



FILM AND EXTRACTION

"Raiding Africa": Motor Raid Films and Italian Economic Imperialism after the End of Colonial Empire

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This essay explores a series of sponsored Italian nonfiction films representing trans-African car crossings, made after the dismantling of Italy's colonial empire following World War II. I focus on two significant examples of what are commonly referred to as "motor raid films"—that is, film works shot during the Tripoli-Mogadishu and the Algiers-Cape Town crossings, produced by the main national nonfiction film companies, and sponsored by the major automotive firms between 1950 and 1952. Their production histories are traced using the film materials preserved by the Istituto Luce's Archive and Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa, with reference to the corporate sources in Fiat's and Alfa's documentation centers. I investigate how cinema navigated the end of fascist territorial imperialism to become useful to the continuation of economic imperialism in the postwar free-market economy. Taking a cue from the scholarship on useful cinema and adopting an "infrastructural disposition," I read these films as material and discursive manifestations of broader configurations of power and extraction. Their "usefulness" is then rethought in reference to what has been called the "automobility system" or "regime," retracing how their production processes intersected the car companies' extractive interests toward African lands. I argue that, while contributing to expand their markets, the motor raid films supported the car manufacturers' arguments in favor of the extraction of labor in former Italian colonies and of raw materials in parts of the continent still dominated by other European powers. Ultimately, the films advocated an audiovisual and discursive "reframing" of Africa by representing it as a place of transit and of resource extraction, a mere testing ground for Western industries.

Introduction

Instances of crossing reflect complex regional and transregional histories which, since 1900, have been powerfully inflected by three connected global forces: the continuing legacies of empire, the effects of unprecedented world wars, and the global consequences of industrial capitalism's disruptive, restructuring activity... (Clifford 1997, 6–7)

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Figure 1: The car raids' trans-African itineraries from Tripoli to Mogadishu and from Algiers to Cape Town, as shown in Luce's (left) and Incom's (right) films.

Sources: Courtesy of Archivio Luce. Both films are available on the Luce archive website.

This article deals with the production of nonfiction films covertly sponsored by two of the largest Italian automotive firms, Alfa and Fiat, between 1950 and 1952. As they depicted cars traversing Africa from Tripoli to Mogadishu and from Algiers to Cape Town, they were commonly referred to as “motor raid films.” Their production is located precisely at the intersection of the global forces described by James Clifford in the quotation above. In the following, I will reconstruct the making of these Italian motor raid films and how it involved the organization and depiction of trans-African car crossings undertaken by Italian crews in the aftermath of World War II. I will argue the films reveal that the dismantlement of the Italian colonial empire in the Horn of Africa was substantially accompanied by a continuation of colonial terms of exploitation—reframed in this instance through a visual case for Africa’s centrality to Italian auto manufacturers as provider of raw materials, markets, roadways, and labor.

The first car journey crossed former Italian colonial territories from Tripoli to Mogadishu and was organized between 1950 and 1951 by Alfa. It was captured on camera by a cinematographer of the state-owned film company Istituto Luce, resulting in the color documentary feature *Una Lettera dall’Africa* (Bonzi 1951). Barely one year later, Fiat, one of Alfa’s main competitors, supported a similar endeavor: in this case, the route was from Algiers to Cape Town through territories dominated by France’s and Belgium’s still standing colonial powers. This trip, too, was covered by a widely popular nonfiction and newsreel company, Incom, and resulted in a series of newsreels and documentary shorts, released on the national theatrical circuit by 1952 ([figure 1](#)).

The sponsored character of these crossings and their media coverage are expressions of the third global force mentioned by Clifford—namely, industrial capitalism's global activities. Trans-African crossing films mark a shift from Italy's interwar territorial imperialism to a postwar economic practice of empire. The films served to support the sponsoring firms' intent to continue extracting labor from the indigenous workforce scattered across former Italian colonies in Northern and Eastern Africa. They sought to expand their market in foreign colonial territories and contributed to maximize the extraction of raw materials from territorial domains under foreign authorities. Moreover, from a discursive and representational angle, they cooperated in reshaping the public image of Africa as a standing reserve for resource extraction. Both the travel itineraries and the filmmaking processes were articulated in accordance with Alfa's and Fiat's extractive interests toward the African lands. Through their visual accounts and material practices, automotive sponsors fostered a new imperial imaginary. The mobility and spectacle of the motor raid films can be understood as an enduring colonial practice rearticulated to withstand the end of formal imperialism.

To support these arguments, I will take a cue from the burgeoning scholarship on so-called "useful cinema" (see Acland and Wasson 2011; Grieveson 2018) to read the motor raid films as material and discursive manifestations of broader configurations of power—in this case, specifically the realm of the automotive industry. The "usefulness" of these films will then be rethought in reference to what Jon Urry has defined as the "automobility system." I begin with a discussion of the theoretical notions and methodological perspectives essential to this reading, placing it in the historical context of Italian decolonization and the prevalent Italian practice of organized car crossings or so-called motor raids in colonized Africa. I then retrace film production histories with reference to materials preserved at the corporate sources in Fiat's and Alfa's documentation centers and at the Istituto Luce's Archive and the Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa. As these archival materials show, the automobility system's infrastructural complex not only underlay the motor raids but also was crucial in the realization of films depicting such crossings or "raids." The automotive infrastructural system shaped the films' representational modes and discursive features, ultimately reframing Africa in the eye of the European/Italian spectator (and potential car buyer) as a place of transit and economic flows and as a testing ground for industrial development.

