

# Introduction

## “Nothing Like Going to an Authority!”

*This element of “Caesarism” is ineradicable (in mass states).*

MAX WEBER, 1918<sup>1</sup>

*What problems does foreignness solve for us? [ . . . ] Is foreignness a site at which certain anxieties of democratic self-rule are managed?*

BONNIE HONIG, *DEMOCRACY AND THE FOREIGNER*, 2001<sup>2</sup>

### STARS’ SOVEREIGNTY

In February 1927, in a photograph published in *Motion Picture Magazine*, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks appeared in the pleasurable company of friends and colleagues amidst ocean breezes on sun-kissed sands at their beachfront property near Laguna Beach. It seemed a serene and much-deserved escape from their bustling careers. Yet, even a casual magazine reader likely could not help but notice that the image told more than the story of two stars’ belated vacation at their second home. Most of the individuals, including Pickford and Fairbanks, smiled for the camera while proudly raising their right arm and stretching their hand to the sky (figure 1).<sup>3</sup> A long caption identified their distinct gesture as the “Fascisti salute” and explained that “Doug” and “Mary” used it to “greet visitors at their beach camp in true Italian style” after learning it in Italy during a meeting with none other than Benito Mussolini.

Less than a year earlier, in the spring of 1926, the two Hollywood royals had paid a much-advertised visit to Italy, with stops in Florence, Naples, and Rome, where they expressed enthusiasm for Fascism.<sup>4</sup> In the capital, they met with the Italian dictator, and Pickford greeted the press with what a local daily described as a “saluto fascista.” Likewise, before readying himself for the camera, Fairbanks “proudly placed the fascist pin in his buttonhole, promising to carry it in and out of Italy, as long as he was in Europe,” to his wife’s approving nod.<sup>5</sup> Their various public engagements, including a visit to the Circus Maximus and the Imperial Fora, where they posed doing the Fascist salute, were the subject of intense coverage and visual display (figures 2 and 3).<sup>6</sup>

The meeting with the Duce most likely occurred on May 10, 1926.<sup>7</sup> It lasted only fifteen minutes, from 4:30 p.m. to 4:45 p.m., but it gained wide (albeit brief) notoriety on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>8</sup> At Palazzo Chigi, the headquarters of the

The Fascisti salute. Mary and Doug learned it in Italy from Mussolini. There's nothing like going to an authority! And now with their camping party they greet visitors at their beach camp in true Italian style. Right to left are Mary, Doug, Betty Bronson, Doug Junior, Ted Reed, of the Fairbanks production department, Mrs. Elizabeth Cameron, Mary's secretary, and Roger Lewis of the Fairbanks' scenario department



FIGURE 1. Pickford, Fairbanks, and friends giving the Fascisti salute, 1927. "Mrs. Doug," *Motion Picture Magazine*, February 1927, 58.



FIGURE 2. Douglas Fairbanks in Rome at the Circo Massimo. Douglas Fairbanks Collection, General Publicity, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. Courtesy of AMPAS.



FIGURE 3. On a visit to the Roman Forum, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks give the Fascist salute. *Il Messaggero*, April 29, 1926, 5. Courtesy of Archivio Storico Capitolino, Rome.

Italian government, Mussolini received the two celebrities and conversed with them about moving pictures. He also asked them to use their contacts with the American press to publicize that, contrary to rumor, he and the Italian nation were in great physical and economic health. Italian and American newspapers reported the participants' mutual displays of respect and exquisite courtesy. They made it clear that the Duce was no less a star than the Hollywood couple, as his guests had recognized when they arrived in Italy. To Italian reporters, Fairbanks confessed his awe of the Duce's exceptionally energetic personality ("like an airplane propeller") and charisma ("all you need is to look at him to realize that").<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the *New York Times* duly reported that Fairbanks expressed admiration for "the progress and modernity of Italy" but was much more expansive in recounting how the American actor treated the Duce like a film star. "I have seen you often in the movies," Fairbanks allegedly gushed, "but I like you better in real life."<sup>10</sup> For his part, Mussolini did not hesitate to treat his celebrity guests as *his* fans and offered them a Hollywood-like gift: his autographed photograph.<sup>11</sup>

