Traces of fascist urban iconography in the Latina Province, Italy

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Traces of Fascist Urban Iconography in the Latina Province, Italy

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Abstract
The colonization of the plain of Agro Pontino to the south of Rome and the reclamation of the notorious Pontine Marshes is said to be the most ambitious programme and grandest display of fascist power in Italy. Now known as the Latina Province but then as Littoria, the region is a potent symbol of Mussolini’s ambition to build Italy’s future based on Roman ideology and the ‘Myth of Rome’. Aside from bringing under control the region’s problems associated with climate, topography, hydrology, and ecological degradation, and the building of infrastructure such as public roads, bridges, electricity cables, and telephone wires, five modern cities and 18 satellite villages, were established in the 1930s. Today, the province can be interpreted as a ‘symbolic resource’ by which fascism attempted to facilitate transition through the deployment of symbolic elements across a macro-micro continuum.

Rejuvenation of the province is perhaps the largest indicator of Mussolini’s fascist revolution, and the urban fabric of the region is adorned with fascist iconography manifest in the monuments and memorials on public display. But at a smaller scale, visual elements reinforce the identity, meaning and structure of fascism in the form of manhole covers, inscriptions and commemorative plaques on buildings. Many of these symbolic elements have since been removed in the light of attempts to disassociate the place with that time in Italy’s past. But there remain traces of fascism that still serve to stimulate the urban graphic memory.

In this paper we report on the use of historical methods combined with photo-documentation and screen analysis to examine some of these symbolic resources as traces of fascism in the twenty-first century modern metropolis of Latina. A review of the literature and screen-based propaganda on Latina Province will identify the extent to which symbolic resources were deployed to promote Mussolini’s ideology, and reveal some of the more discreet and unacknowledged representations of fascist power. Analysis of the numerous newsreels, documentaries, and films from the Istituto Luce – the ‘Educational Film Union’ provides a resource to demonstrate how the visual language of fascist propaganda changed from 1932–1943. In doing so, we explore the overlooked iconography that worked to reinforce the mythology of the ‘reclamation’ and combined the rural and the urban dimension as a double-faced identity to be shown differently depending on the audience, the message ‘piloted’ by the propaganda and the intended emotional impact.

Keywords: Fascism, Littoria, Latina, Urban Graphic Object
**Introduction**

The various ways that fascism communicated its ideology spanned the ephemeral nature of printed materials and the permanence of the built environment, supported by more dynamic screen images. Consequently, although much of the bulk of print material is now lost (in the sense of it having been produced in multiples), the new towns that were built under Mussolini’s rule now exist as permanent exhibits of how fascism utilized symbolic resources to help meet its aspirations. The aim of this paper is to identify the scope of graphic images that provide traces of fascism in the new towns in what was then known as the province of Littoria but now Latina. Our initial efforts are concentrated on the city of Latina as the provincial capital. We are interested in establishing a methodological framework for examining the various graphic images that were integrated into the urban design activities of fascism. First, we do this by considering three research methods before more specifically discussing the relationship between iconography and fascism. Then a short discussion about the reclamation of the Agro Pontino plane to the south of Rome, a sample of graphic images of fascism in Latina, and the use of screen-based moving images will provide some focus and context.

This paves the way for further research into the way fascism utilized cultural elements as symbolic resources. Cultural elements (also referred to as symbolic elements) and symbolic resources in this sense is borrowed from psychology, where symbolic elements are the ‘shared concrete things, or some socially stabilised patterns of interaction or customs which encapsulate meanings or experiences for people’ (Zittoun et al. 2003: 4). These range from ‘shared bodies of knowledge or argumentative strategies to movies, magazine, or art pieces’ and when used as symbolic resources ‘might sustain or scaffold the work of reframing and reorganising the chaos and the uncertainty of a present situation’ (2003: 5).

**Research Methods**

In this section we consider three approaches to exploring a layer of visual communication evident in the urban design activity that resulted in the new towns being built in the Latina province during the fascist rule. In doing so, we attempt to provide a more systematic and robust framework for future research that concentrates on the various graphic forms of communication that reinforced fascist ideology in new settlement patterns. These come from art history, design inquiry and historical archives to form a mixed methods approach comprised of iconography, photo-documentation and screen sources from newsreels from the 1930s. We begin with a short overview of iconography.

