

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

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Reworking National History The Representation of Power and its Subsequent Overturning in Relation to Postcolonial Art in Italy

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Abstract This presentation aims to analyse the representation of power and its subsequent overturning, in relation to postcolonial art in Italy. Works such as *Pays Barbare* by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Alessandra Ferrini's *Negotiating Amnesia or The Return of the Axum Obelisk* by Theo Esthetu, use editing process and the video medium to decolonize images through artistic postproduction of archival material related to imperialist visual propaganda. In this way, the same picture is placed and recontextualized within another picture, leading the image to take on a different meaning, calling into question its relationship to power.

Keywords Postcolonialism. Decoloniality. Contemporary Art. Italy. Fascism.

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1 Decolonizing Italian Visual Identity

Dealing with coloniality in Italy nowadays, in the words of Massimo Vaschetto means embarking on a path of self-critical reflection, moved by the intention of questioning our own “subjectivity, social position, and, above all, our responsibility to the community” (2021, 21). Italian colonialism seems too often unjustly underestimated as if it were legitimate to consider it as a secondary plot compared to other similar ventures. The scant attention paid, especially in the past, to this not edifying page of our collective history shows the

burden of the failed historical, cultural, and political reworking of Italy's colonial past. Certainly, the management of the military campaigns themselves, as well as the different economic, social, and cultural policies adopted since World War II, delineate a radically different scenario than, for example, that of France or Britain. Yet, the onset of Italian colonialism dates back to the late nineteenth century, with the acquisition of the African ports of Assab Bay and Massua, on the Red Sea. As early as 1890, Eritrea was officially declared an Italian colony, anticipating the conquest of North African regions of Tripolitania, Dodecanese, and Cyrenaica promoted by Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti in the second decade of the twentieth century. The advent of Fascism and the subsequent foundation of Italian East Africa (AOI) are nothing more than the tip of this bulky iceberg. The impact of Italy's expansionist aims, though reduced and sometimes downgraded in the collective imagination, to the rank of 'ragged colonialism', is actually considerable. The estimated victims are indeed almost 40,000 between Libyan, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali civilians and militaries. These are without a doubt remarkable numbers that attest to the heinousness of the crimes committed by the Italian occupation troops. The massacre of Debra Libanòs or the establishment of what Achille Mbembe called a "state of exception" (2003, 26) such as the Danane concentration camp - about 40 km south of Mogadishu - for the internment of political prisoners are just a few notable examples. Italy therefore is by no means free from faults. However, the history of Italian colonialism is still underestimated, as if it were just a subplot or a negligible fact of little relevance. The economic miracle in this sense seems to have overshadowed the end of eighty years of Italian colonialism, sanctioned by Somalia's independence achieved in 1960, only seventeen years after the fall of Fascism. From a certain point of view, it is as if the colonial project began precisely with the unification of Italy, playing a relevant role in the national identity-building process. But the pressing need to leave the regime behind soon proves decisive for the stringent identification of colonialism with Fascism, while encouraging the spread of self-congratulatory and opportunistic narratives. This process of removal contributes even today to the consolidation of that false and execrable myth of the 'good Italian', centered on the supposed pitiful and fair attitude of Italian soldiers toward colonized populations. Just as the apologetic support of the arts for expansionism, following the fall of the Fascist regime, gives way to a kind of aphasia, a nostalgic falsification of national colonial history. The removal of our colonial past from public debate and its almost total absence in the educational curricula of the national school system further confirm this lack, highlighting the critical nature of a very complex issue that is still unresolved. It is almost a collective amnesia, rooted in the mythology of conquest moved by the will to trace