In 1927, the *Motion Picture Magazine* caption reminded readers of that special moment and included the memorable line "There's nothing like going to an authority!" Historians may not be able to identify who uttered the striking phrase; it may have even been an editorial flourish. Considering the arranged unanimity of the gestures and that Pickford and Fairbanks were the hosts, parents, or employers of the scene's other participants, it is likely that the caption expressed the sentiments of one or the other. No matter who signed off on the caption, in theory, the image and the well-documented Roman meeting with Mussolini should have disturbed contemporary observers. After all, just a few years earlier, Pickford and Fairbanks had raised millions of dollars for Woodrow Wilson's "war for democracy" against Europe's autocratic regimes. Something had changed; now they were publicly flaunting their personal encounter with Europe's most flamboyant dictator. The unusual pairing of the erstwhile democrats with the authoritarian leader did not provoke outrage or protests—except among a few antifascist dissenters. Instead, the visit summoned curiosity and marvel, as if it were a natural meeting of like-minded celebrities.

The meeting did not have the same meaning for the two parties. The pro-regime Italian press was enthusiastic about the Hollywood duo's visit since it meant a Hollywood homage to both the archeological beauty of old Italy and Mussolini's modernizing aspirations. It was an endorsement that the Italian dictator took great pride in, considering the couple's international fame. Yet, what was the meeting's significance for Pickford and Fairbanks as American celebrities? What exactly could the notion of "authority," conventionally associated with political leadership, bestow upon them in the Hollywood context?

In this study, I assume that what occurred in Rome had much more than anecdotal significance. Instead, it revealed a morphological kinship between the *popularity* of the Hollywood royals and the *authority* of the Italian dictator. It was a

newsworthy event that, I argue, rested on two converging historical phenomena: the rising political import of celebrity culture and the growing popularity of authoritarian political leadership. Even in their contingency, the widely advertised Roman meeting, the Los Angeles beach scene, and the caption reveal the increasing public significance of both film stars and political leaders *beyond* their respective realms of screen and political culture. This contention begs several questions. How was it possible that in apparently nativist and isolationist 1920s America, a foreign leader like Mussolini, who never set foot in the country, could become a paragon of authoritative leadership? Why did the praise for a foreign dictator's authority in political *and* popular culture develop at the same time when access to suffrage and civil rights (i.e., the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment), employment opportunities, and consumer choices were expanding? When and how did film stardom and political leadership, as apparently distinct institutions of mass governance, become comparable, parallel, and analogous? Was this phenomenon *specifically* linked to the immediate postwar period and to the 1920s? After all, about a dozen years later, when the Duce had become widely seen as "a blowhard whose strutting often inspired derisive cackles," the more ominous Hitler was widely known in America but almost invisible on American screens. U.S. newsreel editors declared taboo most shots of Hitler, not just the close-ups, as his chilling and provocative authority was not to be publicized.<sup>12</sup>

One approach to comparing Mussolini with 1920s Hollywood stars would rely on a tempting, but limiting, side-by-side analysis of personal charm and appealing performative style. Inherent in this celebrity-centered comparative reading is a top-down approach to stars' relationship to their followers. Cultural historians might instead argue that personal charisma and performances matter a great deal, but they ought to be placed in dialogue with the social and cultural circumstances that enable certain individuals to emerge as popular authoritarian figures. While I find both the top-down and the culturalist approaches to be productive, I argue that what is needed is a third, complementary one. Comparisons of famous and charismatic individuals in different countries, in fact, overlook the most consistent factor of their popularity: namely, how distinct publicity practices shape stars' media representations. The effectiveness of these practices is itself informed both by the stars' charisma and broad social and cultural dynamics, but their mediating role deserves close attention.