Iconography is defined in the discipline of art history as the systematic investigation of subject-matter (Lucie-Smith 2003: 116), the consideration of the meaning of subject matter (Adams 1996: 36), and the study of meaning in images (Fernie 1995: 345–6), whatever they may be. It is closely related to iconology, which is said to concentrate on the interpretation of subject matter and its cultural and historical context. On occasions, iconography and iconology stand for each other as interchangeable terms, but some define these as distinct from each other in that iconography is more concerned with the ‘interpretation of the total symbolic horizon of an image’ compared to iconology which is more about the ‘cataloguing of particular symbolic motifs’ (Mitchell 1986: 2, citing Panofsky). In this paper we embrace both terms in that the regional scope of our study means the total symbolic horizon is relevant, but we also strive to eventually fit the subject matter into some sort of...
typology or classification system. In order to do so we must consider the meanings associated with the subject matter.

With regards to Fascist urban iconography, as it reads in the title of this paper, we are interested in subject matter and images, or more specifically ‘graphic images’, so defined by Mitchell as ‘pictures, statues, designs’ (1986: 10) that symbolize Fascism. We use this as a starting point for the identification of a wide variety of designed objects that will be featured hereafter, and are better referred to as urban graphic objects: the structural and infrastructural components designed to serve graphic communication needs in an urban environment (Harland 2015: 372).

In this paper we also utilize practical research methods from the field of ‘environment-behaviour’ (Zeisel 2006) to help us better understand the symbolic elements associated with fascism in the Latina Province, Italy. These methods include empirical research through observation and sampling of phenomena, and specifically the observation of physical traces. ‘Observing physical traces means systematically looking at physical surroundings to find reflections of previous activity that was not produced in order to be measured by researchers’ (2006: 159). Photography is one of the recording devices associated with this method and we used this to gain a quick snapshot of fascist symbolism in Latina, initially through random sampling during a brief visit to the city in 2015, with the intention of establishing more systematic approaches in future research.

In an overview of the qualities associated with this method, four suggestions help guide the observation of physical traces. These cover ‘By-products of use’, ‘Adaptations for use’, Displays of self’, and ‘Public messages’ (2006: 160). These are summarized as follows.

*By-products of use* is concerned with the side-effects of behavior through erosion, leftovers and missing traces, evidenced by:
- erosion (wear and tear)
- leftovers (physical objects left behind)
- missing traces (what people do not do)

*Adaptations for use* reflects the way people change their physical environment and become designers (amateur or professional) by removing or adding things, and utilizing:
- props (the addition or removal of objects)
- separations (sensory ways to divide space)
- connections (physical adaptations that link people and places)

*Displays of self* conveys a sense of individual or collective identity in ways that are ephemeral or enduring, through:
- personalization (expressing uniqueness and individuality)
- identification (temporary and permanent forms of recognition)
- group membership (belonging to familiar and unfamiliar groups and organizations)

*Public messages* communicate graphically across a wide range of different contexts deemed as:
- official (specifically designed site-specific)
- unofficial (temporary individual or group)
- illegitimate (unplanned and disapproved)
The emphasis in this approach is on what Zeisel calls ‘physical trace observations’ and this may be deployed with other methods such as interviews, questionnaires and behavior observations (2006: 179).

Finally, screen sources of visual data also provide useful historic reference material for understanding the symbolic resources deployed by fascism. Between 1932 and 1944 ‘L’Unione Cinematografica Educativa, or ‘Istituto Luce’ (the Educational Film Union) produced a series of documentary films that depict the ‘symbolic horizon’ of fascism. During those thirteen years, the Istituto Luce – under the direct control of Mussolini and his press office – experimented with what has been defined as an extra-aesthetic use of the cinematography (Grierson 1950) in connection with an increasing impact of propaganda on Italian people. Grierson writes that in those years, Italians had no chance to look at their own lives unless through the ‘eyes’ of the Istituto Luce. Within this context, emotions played a big role in shaping a visual language that transformed real lives in mediated representations. As filming techniques improved – newsreels in 1927 were without sound and quite static whereas by 1931 sound was introduced and recorded in real-time – by 1934 commentary was more dominant and ideological, reminiscent of the audiovisual communication between the wars. In this process an ‘anthropological revolution’ (Gentile 1999), new language and new symbols (or old symbols displayed with new instrumental aims) were used to create a new ‘kingdom of the word’ where images and sounds are used to invite the audience to participate in the ‘re-conquest of the square’. All the documentaries and newsreels from this period represent what has been called a ‘catastrophe of the subject’ (Gibelli 1991), in which the main focus is on standardization (not distinction) through massive parades, in massive spaces, with massive buildings, to deliver unequivocal messages.