Sponsored Films after the Dismantling of Italian Colonial Empire: Contexts and Methods

Italy's domination of Northern and Eastern Africa ended earlier than that of other western European empires. The defeat of the Royal Army at the hands of British troops in 1941 and the fall of the fascist regime was

followed by the peace treaties signed in Paris in 1947. Italy turned from a monarchy to a republic, as a totalitarian regime was replaced with a liberal democracy. However, dominant attitudes toward Africa were left largely unchanged (Del Boca 1984; Labanca 2002). Historians and researchers in the field of postcolonial studies demonstrated that pro-American and pro-capitalist republican governments led by the Christian Democratic Party had multiple reasons to claim a hold on former colonial possessions: they hoped to regain position within the new geopolitical realities of the postwar world, to prevent any possible nationalistic regression in public opinion, and to give administrative continuity to the officers and institutions employed during the fascist period (Morone 2011). Postwar governments carried out a propagandistic campaign with these goals in mind. In the process, the violent history of Italy's colonial ventures was revised (Pes 2014). It is a measure of the success of these propagandistic efforts that the United Nations assigned to the Italian administration a ten-year-long trusteeship mandate over the former colony of Somaliland in 1950, allowing a "further disguise of colonial logics, while practically enabling their continuation" (Morone 2016).¹

Film scholars have traditionally interpreted nonfiction cinema's role in the decolonization process in Italy within this historical context. They have discussed how newsreel and documentary shorts intertwined with the government's political agenda, displaying aesthetic and rhetorical continuities with the prior colonial period. Films continued to serve as a means of propaganda, as in the fascist era: they covered up inconvenient memories from the recent past, represented Italians as beloved by the colonized population for their "hardworking attitude," and celebrated Italy's "modernising and civilizing" mission in Africa (Baratieri 2010). Chiara Ottaviano's critical analysis of the 1950s newsreels observes that "despite the changes in style and soundtrack and the advent of color, one has the impression of looking at a reissue of older films" (Ottaviano 2008, 22). In this view, fascist imperialism remained and continued in the republican present.

I build on this work to explore the role played by nonstate actors within the newly established political-economic scenery and to understand how film was used to foster extractive practices integral to the expansion of businesses headquartered in ex-imperial states and to the continuation of profound racial inequities. Fascist Italy's colonization had not been grounded on the acquisition of distant and economic-based territories but rather on the establishment of "contiguous territorial and autarkic empires" (Hendinger 2017, 197). In Mussolini's view, Northern and Eastern African colonies were not supposed to increase flows of products and raw materials as much as provide Italian settlers with jobs, lands to cultivate, and living space for an overgrowing population. Industrial enterprises had been involved in

¹ All of the translations of the Italian bibliographic references and archival sources featured in the text are the author's.

overseas businesses, but only under the close supervision of the nation-state, within the framework of economic corporatism and self-sufficiency or autarky. Consequently, the migratory flows of Italian laborers and business activities in the colonial settlements strongly depended on public investments and were strictly controlled by the Fascist Party (Ertola 2020). Following World War II, the reopening of trans-African routes remained a project shared by the republican government and private enterprises, albeit with a different agenda. As the former Italian Colonial Institute (renamed the Italian Institute for Africa) made clear immediately after the assignment of the trusteeship mandate on Somaliland, industrial firms needed to focus on their share of gains in keeping old trans-African routes open while paving the way for new ones:

... seeing the Tricolour [flag] waving again on the Government Palace in Mogadishu is not only a reason for national prestige and a source of satisfaction for the way we managed to defend Italian interests in that part of the Black Continent; it means, instead, a concrete recovery of our economic expansionism throughout Africa, after the unfortunate war period. [...] Clearly, Africa is still a major attraction for our overseas trade, and perhaps the flow of Italian goods into Mogadishu will serve to prepare a formidable base for the necessary resumption of our trade with the whole of Africa. (Salvatori 1950, 48)

Keeping these entrepreneurial and commercial interests in mind is particularly relevant when trying to reassess the role played by nonfiction films as informational and rhetorical forms in the newly established liberal democracy in Italy. Notably, Italian newsreel and film companies did not merely follow a progovernment editorial orientation during this period but also served as “an instrument of communication of capitalism” (Sorlin 2001, 72). Besides feeding the construction of an idealized image of consumer society, this new entrenchment in capitalist logics intersected with the practices and routines of film production. It was not uncommon for a documentary short or a newsreel report meant for theatrical screening to be secretly sponsored by an industrial enterprise (Bonifazio 2014, chap. 2). Based on private arrangements made between Alfa and Fiat as sponsoring bodies, on the one hand, and Luce and Incom as executors, on the other, the films on the Tripoli-Mogadishu and the Algiers-Cape Town crossings fall into this category.

As a further similarity, both the crossings were commonly referred to as “motor raids” (in Italian, *raid automobilistici*), reviving a term and a practice that had been widespread during the short-lived colonial venture. The term “raid” held both a strictly “military” meaning and a more “technical” one, simultaneously indicating a sudden invasion or surprise attack by military forces and a long-distance trip or expedition aimed at testing the strength of

the means of transportation and their manufacturing materials (see Mariani 2017; Denning 2020). Within the context of racialized colonial domination, these two semantic nuances were intertwined: even when raids did not contribute to an armed attack, speed and resistance tests still pursued an inherently imperialistic aim. They helped to establish transport and communication networks over lands and populations in former colonies and to explore and expand territorial domains. In the postwar period, the “raids” ceased to serve a militaristic function, nor were they still a “moving visual catalogue of [...] colonial possessions” (Bloom 2006, 129). Nevertheless, these trips and films persisted.