Preliminary definitions of publicity are in order. In 1968, historian Alan R. Raucher noted that as a modern profession publicity "sprang from multiple antecedents [. . .] not entirely separate, including press-agentry and advertising, from which in the early 1920s it sought to assert itself."<sup>13</sup> Press agentry was a theatrical, ostensibly vulgar, Barnum-like mode of influencing the press with free publicity, often by way of monetary compensation, and was already being practiced during election campaigns. Advertising, in contrast, was a much more explicit strategy of conveying information toward a straightforward commercial goal: promoting

and selling products or services. By the early twentieth century, these activities, as well as their names, oscillated between information and commerce, news and products, facts and promotion. At the same time, while indebted to practices of press agency and advertising, the dissemination of information for promotional purposes also represented a reaction to the news-making practices of Progressive muckraking. Initially Progressives had denounced corporate “secrecy” as detrimental to the public interest. Reacting to these charges, corporations began making use of publicity strategies to defend themselves against damaging criticism.<sup>14</sup> They hired publicity specialists, variously known as “publicity experts” or “specialists in relations with customers,” and “came to sponsor the largest and most important experiments in publicity before 1917.”<sup>15</sup>

This date was not a random choice. Raucher points to the start of a process that was eventually affected by a watershed moment in American media history. The U.S. government’s 1917 decision to enter World War I mobilized a massive institutional and commercial apparatus of pro-American initiatives both domestically and internationally. Publicity was not unknown to the film industry or to political campaigning, of course. Even before there was a Hollywood, moving picture companies had realized that publicity practices could expand the popular aura of screen actors beyond their film roles. Similarly, since the turn of the century, presidential contenders, from the publicity-obsessed Theodore Roosevelt to the media-shy Woodrow Wilson, had turned to publicity strategists to manufacture and broadcast narratives, images, and slogans about their politics and about themselves. The publicity machine of the Great War, however, generated an entire repertoire of new practices of mass communication and public opinion management. In the short term, the war-fueled publicity machine engaged Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, and William S. Hart into serving the national interest by selling Liberty Bonds and promoting Wilson to new heights of domestic and, especially, international celebrity. This was a safe, patriotic—and thus virtually unanimous—cause, but a political one nonetheless. In the longer term, such innovations taught the burgeoning film and public relations industry that, through skillful publicity, stars and public leaders could sell a whole range of political and cultural ideas to the public in America and overseas.<sup>16</sup> In ways that became more systematic, institutionalized, and transnational after the Great War, the success of stars’ and politicians’ public management brought mass entertainment, politics, and news ever closer and inaugurated the familiar crisscrossing of attributes between popular and political stardom on both domestic and international ground.

*The Divo and the Duce* studies how the public notoriety of Hollywood actor Rudolph Valentino, the “Divo,” and Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, the “Duce,” indexed and shaped a broad range of 1920s celebrity-centered publicity initiatives that interwove news-making, media economics, and political communication. While it is attentive to their distinct career trajectories, my approach shows that, despite never having met each other, the Divo and the Duce form a productive



pairing. For a few years, from the very early 1920s to Valentino's untimely death in 1926, the two Italian-born icons showcased a comparable type of fame that exceeded each man's respective domain. With the 1921 release of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and *The Sheik*, the ideal and passionate lover Valentino was promoted as Hollywood's first truly foreign star. His fame was not limited to fantasies of screen romance. In carefully managed pronouncements to the press, he spoke against women's rights, democracy, the Hollywood industry, and even American masculinity. At first glance, these were not advisable positions to hold due to the potential of alienating the moviegoing public. At the same time, however, Valentino did not touch upon what Thomas Doherty defines as "the controversial issues and *causes célèbres* of the 1920s—immigration restriction, labor strikes, or [the long public trial against] the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti."<sup>17</sup> And neither did Mussolini, who, whatever his domestic agenda, was careful not to meddle in American politics, which would have risked damaging his political and diplomatic relationships with U.S. officials.<sup>18</sup> Still, after the October 1922 March on Rome, the large-jawed, Caesar-like Duce was widely promoted in America not just as anti-Communist exemplar but also as a paragon of antidemocratic male leadership. His fame lasted for little more than a decade, until Italy's imperial campaigns in East Africa in 1935–36 and his concurrent formation of the Axis alliance with Hitler. Throughout the 1920s, though, Mussolini's name, image, and opinions pervaded American media through interviews, syndicated columns, (auto)biographical accounts, books, and films. Popular media broadcast his authoritative pronouncements—which Valentino appeared to share—about modern leadership and the importance of traditional gender roles.