In the historic archive of the ‘Istituto Luce’, we analysed 86 audiovisuals with explicit link to Littoria and the other new towns in the Pontina region: 72 of those are newsreels, 11 documentaries, 1 film and 2 combat films. If we look closer at numbers, we see that the majority of these audiovisuals was produced to celebrate the foundation of the first of the new towns in that area (18th December 1932). After 1935, the number suddenly decreases until the meaningful silence with the beginning of the war, with the exception of a documentary about the new town of Carbonia, in Sardinia, where the connection to Littoria is just to highlight the ‘leaders’ of the Pontina region in the national reclamation plan, and of the two combat films conserved in the Istituto Luce archive, but actually produced by the American army in 1944. The frequency of the screening instead is highest between 1933 (for the first anniversary of the foundation of Littoria) and 1936 (the year of the coronation of the imperial effort) and then again in 1938, when the international relationships demand a new effort in terms of propaganda to highlight the capacity of a Regime that self-represents itself as a vector of modernisation in Europe. Three of the eight newsreels produced in Littoria in 1938 are documenting a visit of an official delegation from a foreign country and one, that is one of the longest ever produced, is about the visit of journalists and press offices from all over Italy.

In this paper various aspects of these methods combine to help frame an approach to understanding fascist iconography in the Latina province. In this pursuit we acknowledge the difference between iconography and iconology in that one precedes the other, and we must first challenge the idea of a total symbolic horizon as it has been portrayed in the literature up until now, before contemplating research questions that satisfy an iconological approach. This last intention – a move from
iconography to iconology – is beyond the scope of this paper. The empirical research undertaken until now is only at the level of sampling through the gathering of photographic data in Latina, and a review of screen materials. We have concentrated on the official public messages that remain as part of the urban fabric in the city of Latina.

To gain a sense of what the total symbolic horizon of fascist iconography might look like, the following section asks the basic question: what is fascist iconography?

**What is Fascist iconography?**

When the words ‘fascist’ and ‘iconography’ are used together, what does this relate to? What subject matter, or images, convey the meanings associated with fascism? These are not questions with clear-cut answers. As stated earlier, iconography is concerned with the entire symbolic range of experience and this seemingly includes tangible and intangible things, suggesting iconography as a method turns its attention to any form of representation that symbolizes a phenomenon.

In the case of Fascism, for example, when describing the first anniversary celebrations in Bologna of Mussolini’s appointment as Italy’s prime minister on 28 October 1922, Mabel Berezin (1997: 72) explains how: ‘The city “dressed” the train station for the occasion with an exterior mural of the March on Rome and decorated the piazza in front of the station with flags, disks with fascist iconography, ornamental plants and laurel wreaths.’ From this we have the impression that fascist iconography as something concrete, and separate from the flags, plants and wreaths. Furthermore, she goes on to say how the newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* reported on the occasion using ‘the language of feeling to create an iconography of emotion: vivid mental pictorial images drawn from the repertoire of Italian cultural schemata.’ In this second instance iconography depicts something more difficult to understand, and begs the question: what is an iconography of emotion?

The entire symbolic range of fascism presents an infinite number of possibilities for studying fascism. For example, Luzzatto (1999: 318–24) spans the ‘central importance of death in fascism’s symbolic universe,’ the ‘fascio littorio’ (the lictor’s fasces, a bundle of rods around an axe carried by a magistrate’s attendant in ancient Rome, which became fascism’s principal symbol)’ or the way The Pontine Marshes became the ‘symbol’ of their programme of ruralisation through the creation of the city of Littoria (now Latina). The implication here is that fascist iconography is not limited to something seen on a disk in a parade, nor is it something limited by scale. In this sense, the symbols associated with fascism, as with any context, are not obvious beyond the recurring themes that feature in different portrayals of fascist rule and discussion about fascist culture.