What did automotive (and film) companies have to gain by supporting and covering “raids” across lands that were by then outside Italy’s (colonizing) domain? One preliminary answer is that going back to “raid Africa” was meant by car manufacturers as an effort to transact the shift from territorial to an economic form of imperialism. Of all industries, the automotive one had a particular interest in resuming the overseas trade exchange: until 1939, right before the outbreak of World War II, the transport sector had been the one with the most amount of capital invested (1.7 billion liras) and with the highest number of enterprises (1,262) in the Horn of Africa (Podestà 2004, 303). Albeit with different interests, both Alfa and Fiat, alongside other firms, had participated in the Italian Company of Transport in Eastern Africa (CITAO), the state-controlled corporate union that had held the monopoly of mobility routes during the Fascist domination (Podestà 2004, 355).

Continuing the practice of trans-African motor raids after the end of colonialism served the sponsoring bodies’ interest to reposition themselves within what John Urry has called “the automobility system,” understood here as a constitutive force of extraction and global domination that extends far beyond the capacities of single nation-states (Urry 2004; Böhm et al. 2006). In this sense, the intertwining between Luce’s and Incom’s motor raid films and the extractive and exploitative purposes of their sponsoring organizations can be shown clearly by reconstructing the films’ production histories through an “infrastructural disposition”—namely, “a disposition toward audiovisual media that approaches what is framed as a starting point for imagining and inferring other infrastructural parts or resources” (Parks 2015, 359). The automobility system’s infrastructural complex of “technical and social interlinkages with other industries, car parts and accessories; petrol refining and distribution; roadbuilding and maintenance ... car sales and repair workshops” (Urry 2004, 25–26) establishes the necessary conditions for the car trips *as well as* for the processes of recording them on film.

In the following two sections, then, I attend to how the making of these documentaries was articulated in compliance with Alfa’s and Fiat’s corporate agendas, and actively contributed to “mobilizing labor” and “connecting sites

of extraction to the sites of consumption,” as well as producing “landscapes of extraction in service of ever-expanding mobility-related industries and infrastructures” (Leibert, Rekhviashvili, and Sgibnev 2022).

Back on the Roads of the Empire: The Tripoli-Mogadishu Car Raid (1951)

Few documentaries embody the multilayered continuities that tied postwar Italy to its colonial past as vividly as *Una Lettera dall’Africa* does. Representing the motor raid from Tripoli to Mogadishu as “a sentimental journey to meet the Italians in Africa and their memories,” it appeals to the viewers’ sense of patriotism by showcasing Italian soldiers’ graves scattered across the desert of Cyrenaica. It reiterates racial and Eurocentric stereotypes by verbally and visually suggesting the cultural backwardness and inherent unsuitability to modernity of the populations living in the Horn of Africa. Ultimately, the film constitutes “a perfect litmus test to analyze, in all of its celebratory and nostalgic components, the gaze upon Italy’s human and historical experiences in the African lands” (Zinni 2016, 79). Additionally, aspects related to the film’s production increase a certain feeling of déjà vu. Istituto Luce, producer of the motor raid film, was a state-owned company that had been operating with its film unit in Eastern Africa since the 1930s and through the duration of the Fascist period (see Mancosu 2021). Indeed, the protagonists of the motor raid played an important biographical role in the conquest of colonial territories. Leonardo Bonzi (acknowledged as the film’s director and co-producer) and journalist Maner Lualdi were former air force pilots, enrolled respectively as a lieutenant commander of the Special Air Services in the late stages of World War II and as a pilot of the Royal Army’s fifteenth bombing squad during the Italian-Ethiopian War. During that time, they personally helped in bridging the gaps between the heart of the Italian Empire and the conquered lands of Ethiopia by setting new flying records from Rome to Addis Ababa within a few months of each other (Stefani 1939, 2).

Given these premises, it would be easy to state that the motor raid films were part of the Italian right’s gambit to maintain its influence over former colonies, perfectly in tune with the government’s policy. In the wake of the United Nations’ assignment to administer Somaliland, Bonzi and Lualdi made a stop in Rome to collect messages for the commissaries in Asmara on behalf of Giuseppe Brusasca, the Italian undersecretary in Eastern Africa, who characterized the trustee mandate as an “act of international solidarity” and a “mission of peace and brotherhood” (Brusasca 1950, 1). However, besides its evident interests in the Tripoli-Mogadishu motor raid, the government never materially supported the trip. It was instead fostered by Alfa as part of a public relations campaign to promote their commercial products and revive their overseas industrial activities.

The choice of a ground vehicle instead of an aircraft is revealing. Lualdi and Bonzi drove two Alfa 1900s, a saloon standard model serially produced for civilian and sporting purposes. Some film journalists found it peculiar that two aviators of that caliber had settled for cars, explaining this unusual choice with the different nature of the motor raid, which, unlike wartime expeditions and flight records, required no haste because it was supposed to be captured on camera (N.a. 1951, 2). Before embarking, Leonardo Bonzi made some arrangements with enterprises that had previously sponsored his wartime undertakings. First, the tire manufacturer Pirelli provided free supplies and contributed to the expenditure with an additional funding of 500,000 liras in exchange for a mention of their products on every public occasion (Bonzi and Soffici 1999, n.p.). Second, and more crucially, Alfa didn't merely provide the vehicles but also took charge of the technical and organizational aspects of the crossing. Alongside Bonzi, Lualdi, and the cinematographer Marco Scalpelli, the company's test-driver Mario Aspesani was chosen as the fourth member of the car crew. As evidenced by a "filming and press-reporting schedule" preserved by the firm's corporate archives, the entire itinerary was planned by the enterprise's press office. In complying with the travel's technical requirements on the one hand and the needs of filmmaking on the other, it served simultaneously as a road map and as a film script ([figure 2](#)).