With different degrees of success, official and unofficial publicity agents—whether filmmakers, journalists, ambassadors, or newspapers editors—established and managed the Italian duo's public personas. By repurposing the public relations practices used during World War I and working in the service of press syndicates, Hollywood studios, and business conglomerates, these publicity enablers had diverse purposes that ranged from journalistic self-advocacy to studio advertisements to political and financial gain. I shall refer to them as the architects of ballyhoo, to use a 1920s expression popularized by writer and publicist Silas Bent.<sup>19</sup> Whatever their individual agendas, their work shared a common repertoire of journalistic and narrative techniques. Of these, the most sensational and Boorstinian one—the publicity stunt—bestowed upon the Divo and the Duce the authority to shape consumer choices and manage modern crowds at home and abroad.<sup>20</sup>

Focusing on the promotional activities around these two foreign-born celebrities provides significant advantages. First, by looking at Valentino and Mussolini *as a pair*, and not as representatives of the distinct domains of entertainment and politics, I aim to foster a dialogue between the usually divergent disciplines of film and political studies. These scholarly disciplines have looked at the Divo and

the Duce, respectively, as a subversive model of masculinity (film and cultural studies) and as a popular anti-Red Scare icon (history; political studies). Pairing them offers new insights into one of the earliest interweavings of film stardom and political leadership in the emerging celebrity-centered media economy that shaped advertising, news-making, and political communication. As Graeme Turner has noted, the success of celebrity culture is rooted in its ability to “generate large amount of content” and “secure a relationship of interdependency between media outlets.”<sup>21</sup> Over the course of my research, the popularity of Valentino and Mussolini, especially in their outspoken endorsement of antidemocratic governmentality, revealed the emergence of a novel public discourse about authority and citizenship.

A second advantage of my focus on the interweaving of stardom and political leadership is that it also foregrounds two other historical dynamics—antinativism and anti-isolationism—one opening America to its own national diversity, the other opening it to the world. On the one hand, even before America’s participation in the Great War, growing misgivings about the melting pot ideal were at least in theory legitimizing the foreign culture of immigrant communities within the country’s popular and political scene. In 1916, the intellectual Randolph Bourne characterized the country’s great democratic experiment as “a transnationality.”<sup>22</sup> A few years later, despite the passage of anti-immigration legislation, American film culture witnessed a dramatic internationalization. “In the roaring converter of war more than nations are fusing,” *Photoplay* boasted. “The Iowa lad is learning that the French aren’t frog-eaters, nor are the Italians ‘Ginnies.’”<sup>23</sup> The acceptance of international diversity in America opened the way to novel formulations of male character, personality, and leadership. The Divo and the Duce, I will argue, became popular not despite, but because of their widely advertised national and racial otherness. Their diversity offered license for daringly authoritarian political statements, most pointedly against women and the democratic process, while still enabling them to remain as charming and exotic specimens, ready-made for news and photographic coverage.

As for opening the United States to the world, the war catalyzed the country’s political, financial, and cultural engagement with other nations. The assistance provided by American financial centers to European nations, banks, and film industries enabled Wall Street and Hollywood to achieve financial and commercial dominance. The worldwide fame of Hollywood’s stars alerted U.S. financial and government leaders about the impact of celebrities’ transnational branding for America’s commercial and geopolitical reach.<sup>24</sup> The postwar collaboration between the industry’s top organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), and the U.S. State Department, even if their economic and political interests were not always precisely aligned, warrants the consideration of the role the international framework played in the Divo’s and the Duce’s rise to fame. In brief, America’s growing domestic acceptance of foreign cultures and

their divergent ideas of leadership and gender relationships went hand-in-hand with the expanded projection of American culture onto the world.

A third advantage of focusing on both stars, and specifically of reading them through the lens of publicity practices, is that it allows us to avoid the teleological temptation to simply match celebrities' personas with the popular enthusiasms of 1920s America. Instead, I follow promotional mediators' deeds along a historical trajectory of personal and institutional agendas and continuous adjustments, rather than postulating the somewhat ahistorical closed circuit between charismatic figures and popular reception.<sup>25</sup> Stars' popularity was not a *fait accompli* but the result of actions taken by individuals on the basis of institutional imperatives, guesswork, and artful manipulation of popular rituals and preferences.<sup>26</sup> If celebrity culture is a given phenomenon today, it was not during and after World War I, when women and men made decisions that would create a new public, political role for film stars and a new cultural import for political figures.

