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Representing Aviation in 1930s Italy *Journal of Cultural Geography*
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Abstract

This paper examines the geographical imaginations associated with aviation in fascist Italy, focusing on the representation of flight on the one hand, and on the role of propaganda flights organized by the regime in the 1930s. The representation and use of aviation in interwar Italy is explored in light of the concept of technological legitimation, based on an understanding of technological practice as a political and ideological instrument. Aviation, as one of the new subjects of artistic representations of the modern era, was grasped by avant-garde and modern movements in the early 20th century. In turn, representations of aviation were used by the regime, which considered it a key to national development and modernization, materially as well as in the representational sphere. Propaganda flights in 1930s Italy were organized by the Ministry of Aeronautics and local aero clubs, and were an expression of the politicised use of aviation, both in terms of representations of technology and the aviator, and the exploitation of flight's public potential for the construction of fascist spectacle.

Keywords: Aviation, technology, modernization, fascism, Italy, propaganda

Introduction: defining geographical imaginations

As aeronautical designer Groever C. Loening commented in 1919, ‘Airplanes are very material, their vibrations are very evident, their grip on the air almost ferocious, and frequently oil, exhaust, and the cold rush of air add to a feeling of utter subordination to a mechanical power’ (Bilstein 1983, 156). The interwar period (1918-1939) was an age of expansion in civil and military aviation. Airlines commenced service, on trails blazed by airmail services in the early 1920s. Military aviation developed rapidly, and monoplanes and all-metal aeroplanes were introduced. Networks of airports, air bases and maintenance were instituted, and radio communications and radio navigation became standardised. Aircraft engine development followed apace. In spatial terms, aviation started to bridge the world. At the same time, a particular aeronautical aesthetic was formed, focusing on aeroplanes themselves, but also on the figure of the aviator, the idea of flight, new technologies and the overcoming of physical and geographical boundaries. The link between aviation’s physicality, its rootedness in material economic and scientific bases, and its representation and use for political aims during this period can shed light on the ideological use of technology in the formation and promotion of ideological and political ideas. In this paper, I argue that representations of aviation can be coherently understood in terms of the creation of geographical imaginations.

This paper analyzes the case of aviation in Italy during the interwar period, focusing on aviation’s propaganda potential and its co-optation as part of a ‘fascist’ aesthetic at a time when European states constituted a landscape of fraught political and ideological reconfigurations. Recent studies in cultural geography (Adey, Budd and

Hubbard 2007) have attempted to situate air travel, aviation and airspace within richer theoretical frameworks which include nuanced analyses of aviation not limited to the approaches found in transport studies and allied disciplines. This paper draws on geographical and cognate literature on the visual aspects of aviation (Fleming 1984; Cosgrove 1994; Wohl 1996; Hallion 2003), and situates representations of aviation in recent analyses of the technological production of geographical imaginations (Ryan 1997), as well as research on geographical knowledge and imaginations in fascist Italy (Atkinson 1996). The approach taken in this paper attempts to reconcile the visual with its material bases. Linkages between visibility, representation and wider discourses have contributed to an understanding of how 'imaginings' become enmeshed with materiality. Dittmer (2007), for example, has explored the manner in which *Captain America* comics were enrolled in the processes which produced American national identity before 1941.

Visual, imaginative representations of aviation in fascist Italy are windows into the representation of aviation as a technology, and the use of the aeroplane and the 'view from above' as a platform from which to communicate political-ideological meanings (Ryan 1997). To paraphrase Halford Mackinder (in Ryan 1994, 157), if thinking visually is to think geographically, then the visual representations of aviation considered here can be considered the incipient parts of the process of production of geographical imaginations. Furthermore, focusing on representations of aviation as a technology will enable further studies of aviation-related geographical imaginations of fascist Italy to be grounded in a reflexive consideration of the production of visual knowledges through geographical imaginations (Proctor 1998). These knowledges are necessarily intertwined with notions of power and domination: see, for example,

McCormack (1976) analysis of the ways in which colonial aviation was linked to British imperial projects in Kenya.

This paper brings the concept of geographical imaginations to bear on fascist conceptualizations of aviation (Said 1979)¹. Geographical imaginations have been a fertile focus of research, especially in cultural, social and historical geography (Gregory 1995; Kasbarian 1996), as well as in more contemporary political and cultural analyses, such as McFarlane's (2004) study of the Indian Alliance or Chang and Lim's (2004) research on the geographical imaginations constructed through tourism-focused representations of 'New Asia-Singapore'. Before articulating the paper's main argument, I wish to offer a conceptual definition of geographical imaginations as visually-based knowledges about spatial processes. By utilizing the concept of 'spatial processes' I try to capture *within* geographical imaginations both static views of places, space and landscape, such as could be found within visual representations, and studies which focus on visibility, ephemerality and visual spaces as transitional and inherently unstable. As Crang (2002) has argued, there has been relatively little emphasis within cultural geography on the visual, although these lacunae are increasingly being filled (Rose 2007). At the same time, the paper's focus on technology remains rooted in an understanding of the *material* processes implicit in the production of cultural representations (Castree 2001).

