

## Article

# Constructing imperial imaginations through educational cinema in Britain and Italy (1922–1937)

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## Abstract

During the period 1922–37, both the British and Italians launched institutes for educational cinematography and collaborated in the creation of the League of Nations' International Educational Cinematographic Institute. Their leading newspapers dedicated entire sections to the advertising of educational campaigns through cinema. Comparing official documents and the print apparatus about the establishment and the activities of two institutes for educational cinema in Europe gives us a perception of how similarly and differently the British and Italians used their educational films to convey imperial sentiments and rhetoric into civilian life during fifteen years of colonial rule.

**Keywords** colonialism; cultural propaganda; documentary; education; British cinema; Italian cinema

## Introduction

During the period 1922–37, British and Italian governments pursued an educational mission, making several films that portrayed the effects of their colonial rules on people and lands from various British and Italian territories. For example, in 1924, the newly founded British Instructional Film (BIF) produced films of royal and imperial tours for the Admiralty, starting with a tour of the empire, *Britain's Birthright*.

The same year, the newborn Italian Union for Cinematic Education (SIC) released its first production: Guelfo Civinini and Franco Martini's film *Aethiopia*, portraying the territories and people near the Tana Lake in Ethiopia. One year later, in 1925, the BIF released *The Prince of Wales Tour of Africa*, and a few years later, the Italians released a film with similar contents, *La spedizione Franchetti* (1928, LUCE, Mario Craveri). Their representations of the meeting between the European ruling class and 'the Black African savage' were acclaimed in national newspapers, and the films were promoted in terms of educational themes, and were used in schools as educational tools.

These films are only a few examples of the numerous productions by the British and the Italian institutes for educational cinematography from this period. Other colonial cultural propaganda films from the period 1922–34 are the films for the Empire Series by BIF. Among those shot in African territories are *Basutoland and Its People* (1925), *Black Cotton* (1927) and *Oil Palm of Nigeria* (1928) (for more titles, see the list at [colonialfilm.org.uk](http://colonialfilm.org.uk)), while *England Awake* (1932) had similar content to the earlier Italian production by L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa (LUCE), *Le opere, il popolo, il valore* (1931). Among the Italian productions, LUCE's *Abissinia* was made between 1932 and 1937, portraying the colony and its people. These films became a preferred form for 'popular education', and African territories and people were among the preferred subjects for these visual images. Popular leading newspapers such as *The Times* and *Il Corriere della Sera* promoted this cultural propaganda, which endorsed the prevailing government attitudes towards people from the colonies by highlighting national primacy, portraying the 'African natives' as primitive, and constructing a sense of necessity for European institutions.

States mobilised directors, intellectuals, journalists and politicians to promote the 'educational' nature of these films. The driving force for these productions self-legitimised 'civilising missions' in the colonies, fostered (or revived, in the British case) ideas of European White supremacy, and constructed the idea that European institutions were essential to improve the lives of 'natives'.

Britain was a 'liberal empire', while Italy was under Fascist rule. The two countries thus operated under remarkably different political structures. Notwithstanding these differences, during colonialism, they both produced colonial cultural propaganda in the form of educational films, some addressing the national audience, and some addressing the audience in the colonies, which instilled ideas of 'European supremacy' through mutual humanitarian rhetoric based on Eurocentric and empire-centric ideas of 'education' and 'civilisation'.

Italy and Britain were among the first colonial powers, along with France and Germany, to allocate funding to develop this cinematography. As mentioned above, in 1924, two semi-private institutes that played an essential part in the history of this cinematography were established, British Instructional Film, and the Italian L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa. Only three years later, both Britain and Italy contributed to educational cinema production and distribution as an international endeavour: in 1927, the League of Nations, of which Britain and Italy were members, inaugurated its International Educational Cinema Institute, and, at the same time, it also launched the *International Educational Cinema Review*. The significant investments, and the attention paid to educational cinematography by the British and Italian colonial governments, and by other colonial powers that were members of the League of Nations, make it a compelling case study for understanding the role that cinema had in constructing imperial imaginations.