Overall, this publicity-centered historiographical framework has enabled me to unearth new evidence related to the Italian duo's intersecting trajectories, such as Valentino's ghostwritten political pronouncements and Mussolini's rarely studied biographical exposés and screen appearances. It has also led me to new archival repositories that reveal the "Pink Powder Puffs" scandal as a publicity stunt and identify its architects. Ultimately, research into the promotion of each man's celebrity has enabled me to recognize links in film history to 1920s debates about public opinion management and propaganda in democratic America.

This volume consists of three parts and a conclusion. In the three chapters of part 1 ("Power and Persuasion"), I reconstruct the historical context of publicity practices that first informed the wartime alliance between Hollywood and the White House and that after the war affected the relationship between American cinema and U.S. public culture at home and abroad. In the five chapters of parts 2 ("The Divo, or the Governance of Romance") and 3 ("The Duce, or the Romance of Undemocratic Governance"), I detail the promotional strategies deployed to shape and maintain the popularity of Valentino and Mussolini.

In chapter 1 ("Popular Sovereignty, Public Opinion, and the Presidency"), I start from the 1915 Supreme Court decision that ruled that motion pictures were "not to be regarded [. . .] as *organs of public opinion*" but as "a business pure and simple."<sup>27</sup> Yet, the history of how the Wilson administration worked with Hollywood to shape public opinion during America's participation in World War I shows how the executive branch embraced cinema as a legitimate force in public discourse. The Wilson-appointed Committee on Public Information (CPI) worked with Hollywood to advertise the nation's war effort to domestic and foreign audiences alike. The Treasury Department engaged such Hollywood superstars as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks to market its Liberty Bonds. These new displays of patriotic persuasion and authority were extremely influential; not only did they promote Wilson's visionary leadership and Hollywood stars' political credibility, but



they also inaugurated a powerful new correlation of national political ideals with celebrity culture.

As many observers noted, however, the wartime explosion of publicity activities by a small group of government officials, media operators, and businessmen constituted a challenge to the core democratic principle of popular sovereignty. In chapter 2 (“Cultural Nationalism and Democracy’s Opinion Leaders”), I trace the intellectual debates about the impact of public opinion management on the fabric of American national identity, U.S. democracy, and political leadership. Concerned intellectuals, editorialists, and political scientists—most notably Walter Lippmann and John Dewey—reflected on the surprising efficiency with which unscrupulous private management of public opinion—in which cinema stood out as a paragon of visual suggestiveness—could end up dominating the nation’s political discourse. Public relations operatives such as Edward Bernays embraced the role of public opinion managers as fundamental to advertising and consumer education—practices he saw as utilitarian and democratic.

In chapter 3 (“Wartime Film Stardom and Global Leadership”), I return to the wartime collaboration between Hollywood and the U.S. government, but this time from the perspective of the film industry. Specifically, I examine the effects of war propaganda on two of Hollywood’s most important stars: Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Their widely reported participation in the Liberty Loan drives in 1917 and 1918 turned them into on- and off-screen icons of both the Hollywood film industry and U.S. democracy. Pickford became the nation’s sweetheart and a model of resilient and evergreen Americanness, and Fairbanks became a flashier update of Theodore Roosevelt’s ideal of the athletic and strenuous life. After the war, the film industry and its Wall Street backers recognized in film stardom the key vector for the industry’s financial capitalization, market consolidation, and global hegemony. In conjunction with the growing global alliance between Hollywood and Washington, Pickford’s and Fairbanks’s American branding promoted the country and its interests around the world. By the middle of the 1920s, however, both began to age out of their juvenile personas. Other charismatic idols sporting a more exotic flair, such as Greta Garbo, Ramon Novarro, and Rudolph Valentino, were exciting a younger generation of film audiences.

Part 2 (chapters 4, 5, and 6) focuses on how film roles and publicity often failed to match in the ways they shaped Valentino’s public image from the beginning of his career in the late 1910s to the immediate aftermath of his death in 1926. In chapter 4 (“The Divo, New-Style Heavy”), I focus on the years before and immediately after Valentino’s breakout role in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (March 1921). His pre-1921 performances, including the one as seductive exotic villain in *The Married Virgin* (1918), help us to understand how his persona was made to attract sympathy so much that later screenwriters and publicists used it in tales of either moral conversion or Americanization (or both). June Mathis’s script for *The Four Horsemen* created the role of the charming but vulnerable

(and thus sympathetic) seducer, who initially displays a kind of primal sexual desire but eventually sacrifices himself to authentic love. Still, Mathis did not control the film's publicity and its impact on the broader American public. The film's studio, Metro Pictures, and Valentino's unofficial publicist, Herbert Howe, promoted his image as a "new style heavy," that is, as an exotically unrepentant lover, which became particularly resilient and found its most complete cinematic embodiment in *The Sheik* (November 1921).