Luzzatto (1999: 318) emphasizes the media associated with this culture by referring to ‘public speeches, newspaper articles and artistic, theoretical or propagandist works … private documents, the rituals and symbols of mass mobilization, advertising posters, fashions in consumption and sexist or familist slogans,’ but for those people less familiar he points us to the ‘iconographical culture of fascist Italy’ in the book *Bodily Regimes* (Pinkus 1995), with particular emphasis on its illustrations. From these we learn about propagandist images that promote fascist ideas about Italy’s colonial expansion into Africa, through racial identity and black consciousness as typically shown in print advertisements, posters and information brochures featuring
illustrations and graphic abstractions of black people. One of the most obvious examples combine in an advertisement for *L’Istituto Nazionale della Assicurazioni* state insurance, where a black baby looks up towards the *fascio lottorio* symbol, which is positioned in the same place as the sun would otherwise be (1995). See Figure 1. The state insurance organization is significant in its association with the fascist government of the time. The baby sits on a protruding barrel supporting shape with the letters INA displayed on the side. Within the picture plane are chains, supposedly broken by INA, releasing liberating a white farmer who is also shown. This emphasis on the ‘baby’ is referred to as an ‘iconographic type’, whereby the baby is always seen apart from any family structure, or national and institutional identity. Sugar is the centerpiece of another image, promoting ‘bourgeois’ sports such tennis, and in another, pasta forms into a man’s body to supposedly symbolize a healthy body. Furthermore, Pinkus alerts us to an agricultural ethos in other contexts, emphasized in many of the images.

Figure 1: Insurance baby (Salce Collection, 18822, cited in Pinkus 1995: 71)

Today, the prominence of *L’Istituto Nazionale della Assicurazioni* remains evident in the city of Latina. In one of the three piazzas, the organisation’s name is inscribed in bold black condensed lettering across two buildings on each side of an exit road. See Figure 2. Although the organization was in existence before the rise of fascism, the presence of this inscription – a landmark as much as anything else – is a direct result of fascism’s town planning initiatives. These were realized in Italy, most prominently through The Pontine Marshes project, but also partially in Ethiopia, which Italy colonized in 1936.
During this colonial expansion, fascism inflicted its ‘iconographic apparatus’ through urban planning in order to promote its concepts of progress, order, hierarchy, and racial segregation (Antonsich 2000: 325). These ‘Fascist urban iconographies’ are identified as a network of roads that could be used all year round, and tunnels, one called after Mussolini on the Termaber Pass, followed by the formation of towns that followed geometric layouts to reflect ‘civilization and progress,’ the intention being to impose a new social and spatial structure. Some original elements were kept for historical reasons, such as castles and small towns, and new ‘iconographic elements’ were built, such as monuments and obelisks, as well as destroyed. One of the most significant examples of iconographic planning is defined as ‘the super-imposition of the new power over the old power’ manifest in the Latin cross being used as the central planning device for the new politico-administrative centre of Addis Ababa in 1936 (Antonsich 2000: 331–7). In this sense, fascist urban iconography is comprised of the widespread transport infrastructure, the geometry of the urban layout and the relationship between building structures, smaller elements such as monuments, all to convey the concept of civilization through a new sense of community and spatial arrangement.

All this public building work is defined by Ghirardo (1990) as ‘arms of fascist cultural and social policy’ and began in Mussolini’s first fascist new town, Predappio, in the mid-1920s, which also happened to be his hometown. The new town enterprises that soon followed were characterized by typical features such as ‘long broad avenues,
overscaled piazza for mass demonstrations, new building types isolated in monumentalizing fashion, major institutions fronting on the central piazza, fixed spatial and axial relationships, and the prominence, both in plan and elevation, of the new fascist institutions with respect to the older organs of the commune’ (1990: 175). In existing places, older buildings were simply adorned with the fasces and symbols of the Partito Nazionale Fascista.

Compared to Germany, where Hitler also pursued a building programme but much of it being reduced to rubble, most fascist new towns remain intact. Despite some fascist symbols and lettering being removed or falling, fascist iconography is ever present.

