

Bologna Institute for Policy Research

SAIS Bologna Center
via Belmeloro 11
40126 Bologna, ITALY
+39 051 291 7811
www.jhubc.it/bipr

Date: 15 October 2012

Speaker: Stephen Gundle, Professor of Film and Television Studies, University of Warwick, U.K.

Chair: Mark Gilbert, Professor of History and International Studies, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Bologna Center, Italy

“Mussolini’s Ghost: The Afterlife of a Personality Cult”

Professor Stephen Gundle’s lecture is premised on the question, “What happens when a dictator falls?” With the collapse of several tyrannical regimes in recent years, the issue of what happens to personality cults is a topical one, for these often survive long after a ruler’s demise. Formed by often distorted representations of a leader through propaganda and mass media, personality cults endure not only because they create a seemingly infallible and deity-like public image of a ruler, but also because they produce lasting tangible objects and a repertoire of images. Gundle interprets the aftermath of Mussolini’s personality cult in relation to the concepts of dethronement, resurrection, and re-integration. These correspond to processes that in broad terms are sequential but which in reality continue to work independently and together over time.

Gundle prefaced his lecture with an image of a recent painting by Luciano Boccardini entitled *Mussolini ultimo atto*. The painting, depicting a make body hanging upside down in the manner of Mussolini at Piazzale Loreto in 1945, also features a red balloon and stage curtains. At once ‘macabre and joyful’, it exemplifies the complex problem of Mussolini’s legacy, as well as the continued resonance of the manner of his death. Furthermore, Gundle referenced Sergio Luzzatto’s book, *Il corpo del duce* (1998), the only work dealing with Mussolini in death. While an important contribution, the book is focused solely on the dictator’s body and gives little space to questions of the mass media.

Dethronement: Equestrian Statue of Mussolini by Giuseppe Graziosi

Dethronement often consists of a cultural work of reduction and degradation. It is a process that can begin before the death of a tyrant through the destruction of visual symbols such as statues or artworks. When Mussolini was removed from power on 25 July 1943, an outpouring of hostility and fury against his fascist regime ensued. This resulted in the destruction of statues and visual symbols of his fascist regime. Gundle examined dethronement as the first step to interpreting Mussolini’s legacy. He highlighted the destruction of the equestrian statue in Bologna, which was built to commemorate Mussolini’s inauguration of the local sports stadium in 1926. The statue, which was held to be a physical embodiment of Mussolini’s spirit, was the focus of rituals staged during sporting events. Upon Mussolini’s overthrow in 1943, however, the statue was desecrated while loyal fascist supporters buried the head. In an act confirming the dethronement,

the remaining molten bronze was later used to fashion two male and female resistance statues. Representing the spirit of Mussolini, the head was later dug up by neo-fascists and preserved as a symbol of resurrection and an unwillingness to forget.

Resurrection: Predappio – The town of the Duce

Resurrection arises when a tyrant is missed, which gives rise to the desire to restore him or in some way mend his reputation. Under Mussolini's rule, his hometown of Predappio was transformed into a primary site of celebration for the cult of Mussolini. The town became a place of pilgrimage and received investment and infrastructural developments, most prominently the Casa del Fascio building. However, after the war, Predappio fell into a state of neglect. Most fascist buildings remained derelict. While they were considered an eyesore to some, they held nostalgic memories for others. The state's release of Mussolini's body was intended as a step towards healing, or reintegration. In fact the burial of his remains in 1957 was important for the post-war Italian fascist movement. It brought Mussolini's family back into play and key role in created a basis for a limited resurrection of the cult of Mussolini.

Re-integration: Mussolini in Film and Television

The process of re-integration enables a tyrant to be reinstated among his community of origin, his role acknowledged, and any misdeeds forgotten. Reintegration in Italy after Mussolini's death gave rise to an 'indulgent memory' of the dictator and his regime. This allowed for his acts to be seen as sins deserving forgiveness and not as crimes worthy of condemnation. In the mass media's treatment of Mussolini, the two processes of dethronement and reintegration compete. While postwar cinema generally sustained the former, television, with its obligation to work with prevailing opinion, operated within the frame of the latter. Together, but in different ways, the two media did much to perpetuate Mussolini's visibility. Alongside documentaries, historical fiction has repeatedly revisited the life of the dictator, concentrating especially on the tragic period of 1943-45. In both public history and collective memory, television played an important role as a force for reintegration by highlighting the personal, family and domestic aspects of the dictator's final months.

Gundle draws comparisons with the many revivings of Napoleon in French television. Whether these are viewed as dethronements, resurrections or acts of reintegration depends on the situation depicted and the image of the actor chosen to play him. In any event, they show that Boccardini's apparent wish that, one day soon, the stage curtains might be closed on Mussolini is unlikely to come to pass soon.