In chapter 5 ("The Ballyhooed Art of Governing Romance"), I focus on the production and reception history of *The Sheik*, whose construction of Valentino as an assertive, authoritarian male type belied the evidence of his earlier screen roles and his known lifelong dependency on strong women. The film's release also coincided with political pronouncements, possibly ghostwritten by Howe, in which the Divo insisted on the necessity of a "leader for a nation, for a state, for a home" in ways that intertwined antidemocratic rhetoric with opposition to women's new civic and cultural freedom.<sup>28</sup> The chapter juxtaposes this political stance with a series of on- and off-screen occurrences aimed at expanding, but also taming, the quickly clichéd image of the Sheik. In such films as *Camille*, *Blood and Sand*, and *Monsieur Beaucaire*, written or managed by Mathis or his wife, art director Natacha Rambova, he was turned into as an unselfish lover willing to embrace sacrifice and defeat. Similarly, the articles that novelist and publicist Elinor Glyn ghostwrote for Valentino portrayed him as part caveman, part inveterate romantic. Reviews and letters to editors of film magazines were dismayed at how these productions compromised his more popular image of an authoritarian ruler of women's and spectators' romantic longings.

In chapter 6 ("Stunts and Plebiscites"), I detail the ways in which promotional experts sought to resurrect Valentino's stardom following the lull in his popularity beginning in 1924. United Artists publicity men Harry Reichenbach and Victor Mansfield Shapiro sought to restore his prospects by designing publicity stunts that cast him as a Sheik-like romantic figure. Shapiro presided over the "Pink Powder Puffs" scandal, which started with an anonymous editorial in July 1926 that challenged Valentino's heterosexual masculinity. The actor's response garnered newspapers' front pages and a massive attendance for his latest film, *The Son of the Sheik*. Valentino's sudden death in late August, moreover, would not bring an end to this publicity. His handlers collaborated with the funeral home's publicity manager to stage and manage a media display of unanimous grief. Few in America could remain indifferent; even Fascist representatives residing in New York sent Blackshirts to place a wreath on his flower-covered bier as if Mussolini himself were paying patriotic homage to the Divo. By then the American press had already turned the Duce into a competing version of the Sheik.

Part 3 turns to similar publicity processes across the Atlantic, looking at the thoroughly modern efforts to craft Mussolini's public appeal. This section also challenges the culturalist approach that posits an unmediated rapport between

the Duce's virile image and his American audiences. In American political and diplomatic circles, Mussolini represented the perfect anti-Bolshevik ally, but his celebrity status resulted from the contributions of a range of mediators, including diplomats, journalists, editorialists, and writers. Chapter 7 ("Promoting a Romantic Biography") details the actions of these individual promoters, who were variously affiliated with the Italy America Society (IAS), a lobbying group with links to the U.S. State Department, Wall Street, and the press. Created in 1918 to promote American financial and geopolitical interests in Italy, from industrial investment to postwar debt compliance, IAS became an influential PR agency for Mussolini in America. One of its members was the U.S. ambassador to Italy during the March on Rome, William Washburn Child, who contributed significantly to Mussolini's acceptance in America, initially in high government circles and later in the court of public opinion, particularly through his ghostwriting services and connections. The Duce's image in financial circles and in the press also benefitted greatly from the work of Thomas W. Lamont, a founding member of IAS and J. P. Morgan's chief executive, and from the tireless mediation of the Italian ambassador, Prince Gelasio Caetani. Their public relations efforts, together with the publication of *The Life of Benito Mussolini* (1925) by the Duce's former lover, Margherita Sarfatti, and largely ghostwritten autobiographies like Child's *My Autobiography* (1928), filtered any discussion of Mussolini's despotism through a celebratory exposé of his personal life that romanticized his humble upbringing, iron discipline, and popular charm.