There were important differences in the images that the empire films promoted, and how they imparted the differences in how colonialism was carried out. For instance, French educational cinema was exported to the colonies as a means of 'rhetorically transforming colonial subjects into citizens' (Bloom, 2008: 127). These visual narratives remade the colonies in the image of France, and they mostly advertised the government's intent to renegotiate the social contract between the citizens of the empire and the state (Bloom, 2008: 147). To attempt to form a unified French national consciousness, these films advanced the logic of populist nationalism based on the idea of the similarity of the citizens of the empire. They conveyed the rhetoric that the unity of the French empire was based upon similarity, social and cultural homogeneity, and political unity (Fallers, 2017). Unlike the French, the British and Italians never promised

universal citizenship rights, and their educational films conveyed an idea of colonial subjects that was starkly different to that of the French.

Neither the British nor the Italians constructed the communities from the African colonies as the empire's citizens. As will become apparent in this article, their colonial films chose similarly to focus on the representation of how the British and the Italians developed the colonies, and the devotion, support and enthusiasm of the colonial subjects for the empire. Unlike the French, the British and Italian educational films emphasised the differences between colonisers and colonised, and the power dynamics regulating their coexistence. This commonality is the reason I choose to focus on a comparative study of British and Italian colonial and cinema histories, as opposed to the French films, which produced starkly different educational and sociopolitical narratives.

Additionally, in the period under scrutiny, the two governments were coexisting as colonisers in contiguous North and East African territories. Colonial domination was of vital importance to both for many reasons, including the fact that both had a history of colonial rule. Through the films which they produced and labelled as educational and edifying, they perpetrated and revived nineteenth-century social Darwinism and racial theories, justifying colonialism as a foundational step of their so-called civilising missions.

This study shows that these films represented 'natives' as 'subordinates' of White Europeans, in contrast to the 'modern and civilised' world of the film-makers. The mainstream *educational films*, and the critical apparatus of newspapers and cinema journals commenting on them, had a significant impact on the way people on national soils and settlers in the colonies considered the 'natives'. Looking at official documents, journal articles and advertisements related to these films from the period, this study observes both the recurrence of debates on cinema as 'modern educator' and the absence of a clear definition of educational film. The term *educational* indicated a wide range of films, all advertised by the governments that produced them as being instructive. For instance, scientific, geographical and nature films made for schools were announced as educational, as well as 'pseudo-ethnographic' films used as cultural propaganda about 'Britishness' and 'Italianness'.

What arises from the study of these sources is that 'educational film' is a blurred category that, I argue, perfectly exemplifies what Steven Ricci (2008: 12) has defined as 'slippage between the two ontological categories of the "cultural" and the "political"'. Building on Ricci (2008), I argue that it is this entanglement of the cultural and the political that complicates the definition of Italian educational films from the 1920s and the 1930s, as well as their categorisation. This study shows that this slippage also occurs in British state-produced films promoted as instructive from this same period.

## 'Educational films': a blurred definition

To clarify the subject of this work, first of all, we should ask if all the educational films from the interwar years made by the Italians and British were forms of state propaganda. This is a crucial question that deserves further consideration. Under Fascist rule in Italy, the LUCE institute was government-led and in charge of educational films. It is, therefore, impossible to distinguish between Fascist cultural propaganda and educational films produced by LUCE. In Britain, we can see that the semi-private initiatives dedicated to educational cinema (the British Instructional Film and the department that produces these specific films, and the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment) endorsed the government's politics and were co-funded by the government. Therefore, in both cases, state cultural propaganda and educational films overlap.

Film producers labelled as 'educational film' a wide array of different visual narratives, which were mostly, but not exclusively, scientific films, non-fiction short documentaries and ethnographic films (Dahlquist and Frykholm, 2020). Historian Rachael Low (1971: 53) notes that in the 1920s and 1930s 'little was known of the film's potential use in a strictly educational sense'. Low (1971: 4) adds that, for instance, the British *National Encyclopedia of Educational Films* released in 1937 had a broad focus, 'from amateur films, teaching, and advertising films, documentaries, and films about hygiene and health'.

