

POPULAR TRADITION, AMERICAN MADNESS AND SOME OPERA. MUSIC AND SONGS IN ITALIAN NEO-REALIST CINEMA¹

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“Non sono molto originale”

“Meglio così”

Marcello and Luisa in *Gioventù perduta*

After decades of ideological appropriations, in the past thirty years Italian neo-realism has been thoroughly and refreshingly scrutinized. Among the recently contested features were its popular success and mode of address. As is now well known, the circulation of postwar critical narratives about Italy was mostly limited to urban areas, particularly those of major cities.² Moreover, one should consider, ideology aside, the indisputable market setback. Few films among the acknowledged masterpieces of Italian neo-realism met the interest of mainstream audiences.³

What emerges from a closer look is a discrepancy between neo-realist aims and practices: between a production discourse addressed to the nation and its people at large, and a reception and consumption mostly identified with a social and political minority, in search of a native, yet still missing, art cinema. In this respect, neo-realism can be associated with a typical trope of postwar European cinema, that of the auteur film, taking up the highbrow segment on the market, and introducing a redeemed Italian culture abroad.⁴

As many recent scholars, I would rather like to work with a more inclusive research perspective, not merely based on ideology.⁵ I would thus like to consider also films contaminated by a number of all too popular genre narratives and iconography, and perpetuated throughout a series of different media supports. As a matter of fact, I assume that in terms of narrative and ideological role of musical scores one may detect only some small differences between Rossellini's and De Sica's masterpieces on the one hand and much more formulaic products on the other. Actually, this latter group of films registers with greater clarity and cogency Italy's postwar cultural life. In what concerns the scores of neo-realism, I agree with Richard Dyer who writes: “There is a contradiction within the neo-realist project between making films about ordinary people and a tendency to view with suspicion what ordinary people liked, a contradiction sharply registered in music.”⁶ This suspicion was expressed through old-fashioned extradiegetic musical scores, and through popular diegetic music, that narratives associated with negative characters or situations. Here I would like to develop my argument through the notion of *mediascape*, as proposed by Arjun Appadurai,⁷ understood both as a set of technological media aimed at distributing information and as the world images generated by such media. In my opinion, the role music played in neo-realist era should be considered within a postwar Italian mediascape defined in its relationships with media and culture under Fascism; the widely imported American culture; domestic production efforts to establish a national musical tradition through films; popular music consumption within live entertainments and media.

In the preceding decade, the Italian cultural industry underwent a significant acceleration.⁸ Two major musical and medial phenomena define the era: first the popularization of American swing and jazz rhythms, mediated and vernacularized by former immigrants to the US,⁹ and large bands and their lead singers, such as Alberto Rabagliati;¹⁰ secondly the intermedial ubiquity of songs, as featured in radio broadcastings, film accompaniments, and stage shows (i.e. live revue).¹¹ In the 1930s, a song used in a film can easily be traced back to a variety show, listened to in radio programmes, and from commercial records. Still, what is largely missing is a *specific* film music culture, as Sergio Miceli recently explained:

*With a few exceptions, [in the 1930s] the attitude behind the approach of cultivated composers to film music highlights the difficulties – or the refusal – to understand the importance and potential of the film language [...]; it reflects an aesthetic inclination, strongly influenced by Croce's idealism, that corners music into a kind of chastity, thereby excluding any application or contamination outside the music realm.*¹²

In the postwar era several films exhibited traits that were quite different from those seen in the previous decade. If in the 1930s a theatrical model overdetermined the mode of representation in terms of framing, acting, and dramatic structure, the postwar culture privileged an authorial perspective: the film-makers had to be in charge of the film's aesthetic register. In addition: if the film music of the 1930s often resulted in a fragmented sequence of vaguely diegetically motivated songs, which expressed a lack of communication between the film's director and its composer, postwar scores were definitely different. Here are some features of this new era: firstly, the definite rise of both melodramatic and symphonic models for extradiegetic music; secondly, an enhancement of the role of diegetic music as stated by Enzo Masetti, one of the most important figures of the postwar era, in his role as both composer and teacher:

*The film music can be true to the musical reality in its absolute, photographic reality; [film music] can be [...] 100% realistic: whatever is within the frame might be a realistic source of music, and the director might use it as he does with the furniture, a noise, a light, all the realities that affect the audience's senses.*¹³

Thirdly, this appreciation for diegetic musical sources elicited a new understanding of popular music consumption. The new attention given to folk music expressed an answer to the dominant attitude during Fascism, which had deplored indigenous forms of expressions and practically reduced their occurrence to formulaic manifestations.¹⁴ Finally, film composers searched for a closer collaboration with directors as the case of musicians like Masetti or Goffredo Petrassi.¹⁵ Consider also the remarkable work of Carlo Rustichelli with Pietro Germi.¹⁶

Postwar film scores certainly perpetuated traditional forms of highbrow musical culture. Nonetheless, this process is a reaction to preceding musical scores. Moreover, such a process is somehow similar to what happens with the establishment of directors' culture, i.e. the promotion of an artistic identity for cinema itself.