The paper is further contextualized and situated by drawing on the field of aviation history. Recent studies of aviation have emphasized its chronological and technological development (Crouch 2003; Wohl 2005; Hallion 2003), as well as the evolution of airlines and their routes (Sampson 1984), although work in this vein has

been produced throughout the history of aviation (Salt 1930). A recent focus on the aesthetic facets of aviation has generated insights on the representation of aerial technologies (London 2007; Wohl 1996; 2005). Research has also been carried out on aviation and modernity, focusing specifically on modern architectural and planning projects, such as airports, which populated the material, lived environment of the twentieth century as a result of the exploitation of air for transport (Gordon 2004). There has also been a recent resurgence of interest in Italian aviation history within Italy (D'Agostino 2007; 1996; Ghiringhelli 2005; Grampa 2004; Lombardi Susy 2004). Some excellent histories have been written of pre-First World War (Lombardi Susy 2004) and fascist aviation in Italy (Ghiringhelli 2005). However, as Labranca (2005) recently pointed out, studies of pre-1945 Italian aviation lack a connection to wider issues in Italian and European history of the period. Indeed, most research to date has focused on particular aircraft manufacturers. For example, Grampa (2004) has studied the SIAI Marchetti company (Grampa 2004), and D'Agostino (2000, 1996) has investigated Cantieri Riuniti Dell'Adriatico (CRA), manufacturers of the distinctive CANT and CANT.Z seaplane. There have also been histories of specific aircraft, such as the S.V.A. biplane (Pertino 2004). The following tries to go some way towards filling that gap by marrying a consideration of aviation, technology and propaganda with an approach informed by recent research on the links between fascist Italy's cultural, aesthetic and political realities (Ben-Ghiat 2001; Falasca-Zamponi 2000; Fogu 1997; Mosse 1996; Adamson 1990), the aim being to identify the processes through which imaginations became constructed in fascist Italy.

This paper draws on archival material from the Central State Archive (*Archivio Centrale di Stato*) in Rome, and specifically on documents from the Ministry of

Aeronautics. Archival sources analyzed here range from communications between ministry officials, to communications between Mussolini and ministry representatives, public letters to the ministry, and route maps and propaganda flight programmes. Documentary sources from the interwar period are also analyzed. Archival materials were selected through a targeted, systematic sourcing approach based on a keyword analysis of the catalogues to be found within the Central State Archive. The analysis of keywords and the locations of documents corresponding to these keywords enabled the identification of the Ministry of Aeronautics archival collection as the richest resource; this became the focus of analysis. Materials themselves were analyzed utilizing critical discourse analysis, and specifically employing an understanding of discourse, text and images as mediators of power and power relations (Foucault 1972; Berger 1973; Jay 1993). Geographical imaginations built around the visual can therefore be understood through documents rooted in institutions of power, such as the Ministry of Aeronautics. At the same time, these constructed imaginations mediate the power in question (Weiss and Wodak 2003; Fairclough 1995). In this sense, geographical imaginations are conceptualized as discourse constituted simultaneously at three distinct but intertwined levels: at the level of text, image, and materiality.

The following section briefly considers the links between aviation and the imagination, situating this within a broader panorama which encompasses various aesthetic uses of flight. The argument is that aviation and its aesthetic use can be seen as a practice of technological legitimation. The next section sets the scene for a consideration of fascist aviation by analyzing the inscription of aviation into the popular imaginary in Italy after the First World War (although I recognize the

continuity between late-1910s representational trends and the depictions of aviation prevalent after the inception of fascism in October 1922). Drawing on archival material and published sources from the era, the penultimate section goes on to consider aviation propaganda under the fascist regime, focusing in particular on nationwide propaganda flights organized by the Ministry of Aeronautics and local flying clubs in the late 1920s and 1930s. These *voli di propaganda* (propaganda flights) are interpreted in an aesthetic key, as expressions of the formation of a particular fascist aesthetic and geographical imaginations, as well as occasions in which the regime could organize mass spectacle.

Aviation, Futurism and technological legitimation

Flight was aestheticized in various forms throughout its early history; Italian fascism developed at a critical juncture in the history of flight. The 1910s were a period of rapid aeronautical development, as well as being a time in which representational potential increased through innovative means such as film, as well as other more traditional art forms. Aviation was quickly adopted as a subject of expression and composition by various avant-garde movements, including cubism and Futurism. In 1912, for example, Picasso produced three cubist paintings, featuring pamphlet covers advertising military aviation (Goodyear 2003, 222). The paintings' title was '*Our future is in the air*'. This is indicative of a nascent, positive representational period with regards to art, aviation and flight. However, from 1914 onwards, aviation could no longer be considered purely as a technological pursuit, or a sport, but would be

brought down into the mud of the trenches and inextricably linked to the events of Guernica, Dresden and Nagasaki. In artistic terms, aviation's bellicose expressive potential was firmly grasped by Italian Futurist artists, who saw in aviation a joining of man and machine into a hybrid represented by speed and the promise of annihilation. In technological terms, 'Although F. T. Marinetti and his colleagues were attracted to machines in general, they were particularly fascinated by the internal combustion engine. While locomotives and ocean-liners appeared in many of the early works, they were eclipsed before long by automobiles and airplanes' (Bohn 2006, 207).

