt attempt to capitalize on the Divo's fame and help legitimize the regime abroad. This apparently unauthorized gesture is one of the few times where we see the historical collision of these two celebrities.

Bertellini, however, is less interested in direct parallels and more dedicated to exploring the simultaneous construction of an archetype of the dominating Latin male that appealed not just to female spectators, but to Americans more generally. This comparative framework is explored in the third part of the book, in which Bertellini looks at the reception of Mussolini in the United States and at how the dictator, who never actually visited America, received positive press through the often overlapping efforts of diplomats, newspapers, and Hollywood producers. In Chapter 7 Bertellini explains the ways in which these efforts helped promote a cult of personality that distracted from the undemocratic policies of the Fascist regime. This tactic was in part successful because of the strategic economic and political advantages of a strong rapport with the Italian government—an approach that endured until the early 1930s, when public perception soured following the Italian colonial expansion in Africa.

Of note here, and key to one of the main ideas of the book, is the way in which both interested and disinterested correspondents helped configure the Duce as a kind of cinematic *divo*, likening him to a movie star and emphasizing his physical prowess and sex appeal, an aspect that had already been essential to the creation of stars such as Fairbanks and had also characterized publicity coverage of Valentino. The same way that the Hollywood movie magazines emphasized Valentino's exotic features while also associating him with all-American ideals of self-discipline and physical effort, the press spin on Mussolini sought to “combine exotic Italian elements with recognizably American features” (184). Tropes of Italians as weak and ineffectual helped promote the figure of Mussolini as a much-needed antidote to the presumed effeminate qualities of the Italian populace.

While Mussolini himself was unable to exercise full control over his media image in the United States, he was able to manipulate it through the help of Hollywood, and Chapter 8 focuses upon the dictator's appearances on American screens. The silent film *The Eternal City* (Fitzmaurice 1924), a political romance filmed in Italy and featuring the Duce himself, helped promote Fascism in the United States and was an unusual example of Hollywood political propaganda focused on another nation's government. While this backfired with most audiences, the action scenes and on-location imagery helped promote the Duce and associate him with a romantic yet modern vision of Italy, a process that the Fascist publicity machine was simultaneously striving to promote at home as well (Ben-Ghiat 2001). The development of film technology also intersects with the story of Mussolini's reception abroad when he was featured in a special Fox Movietone newsreel, one of the first synch sound films, entitled *Man of the Hour* (1927). Here the Duce is seen delivering a speech first in Italian and then in English in a short that would be screened in American theaters for months as an accompaniment to F. W. Murnau's masterpiece *Sunrise* (1927). While neither of these efforts were entirely successful in cementing popular opinion of the dictator, they demonstrate the early recognition of how moving pictures could be an important means of disseminating the physical and sonic presence of political figures, a strategy that would soon have lasting implications in the establishment of political celebrity.

In his conclusion Bertellini explains the particularly American effect of these two Italian figures, and how the personalities of the Divo and the Duce "facilitated a cosmopolitan and authoritarian reimagining of American male leadership" (229). Only at the end does Bertellini make reference to our current political moment, when he acknowledges that we are inhabiting "an epoch that is all too familiar with the convergence between celebrity culture and political leadership" (233), a fact that he avers has resulted in a deepening crisis of democracy. While the author does not refer to current events or political figures, reading Bertellini's book in the aftermath of the Trump administration is a sobering reminder of the power of popular media in enabling strong masculine political celebrities. The significance of his work thus goes beyond its contributions to the historiography of Hollywood, publicity, and 20th-century political stardom to hold lessons about the future of democracy in the age of mass media.

**Rebecca Bauman** is Associate Professor of Italian at Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY, where she also teaches film studies. She has published essays on masculinity in Italian cinema and mafia movies in such publications as the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* and *Italian Studies*. She is *Film and Digital Media Reviews* editor for the journal *Italian American Review* and Chair of the Columbia Seminar in Modern Italian Studies.

### **Works cited**

- Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Bondanella, Peter. *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, and Sopranos*. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Honig, Bonnie. *Democracy and the Foreigner*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.