In chapter 8, I detail the specific ways in which the few film productions featuring Mussolini emerged out of this network of Italian and American mediators. *The Eternal City* (1924), shot in Rome by George Fitzmaurice and featuring Mussolini as himself, resulted from the contacts between the U.S. State Department, MPPDA's chief Will Hays, IAS's factotum secretary Irene di Robilant, and Ambassador Caetani. Despite their collective effort, the film proved disappointing and led Mussolini to demand control over future projects. The opportunity came when Fox, in search for a world-renowned celebrity to test its new proprietary sound technology, cast the Duce as himself in an address to Americans and Italian Americans in a Movietone News short entitled *The Man of the Hour* (1927). The results appeared remarkable: never before had Americans heard the Duce speak in English directly to them (he also addressed Italian immigrants in Italian). Critics' praise focused on his acting style and star quality, as if his plebiscitarian appeal trumped any questions about his antidemocratic domestic politics. At the same time, American newsreel companies enhanced Mussolini's cinematic visibility in America as an exemplar of undemocratic governing.<sup>29</sup> Fox and Hearst, for instance, edited the newsreel footage of the Istituto LUCE, the cinematographic arm of the Fascist state, and inserted it into their own effective distribution networks from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. A collage of LUCE footage was also the basis for Columbia's much-promoted *Mussolini Speaks* (1933).

The danger of these productions, as Caetani's most eloquent communications described it, was that the Duce ended up as a character actor in someone else's story and not the protagonist of his own.

The question of Hollywood's historical relationship with powerful political players, from mainstream American parties to totalitarian regimes, has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. Although researchers have begun to study studio moguls' contacts with the Wilson administration during World War I,<sup>30</sup> most scholars have chosen to focus on the 1930s relationship of Hollywood to aspiring California governors and U.S. presidents<sup>31</sup> and the menace of Nazi Germany.<sup>32</sup> In the 1920s, however, Hollywood and Washington began to partner with each other to regulate and institutionalize forms of public coexistence and mutual benefit. The familiar narrative that sets up Hollywood scandals in opposition to the Hays Office tells an important but only partial history of personal confrontations, institutional regulations, and occasional collaborations. What is left out are other significant convergences that emerged after World War I on the basis of a shared, pressing need: the management of ever-increasing and diverse crowds capable of accessing film theaters, consumer goods, and voting booths.

Hollywood's euphoric self-mythologizing as America's progressive and democratic arena par excellence emerged concomitantly with the consolidation of film stardom as an effective technique of cultural and commercial regimentation. The industry's self-serving promotion of moviegoing as a democratic practice postulated film audiences' *spontaneous* preference for stars or films within the conveniently self-celebratory notion of cinema as a universal and democratic art.

The selling of the Great War and of star-studded Hollywood films at home and abroad educated government officials, film studios, and public relations specialists on both coasts about the political potential of charismatic male personalities and film stars. What ensued was a striking gathering of ideals about men's personalities and views on authoritative leadership that prevailed over mass conformism and challenges of modern life like women's rights and labor strife. As such gendered ideals pervaded political and film discourses, political figures were made to exude celebrity-like charisma while film stars came to be seen as masters of public opinion and social mobilization, at least for patriotic causes if not yet for social justice campaigns. Celebrity-centered publicity was key to the articulation of an apparently un-American attitude: a suspicion of the inadequacy of liberal democracy. At a time when ideas about dictatorship were preferable to the chaos of "mobocracy," Hollywood and Washington began to converge—sometimes haphazardly—on the promotion of public figures capable of effectively managing public opinion. Film celebrities emerged, on- and off-screen, as imagined authorities and leading men (i.e., sheiks, barons, Zorros, industry captains) capable of turning threatening crowds into well-managed consumers. Similarly, politicians emerged as iconic leaders capable of turning citizens, whether recently enfranchised or not, into identifiable targets for political campaigns. In a tumultuous

decade marked not only by social protests, nativism, and radical immigration restrictions but also by the rise of a multiclass consumer base and the expansion of civic and employment opportunities for women, the Divo and the Duce were similarly branded as captivating authority figures and charismatic male models of mass governance. This book tells the story of the remarkable hits and misses of their mass promotion.