a phantasmatic Romanity. However, it seems more appropriate to speak of amnesty, which is a self-absolution without trial, of a suspension of judgment towards the Italian colonial past, rather than of an oversight. Perhaps, in the words of Vasco Forconi, Italian identity itself is conditioned by a kind of underlying “victimhood” (2018). The deceptive myth of mutilated victory, for example, takes its cue from this attitude. The construction of the nation-state in Italy passes through the building of an essentially invented tradition, that is a set of symbolic and ritual practices assembled to instill specific values in the community and to affirm a supposed continuity with the past. But in the case of Italy, this past must be invented in order not to jeopardize the uncertain stability of national sentiment. Probably also because of this, Italian historiography seems to have systematically erased, at least until the 1970s, the chapter about the centrality of national colonial enterprises in the development of our collective identity. As if Italian troops were not going to conquer African territory, but were ideally returning home, right where the Roman Empire once thrived. The Italian people therefore cannot so easily identify with the unusual role of the executioner. And not surprisingly, it is said that Italy has not yet dealt with its past. Even in art history as much as in national contemporary art, as a result, a postcolonial research perspective is struggling to establish itself. Although there is no shortage of positive exceptions, both critical and expositive, it is a phenomenon in the making and still rather marginal. Studies published in Italy regarding the colonial question often seem to leave out or summarily address the Italian postcolonial scenario, just as a critical engagement with contemporary art production appears diluted, sometimes out of focus, and attenuated. The colonial exercise seems to be enacted in the silencing, in the constriction of a power matrix that inscribes the relationship with the other in an oppositional and binary code, concretizing Western - and therefore Italian - identity through the systematic denial or internalization of what is not Western. It is not a matter of reaffirming the existence of a voice of subordination, but rather of hindering its failure to be heard. The need to interrupt this silent connivance is seen in the necessity to examine the very concept of removal, passing through the decolonial decentering of subjectivity. Decolonial and not post-colonial, precisely because, using this specific term, the focus is on the need to highlight the criticalities consequent to the reproduction, in the sphere of knowledge, of a colonial device of domination and prevarication that is still difficult to unhinge. Therefore, one should not attempt to understand differences by fitting the other into already existing categories, but should instead claim one’s right to opacity, to one’s own singularity sometimes elusive in its entirety. Reminiscences of Italian colonialism persist in contemporary visual reciprocity, both in observing and being observed. The white hunter’s

racialized gaze on former colonies and Africa more generally is still relevant to this day. It continues to crystallize, dissect, and define the black body. The posterity of toxic imaginaries, consciously or unconsciously shared and reproduced by the 'imagined community' of the Italian nation, adopts this view. But while the images of the past show the colonial violence, they can also take on a new meaning through their own resensitization. It is a form of posthumous coloniality, that is a way of acting and thinking that has become entrenched in the daily structuring of the collectivity through the consolidation of an intersectional system of privilege and prevarication. A coloniality that is evident, yet often invisible. Contemporary art, therefore, could become a vector of representation in order to subvert the dominant colonial gaze and the reductionism of otherness, opening a third way, a third desovranizing and aporetic space. The medium, after all, represents a matrix, a possibility, and a set of operating principles. But this is by no means to equate visual production with a field devoid of rules. The work of the artists is inseparable from a conscious deconstructive investment in material and institutional space, in their own perceptual habits, interpretive grids, or prevailing ideological segments. Indeed, the relationship between power and art appears to be inseparable, complex, and enduring. This is an equivocal relationship: while power is irresistibly attracted to aesthetics, it is art that expresses its will to power. This means that power looks with awe at the influence of art on its collective perception precisely because it needs it. Representation basically means making a political gesture through the more or less explicit conveyance of a specific message. Popular consent, then, must necessarily come through art and thus through one's own image or risks giving way to doubt, rejection, and consequent rebellion by the national community. From classical antiquity to contemporary times, art has always played a diriment role in the construction of the visual identity of power. And Italian colonial history is just another dark page in this complex and ambiguous book. Throughout the duration of national colonialism, in the words of Alessandra Ferrini and Simone Frangi, there is a kind of fruitful, as much as problematic, the "complicity between artistic, architectural, and cultural practices and colonialism" (2017, 113). The intent of this tacit agreement is to strengthen the popular support for the imperialist project through the necessary structuring of incisive yet reassuring imagery. Exhibitions, advertising, and architectural productions thus contribute to the delineation of a new colonial consciousness. Similarly, the widespread erection of monuments in Italian cities plays a decisive role in the process of ideological indoctrination promoted by the fascist regime, as if they were affective garrisons made to fulfill a precise pedagogical function. Fascism in fact restores the imperialist attitude intrinsic to the national imaginary itself, formed around the misleading value emblem of the