In 2007, Zoe Druik published a critical essay contributing to the study of the history of educational cinema. Her study traces the historiography of the League of Nations' International Educational Cinematographic Institute (1928–37). In this work, Druik (2007: 2) laments the fact that educational cinema as it was produced by some European colonial powers between the 1910s and the 1940s has been left out of the 'extant history of film'. Thirteen years after the publication of Druik's essay, a collected volume titled *The Institutionalization of Educational Cinema* was released (Dahlquist and Frykholm, 2020). In the introduction to the book, the editors explain that 'film scholars have failed to acknowledge the diversity of educational cinema and its complex forms' (Dahlquist and Frykholm, 2020: 7). With their work on the history of North American and European educational cinema from the 1920s and the 1930s, they 'expand the terrain of cinema studies' (Dahlquist and Frykholm 2020: 8). Therefore, more than a decade after Druik's (2007) groundbreaking study was released, little has changed, and educational cinema remains an understudied topic.

With this in mind, I do not use *educational film* as a defined cinematic category. I am concerned with how and why British and Italian governments used this term to promote films that they had either entirely or partially produced, how ideas of 'education' were constructed and developed through cinema by empires, for what purpose, and the role of these films in colonial rule. To find answers to these questions, I consider educational films as products of European imperial ideologies from the interwar years, which are self-aggrandising and self-legitimising visual constructions crucial for national and international cultural propaganda aimed to justify colonial rule.

To comprehend the role of educational films within the colonial structure, we need first to trace the most critical phases in the history of this kind of propaganda in Britain and Italy, and locate them in the larger context of European cinema history. Perhaps the most prominent figure who in this period contributed to the institutionalisation and the proliferation of theories about the use of cinema as a tool for education and cultural propaganda was the Scottish director, John Grierson. He was a producer, as well as a critic, historian and theorist of the cinema. Thanks to the visual representation that he organised, Paul Swann notes (2008), the government-led film units controlled the entire national cinema production. Grierson wrote extensively on propaganda cinema, which, from approximately 1926 onwards, was systematically produced not only in Great Britain, but also in Italy, Germany and France. In Grierson's words, 'citizenship education was the broad necessity, the film the chosen medium, documentary its special form' (quoted in Druik and Williams, 2014: 13).

Low (1971: 53) notes that in his seminal works about modes for documenting 'reality' with cinema, Grierson associated the concepts of 'reality', 'propaganda', 'documentary' and 'education'. In doing so, Grierson did two things. First, he contributed to blurring the pre-existing definition of *educational film*. Second, he provided a theoretical substrate to merge films with political and pedagogical aims. He also had a significant role in promoting educational cinema during the 1940s and 1950s while working for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

## Educating to 'reality' through cinema: crucial contributions

Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov offered additional crucial approaches from the 1920s cinema for cultural propaganda based on the idea of representing and educating to 'reality'. Their work does not fit any contemporary cinematic category; for instance, Flaherty's popular film *Nanook of the North* (1922) is best defined as a docudrama, while Vertov's most popular work, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), could be considered as an experimental film.

In his film, Flaherty focused on what he defined in the opening captions as the 'simple life' of the Inuit. He was neither an anthropologist nor an ethnographer, and he did not follow any specific observational methodology. He went to the Arctic as a member of the Railway Company during British rule. However, he tried to create ethnographic surveys that could also be entertaining for mainstream audiences. His film *Nanook of the North* was shot in the Arctic between 1906 and 1910, and released in

1922. Peter Loizos (1993: 23) explains that the film represents ‘an epic struggle with the forces of nature’, describing the film’s dramatised narrative.

The plot, in fact, is dramatic; it visualises a family of Inuit facing several difficulties daily due to severe weather conditions, season changes and environmental setting. By that time, the Inuit had altered their traditional lifestyle, but Flaherty wanted to revive and reconstruct the essence of their earlier life. This representation of the Inuit is that of the ‘savage’ as ‘innocent’ and ‘naive’. It reveals that Flaherty’s gaze was colonial, embedded within feelings of superiority due to his belonging to ‘civilisation’; his words in the preface of the film: ‘Finally, after wintering a year on Belcher Islands ... got out to civilization along with my notes, maps and the films.’ From these words by Flaherty, we understand that to him there was a clear concept of ‘civilisation’, which does not apply to the people he portrays in his film. In subsequent captions, Flaherty declares that Nanook asked him to delay the expedition and the filming, as ‘he never understood why I should have gone to all the fuss and bother of making the “big aggie” of him’. Therefore, from the very beginning – these words appear at the second minute – the film describes Nanook as ‘simple’, and portrays him as someone who does not understand the film-maker’s intentions. This is only the first of a series of remarks about the differences between Nanook, the ‘Other’, and Flaherty, representing White imperial and civilised society.