It is crucial to remain conscious of the fact that, as a modern technology, aviation and its associated annihilation of speed, time and space was interpreted in different ways by various protagonists of the modern and avant-garde movements (Simonsen 2005)². However, Futurism is relevant here as it has been closely linked to Italian fascism. Klöck (1999), for example, posits a distinction between studies of futurism which equate the movement with the birth of a 'fascist' form of culture, and studies which depoliticise Futurism by not focusing on futurist intellectuals' links with Italian politics and ideology. I argue that it would be counterproductive as well as historically and aesthetically revisionist to ignore the links which existed between the movement and fascism (although remaining conscious of the pitfalls implicit in attempting to conflate futurism with fascism) (Berghaus 1996; Schnapp 1992). An example of Futurist engagement with aviation is Giannina Censi's theatrical representation of aviation through dance, in the *aerodanze* spectacles of the 1930s (Klöck 1999). These performances were themselves based on ideas which had evolved from the futurist manifesto on dance, elaborated in 1917. Klöck discusses the links between

representations of technology, the role of gender in these representations, and the figure of Censi, situated ‘within both the futurist movement and within the cultural politics of Italian fascism’ (Klöck 1999, 395). Italian intellectuals linked with Futurism navigated an opaque course between fascism and Futurism in their engagement with certain artistic themes such as aviation, the machine, speed and technology. Futurist ideas on mass spectacle and the blending of theatre and aerial themes were aired by Marinetti in his 1931 *Manifesto del Teatro Futurista Aereoradiotelevisivo* (‘Manifesto of Futurist aerial, radio and televisual theatre’). Similarly, Futurist attempts to link aviation with painting (Bohn 2006), poetry (Marinetti 1931) and music (Toni 1933) were theorized, and in the latter case sometimes evolved into complete musical compositions (Grandi 1935).

It is useful here to link Futurism’s adoption of aviation to the fascist regime’s own promotion of civil and military aeronautics, and of aviators as heroic personages linked with fascism. Futurist ideas on flight informed the regime’s representation of flight and technology. The intermeshing of aviation, art and politics can be seen as an example of the exploitation and fetishization of technology in the ideological and political spheres. In particular, I focus on the idea of technology as a practice of political-ideological legitimation. Technologies can be defined as instruments utilised to organise knowledge and experience; technological practices, on the other hand, are activities dependent on these instruments (Klöck 1999, 395). When technological practices are considered, their political use for the purpose of legitimation can be assessed, and related to the specific technology (in this case, aviation) and its representation. Legitimation of this kind can be seen as a political practice which ‘emphasized the scientific basis of [...] hegemony and particularly accomplishments

of technology as evidence of [the regime's] right to rule' (Bailes 1976, 58). In his consideration of the role of aviation in the USSR in the 1930s, for example, Bailes (1976) introduced the idea of a process of 'technological legitimation' through aviation technology and representation.

In the USSR, the regime co-opted the efforts of individuals, such as Andrei Nikolaevich Tupolev, and aeronautical industries, for political aims (Bailes 1976). These included the tactic of diverting attention from contemporary purges, and enabled Stalin to be portrayed as a caring father figure to aviation and aviators. Similarly, in Italy, 'heroic' competitive pursuits and sports became a way for the regime to compensate for harsh political, economic and social realities. For example, whilst sport became a tool for reviving mass consumption in the United States, in Italy it remained within the sphere of spectacular politics (Falasca-Zamponi 2000): 'living through the exploits and victories of [the] famous figures of fascism was a way of forgetting anxieties over the future and daily hardship' (Dogliani 2001, 333). Aviation was treated as a masculine, fascist sport by the fascist regime. Mussolini himself became the figurehead of this refashioning of sport as a discipline which could form fascist bodies and minds: as well as being a licensed pilot, propaganda newsreels and publications emphasized his high levels of physical activity, from running, to threshing wheat with peasants (Caprotti 2007). The figure of Mussolini as Italy's exemplary aviator was also widely publicised. A case in point is the 1934 publication of a book titled *L'Aviazione negli Scritti, Nella Parola e nell'Esempio del Duce* ('Aviation in the Writings, Words and Example of the Duce')³. The tome celebrated the advances of fascist aviation, and claimed that they were inspired by Mussolini: 'A trembling tricolour streak persists in the sky, like a rocket's fiery

trajectory, signalling Italy's valour, in eternity' (Anonymous to Mussolini, 11 October 1937). The book, a highly visual artefact, was broadly chronological in scope: it claimed to chart the development of aviation up to 1937, and the chronology employed is telling, as a 'fascist' lens on aviation is employed. Each chapter opens with a full-page illustration indicative of the 'spin' placed on aviation within the chapter. For example, the first chapter is titled 'End of Prehistory', and the opening illustration is a frontal image of an early biplane superimposed on a map of the English Channel, a clear pointer to Latham and Bleriot's various attempts to cross said channel in 1909. Both the illustration and the chapter title denote the dawn of a new technological era which enabled the bridging of geographical boundaries. At the same time, the illustration, with its focus on a biplane from the 1900s, clearly situates the dawn of aviation in a somewhat distant past. As the book progresses, the chapter titles become focused on Italy, and on fascism and aviation. Mussolini is thus clearly linked to aviation in a chapter titled *L'esempio* ('The Example') (Ministero dell'Aeronautica 1937: 185). The opening image is of a bold 'M', signifying Mussolini; this is superimposed on an illustration of eagle grasping the fasces, a symbol of power as well as fascism.

Aviation was politicized by Italian fascism in a similar manner to the way in which other technologies and modernizing initiatives had been utilized in a political vein. Land reclamation, architectural and urban planning interventions, and advances in transport became foils for the regime's modernizing drive and multifaceted cultural agendas. In this sense, fascism was aestheticized, causing two distinct effects to come into being. Firstly, there was a critical separation of political practice and the practice of politics, through mass spectacle (Benjamin 1968; Falasca-Zamponi 2000).

Secondly, aestheticization had the effect of producing a highly visual culture which externalized the technological ideas of the era. Referring to Walter Benjamin's theorization of aesthetic politics, fascism can be interpreted here as:

'a catastrophic phase of capitalist modernization in which the logic of political action and representation themselves become subsumed under the laws of commodification and commodity fetishism. Fascism aestheticizes politics because it transforms its ideological core--the promise of a strong, autonomous, and resolute state--into an eminently marketable object of mass consumption, a multi-purpose commodity circulated by a peculiarly modern and Fordist culture industry' (Koenig 1999, 64-5).