Mediterranean. A paradigm that still survives in Western critical thought today through an uncertain form of post-colonial populism, centered on the idea of a supposed ideological south. However, this attitude seems to shy away from the intimate complexity of the colonial question, staging the reproduction of an ideological coloniality that is all but dormant, precisely in the constant denial of the Eurocentrism inherent in the very idea of the Mediterranean culture. This is the more or less direct consequence of the depoliticization of monuments, buildings, and artworks, perceived and treated by the community as aesthetic objects. Similarly, however, merely removing certain visual expressions of power from public space is just a palliative measure. The failure to reframe the national colonial past, therefore, enables the survival of racist ideologies as well as today's settling of the radical right through the instrument of cultural habituation. But then, how might contemporary art production attempt to subvert the relationship between images and power by enacting a process of decolonizing national visual identity? There are certainly many answers to this question, yet the intent of this paper is to examine three specific case studies as paradigmatic examples of the possible figurative re-signification of colonial power.

2 Resemantization. Three Case Studies

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's *Pays Barbare*, Alessandra Ferrini's *Negotiating Amnesia*, and Theo Esthetu's *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, in fact, use editing and the video medium to turn the meaning of images upside down, through the recontextualization of archival materials related to Italian propaganda and imperialist history. Although with due differences, these works implement a conceptually similar creative process, focusing on the semantic function of selected images in a specific and unprecedented predicative context. It is then a matter of addressing what Kader Attia called the "Paradigm of Repairability" (Pesarin, Tinius 2023, 73), synonymous with the Western obsession with putting back together what has been destroyed, or rather thinking that everything can be repaired, hiding the wounds, as if it were impossible to even admit the existence of cracks, fractures or imperfections. These works show the wounds, making them tangible. It is not, therefore, a matter of denial, trying to restore a body or object to its formal integrity, but rather the will to visualize the signs of these wounds, which are often still open. They are scars that cannot, sometimes do not want to heal. And for this very reason, the importance of these works lies in the strenuous reaffirmation of the relevance and demeaning topicality of these injuries, through their own complex resemanitization. Not surprisingly, Angelica Pesarini and Jonas Tinius have recently put forward the

proposal to set up an unusual “Museum of Undoing” (2023, 65-81), so as to highlight the incompleteness of healing processes with respect to painful colonial wounds. The works of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, Eshetu, and Ferrini retrieve different images and symbols of Italian colonial history and then place them within a different narrative dimension, but without altering their aesthetic characteristics. In this way, the picture remains unchanged, but the image becomes something else, taking on a meaning quite antithetical to the original monument or archival document. If in the past, these pictures represented, narrated and above all exalted Italian colonialism, now those same pictures show its disastrous consequences. After all, images are weaker than we think: they are subject to change. It is then a matter of scaling back the authority of the images themselves. Of course, these are by no means powerless figurations. On the contrary, they are certainly capable of exerting considerable influence on the surrounding reality. But they often seem to hide their own inner fragility. In *Pays Barbare* (2013), Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi recover unpublished images of the Italian colonial enterprise in Ethiopia to continue their research work on the Italian colonial past, specifically addressing the reciprocity between power and representation. The film opens with the bodies of Benito Mussolini, Claretta Petacci and other members of the Italian Social Republic displayed upside down in Piazza Loreto, Milan, on April 25, 1945. In the process of postproduction, the two filmmakers and artists slow down and zoom in the original footage so that the viewer can take a closer, more attentive look at details that would otherwise be elusive and secondary to the bodies displayed in the square. The first ten minutes of the film proceed without any sound intervention. It is silence, in fact, that introduces the scenes shot in the so-called Abyssinian colony. Almost as if it were an undiscovered story, kept hidden too long under the burdensome weight of time. The work then continues by dwelling on the time span between 1922 and 1936. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi juxtapose images of a parade held in the streets of an unspecified Italian city, with participants disguised as Arabs or blacks, with those of a plane intent on flying over the Ethiopian capital - perhaps to conduct a reconnaissance of sensitive places to bomb. After this unusual and alienating juxtaposition, there are some scenes shot on the streets of the Ethiopian capital, alternating with the arrival of the Italian troops. The heinous physicality of the Ethiopian conquest emerges from the montage, through the racialization and sexualization of subjugated bodies, the use of chemical weapons banned by international treaties, and the structuring of a complex propagandistic communication system. As in other previous works by the two, this movie also focuses on the construction of colonial consensus during the Fascist regime, showing letters, photographs, and heterogeneous film material from both private collections and works