To have a sense of the great popularity that this film achieved in Europe and the United States when it was first released, we should consider that some scholars today consider it as ‘the age d’or of silent ethnographic cinema’ (Tobing Roney, 2004: 117). Scholars have also noted that Flaherty’s films contributed to the consolidation of the notions of the ‘petty primitive’ and ‘the Primitive opposed to the Modern man’ (Tobing Roney, 2004: 99).

Flaherty’s role in the development of non-fiction as a genre is therefore a problematic topic that has been at the centre of numerous debates. Some scholars, Barsam (1973: 42) explains, define Flaherty’s films, and in particular *Nanook*, as the results of his ‘determined independence and romantic vision that inspired his unique films’. Other scholars undermine the flattering descriptions of Flaherty by stressing the fact that his films were produced by businessmen looking to expand their markets. *Nanook*, for instance, was produced by the furriers Revillon Frères and, therefore, many critics, including John Grierson, stressed the monetary interests guiding Flaherty’s cinematography.

Another example of a film-maker who aimed at representing ‘reality’ is Dziga Vertov. His film is remarkably different from Flaherty’s, but it also exemplifies a form of cultural and social propaganda from the 1920s based on the idea that the camera could capture what ‘real life’ is. *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is an experimental film of the early Soviet avant-garde. The experimentation is directed to reproducing a social movement. Vertov was selling an ideology, showing the overlap between different forms of labour with a film that was the artistic expression of the political instances of the post-revolution. As Vertov (1984a: 190) explained in his notes about the film, ‘the camera is the kino-eye capable of a vision freed forever from human immobility’, and the camera helps the workers to become more aware of each other because ‘a given worker cannot see the relationship between his work and the work of others with his bare eye’.

Unlike Flaherty’s and Grierson’s, there is no ethnographic focus on ‘Otherness’ in this work. Vertov made this film, among others that he made for the state, as a member of the community he was addressing. This film is not even an auto-ethnographic survey, as there is no plurality of voices, but only his view on ‘reality’ presented as an objective view potentiated by the use of the camera. The camera was, in his words, ‘the total-eye ... a Communist decoding of reality’ (Vertov, 1984b: 49).

*Nanook of the North* and *Man with a Movie Camera* exemplify two approaches that both differ from each other and from Grierson’s in understanding and using cinema as a tool for cultural propaganda from the interwar period. Stephen Charbonneau (2014) argues that Grierson understood education through cinema as a practice to shape public opinion through ideas of ‘modernity’ and ‘citizenship’. In his film, Flaherty, who was not working for the British government but for a private venture, educated the audience to the idea of ‘White-imperial civilisation’ by showing its opposite – the ‘petty primitive’ opposed to the

'Modern man'. Vertov was the official propaganda maker of the Soviet State and, as he explained in his notes, with his film, he aimed at introducing 'each oppressed individual and the proletariat as a whole ... to understand the phenomena of life' (Vertov, 1984a: 49).

Since the 1920s, there were also state-sponsored films referred to as *educational films*, rooted in theories about realism, and in particular on how to represent history through cinema. This kind of propaganda adapted the idea of cinema as able to replicate 'reality' to the politics of states. These films were promoted as 'educational' to reach a wide audience, and to convey imperial sentiments and rhetoric during colonialism.

In 1922, in Britain, M. Jackson Wrigley published *The Film: Its use in popular education*, among the first comprehensive studies on this topic. After a general introduction about the potential of cinema as 'modern educator', the author dedicates an entire chapter to the colonies. In this chapter, he writes:

The film in short is a fine medium for political propaganda, if wisely used. The following subjects lend themselves to effective treatment as film productions for educational purposes: the growth of the European Colonies, the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire, the decline and renaissance of Poland, the historical groupings of the various States of Europe in the wars of the eighteen and nineteenth centuries, to name but a few. (Wrigley, 1922: 26)

Having this technology enabled the representation of history from one viewpoint, and the promotion of it as 'educational'. Around the same time as the publication of Wrigley's (1922) book, the British and the Italians launched institutes for educational cinematography almost at the same time. In Britain, British Instructional Film was founded in 1922, and in Italy, the Union for Instructional Cinematography and the Union for Educational Cinematography were launched between 1922 and 1924.