Almost every visible part of the aeroplane was fetishized, in some form or other, by the time the fascist regime took power in Italy. Aeroplanes, wings, engines and flight were used as metaphors both in the political and economic sphere. As Klöck (1999, 406) has argued, 'By the late 1920s, the airplane had entered public consciousness and many people's daily lives as a means of transportation, a recreational tool in sports and flight-shows, a presence in the sky and daily newspapers, or an icon in popular culture'. Although overstating the claim that the aeroplane became a means of transportation for 'many people' in the 1920s (U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission 2007; Lee 2003)⁴, the fact that aviation and its associated technologies and technological practices became epitomic of the early 20th century (and infused with political meaning) has been widely observed (Bilstein 1994; Lombardi Susy 2004; Rieger 2005; Solberg 1979; Weiser 1978). Commercial advertisements, for example, traded on the speed and technical prowess associated with flying. One such

advertisement, for the Ford Motor Company, showcased the new Lincoln car with a background of Ford trimotors (Bilstein 1983, 152)⁵. Aviation became a mass commodity through an aesthetic process. This involved the spectacular representation and involvement of a mass public in air shows, as well as in other forms of propaganda, such as aviation pavillions at national and international exhibitions, as well as airline posters and promotional documents. It is to the propaganda potential of flight that this paper now turns.

Aviation, propaganda, and the fascist regime

The early twentieth century saw the inscription of aviation as an established theme in the popular imaginary. This proliferation of images and imaginations was inspired by military, postal, commercial and sport aviation, as well as by representations of technology and the figure of the aviator. At the same time, the 1920s and 1930s saw great advances in aeronautical technology and engineering, as well as a parallel, increasing exploitation of this potential as a trope for political and cultural propaganda and publicity. Aviation can be seen as a technology epitomic of the modern era, and its use in political imagery became especially prevalent from the late 1920s onwards (Rieger 2005; Fritzsche 1992; Golomstock 1990). Most often nowadays associated with figures such as Lindbergh or Earhart, flight in the interwar period was a much more fertile ground for the construction of imaginations, and for the instilment of political and ideological metaphors in the minds of the 'public'. It is useful to consider events and actors which are often overlooked by an exclusive focus on a small number of key figures of the time. Analysing these marginal events can lead to

insights into the political use of technology. Sean Kennedy (2000), for example, has analyzed how France's Croix de Feu party utilised aviation and 'air-mindedness' in a politicised manner in the 1930s; in the Soviet Union, the pursuit of world aviation records in 1933-38 was part of a wider propaganda effort both at home and abroad (Bailes 1976). In Germany, the rise of aviation in the 1920s became a metaphor for the country springing back onto its feet (Fritzsche 1992). This paper focuses on the creation of geographical imaginations through representations of aviation.

In Italy, aviation's potential for propaganda and publicity was not discovered by the fascist regime. The war in 1915-1918 saw the use of aviation in propaganda missions (mainly leaflet drops over enemy territory); these missions were in themselves propagandized to a wider public as examples of the successful projection of power outside national borders, and of technological prowess and derring-do. For example, poet and aviator Gabriele D'Annunzio led a squadron of seven aeroplanes on a raid over Vienna on 9 August 1918⁶, dropping leaflets aimed against the Austro-Hungarian war effort. This was later billed as a mythical event, signalling Italy's turning fortunes in the late stages of the war; D'Annunzio was also represented as a modern knight, fusing technology and patriotism in the pursuit of victory. The S.V.A. biplane type involved in D'Annunzio's raid on Vienna was later chosen as the means of transport for the 'heroic' 1920 Rome-Tokyo 'raid' (Pertino 2004), an 11,200 mile jaunt by Arturo Ferrarin⁷. I will delve further into propaganda flights instituted by the fascist regime below. However, it is important to note that geographical imaginations of aviation were not an imaginary wholly controlled and exploited by the regime alone during the interwar period. Aviation was, to some extent, a contested space of political and ideological expression.

While ‘heroic’ flights such as D’Annunzio’s raid on Vienna were celebrated by the fascist regime, and while later enterprises (such as Balbo’s flight to Chicago) would be organized, supported and celebrated by the fascist regime, ‘heroic’ counter-ideological flights also took place. Aviation became a contested space of expression and representation. Perhaps the most famous antifascist propaganda flight occurred on 11 July 1930. Giovanni Bassanesi, a young liberal Italian from Aosta living in Paris, flew over Milan and dropped 150,000 antifascist leaflets over the city (Butti and Genasci 2002). Whilst on the homeward leg of his flight, Bassanesi crashed on the St. Gotthard pass, but survived. Ironically, Bassanesi and fellow intellectuals associated with the *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Liberty) journal were tried (unsuccessfully) in court towards the end of 1930 in Switzerland. Charges had been brought against them for violating Swiss airspace⁸. Bassanesi’s unauthorized flight was in many ways as ‘mythical’ and ‘heroic’ as D’Annunzio’s – a dangerous flight over the Italian Alps, with no guarantee of return, over what was essentially enemy territory for an antifascist, and culminating in a crash-landing to boot, after a successful leaflet drop.