funded and commissioned by the LUCE Institute. Indeed, these are mostly unpublished images that more or less fortuitously escaped confiscation by the U.S. military after the end of the conflict.

Con la nostra camera analitica siamo tornati a frugare negli archivi cinematografici per trovare fotogrammi dell’Etiopia Abissinia del periodo coloniale italiano. Abbiamo trovato diversi film privati di un medico. L’erotismo coloniale. Il corpo nudo delle donne e il ‘corpo’ del film. Vedute aeree del territorio. Sui bombardieri si caricano bombe all’iprite, il cui utilizzo è sempre stato negato. Fotogrammi militari sconosciuti che mostrano gli uomini e le armi della violenta impresa italiana per la conquista dell’Etiopia. (1935-36)¹

With our analytical camera, we went back to rummaging through film archives to find stills from the Italian colonial period. We found several private films by a doctor. Colonial eroticism. The naked body of women and the body of film. Aerial views of the territory. Mustard bombs are loaded on the bombers, the use of which has always been denied. Unknown military stills showing the men and weapons of the violent Italian enterprise to conquer Ethiopia.

As seen in other works such as *Il fiore della razza*, *Dal Polo all’Equatore*, or *Lo specchio di Diana*, for Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi fascism cannot be reduced to public expressions or its explicit manifestations alone. The legacy of the regime, on the contrary, can be found in all those objects, in all those images that have fully entered the private sphere of Italians, settling in the family’s everyday life. Therefore, the two seem to move backward, starting from the epilogue of Fascism to narrate Italian colonial imperialism. The title of the work, not surprisingly, takes its cue from the propagandistic language used by the regime to promote the campaign in Ethiopia: “Per questo Paese primitivo e barbaro l’ora della civiltà è ormai scoccata” (For this primitive and barbaric country, the hour of civilization has struck).²

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s analytical gaze and rigorous research constantly move in the balance between personal posture, attitude, working methods, and personal obsessions. Their works implement a cataloguing process that is anything but static and definitive, through the recontextualization of archival and stock images. In this way, this reflection on the often controversial concepts of barbarism

¹ *Pays Barbare* (2013) by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Torino Film Festival. <https://www.torinofilmfest.org/it/31-torino-film-festival/film/pays-barbare/16326/>.

² *Pays Barbare* (2013) by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Torino Film Festival. <https://www.torinofilmfest.org/it/31-torino-film-festival/film/pays-barbare/16326/>.

and civilization places the emphasis on the invaders, who are rude, violent, and ignorant, rather than on the conquered population. The images shown, then, take on an unprecedented significance: if they originally served to consolidate consent at home and abroad, they now highlight the atrocity of a reckless enterprise, while underscoring the many alarming critical issues resulting from the failure to reframe Italy's colonial past.

Non siamo archeologi, entomologi, antropologi, come spesso veniamo definiti. Per noi non esiste il passato, non esiste la nostalgia ma esiste il presente. Far dialogare il passato con il presente. Dialettica tra passato e tempo presente. Non usiamo l'archivio per se stesso. Usiamo il già fatto con un gesto alla Duchamp, per parlare di oggi, di noi, dell'orrore che ci circonda. (Lissoni 2012, 16)

We are not archaeologists, anthropologists or entomologists, as we are often called. For us there is no past, there is no nostalgia, but there is the present. To make the past dialogue with the present. We do not use the archive for itself, we use the already made, with a Duchamp-like gesture, to talk about us, about today, about the horror that surrounds us.