In this period, the Italians and the British were concerned with developing national cinema markets for specific audiences. This task was particularly hard to accomplish because at the time the most screened films were American (Bondanella and Pacchioni, 2019: 35). It is in this context that the Italians and the British invested in the production of educational films to convey ideas of 'nation', 'education' and 'civilisation'.

## The contribution of mainstream newspapers to advertising educational films

It was also thanks to the pages of mainstream journals that this form of state propaganda reached a wide public. In this period, a stable critical cinematic apparatus emerged, and it manifested in the fixed sections dedicated to cinema critique in mainstream newspapers. For example, from the mid-1920s, the popular Italian newspapers *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* launched their sections dedicated to cinema; debates about the meaning, uses and nature of educational films occupy most of these sections.

Mainstream newspapers published extensively on the ongoing discussions on the use of cinema in education, and, for the most part, they were concerned with the morality of films. For example, on 10 January 1922, *Il Corriere* published a detailed article about the 'absolute innovations' of the exhibition, titled 'Milan exhibition: The stands on Monforte' ('Fiera campionaria a Milano. I padiglioni sul viale Monforte') about the experiment that saw a number of didactic films and theatrical films compared and judged by a jury (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 1922a: 5; all translations from Italian newspapers are my own). This competition aimed to determine which kind of film was moral and which immoral; films with educational aims were received as moral, while theatrical films were more often judged to be immoral.

The most influential institutions also made decisions about the morality of films, and collaborated on the promotion of the national cinema industry. The US was cited as an example of a reliable and functional cinema industry. For instance, another article in *Il Corriere*, published in September 1922, asserted that 'the true judges are the institutions of the Academia and the Church'. These institutions have already, the journalist from New York writes, made their decision and 'recognised cinema as an art'.

'In the State of North Carolina,' continues the journalist, 'the Ministry of Public Education has recently decided to finance the production of a hundred films on the history of the United States, and in several churches of the state they screened films about the history of the Church or the missionaries' activities' (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 1922b: 3).

Like Italy, in Britain, in 1922 and 1923, the debates concerning educational cinematography mostly related to its morality and its uses. In an article titled 'The cinema and education' published in *The Times* in 1923, there is a detailed description of the issues discussed during the Conference of Educational Association that took place at University College in London. The discussion focused on how to consider and judge the educational value of cinema, for which two committees were appointed; one was in charge of examining applications, the second in charge of psychological research (*The Times*, 1923a).

Further ideas on the application of cinema as an educational tool appeared in a later edition of *The Times* published in November the same year, in the article 'Home-made films', suggesting using educational cinema 'to promote trade', or to show 'the wonders of animal life and of natural scenery'. However, it is the political application of film that the article describes in most detail: 'it would be a profitable application of educational cinema,' reports the article, 'to screen English films where English types and ways are represented only through the distorting medium of foreign imitation or travesty'. In conclusion, the journalist says, 'The time has come for the English race to have its own films' (*The Times*, 1923b: 15).

Within the debates about its morality, educational cinematography started to be presented as a crucial tool to be used for the empire's civilising mission in the colonies. Such development in the conception of educational cinema is evident in other articles published in *The Times*. For example, in a letter from 1923, Sir Edward Davson, a prominent figure on numerous imperial trade committees, suggested using films for the 'development of Empire trade and the encouragement of emigration to the Dominions'. Davson argued that the films would serve to 'educate our people ... in an appreciation and knowledge of our Dominions and Colonies, of their scenery and the life of their people, of their industries and products' (Davson, 1923: 11).

During the 1920s, the crisis concerning cinematography was at the centre of numerous debates both in Italy and in Britain: the cinema industry that had the most screenings in Europe was the American, as mentioned above, and this became a problem for those governments that wanted to develop a national cinema industry.

In 1926, an article in *Il Corriere* concerning the very large number of American films screened in Europe distinguished between the 'direct propaganda' made by the LUCE and the hidden, indirect, propaganda of American films. The propaganda made by LUCE was described as a legitimate image tool in the hands of the government; on the contrary, American films that conveyed propagandistic ideas without declaring them beforehand were seen as illegitimate propaganda (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 1926: 2).