The fact that the regime viewed Bassanesi’s politicized use of aviation as highly significant is shown in the treatment meted out to Bassanesi and his wife upon his return to Italy. Archival records show that Bassanesi and Camilla Restellini attempted to move back to Italy in 1939, but were arrested at the alpine border post of San Dalmazzo di Tenda (a warrant for his arrest had been issued in 1931). Police records describe him as being ‘notorious for his antifascist activities, which he conducted from France. He is an irreducible enemy of Fascism. His most notorious act was the

release of subversive leaflets over Milan, from an aeroplane, on 11 July 1930' (Public Security Directorate to Sebastiani, 16 January 1942). He was subsequently released, and then re-arrested for writing and mailing anti-fascist pamphlets, aided by his wife. Sentenced to 4 years in prison in September 1939, he was soon found to be showing signs of 'mental alienation' and was sent even further from home, to Naples psychiatric hospital. There, he was diagnosed as a danger 'to himself and others' and confined to the dangerous patients ward of Collegno mental asylum, where he spent the next 22 months. At this point, he was again released on leave, and promptly re-arrested for 'anti-fascist' activities. He was again sent to Ventotene prison, and re-diagnosed as dangerously unstable when he complained that a period of leave, which he requested to visit his home, had been summarily denied. This complaint was seen as a sign of 'grave mental imbalance'. The prison director had Bassanesi searched and, finding on his person writings inciting 'fraternization with the French', the prison doctor diagnosed Bassanesi as suffering from 'acute hallucinatory persecution mania' (Director of Ventotene prison, 20 February 1940). Bassanesi's wife spent the following two years requesting audiences with Mussolini, pleading for his husband's return home, in vain. Several handwritten letters went unanswered (Restellini to Mussolini, 22 January 1942), and she took costly trips to Rome on several occasions to request audiences with the Duce (Quaestor of Rome to Sebastiani, 22 January 1942). Personal meetings were requested on standard forms, which were inspected by functionaries before submitting the request to Mussolini. One such audience request, dated 24 November 1941, was rejected. However, the back of the form was annotated, in pencil, by officials: 'I believe this is the famous Bassanesi, whom people were talking about when those subversive leaflets were dropped from aeroplanes'

(Audience request, 4 November 1941). More than a decade after his flight over Milan, Bassanesi's cooptation of aerial propaganda still resonated strongly within the regime.

Another way in which aviation and its aerial landscape can be seen to have been interpreted not only as spaces of expression and political propaganda is through the regulation of Italian airspace in the interwar years. The regulation of airspace was not an enterprise exclusive to the fascist regime or to the interwar years (Millichap 2000), and in fact the 1920s and 1930s were a time of rapid change in European and North American airspace ordering (Pirie 2004), even though early attempts at regulating airspace until 1914 had met with limited success (Budd 2007). Italian regulation developed, crucially, in the interwar period as both civil and military aviation increased in national importance. Regulation and tightening control over airspace was a precondition for the utilization of aeronautical infrastructure at a national level, and is an example of the increased rationalization of space. The period 1922-39 saw an increasing level of control and militarization of Italian airspace. Three levels of control can be identified by analysing official documents and charts produced by the Ministry of Aeronautics. Firstly, certain sectors of airspace were banned from any form of aviation due to their hazardous nature. This was the case, for example, with most high altitude Alpine areas (except for selected mountain passes), as well as various desert areas in Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*) (Ministerial Decree: Airports Open to Civil Aviation, and No-Fly Zones in National Territory, 3 May 1939).

Secondly, restricted military airspace was instituted and expanded over sensitive areas, air bases and military installations. This was the case with airspace over Rome,

and over bases such as Taranto, Brindisi, Pantelleria island, the Maddalena archipelago in Sardinia, and various airports (Chart of Airspace Forbidden to Civil and Foreign Aircraft, May 1939). Aeroplanes wishing to fly in Italy's African colonies were required to submit a flight plan for approval, and were obliged to carry a radio transceiver as well as a qualified operator (Ministerial Decree: Airports Open to Civil Aviation, and No-Fly Zones in National Territory, 3 May 1939). Evidence indicates, however, that restricted airspace was often breached in the 1930s, and perhaps willingly: official records relating to Great Britain's Imperial Airways and its routes over Italy show that on several occasions, Imperial Airway aeroplanes and flying boats flew at very low altitudes over sensitive military areas. For example, general Pellegrini of the Ministry of Aeronautics asked Italy's airline, Ala Littoria, to communicate to Imperial Airways the request not to fly over prohibited areas: in the space of 10 days in April 1937, Imperial Airways aeroplanes had flown over the military airports of Vigna di Valle and Montecelio, as well as over the Furbara restricted area (Pellegrini to the Cabinet of the Minister for Aviation, 3 May 1937)⁹.

Thirdly, any form of aviation activity was banned over certain non-military sensitive areas, such as the Vatican or Mussolini's Villa Torlonia. Again, as with areas of interdictory military airspace, personal protection zones were often breached. For example, a seemingly irate general, Giuseppe Valle (chief of staff for aeronautics at the time), reported that on 15 May 1939 an aeroplane, 'flying at very low altitude, flew over the Vatican garden as the Holy Father was taking his usual brief afternoon stroll. I hereby remind you [...] of the no-fly zone over the Vatican City' (Valle to Headquarters, Third Aerial Territorial Zone, 27 May 1939). The no-fly zone was established on 5 August 1929 following the signing of the Lateran Pacts in June of

that year. Airspace over Mussolini's villa was also breached, causing security alerts (Ilari to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation and Air Traffic, 3 June 1939)¹⁰. The regulation of airspace remained an important issue throughout the duration of the fascist regime.