**Reclaiming a region**

On 24th December 1928, Mussolini’s desire to elevate the life of peasants and build an agrarian model of civilization gathered pace with the passing of what became known as Mussolini’s Law. This would begin a process of internal recovery to synthesize rural and urban communities through a Rationalist architecture, starting with the reclamation of new land for farming and the building of villages and new towns. The plan for the integral land reclamation – in terms of propaganda – finds its ideal place in the Pontina valley, a wet area at less than 40 kilometres from Rome where people, at the beginning of the 20th Century still lived in semi-primitive conditions, affected by periodical epidemic malaria. The location of these new towns, being so close to Rome, provided an ideal opportunity to establish and promote the values associated with fascism, which started first with redeeming land, to redeem man and race.

A big part of the Italian publications in which the Pontina region’s reclamation and the foundation of the new towns have been mentioned answers to research questions related to their ‘functional’ use for fascist propaganda, where the main focus is not on ‘what’ was happening in that part of the country, but ‘how’ and ‘why’ that process was ‘manipulated’ by the Regime as a sort of massive and prolonged exercise of propaganda. And the language used by the Regime is what has been explored most to interpret manifest symbols and subliminal messages. Words, gestures and often iconography were analysed to catalogue the pillars of the fascist propaganda and its ‘memento’ to prolong the battle, with the same spirit of sacrifice and dedication for their land already proved during the First World War. One common element identified in all the chronicles of that time is a sort of maniac effort to do everything as fast as possible (Bianchini 1956), in a process of reclamation that is firstly hygienic, then economic and eventually oriented to increase the population. Valentino Orsolini Cencelli himself talked about this ‘fascist rapidity’ to highlight the distance with the precedents liberal governments, during which ‘demagogy and apathy were dominant’ (Andruzzi 1932: 41–53).

Yet there are a few local studies in which the overall phenomenon has been analysed within the frame of a specific context, and a focus on the local social life often ignored by those studies with a national focus where Littoria seems to be represented as a ‘non-place’. But at local level it took time until the nostalgic ‘myth’ of the fascist origin of Littoria, perpetuated by ideological approaches, was substituted by a tensionless historic desire to explore Latina’s origin. The first occasion was the 50th anniversary of its foundation when for the first time the transition from Littoria to Latina was explored, even if still through political lenses (Stabile 1982), and the author of the most complete book about fascism and the new towns (Mariani 1976) was invited to be the editor of a volume about local history (Mariani, 1982). After that we can
mention studies with a local focus two books with a specific disciplinary perspective the translation in Italian of a book published in German in 1942 (Vochting 1990) and the translation of research published in USA in which Fascist Italy was compared to New Deal America from an architectural angle (Ghirardo 2003). Eventually a broader analysis of the social history of the Pontina Region, published on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the foundation of Latina, for the first time the documentaries and newsreels produced in that area by the Istituto Luce to were studied (Liguori 2012).

**Graphic images of fascism in Latina**

Having been commissioned in April 1932, Littoria was designed by the architect Orolo Frezzotti, to a near radial plan. Its geometry conforms with fascist idea of order, and its major individual public structures are considered ‘grandiloquently conceived and immodestly rhetorical’ (Millon 1978: 335). The central place that Littoria played in the fascist project – as the largest administrative centre for a province of the same name – means that in its present day state as the city of Latina it stands as a memorial to fascism.