Some of the legs of the raid, such as the ones shot on El Alamein's battlefields or with the Italian communities in Cairo, were probably scheduled with the film sequences in mind. Others followed a different logic, apparently driven by strictly functional requirements (technical stops, petrol fillings, mechanical supplies, and so on). These logistical stops are precisely what reveal the infrastructural articulations that enabled the automotive firm to organize the car raid and control it from afar. Long-distance communications along the itinerary were channeled through a preexisting automobility complex that even despite the loss of colonial landholdings remained mostly in Italian hands. Alfa headquarters in Milan communicated primarily with Italian-owned garages and mechanical workshops in Nairobi or Mogadishu to inform them about the racers' arrival, instructing them to offer adequate technical assistance and sending photographic documentation and promotional materials. From Alfa's point of view, to "meet the Italians in Africa and their memories" implied resuming ties with the whole range of small-sized businesses and services that had flourished across the Horn of Africa during colonial domination. After the Fascist regime had encouraged its citizens to move to the overseas territories, the "firstborn" colony of Eritrea alone counted more than ten thousand Italian settlers employed in the automobile and mechanical sector, working alongside indigenous workers (see Bellucci and Zaccaria 2012).

ALFA ROMEO Il Nuovo Corriere della Sera

TABELLA DI MARCIA GIORNALISTICO - CINEMATOGRAFICA
DELLA SPEDIZIONE TRIPOLI - MOGADISCIO di LEONARDO
BONZI E MANER LUALDI (Alfa 1900)

24 febbraio	- Arr. TRIPOLI	
25 febbraio	- TRIPOLI	
26 febbraio	- TRIPOLI	
27 febbraio	- TRIPOLI (Concessioni Italiane)	
28 febbraio	- TRIPOLI - MISURATA - SIRTE	
1 marzo	- SIRTE - BENGASI	Km. 390
2 marzo	- BENGASI	Km. 650
3 marzo	- BENGASI	
4 marzo	- BENGASI - TOBRUK	
5 marzo	- TOBRUK (Bir El Gobi)	Km. 550
6 marzo	- TOBRUK - SIDI BARRANI	
7 marzo	- SIDI BARRANI - EL ALAMEIN	Km. 300
8 marzo	- EL ALAMEIN	Km. 300
9 marzo	- EL ALAMEIN E CAMPI BATTAGLIA	
10 marzo	- EL ALAMEIN - ALESSANDRIA	
11 marzo	- ALESSANDRIA - CAIRO	Km. 150
12 marzo	- CAIRO (Dintorni)	Km. 100
13 marzo	- CAIRO (Itellani del Cairo)	
14 marzo	- CAIRO - LUKOR (Tobe)	
15 marzo	- LUKOR	Km. 850
16 marzo	- LUKOR - VADI HALFA	
17 marzo	- VADI HALFA	Km. 550
18 marzo	- VADI HALFA - BERBER	
19 marzo	- BERBER - KASSALA	Km. 650
20 marzo	- KASSALA	Km. 500
21 marzo	- KASSALA - ASMARA	
22 marzo	- ASMARA	Km. 500
23 marzo	- ASMARA	
24 marzo	- ASMARA	
25 marzo	- Concessioni Italiano Eritroc	
26 marzo	- Asmara, KASSALA, KARTOUM	
27 marzo	- KARTOUM	Km. 1000
28 marzo	- KARTOUM - RENK	
29 marzo	- RENK - HALKAL	Km. 500
30 marzo	- HALKAL - INJIA (LAGO VITTORIA)	Km. 500
31 marzo	- LAGO VITTORIA	Km. 600
1 aprile	- LAGO VITTORIA	
2 aprile	- INJIA - NAIROBI	
3 aprile	- NAIROBI	Km. 550
4 aprile	- NAIROBI	
5 aprile	- NAIROBI - MOMBASA	
6-7 aprile	- MOMBASA - MOGADISCIO	Km. 500
		Km. 1000
		Km. 10140

Varini Anno 1933+

Figure 2: "Filming and press-reporting schedule of Leonardo Bonzi's and Maner Lualdi's Tripoli-Mogadishu expedition (Alfa 1900)."

Source: Courtesy of Centro Documentazione Museo Alfa Romeo, Arese (Milan).

No indigenous African laborer employed in mechanical workshops made it to the screen. Instead, the film dwells at length on the massive road network built from the second half of the 1930s onward. The three-day-long stop in Asmara planned by the press-reporting and filming schedule not only served to fulfill the trip's diplomatic mandate and meet with the UN commissaries, but also captured on film the remnants of a once lively national industrial activity. As a crucial junction along the routes that led to Gondar, Dessié, and Addis Ababa, the capital of Eritrea had seen the rise of several plants and branches of an Italian oil company (Agip) and automotive enterprises (Pirelli, Fiat, and Lancia). Alfa itself had established its own settlements in Eritrea and built around it a whole residential area named after the company for Italian colonists. Before the outbreak of the war, the town had become, together with other important nodes such as Dekhamerè, a heavily motorized urban center with traffic volumes that were comparable to many Italian metropolitan cities (Podestà 2013). Commenting on the sequences shot on the roads in Asmara, *Una Lettera dall'Africa's*



Figure 3: Car traffic in Asmara, as seen in *Una Lettera dall’Africa* (Leonardo Bonzi, 1951).