The importance that the regime placed on aviation as a national, and in particular a military, enterprise can be assessed in material as well as representational terms. In yearly government budgets, the funding of Italy's air force increased from 100 million lire in 1922 (US \$4.3 million in 1922) to 629 million lire in 1927 (US \$33 million in 1927); however, as Balbo noted, this was still far below the amounts spent by Europe's powers on their respective air forces. In 1920-7, Italy spent 1.9 billion lire on its air arm; France spent over 5.6 billion lire; the USA 6.2 billion lire, and Great Britain far outstripped the rest in spending, at 16.2 billion lire (Balbo 1935, 19). Italy's budget spending was mainly absorbed by maintenance at the start of the 1920s: the regime had inherited approximately 4,200 First World War aeroplanes in serviceable order, and demolished half of these due to a reduction in demand during peacetime (Minniti 2004, 44). A new round of spending began in 1923, with the aim of modernizing the air force. The main beneficiaries of the increased budgets were aeronautical industries centred around Turin, Milan and Varese. The Italian aviation industry had, in fact, seen a period of consolidation after the post-war reduction in demand for aviation-related technology products. The companies involved were, for fighter plane orders, Macchi, FIAT and Ansaldo¹¹, and for bomber and transport missions, Caproni. Reconnaissance aeroplanes were supplied by Ansaldo. Seaplanes were mainly supplied by Macchi and SIAI during the 1920s (Minniti 2004, 47; Grampa 2004)¹². Furthermore, the fact that aviation was of paramount importance for

the regime can also be seen by the foundation of a New Town near Rome, completely devoted to the air force. Guidonia was founded in 1937, based on plans commissioned in 1935 (Mussolini's foundation decree is dated 15 December 1935) (Ministero dell'Aeronautica, 1937).

At the same time that Italian aviation was being increasingly regulated, and a complex imagination flight developed in the 1920s and 1930s, the imagination of aviation changed in the 1920s and 1930s. Furthermore, the image associated with the aviator changed from barn-storming bohemian figure in the period up till 1914, to that of sober, performance-minded and technically able master of a complex machine as the 1920s wore on (Fritzsche 1992, 161). In Germany, for example, air rallies, aviators, zeppelins and the rapid development of postwar German aviation pointed to a modernized Germany rising from the ashes of 1919 (Fritzsche 1992). Thus, aviation's temperance and quiet industriousness was juxtaposed to modern industrial society's excesses, exemplified by cosmopolitanism, consumerism and what many saw as social degeneration. In 1930s Italy, emphasis was placed on the competitive aspects of sport, including aviation, which became 'a vehicle of nationalist propaganda in Italy and abroad. Competitive sports heralded the conflict among nations and ideologies which was soon to pass from the sports ground to the battlefield' (Dogliani 2001, 327).

The figure of the aviator in the 1920s and 1930s is inextricably mediated by the spotlight placed on certain aeronautical protagonists. Analysis of the figures of leading Italian aviators during the fascist period lies outside the scope of this paper. Wohl (2005), for example, has examined the creation of an imaginary of flight

through epitomic figures (and their representation through public spectacles and visual materials such as posters and publications) such as Gabriele D'Annunzio and Italo Balbo in interwar Italy. Whilst Balbo was, and still is, seen as Italy's most famous aviator of the period, I would like to focus on Mussolini's portrayal as Italy's pilot. Mussolini was a qualified pilot, as was often publicized (Ministero dell'Aeronautica 1937); in publications regarding his flying experience he was often referred to as 'Italy's first pilot' (Redaelli 1933). For example, in Redaelli's (1933) book on aviation and fascism, a picture of Mussolini the pilot features prominently in the inside jacket (figure 1). The illustration shows Mussolini leaning out of the open cockpit of a biplane, a confident look on his face. He is dressed in a leather flying jacket and cap, and sports aviator goggles on his forehead. The caption explains that this was 'Italy's First pilot'. An interpretive link can be suggested between the denotation of Mussolini as a pilot, and as the supreme leader of Italy. Visual depictions of Mussolini in the guise of aviator/leader can also be found in other published sources of the time (Ministero dell'Aeronautica, 1937, 5). Balbo himself utilized the figure of Mussolini as pilot: in a speech given on 29 March 1927 to the Chamber of Deputies (*Camera dei Deputati*) on Italy's 'aeronautical politics'¹³, Balbo referred to Mussolini as Italy's minister of aviation (Balbo 1935). Mussolini's depiction as Italy's 'first pilot' is key to understanding the utilization of aviation in propaganda flights and in representations of aeronautics. Through representations of aviation and the creation of geographical imaginations, a direct link could be posited between Mussolini as a competent pilot, technically sure of himself and in control of a mystified technology, and his role as in directing a complex state system.



Il Primo pilota d'Italia

Figure 1: Italy's 'first pilot' (Redaelli 1943)

Perhaps the most obvious example of the increasing engagement of politics with aviation can be found in the use of political symbols in wartime advertising: the Piaggio company showcased images of its four-engined bombers flying over convoys (supposedly in the Mediterranean) in a 1942 edition of the *Ala d'Italia* ('Wings of Italy') aviation magazine (figure 2). The bombers are shown in the midst of a turn away from the convoy, and project an image both of potential protection or menace to the convoy. The viewer's perspective is positioned in the middle ground, above the convoy but just below the aeroplanes in the foreground. Clouds are emphasized in diagonal streaks across the sky, giving a sensation of speed and motion. The aeroplanes themselves are passing just above the viewer's vantage point, emphasizing flight and the power and speed of the aeroplanes over the relatively static ships below. The advertisement carefully posits a hierarchy of power and speed between aeroplanes and ships, and, by definition, between sky and sea. In the advertisement, the bombers are depicted in motion through the use of faint white trailing lines, which are drawn from the rear edges of the vertical stabilizers, and black lines trailing from the engines, suggesting exhaust fumes in the slipstream. These features help to build a sharp contrast with the smoke issuing from the funnels of the ship below. The ships' smoke seems to be belching forth, and its tangled and blurry lines are very different to the straight, go-faster lines drawn behind the aircraft's engines. Furthermore, while the ships' movement is evidenced through their wake in the water, the aeroplanes' propellers are shown in a white blur of movement such as cannot be captured by the naked eye. This reinforces the hierarchy in the advertisement, between plodding vessels and dynamic aeroplanes. Lastly, a less than subtle political link is made through the bombers' diagonal positioning as they pass over the viewer. The

aeroplanes' turn angle enables the fascist symbol to be seen under the wings, within a circular frame.