Articles from *The Times* also dismissed American films as 'low-quality films'. For example, a 1926 article titled 'A better class of film' described the thoughts of Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil Levita, a member of the Theatres and Music Halls Committee of the London County Council, about American cinematography:

... he [the Colonel] had seen a vast number of American films shown, and who could say whether a good deal of the unrest in the world was not due to the lowering of the white man's standard as depicted in these productions? (*The Times*, 1926a: 10)

A further example of the open debates regarding American films comes from an article published the previous year, on 29 January 1925, titled 'British films and education', where the biographical film *Livingstone* (M.A. Wetherell, 1925) is celebrated as a high-quality film of British production, different from the 'criminal [American] films', which 'among Eastern races – and especially in India – were doing incalculable harm' (*The Times*, 1925: 10). We can see how frequently this issue was brought up in the sections dedicated to cinema in mainstream and specialised journals. For instance, on 24 May 1926, in an article in *The Times* titled 'Films and the Empire', a correspondent wrote about the 'lack of British [film]

production' as being harmful for the Empire, given the 'connection between British films and the British Empire' (*The Times*, 1926b: xiv). The journalist used the term 'connection' to describe the importance of visual representations of the Empire for the endurance of the Empire itself.

The correspondent continues, focusing on the problematic lack of British films to screen in the colonies, an opportunity that the Americans took because 'everybody realizes what wonderful propaganda films may provide' (*The Times*, 1926b: xiv). These articles also refer to other European cinema markets as being endangered by American films. For example, the correspondent for *The Times* from Milan wrote: 'The Italian market has in the last few years been invaded, and almost completely conquered, by American films' (*The Times*, 1929: xvi).

In both cases, we can see why the American films represented a threat to imperial rule, and why there were political reasons related to colonialism to develop national cinema industries in Europe. What we can understand from the articles quoted above is that, at the time, cinema was the preferred tool for cultural propaganda, a crucial instrument to construct ideas of 'nation' and 'race'. It is in this climate that the humanitarian rhetoric of 'civilising' and 'educational' missions through cinema reached a wide public in Europe.

## Contrasting the American cinema industry: the creation of the International Educational Cinematographic Institute

To have a sense of how many American films were screened at the time, Low (1971: 53) reports that by 1925, 'British film production had declined to a point where fewer than 40 feature films a year were being made, compared with over 150 in 1920. Most films shown here were American.' Likewise, in Italy, Hollywood films were the most screened. Some European countries decided to limit the number of imported films to stop this disruptive situation.

For instance, in 1927, the British Cinematograph Films Act imposed quotas for non-British-made films. This Act aimed to increase the production of national films to limit the import of American ones. The Act was reviewed in 1937, and it was decided that it deserved a renewal for another ten years.

To create a strong cinema industry able to counterbalance the popularity of American films, for the reasons discussed above, the most powerful members of the League of Nations – Russia, Austria, Germany, France, Britain and Italy – joined forces to cooperate to establish a European cinema market. Looking at the history of this collaboration, we can see that even if Britain and France were the most powerful European empires at the time, it was Italy that had the leading role in dictating theories about how to use films for cultural propaganda.

As Zoë Druick (2007) argues, the groundwork for the construction of a specific cinema industry project began with the 1921 report by the French representative, Louis Bourgeois, on the intellectual organisation. The document presented to the League of Nations the need for:

improved and fuller exchanges of documents in all branches of knowledge and call[ed] upon the League to fortify its ideals through the intellectual life uniting the nations and favor educational enterprises and research study as important influences on opinion among peoples. (Druick, 2007: 88)

Furthermore, in 1924, the French government volunteered to host the commission established in the 1922 meeting in a permanent institute in Paris under the name of the Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIC). Among the many interests of the commission, there was the development of national and international cinema industries in Europe. On 22 July 1924, Julien Luchaire, director of the IIC, submitted a report to the institute, in which he argued that an international congress focused on the topic of the effects of cinema on the human mind was necessary. The congress was organised, and it was inaugurated in September 1926. It lasted from 27 September to 3 October, and it took place at the Royal Palace, where there were the offices of the IIC. There were 432 guests, representing 32 nations



and 12 international organisations. Afterwards, the IIC increased its activities, and focused in particular on defining educational cinema.