Source: Courtesy of Archivio Luce - Cinecittà, Rome.

speaker notices how “the intense and joyful city traffic is carried on by old Italian cars, held together by miracles of mechanics and faith” (figure 3). Luce’s cameraman Marco Scalpelli had an easy task in portraying the town as an elegant and modern yet “embalmed” place, where everything had been standing still since 1939. Maner Lualdi further elaborated on these sequences in his report for the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, explaining that despite the current British administration’s banning the importation of cars produced in other countries, wealthy drivers in Eritrea “would still break their own back on ancient but strictly Italian relics in order not to purchase a foreign car” (Lualdi 1951, 5).

These scenes and comments reveal how the motor raid film’s promotional and corporate-oriented discourses paralleled more explicitly patriotic and nostalgic ones. Old rhetorical motifs previously employed by Fascist imperialist propaganda were resumed and reinvested with new functional meanings. The “empire of labor” that Mussolini dreamt of as an extension of the nation-state in Italy’s African colonies had left scattered and dormant a range of sources for workforce extraction. These needed to be reactivated to maintain Italy’s overseas car market. Previously celebrated as evidence of “the vitality and power of the Fascist regime” (Denning 2019, 3), the road network built during Italian colonial domination was now conveniently presented as a crucial facilitator for “the development of an industrial and consumer economy predicated on the rapid transit of produce, raw materials, and manufactured goods” (Grieverson 2018, 142). The right to cross African territories again was, of course, key to the resumption of car exports and

of the intercontinental trade in general. In this sense, the motor raid films served as a public and visual demonstration that, even after the end of the empire, African lands could still be crossed because of the sole infrastructural power of Italian firms participating in a worldwide system of automobility. What Alfa was publicly claiming by sponsoring both the car trip and its film coverage was the private “right” to keep on extracting indigenous labor in the Horn of Africa, where several of its corporate facilities and car dealers were still operating.

Paving New Roads: The Algiers–Cape Town Car Raid (1952)

Although its sponsored nature was never publicly revealed, *Una Lettera dall’Africa* became known among motor industry insiders as the core piece of a successful media campaign. As revealed by Fiat’s press service diaries, the executives of Fiat, Alfa’s competitor, were so aware of the agreement with Luce that they were able to estimate that the costs of the operation amounted to four million liras. Bonzi’s documentary is explicitly mentioned in the diaries on November 16, 1951. At that time the automotive firm was set to launch a similar campaign for its latest car model, Fiat 1100, an off-road vehicle originally meant to replace the Willys Overland B2 Jeeps inherited from the Allies by the Italian Army when they fought alongside each other to liberate Italy after 1943. When “rebranded” for the civilian market, the car model was changed in color and renamed Countrysider (*Campagnola*), to enhance its potential for agricultural work.

The ultimate rebranding opportunity came in October 1951, when racing driver Paolo Butti visited Fiat’s headquarters in Turin, asking the firm to support an off-track race from Algiers to Cape Town. The route had been opened just one year earlier by retired French general Octave Meynier’s association, Les Amis du Sahara, through the organization of the *Rallye Méditerranée-le Cap*. As shown by Meghan Brown’s extensive research, the Rallye was intended as an instrument of propaganda aligning the long-standing imperial conception of Eurafica with postwar political thought, to establish new narratives of intercontinental fraternity and collaboration toward economic development (Brown 2020). According to the *Rallye* organizers, promoting tourism in African lands served both as a reminder “to everyday Europeans of the importance of the empire” and as “an act of reconquest,” to be channeled through “an infrastructure reliant on armies and private industries alike, with new modes of transport and travel intended to exert control over colonized spaces by bolstering economies and making territory easily accessible” (Brown 2020, 82–83). Honoring these promotional intents, the first edition of the race held between December 1950 and February 1951 was opened to international competitors. On that occasion, Butti was enrolled in the car crew that drove a Willys Overland Jeep to victory. The driver intended to repeat the same route alone, without crew,



Figure 4: Pilot Paolo Butti poses with unnamed women and men next to his Fiat 1100 Countrysider in a picture probably taken by cameraman Aldo Pennelli or another member of the car crew in Western Congo.

Source: Courtesy of Centro Storico Fiat.

and set a new speed record for a solo ride. From Fiat’s perspective, sponsoring this sporting feat represented a chance to publicly test the strength of its new car model while also exploring foreign markets.

In November 1951 Fiat made simultaneous arrangements with a pilot to plan the trip and with the Incom newsreel company to prepare film coverage. Butti was offered the assistance of Alfa’s test-driver Domenico Martesani, provided with two 1100 car models for the outbound and the return journey, and guaranteed free Pirelli tire supplies along the entire itinerary. On his part, Butti agreed to use exclusively Fiat products and to attempt to set a record for speed only on his return from Cape Town to Algiers. During the outbound journey, the “trip’s stages for journalistic purposes” were planned “so to make sure that the successful outcome of the motor raid is properly capitalised on” (figure 4).² To this end, Incom’s cinematographer Aldo Pennelli was enrolled as a member of the car crew and promised wide newsreel coverage to create a short color documentary film. As the press service diaries read, “Incom is itself interested in doing something nice, a documentary film that would eventually circulate abroad and make a sensation in the Italian theatrical circuit.”³

² “Commercial Department Meeting,” June 11, 1951, typescript minutes, Diaries of the Press and Advertising Services, n.p. (Centro Storico Fiat, Turin).