Figure 2: Piaggio advertisement (1942)

Voli di Propaganda: writing fascism into the sky

Having discussed aviation's propaganda potential in fascist Italy, and the aesthetic facets of flight (and its associated technologies) which could be politicised, the paper will now turn to analyze the spectacular use of propaganda flights proper. By propaganda flights I intend mass manifestations, organized centrally by the government through the Ministry of Aeronautics, in which powered flight was a central motif. One of the characteristics of propaganda flights which should also be highlighted is that the aeroplane, technology and the *ebbrezza* ('thrill') of flight were to be as central as mass participation by crowds of onlookers in the spectacle of aviation and, by corollary, in the spectacle of fascism. Lastly, propaganda flights were recognized as such by the regime, and were referred to as *voli di propaganda* in official documents and communications.

Aviation events such as air rallies or propaganda flights were, as mentioned above, public events at which the crowd could spectate and wonder at exhibitions of flight. They were also opportunities for public participation in flights. Selected members of the public could experience short flights, through membership of associations and groups targeted by the regime, such as fascist university student groups (*Gruppi Universitari Fascisti*, or GUF). Flights were also granted through personal petitions. Through the fostering of auratic distance which the technology of aviation could engender, the public participated in ritual, but was at the same subordinated to it through the aviator. The aviator, much like the figure of an orchestra conductor, was the individual through whom the whole spectacle was mediated. Without this

predominantly male figure (in fascist Italy pilots were mostly male; female aviators were more common outside Italy in the 1920s and 1930s), no flight could take place. When at altitude, in flight, he was invisible to the naked eye. Yet the public was conscious of an expert hand at the controls. This observation can tentatively be extended to the link, introduced above, between Mussolini as Italy's 'fist pilot', unseen by most, and Mussolini as the hand in control of events nevertheless. The Ministry of Aeronautics, in its propaganda flights, allowed a degree of participation in a highly technological project which at once signified the power and modernizing drive of the regime and the technical superiority of those involved. Epitomic aviators such as D'Annunzio were constructed as ideal-type human beings (as mentioned above). In the case of figures such as Mussolini or Balbo (on the surface at least), ideal fascist individuals. Technology became the cradle in which a resurgent nationalism could be forged:

'Aviation was thoroughly part of the theatrical sensibility of state politics in the modern era; power was choreographed for public display. Italo Balbo's July 1933 "fantasie atlantiche", in which a wing of twenty-four fliers crossed the Atlantic to Chicago in formation, provided Mussolini's Italy with its most effective calling card. *Italia farà da sè!* it announced – "Italy accomplishes it alone" (Fritzche 1992, 151).

In Italy, propaganda flights were predominantly held in the 1930s, and involved the Ministry of Aeronautics allocating aircraft and pilots to participate in the events. The air force partnered local flying clubs (where these existed) in the provision of propaganda events. For example, the Ministry of Aeronautics was involved in mobilizing provincial aero clubs (under the umbrella organization of the *Reale Aero*

Club d'Italia to which they belonged) for the organization of countrywide 'aeronautical propaganda days' (*giornate di propaganda aeronautica*). (Undersecretary of State for Aeronautics to the Presidency, Council of Ministers, 5 May 1934). The flights were often organized as extended tours, whereby several aeroplanes would visit various airports in Italy over the course of days or weeks. For example, on the occasion of national propaganda days during the period 10 May – 7 October 1934, 24 cities were slated for joint participation in propaganda flights with the air force. Three air force squadrons were allocated to propaganda duties during this time, as well as the Sicilian Air Command (Ibid). The following focuses on one particular set of propaganda flights from 1937, as a window into the regime's use of such events in the construction of geographical imaginations.

As mentioned above, propaganda flights were at times also organized so as to target specific groups. Students and education professionals were a particular favourite. For example, during the period 15 May – 9 June 1937, a co-ordinated set of flights for students and educators were held at 31 locations throughout Italy, from Trieste in the north-east to Catania in Sicily. The flight team, involving two pilots, four mechanics and four assistants, travelled between the cities and embarked on a gruelling programme of performances: an eight-day stint (focused on eight different northern airports) with no rest days was included in the schedule (Report, 16 June 1937). The two aircraft utilized for the purpose were Caproni 133 aircraft, a model later used as a medium bomber and a stalwart of Italian colonial aviation.