Similarly, Alessandra Ferrini's *Negotiating Amnesia* (2015) investigates Italy's lingering colonial legacy through materials from the Alinari Archives and the National Library in Florence. The artist's research, specifically, focuses on the collective amnesia related to the Ethiopian War (1935-36), examining images from public and private archives by means of a narrative voice and text folders. This film essay is divided into four chapters, dialectically analyzing – as reported in the artwork description published in *Coloniality and Visual Cultures in Italy*, a collective volume edited by Lucrezia Cippitelli and Simone Frangi – the relations between memory, visibility and cultural heritage from two specific collections: the Pittana fund held at the Alinari Archives and the Ughi private photographic collection. Photographs from the occupation of Ethiopia and propaganda postcards from Italian East Africa are reactivated by the artist through a process of analyzing the visual language of the colonial archive. Ferrini's narrative voice, in this way, emphasizes the centrality of the sometimes elusive link between personal and collective unconscious. However, the intent of the subjective encounter with this photographic material is by no means anecdotal, but rather to raise different questions related to the colonial legacy, attempting to stimulate an often still uncertain awareness by the community. Above all, it is a matter of firmly questioning that do-gooding and deceptive narrative centered on downplaying Italy's colonial past, proposing to make connections between past and present in order to pose questions to the

viewer. The work was presented for the first time at the 56th Festival dei Popoli in Florence, alongside the installation *Notes on Historical Amnesia*, which instead documents the pedagogical approach of the complex research and projects carried out with high school students to make the video. As the artist states, much of her rigorous work, constantly straddling theoretical, political, and visual research, consists of creating constellations, situating these materials in a more expanded context, and bringing out patterns that invite reflection on collective thought processes and systems. Indeed, Ferrini's work focuses on deconstructing the Eurocentric and, specifically, post-fascist Italian gaze, always keeping at the center the duty to listen respectfully and to share the daily conflict of the subjects prevaricated by such gaze resulting from a privileged and hegemonic whiteness. It then becomes crucial to examine the histories of each testimony or collection, dwelling on their function, their dispersal, dismemberment, or preservation as well as on the authors' ideological motivation. And again, the artist recontextualizes archival visual material to enact a process of resensitization: if previously these images exalted and, in a sense, corroborated the Italian colonial enterprise, now they implement a severe and pointed critique of national expansionist aims, showing the responsibilities of an empire.

In general, I am interested in working with material that has not been invested with a status of authority or exceptionality, but whose triviality or apparent innocence nevertheless reflects, in a more latent way, the detritus of an imperialist, racist, orientalist, and fascist ideology underlying the Italian nation-state thought system - and deeply embedded in the way of seeing, thinking and imagining of each individual part of this imaginary community. Or that it has the potential to expose this debris and challenge it. (Ferrini, Zalukar 2021, 250)

The decolonial resignification of the work, albeit with due methodological differences, is similarly crucial in the third and final case study, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* by Theo Eshetu (2009). It is a video installation consisting of fifteen 4:3 monitors arranged in three rows of five, in the manner of the frames of traditional Ethiopian painting, divided into narrative pictures placed in non-linear sequence. The work relates back to the Ethiopian foundation myth of the Queen of Sheba, as recounted in the 12th century by the Kebrä Nagast, reaffirming through the introduction of Christianity the link between Ethiopia and the Holy Land. Not only, in fact, did the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia predate that of Rome, but the myth has it that the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon in Jerusalem and became pregnant. Her son would later visit Jerusalem, then return to Ethiopia with the Arc of the Covenant and rule as King Menelik

I. Eshetu juxtaposes the symbolic power of Queen Sheba's narrative with the symbolic shifts associated with Axum's monumental obelisk. As the title suggests, the work recounts the return from Italy to Ethiopia and the subsequent erection of the Axum stele. The artist documents the complex gestation of this important restitution supported by UNESCO - a mediating institution in the diplomatic agreement between the two states involved. With a detached gaze, the artist captures every single detail of the workmanship from different points of view, highlighting the engineering nature of this operation. The work lingers especially on the ritual of transformation that recodes the symbolic bearing of the obelisk, from imperialist memory to an object of postcolonial discussion to an unprecedented symbol of emancipation. The artist calls into question the role of public monuments as spaces of representation and projection of collective memory through the narrative of this complex return.