³ “Commercial Department Meeting,” June 11, 1951, typescript minutes, Diaries of the Press and Advertising Services, n.p. (Centro Storico Fiat, Turin).

Like the one from Tripoli to Mogadishu, the Algiers–Cape Town motor raid followed a road map linking the car’s technical requirements and the necessities of filmmaking. Some of the trip was especially meant for Pennelli to capture the “exoticism” of African landscapes, wildlife, and local ceremonies. Writing from El Golea, Butti lamented that “if it were up to him, Pennelli would stop the car any moment just to capture a nice view.”⁴ A stop in the Cameroonian town of Ngaoundéré allowed the cinematographer “to finally shoot his own footages in an hunting paradise and in the court of the local Sultan, who takes a great interest in the ‘Countrysider’ and in his travel.”⁵ Shots of the Sultan welcoming the car crew were later included in newsreels and a short film, alongside other sequences showing various encounters with local inhabitants. Indigenous people feature in these films more significantly than they did in *Una lettera dell’Africa*, but it was neither Incom’s nor Fiat’s intent to present them as car drivers or laborers in the local motor industry. One can notice instead a keen tendency in these films to frame the figures from a Westerner traveler’s perspective, to make them appear in some way “exotic.” In film sequences that were not included in these essay, the Tuaregs met while crossing the Sahara desert are put before the camera with the veil lowered for a close-up; a woman from the Mangbetu tribe in Western Congo is captured while being offered a cigarette from the car crew; female vendors in the market of Kano (Nigeria) are shown while trying to sell fabrics to the white men. Their presence seems instrumental to visual reiterations of the supposed “otherness” of local customs and people, especially when seen in opposition with the technological advancement embodied by the car and its crew. A film sequence of kids in Stanleyville surrounding the Countrysider and striding around it in open curiosity, and some “backstage photographs” (probably taken on the roads of Congo) where Butti poses with unnamed local women, are equally aimed at depicting African people as inherently naïve. This is the context within which we should read the image of Butti surrounded by unnamed African women and women ([Figure 4](#)): the intent was a deliberate othering even when the local Congolese people direct their gaze at the camera or car, with no apparent signs of subservience to the car pilot or the photographer.

Other stops were planned during the trip, not for shooting purposes but to fulfill technical and corporate-oriented aims. Different from the ones Alfa had pursued along the Algiers-Mogadishu route, however, Fiat’s itinerary did not consist so much in reactivating an already existing infrastructural complex as in searching for new market spaces. One of Butti’s mandates was to explore the status of foreign colonial possessions and report on it to the car company. On his way to Stanleyville, the driver sent a wire noting that “Belgian Congo,

⁴ Paolo Butti da Algeri a Città del Capo, typescript press kit, p. 6 (Centro Storico Fiat, Turin).

⁵ Paolo Butti da Algeri a Città del Capo, typescript press kit, p. 9 (Centro Storico Fiat, Turin).

a fabulously rich land, whereby pastures and farmlands are just increasing, need tractors. A base of tractors, especially if equipped with spare parts, could make a fortune here.”⁶ The reference to pastures and farmlands may be traced back to the modernization of farming and agricultural techniques that Congo was experiencing in the post–World War II years. The million hectares of land that had been grabbed from local peasants and devoted to colonial interests during wartime were now subject to intensive agronomic research. To overcome the poor quality of the soil in the forest areas and to maximize the extraction of cotton, coffee, and palm oil products, a system of rotational cultivation organized in “corridor settlements” was experimented with, based on “communal practices as mechanical cultivation” (G.D.M. 1950, 353). Since Fiat also operated in the market of farm vehicles, the company promptly followed the driver’s suggestion by exhibiting tractors and off-track cars at the Brussels Motor Show of that year, including the Countrysider itself. A sophisticated installation was set up in the fair pavilion, with the car being driven up and down steep slopes and across trembling bridges to simulate the difficulties of the African terrain.

This setup hints at the kind of public perception Fiat intended to build around its car product, emphasizing its application in rural areas and its capability to cross steep terrain. This view of a motor raid’s “usefulness” diverged so significantly from the newsreel company’s version that it led to different versions of the film created from the same footage. Between January and February 1952, when Butti was still on his way back from Cape Town, three different segments of Incom’s weekly newsreel (*La Settimana Incom*) were released. The same films were later re-edited as a seven-minute-long color short and released in movie theaters as a special newsreel edition.⁷ Fiat wasn’t entirely happy with the final results. As reported by the press service, “despite our insistence, Incom couldn’t make a proper documentary on the Countrysider’s raid. They apologised by saying that, as an institution, they cannot exceed certain limits and so they made it all about the landscape.”⁸ Incom probably couldn’t afford to be too upfront in its promotional intents given that the sponsorship deal with Fiat remained a private agreement between two enterprises. In its capacity as a sponsoring company, the car manufacturer obtained Pennelli’s raw footage and outtakes to craft its own extended cut of the Algiers–Cape Town motor raid film for in-house corporate screenings (see Dotto 2019).

⁶ Paolo Butti *da Algeri a Città del Capo*, typescript press kit, p. 6 (Centro Storico Fiat, Turin).

⁷ All Incom’s films and newsreels on the Algiers–Cape Town raid are available on Archivio Luce’s website, <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/> (accessed June 21, 2024).