The new towns programme testified to the new political order, constructed with aesthetic unity associated with the modern movement, or what in Italy was better known as Rationalism, and a sense of permanence. Significant buildings were positioned in historically important locations, such as on the main square, to emphasize links to the past. In support of this, ‘fascism often garbed the architecture and programs in symbols of a remote past’ (Ghirardo 1990: 191–192). These symbols often took the form of the graphic images – pictures, statues, designs – as noted earlier. Figure 3 shows 8 examples from Latina, illustrating from left to right: the peasant’s toil; the war veteran who became the new citizen of the new towns; the importance of grain, as a centerpiece in the main square; Mussolini’s balcony with its relief frieze in full view; the Roman eagles and accompanying rhetoric; building inscription; a commemorative plaque for the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (ONC); and a manhole cover that today still displays the original city name. In Zeisel’s terms these are leftovers, props, identification, and official site specific images that seek to influence behavior in an urban setting. These details contribute to the total symbolic horizon of fascism, but are mostly discussed only under the generic moniker of monuments. They are, of course, now memorials to fascism, but not in the sense of something celebratory, more as traces of the way it identified and celebrated its own cause. Leftovers. Where the orderly ideals of modern architecture and planning could not be seen, fascism relied on official site-specific objects, more human in scale that could be ‘read’ as words and images, in support of personalization, identification and group membership.
Figure 3: Some of fascism’s graphic images that still adorn the city of Latina (photographs, Harland 2015)
From the street to screen
The Istituto Luce’s fundamental contribution is to emphasise the meeting between the dictator and the crowd in the main squares of the new towns built by the fascism. It doesn’t matter where Mussolini is parading his power around: the newsreels and documentaries made by the ‘LUCE’ (the acronym means ‘light’) transformed Italy in a “diffuse square”, where the symbolic elements within that space play a crucial role. But, looking at this variety of films, what emerges is that the ‘urbanity’ of the context doesn’t seem to be always relevant and sometimes the buildings (even if they display symbolic elements that are linked to the main message highlighted by the film) are juxtaposed to masses as a visual ‘constructive’ metaphor for the regime and not as distinctive elements of a specific context with its symbolic meaning. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: Image extracted from the Newsreels ‘Giornale Luce B101208’, 23/12/1936: Mussolini inaugurates new buildings in Littoria.

Thinking specifically of Littoria, it’s worth reminding that Frezzotti’s first plan for the town, dating from 1932, clearly defines the spaces and the images of the three basic squares and the use of these by the Regime was always linked to their original mission: Piazza del Littorio is the centre of the political and administrative buildings, Piazza Savoia the ideal space for religion and education and Piazza XXIII Marzo for agriculture and business.

Nevertheless, the open space at the center of the main square consciously represents a sort of ‘non-place’, a place without a local identity, the ideal place the project outside the greatness of the Regime. Such greatness is not only something displayed through public ceremonies, but also something potentially strengthened through a constant process of research of consensus and control of the mass. One of the main outcomes of this approach is a new culture of the wellbeing that self-represents fascism as a Regime that looks after its subjects. A posteriori this has been interpreted as a sort of compensation of the lack of freedom through an illusory happiness (Liguori 2012), where the new generations play a crucial role for a strategy that aims at building a long-term consensus. The Regime tried to build that long-
term strategy projected to the future upon a glorious past – as the Roman Empire – from which symbols can be reiterated, and also from a most recent ‘feat’ – as the First World War – to nourish the rhetoric of the nationalism, enrich its language and build a tangible iconography – as happened in the small hamlets around Littoria, each with the name of a battle of the First World War.

Conclusions
We have outlined here an approach to studying fascist iconography in the Latina province, and specifically the new town of Littoria, which became Latina. The intention has been to show how symbolic elements, or urban graphic objects, were deployed in the pursuit of fascist ideals. Iconography – a method closely associated with art history – has been explored in direct relation to fascism, and it has been shown to apply to many things associated with fascism. It ranges across images featured in posters, monuments, transport infrastructure, urban layout, to pictograms or lettering on buildings. Concrete examples can be found in the urban fabric of Latina, and the fascist graphic image is made up from what Mitchell loosely defined as pictures, statues, and designs. But this is a limited range of words to capture the full extent of what is seen when observing physical traces of fascism. To enable a fuller understanding of the context from which these graphic forms emerged, we have outlined the reclamation of the Pontine marshes, as well as the role played by Istituto Luce in promoting the fascist regime across a short period in the 1930s.

What emerges from this brief portrayal is a category of objects – urban graphic objects – that has otherwise been overlooked in discussions about the new towns project undertaken by Mussolini. In the literature, discussion does not stray beyond the role of monuments and ornamentation, and collectively they are overlooked when considered from the perspective of iconography. Undoubtedly, these graphic images are manifest as something resembling pictures, statues and designs, but there is more need for specificity. Within this particular context, there is a need to move from the approach of iconography towards iconology, and an orderly system for classifying how fascism communicated its messages through graphic images at a scale smaller than town planning and architecture. This will be the objective of future research.

References