Based on archival data (Report, 16 June 1937) and measurements of distances between airports using known airport locations, the total distance travelled between

different airports over the 25 days of the tour was of approximately 2,793 miles. Interestingly, of 31 locations involved in the propaganda flights, only five were in cities south of Rome. There is, however, no coherent evidence to support a claim of orchestrated geographical bias favouring the North in the organization of propaganda flight activities. The number of people carried on the 896 flights achieved during the tour were 6,954; of these, 1,110 were university professors, head teachers and teaching staff. The rest (5,854) were students. The flights themselves were considerable in length: the pilots averaged forty minutes per flight (170 hours in total), while 50 hours were spent on repositioning flights (Report, 16 June 1937). As mentioned above, propaganda flights were theatrical events which can be seen as promoting spectacle: therefore, it is telling that the official report on the flights mentions the number (50,000) of school-age spectators estimated to have been exposed to the flights. Propaganda flights were considered a success among students. In a letter to the Fascist University Students' Group in Benghazi, Libya, General Eraldo Ilari of the Ministry of Aeronautics assured the students that from 1938 onwards there would be regular propaganda flights in the colony, as a result of the enthusiasm shown by university and secondary school students at similar events in Eastern Libya (Ilari to Secretariat, Fascist University Students' Group, Benghazi, 31 July 1937). Clearly, propaganda flights were considered to have a high degree of potential for the generation of spectacle, publicity and positive image for the regime.

Individual citizens seem to have been considered for special attention on the occasion of propaganda flights. In particular, archival research revealed letters sent to Mussolini and aviation officials personally asking for the chance to fly during a propaganda day. These included workers (Ilari to Directorate General of Airport and

Materiel Services, 19 June 1937) as well as younger individuals. One example is that of Corrado de Angelis, a 10-year old child who wrote to Mussolini in almost prayerful tones asking for the opportunity to participate in a flight (De Angelis to Mussolini, 1937)¹⁴:

‘Duce,

I am a Balilla, 10 years of age, and I love flying so much that when I turn 18 I will volunteer for the Air Force.

My deepest desire is to experience a flight; for this reason I contacted the headquarters of the “Francesco Baracca” airport, who told me that it wasn’t possible to meet my wish.

What disappointment I felt, O Duce!

For this reason I thought I would turn to you, because you can make anything happen, and because you love your Balilla so much: please grant me this grace.

I love you so much, and I will love you even more.

Obsequious fascist regards,

Your Balilla

Corrado De Angelis'

The tone of the letter reflects political undertones, and it is wholly possible that the writer was inspired and motivated by teachers or parents interested in gaining favour with the regime. The archival record, however, shows that the handwriting in the document is clearly that of a child. While this document is analyzed here with caution about the conclusions to be drawn from analysis of a single document, it is nevertheless an interesting window into an individual's interaction with the regime on the subject of aviation and propaganda flights. The letter was considered at the highest levels. General Ilari acquiesced to the demand, writing to Centocelle Airport in Rome that that, 'Balilla Corrado De Angelis has turned to the DUCE asking for a flight at [the] airport' (Ilari to Headquarters of 'T' Section, F. Baracca airport, Centocelle, Rome, 20 March 1937; see also Ilari to De Angelis, 1937¹⁵). The Ministry for Aeronautics decided to grant De Angelis his wish, and the airport was instructed to comply¹⁶. The young *balilla*'s letter, and the response it generated, is indicative of aeronautical officials' focus on the importance of using aviation and flight. An individual flight of this kind not only held a limited usefulness for propaganda purposes (and it may have been allowed as a result of the letter's clearly obsequious and political tone); on a larger scale, it was important in terms of enabling a technological, affective experience which showed a future 'fascist citizen' the regime's openness and its mastery of technology. At the same time, the youngster would have been subordinated to the figures of authority – air force officers, airport officials and, ultimately, the aviator without whom 'fascist flight' could not take place.

Conclusion

Aviation and flight have been subjects which have captured the mind's eye since the myth of Icarus (Hallion 2003). The appeal of Icarus, however, lies partly not in the flight, but in the fall.. Flying, then as now, is considered almost sacrilegious; technology and progress render flight possible, but the fall is always a possibility. Nonetheless, just a few decades after the discovery of powered flight, aviation was appropriated by artistic, political and ideological movements. Its clear propaganda potential – as metaphor of modernity, foil for ideology, and simile for personality politics – was realized and exploited with vigour. In Italy, Futurist ideas on aviation found fertile ground in fascism's propensity to idealize technological progress as evidence of fascism's progress and improvement over pre-1922 governments. Furthermore, representations of aviation were closely blended with an aesthetic form of politics which, in fascist Italy, could be found across a wide range of lived experience, from sport to demonstrations, to grand public and architectural projects. This visual, representational use of aviation contributed to the construction of geographical imaginations of aviation, focused not only on representing flight and technology, but also directed at showcasing and illustrating fascist ideology through the use of sub-textual devices such as the authority associated with the figure of the aviator. This analytic endeavour is grounded in the definition of geographical imaginations utilized here, as capturing both static representation and the more ephemeral, transitional spaces of representation which applies to flight.

Aviation's clear aesthetic appeal lay not only in technology, nor exclusively in its development as a modern project, through the construction of aeroplanes, rotary (and,

from the mid-1920s onwards, air-cooled radial) engines, airport infrastructure and the regulation of airspace. Aviation's aesthetic appeal lay in ideas of speed, forward progress, and romantic union of body and machine, in the breaking down of natural barriers, in the shrinking of borders and re-scaling of previously insurmountable obstacles. Its political-ideological appeal was also that of being an activity which lent itself well to mass politics: through propaganda flights, the spectating public could participate in a celebration of the regime's successes, and in the creation of a mythological Pantheon of aviator figures. In fascist Italy, propaganda flights pointed to the regime's use of representations, technology, and ideas of modernization to define fascism and its ideology at the same time that the opposite side of the technological coin acted in mystification. This opposite side of the same coin rendered interaction between the public and a technological regime arduous because of the creation of a distance which could only be bridged by aviators and engineers, by artists and flying fascists.

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