⁸ Diaries of the Press and Advertising Services no. 10 – February 26–March 4, typescript minutes (Centro Storico Fiat, Turin), March 4, 1952, p. 2.

In some reintegrated sequences, Fiat's role as a sponsoring body stands out prominently. Other sequences address obstacles posed by the natural environment in greater detail, showing the car as it crossed a bridge or faced a flood in the rural areas of Congo ([figure 5](#)), as in the Fiat installation at the Brussels Motor Show. Meant for a nontheatrical circulation in business venues, Fiat's in-house version of the motor raid film aimed at being "more precisely explanatory of the car's performance over the long, daring journey."⁹ From this perspective, it articulates a different view on Africa than the one offered by Incom's newsreels and color documentary to theatrical audiences. By "making it all about the landscape" (as lamented by the car driver during the journey), the film company stuck to a well-rooted conception of African territories as "exotic, uncontaminated lands," emphasizing their picturesque character through color film. The automotive firm's insistence on depicting the African "settings" as a difficult, inhospitable terrain that could nevertheless be mastered by Fiat's superior technology was instrumental in glorifying their vehicle's strength and performance during trans-African journeys. Both visions stem from the preconception of Africa as an eternally archaic and timeless place, but the latter opens up a chance for transformation, albeit epitomized by the presence of the imported car rather than anything indigenous to the place itself. The sequences in the Sahara Desert or in the forests of Congo are presented to suggest that even in the absence of roads and transport networks, the motor vehicle can work its way out of the most untamed environment—proving, as the promotional slogan read, that the "all-rounder needs no road."

Differently from Alfa, whose main objective was to keep thriving on previously established infrastructures and labor sources, Fiat's primary extractive purpose consisted in increasing the cultivation of rural areas in Central Africa. Originally introduced as a military vehicle, the Countrysider was now serving in the European "war" to modernize Africa.

Reframing Africa through the Car's Window

The production histories of postwar motor raid films show that getting back to Africa and reclaiming the right to cross its land fulfilled private interests as well as public ones. As the raid from Tripoli to Mogadishu demonstrated, former colonial roads remained a viable path, even after the nation-state's control was dismissed, thanks to extant infrastructural complexes: an Italian industry in the Horn of Africa could still exist if enterprises extracted local labor without a break. On its part, the Algiers-Cape Town crossing aimed at showing that it was now possible to expand the car over territories under the

⁹ Diaries of the Press and Advertising Services no. 10 – February 26–March 4, typescript minutes, Diaries of the Press and Advertising Services (Centro Storico Fiat, Turin), March 4, 1952, p. 2. This reedited version of the film has been digitized and preserved by the Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa, Ivrea (Turin), and is available on its YouTube video channel, <https://youtu.be/eDsFUFc02gQ>, accessed June 21, 2024.



Figure 5: The Countrysider Fiat 1100 as it crosses a crumbling bridge in Cameroon in one of the reintegrated sequences of Fiat’s reedited version of Incom’s film.

Source: Courtesy of Centro Storico Fiat and Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa, Ivrea (Turin).

control of the former wartime enemies. Due to the alleged superiority of its products, the Italian automotive industry could contribute to modernizing agriculture and maximizing the extraction of raw materials from Congolese lands.

The adopted infrastructural disposition allows us to see how the realization of the films relied on the automotive companies’ technical-social interlinkages and extractive interests in African lands. In other words, the material needs to extract resources from Congolese lands inform the films’ modes of representation, as distilled in one visual and rhetorical motif shared by both productions—namely, the reoccurring sequences shot from the perspective of the passenger or, more frequently, the front window, simulating the spectatorial impression of sitting behind the wheel and driving across desert and floods ([figure 6](#)). These subjective shots can be easily interpreted as imperialist variants of the “virtual-mobilized gaze,” originally theorized by Anne Friedberg (1993), for the way they turn non-Western lands into objects of consumption, offering virtual voyages into faraway and exotic worlds while, at the same time, reaffirming Westerners’ perspective as dominant (Roan 2010, 11–12; Jaikumar 2019, Ch. 1). One might call it an “automobilized gaze,” for it enhances the cooperation between the car and the camera in reframing territories within an “automobilized time-space.” This sensation of roaming freedom is defined by the apparent ability of “the driver to travel at any time in any direction,” a seamless “that makes other modes of travel inflexible and fragmented” and that affirms the driver’s



Figure 6: When seen through the car windows' perspective, the African landscapes are turned into an inert terrain to be crossed. Shots from *Una Lettera dall'Africa* (left) and Fiat's reedited version of Incom's film (right).

Sources: Courtesy of Archivio Luce – Cinecittà, Rome; Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa, Ivrea (Turin); and Centro Storico Fiat, Turin.

individualized perspective (Urry 2004, 28–30). It is this automobilized gaze that constitutes the formal principles upon which the filmic tale of the motor crossings is articulated. By adopting a car driver's point of view, any morphological specificity of the environment is immediately turned into an obstacle in the way. In this way, local populations and cultures are transformed into passing figures that threaten to slow down the traveling pace. The rhetorical equation with the unstoppable march of modernization established by this choice was not lost upon contemporary viewers. As a newspaper correspondent following the Algiers–Cape Town raid wrote, “we see Africa only as much as we are allowed to by the window of a racing car, and nothing more” (Corradi 1951, 5). Another chronicler noticed that “through a dusty car window, landscape and characters change at a speed of a film that cannot linger in close-ups or in elaborate tracking-shots [...] We are in the era of fast expeditions, led by economical strategies that move capital from one mine to another, always in search of high incomes and quick financial investments” (Lector 1952, 5).