The Italian government aimed at covering a crucial role in the organisation of the institute's activities, announced that it intended to finance it entirely, and proposed a project for it and its activities. It was Luciano De Feo who presented the Italian theories on educational cinema to the League of Nations, theories that were approved and subscribed to by the members of the League. These theories related to the uses of *cultural cinema*, and described cinema as a tool to spread what the Italians thought were the values driving 'educated and civilised societies' (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 1935: 6). It is with these theories that the activities of the International Educational Cinematographic Institute began. The proposal for its creation was made by the Italian delegation at the League of Nations Assembly of 1927, and it was approved in 1928. The inauguration took place in Rome, in Villa Falconieri in Frascati, in 1928.

During the inauguration, Marquise Paulucci di Calboli spoke on behalf of Eric Drummond, Under-Secretary of the Society. We can see that the Italian delegates had roles of responsibility, and gave numerous speeches. In these speeches, they highlighted the importance of cinema to convey those ideas that were also driving Fascist cultural propaganda. For example, Paulucci di Calboli concluded his speech expressing 'the highest trust in the ability of the institution to bring education, civilisation and progress' (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 1928: 1).

Moreover, the same article, titled 'The King and the Duce inaugurate the International Educational Cinematographic Institute in Frascati', reported that in his speech, Italian Minister of Justice Alfredo Rocco stressed the importance of the connection between cinematography and ethnography. Rocco cited as a model the London Ethnographical Society, which in 1909 had made ethnographic films to document the costumes of 'the barbarian people of Africa and Australia' (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 1928: 1).

It is essential to consider that Mussolini's aim with the International Educational Cinematographic Institute was to bind European film productions under one unique ideology concerned with the use of films. Some British politicians, along with politicians from other countries, shared his project. Reverend James Marchand, for instance, wrote a letter to *The Times* in 1929 praising Mussolini as the man 'who has understood the possibilities of the cinema for the intellectual development of the Italian people' (Marchand, 1929: 10). This was an educational campaign, both Mussolini's and Marchand's, for respectively Italian and British people, beginning with the placing of cinema in schools. Marchand (1929: 10) writes that in Italy, 'in Piedmont there are 1,431 apparatuses [cinematographs] belonging to elementary and private schools; 3,419 in Venice; 1,342 in Tuscany ...', and asks if the British government will support a project similar to the one that the Italian government is promoting and enacting. The Italian *Il Corriere* reports on Marchand's letter to *The Times* in an article that appeared on 19 July 1929, entitled 'Istituto cinematografico educativo in un giudizio ammirativo inglese'. The article begins by introducing James Marchand as the director of the British National Council for the Re-Generation of the Race, and describing his request to the British government, a call that refers to Italy as a pioneer in educational cinematography (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 1929).

To promote the institute beyond national borders, and beyond Europe, in 1929, the institute launched the *International Review of Educational Cinematography*, which was simultaneously published in Italian, French, German, Spanish and English editions. It ran from 1929 to 1934, for a total of five volumes. These articles praised cinema as a government tool, without recognising the role of private enterprises in the development of theories and uses of this visual device.

The *Review* focused exclusively on reviewing films of a documentary nature. Zoë Druick (2007: 87) notes that it is 'needless to say that there were some seemingly irreconcilable contradictions in the journal'. For instance, Druick (2007) states that the articles about films representing war scenes moved from concerns for how children could receive those images, to praising war as the most relevant social phenomenon.

Moreover, the *Review* promoted the crucial role of state films in social life. 'Le cinéma d'actualité est le grand éducateur social moderne,' says Germaine Dulac in his article published in the *Review* in

1934, and commenting on the International Congress of Instructional and Educational Cinema of 1931, in Rome. Dulac, an authority in film criticism at the time, continues:

In Russia, the artistic cinema, the best kind, and the educational Cinema, the most prolific flourish. Why? Because, from an artistic viewpoint, while abandoning banal histories, Russian cinema, which is a State cinema, focuses on the most important human issues ... The power of the State is therefore positive, because the State's view does not look for profit, instead it cares for what is altruistic and socially relevant. (Dulac, 2001: n.p.; author's translation)

(Le Cinéma artistique le meilleur, le Cinéma éducateur le plus florissant s'épanouit en Russie. Pourquoi? Parce que, au point de vue artistique, délaissant des histoires banales, le Cinéma russe, qui est un Cinéma d'Etat, s'attache aux grandes questions humaines. ... L'ingérence de l'Etat paraît donc être bienfaisante, puisque l'Etat se place à un point de vue non financier, mais altruiste et social.)