Harmonious compositions created by multiple repetitions and time shifts have counterpoints in compositions that unify fragments into a complete image across all fifteen screens. This is a work that fuses the painterly, the sculptural, the kinetic, the theatrical, the ritual, and the poetic, accompanied by varied musical counterparts. The technical complexities of the video installation echo, in miniature, the complexities of this engineering feat. (s.d.)

The imposing stele of Axum, mistakenly referred to as an obelisk in Italy, is a funerary pyre stele of the monarchs of the Axumite empire, dated 3rd century AD. After the introduction of Christianity, Axum became the religious capital of Ethiopia, and this along with other stelae erected in the oldest part of the city represent Ethiopia's pre-Christian civilization. However, the stele was taken to Rome during the Italian occupation and erected in front of the then Ministry of Colonies in 1937. This is a highly significant act, as it symbolizes the coveted revenge of the Battle of Adwa - when the Ethiopian forces defeated the Italian invading force on Sunday 1 March 1896. At the end of the conflict, the Ministry of Colonies became the headquarters of FAO, but the stele remains in front of the building, in a way marking the post-colonial continuation of the relationship between the two states as if Ethiopia was the main recipient of Western and Italian aid. Compounding its colonial connotations, the stele has long been the subject of political and diplomatic debate over whether or not it should be returned to Ethiopian citizens. But the resolution of the dispute is far more random and trivial than we think: in 2002, lightning severely damaged the stele, and the Italian state, rather than venture into costly restoration, decided to disassemble it and store it for three years at the military airport in Rome, and then bring it back to Axum in 2005. The stele, once returned to Ethiopia, was

paradoxically renamed by the local community as the 'Stele of Rome'. One of the main characteristics of the work lies in Eshetu's ironic decision to align the fifteen screens only once throughout the duration of the video to project the seemingly insignificant image of the two wheels of a truck placed under the erected stele. In fact, as the artist states, it is a monument with undoubted phallic reminiscences, and the collective fervor towards such a symbol is most peculiar. Other subtle references and visual games could be the parade of the three engineers on a camel-mounted construction site as if they were contemporary magi, the analogy between the vivid polychromes of the umbrellas of the Italians thronging in front of the stele and those of the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy, as well as the image of a hand raised to reveal the obelisk, could easily be interpreted as a sly parody of the Roman salute. The point then is precisely to emphasize the resemantization of the stele over time. Again then, the picture remains unchanged, while the image changes drastically, several times: from a phallic emblem of power to a religious symbol, from a booty of imperialist violence to a postcolonial symbol, and later decolonial monument of an unprecedented balance between the global north and south in the age of globalization.

Because Africa is often imagined through images, it is in art, photography, and video that powerful changes can take place and the realities, not covered by traditional media, can be exposed. Everything seems to come full circle with this work. (Wendt 2014, 100-13)

As can be seen from these three case studies, the dialectic of power and desire decisively conditions the relationship of the community with images. It is a double bind that affects both the subject and the object of racism, and it represents, after all, a form of visual violence perpetrated for the sole purpose of making the subject in question hypervisible and at the same time paradoxically invisible, that is, an object of abomination and adoration. The power of images, is ambivalent, often manifesting itself more as a lack than as actual possession. The national colonial legacy itself seems to creep into contemporary times, though it rarely shows its face. Italian colonialism appears as a troubling absence rather than a suffocating presence. As much in the critical deconstruction of the physical, visual, and verbal prevarication of otherness as in the survival of racist attitudes, the Italian colonial ventures seem to be nothing more than a faded memory. As demonstrated by the three works in question, however, art has the potential to play a diriment role in the articulated process of reworking a past that is still near, yet not so immediate as to prevent a lucid understanding of what happened. For this very reason, then, it becomes necessary to define the very evaluation

of the power of images, shifting the focus from what they do to what they want, from meaning to desire, from the dominant model to be opposed to the subordinate one to be listened to. After all, global art history, by its very definition, is postcolonial and contemporary (Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, 178-85).

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