This reframing of Africa “as seen from the car window” comes with broad implications. It marks a gradual shift in the public discourse from fascism's “eschatological vision of the imperial conquest” to “a teleological and progressive vision of the new role of Italy in the Western world” (Mancosu 2016). These films weren't supposed to portray a potential “living space,” a promised land where the Italian population should move and prosper. They depicted instead a “traversed space”: a place that could be reached, crossed, transformed, and soon left by anyone (enterprise or private citizens) who had been blessed by the gift of modern advancement. At the same time, the films diminished African lands, both within and outside the borders of the former empire, as a mere testing ground for the automotive industry.

Promotionally, the “African settings” of these films are nothing more than a compelling backdrop against which Alfa, Fiat, and their products are supposed to stand out. The same consideration applies also to other strands of the advertising discourse around the motor raids. During a stop in Cairo, Lualdi wrote a letter to its sponsor, with “a specific mention” addressed to the Press Office: “the success of the trip is a triumph for Alfa.”¹⁰ Again, in May 1951, he cabled from Mogadishu to confirm that the cars had “brilliantly breached the difficulties” posed by the African terrain, “successfully getting through sand, mud and ford.”¹¹ All these private communications were later included in press releases. Similarly, a telegram sent by pilot Paolo Butti, certifying the quality of the tires’ foam padding in cushioning “the violent bumps in driving through rough terrains,” was reproduced in an advertising poster by the tire manufacturer Pirelli. The poster (not reproduced here) portrays a racist caricature of a smiling, cartoonish African native in tribal wear, who towers over a white man so amiably that a Butti-like driver has fallen asleep in his car while parked in the foreign land. The claim reads, “There’s no insurmountable obstacle if paddings are in Pirelli foam rubber.”¹²

As the advertising poster demonstrates, older signifiers of “dangerous” Africa (i.e. the indigenous man in tribal wear) were making way for a different regime of photography and images. The imagery accompanying Butti’s African road trip and the language describing such crossings drew on the colonial dehumanization and brutalization of Africans while also formulating a new racist idiom better suited for emerging economic realities. Under this new order, Africa is still subject to resource extraction, but rather than being portrayed as the resistant and obdurate land that justified the establishment of an imperial police state, it was depicted as a place that would yield itself to becoming a laboratory and market for Italian trade. In the attempt to address the perspective of individual mass consumption, sponsored films, advertising campaigns, and promotional statements jointly reconceptualized the African environment as an inert terrain and a practical field for technological experimentation. The “extractive” implications underlying this rhetorical tendency are openly stated in an article significantly titled “Africa Is Still No Joke but Is About to Give Way to the Machines That Force Progress” and published in an automotive house organ periodical, to summarize the main tenets of the “corporate take” on the decolonization process. The opening of car racing routes from Tripoli to Mogadishu and from Algiers to Cape Town is announced as follows:

10 Maner Lualdi, 03/09/1951, Cairo, handwritten letter, Mena House Hotel Pyramids letterhead (Centro Documentazione Museo Alfa Romeo, Arese - Milan).

11 Bonzi-Lualdi, 05/07/1951, Mogadishu to Rome, telegram (Centro Documentazione Museo Alfa Romeo, Arese - Milan).

12 Pirelli. *Rivista di Informazione e Tecnica* 5, no. 2, March–April 1952, p. 61. For Fondazione Pirelli’s digitized collection, see <https://www.fondazionepirelli.org/archivio-storico/pubblicazioni-e-riviste/IT-PIRELLI-BIB0001-0021289>.

Africa is about to crack, is going to split like a ripe pomegranate. Just like an enchanted castle, it had been withstanding civilization's sieges for over a century now. But its time has finally come ... By now it is clear that this is not a question of bravery, as it is of organisation, it is not really about boldness, it is about technique. Car crossings over the Black Continent are no longer supposed to give drivers glory, only a fair recognition. The real winners stand a thousand kilometers away from the competition venues. Pencils and slide rules are their weapons. They designed the right tools, engines, tyres and air suspensions. News of the victory may be flattering but cannot surprise them. It is just a successful experiment. (Gennarini 1951, 48)

If claims of the car's superior technology reassure the viewer that Italian industry finds a willing market in Africa, the vegetal metaphor of the "ripe pomegranate" confirm that this land, absent of any resistant African subjects, is manageable, cultivable, and navigable terrain. Further, in Gennarini's comments quoted above, the trans-African motor raids emancipate the land from colonial discursive frameworks about heroism and adventure to reinterpret it through a rhetoric of progress as a rational, technical matter. Gennarini identifies Italian engineers and designers at work in corporate enterprises as the real driving force behind modernization. He also reveals the extreme bigotry of the oft-cited Italian and Western civilizing mission as he compares the continent to a tropical fruit to be split in half, like a land whose alleged "enchantment" is about to be broken by industrial rationality.

Progress and extraction go hand in hand here, a two-sided coin, outlining the new political and economic ratio to which trans-African raids and their cinematic representation were supposed to readjust their functions. Even if no longer aimed at the military conquest of the territories, motor raids in Africa still served to test the strength of automobility's materials, products, and infrastructures. The films told tales of victory and domination over a foreign soil and an untamed environment and so actively contributed to land extraction and transformation of the forest and rural areas of Congo and Cameroon. By adopting the individualized perspective of the car driver and potential Western consumer, they transformed Africa into an anonymized pool of resources standing in the path of progress.

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