Therefore, according to Dulac (2001), governments have no profit from the cinema industry; they are interested in producing films for purely social or political interests. This view of the role of states does not account for the political plans that European governments were pursuing at the time; it does not clarify how states are altruistic and care for social issues; it praises the centralised power of the state over any other ventures in cinema.

Moving to the films produced for the institute, most of them are now lost. However, Druick (2007) notes that we know some of the titles of these educational films from the 1920s: *Baby's Birthright*, *Motherhood*, *Drowsy Drugs* (about the opium trade), *The Magic Nitrate of Soda*, *Reinforced Concrete*, *Underwear and Hosiery*, *Modern Lighting*, *The Romance of Oil*, *Apple Time in Evangeline's Land*, and *Fresh from the Deep* (about fishing). None of the films of this incomplete list appears to have an empire-related subject; instead, they seem to replicate the focus of early scientific films.

Italy's leadership in the life of the institute continued to be influential over time, and gained increasing centrality until 1937, when Italy left the League of Nations. Among the many proposals, for instance, in June 1934, De Feo advocated for the internationalisation of educational cinematography through the erasure of customs among the countries that were members of the League to facilitate the circulation of films with educational aims.

## Conclusions

This study shows that educational cinematography involved important economic efforts and consideration by the British and Italian governments in the period 1922–37, and that it had a critical role in advancing pro-imperial discourses in Britain and Italy in this period. Additionally, this analysis has traced the history of the institutionalisation process of educational cinematography in the two countries, and has highlighted a link between these processes and important contributions to documentary film history by critical directors such as Grierson, Vertov and Flaherty.

Moreover, this article has demonstrated that by comparing the history of the production of the main institutes for educational cinema launched in Britain and Italy in the same years, important analogies arise. For instance, it has analysed a selection of films, and shown that the two colonial governments produced similar imperial imaginations. Additionally, looking at a selection of British and Italian educational films produced in the same period, this study shows that there are critical mutual traits in the colonial propaganda that these films addressed to national and colonial audiences.

This study has noted important analogies in the contents of the educational films produced by the British and Italian institutes. In particular, the films' contents similarly represent the communities from their colonised African territories, who are portrayed as primitive and petty, and as welcoming the colonisers without resistance.

Moreover, what the analysis of the cinema sections of selected major Italian and British newspapers shows is that educational films conveyed the idea of ‘morality’ that was approved by both religious institutions and governments. These articles dedicated to educational cinema in mainstream newspapers of the period constructed a humanitarian rhetoric in which ‘education’ and ‘civilisation’ were presented as gifts that White Europeans were giving to the colonies through occupation.

Other questions arose during this study, for instance, about the role of the League of Nations’ Educational Cinema Institute in promoting British and Italian pro-imperial propaganda. This analysis shows that the early 1930s mark, for both Italy and Britain, a turning point in the production of this kind of propaganda enhanced by the League of Nations’ collaboration to produce *educational films*. Nonetheless, the comparative study of the roles played by the British and the Italian governments within the League of Nations in consolidating ideas of ‘education’, ‘civilisation’ and ‘European supremacy’ through cinema reveals important differences; for instance, Fascist Italy had a leading role in determining the guidelines for a successful systematisation of the League’s cinema industry specialised in educational films.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

## Filmography

- Abissinia* (IT 1932–37, LUCE)
- Aethiopia* (IT 1924, Guelfo Civinini and Franco Martini)
- Basutoland and Its People* (GB 1925, BIF, Empire Series)
- Black Cotton* (GB 1927, BIF, Empire Series)
- Britain's Birthright* (GB 1924, BIF)
- England Awake* (GB 1932, John Buchan and Bruce H. Wolfe)
- Livingstone* (GB 1925, M.A. Wetherell)
- Man with a Movie Camera* (SU 1929, Dziga Vertov)
- Nanook of the North* (US 1922, Robert Flaherty)
- Oil Palm of Nigeria* (GB 1928, Graham Ball)
- Anno IX. Le opere, il popolo, il valore* (IT 1931, LUCE)
- The Prince of Wales Tour of Africa* (GB 1925, BIF)
- La spedizione Franchetti* (IT 1928, Mario Craveri)

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