The way in which postwar Italian films adopted American music and dances highlights a departure from 1930s film culture and signalled the emergence of a new imaginary, reflecting post-1945 social, cultural and ethnic preoccupations. As stated above, the American rhythms had made their way into 1930s culture, at a local level – as in Naples – or in national radio broadcastings. Up until the late 1930s, early 1940s, radio programmes consisted of a diet of theatre adaptations,

but also featured pop music and dance music for, respectively, 28% and 6% of their schedule.¹⁷ In the 1943-45 period, the radio stations under the control of the allied forces in Italy proposed a musical selection based on the new American rhythms. As Franco Monteleone describes:

*In the late fall [of 1943] the Radio Bari programmes were much more wide-ranging: the broadcasting hours increased, the technique improved, offerings included pop music jazz and boogie-woogie. The image of the liberating armies was pervading all the media, through posters, dance music broadcast on the radio or played in dance halls, the first American films screened in movie theatres.*¹⁸

The impact of this sudden cultural presence in Italy is still to be assessed in its multifarious effects. For sure, it provoked a conservative reaction. This was obviously an ideological effect. As Stephen Gundle explained, the postwar ideological attitude of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was split between a deep fascination for mass culture, and anxieties over its capitalistic nature.¹⁹ A film as *Bitter Rice* (*Riso amaro*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1949), blatantly affiliated with Marxist ideology, associated the most erotic display of Silvana Mangano star's body with boogie woogie, just to punish her soon after through the narrative. But more generally, the sudden reversal of gender roles and body culture caused a widespread worry. It should be noted that in 1940 American music was forbidden, and public dances as well; in the preceding years beauty contests too were shut down.²⁰ Postwar culture imported dances and forms of beauty display from the US; Italian neo-realist films often worked through narratives the difficult acceptance of what was experienced as superficial euphoria, compared to deep national pain. Maybe this is the reason why in *The Bandit* (*Il bandito*, Alberto Lattuada, 1946) the protagonist Ernesto discovers the ruins of his home and family, while we hear a merry boogie-woogie tune coming from a nightclub out of frame. Or in *Revenge* (*Un uomo ritorna*, Max Neufeld, 1946), Sergio looks so upset with his younger sister, dancing in a rather unbecoming way to the sound of American music.

American culture could be easily identified with film genre codes which had been inaccessible during the preceding decade, i.e. gangster movie. Thus, vernacular crime films suddenly pervaded postwar Italy, depicting a suffocating underworld; in these Italian films American icons appeared in ambiguous nightclubs where a surrogated American jazz was played. The scenery exuded social anomy. It is the case of many films, as *Behind Closed Shutters* (*Persiane chiuse*, Luigi Comencini, 1951), *Four Ways Out* (*La città si difende*, Pietro Germi, 1951), *The Bandit* and most of all, of the first censored film in postwar Italy: *Lost Youth* (*Gioventù perduta*, Pietro Germi, 1948). The music score expresses some form of revenge against the villain, and when he is finally shot and moral values again established, the jazzy song of the diegesis is perverted into extradiegetic parody.

Music was also registering another social fear, spread all over the nation: the irretrievable loss of traditional differences, whether social, gender or racial. This clearly lies beneath such successful songs as Neapolitan *Munasterio e' Santa Chiara* (Saint Chiara Monastery, Galdieri-Barberis, 1945), or *Vecchia Roma* (Old Rome, Ruccione-Martelli, 1947) and especially *Roma forestiera* (Rome Foreign to Us, Libianchi-Granozio, 1947), describing the loss of the beloved woman due to the American music. But behind such an image hides another more troubling one: miscegenation, a result of the presence of black soldiers in Italy. It pops up in such songs as *Tammurriata nera* (Nicolardi-Mario, 1944), and in several films, such as *Senza pietà* (Without Pity, Alberto Lattuada, 1948), *Campane a martello* (Luigi Zampa, 1949), *Tombolo* (*Tombolo, paradiso nero*, Giorgio Ferroni, 1947). In *Angelo* (*Il mulatto*, Francesco De Robertis, 1950), the problematic outcome of interracial encounters can finally be expelled outside the Italian society

thanks to a musical confrontation: the black spiritual song enables the child to acknowledge his real race and nation, and finally to allow his putative father build his own family.

American music in neo-realist films embodied the disjuncture within the mediascape, between the access to mass culture, and the fears of losing a national one. And the disjuncture between a problematic mediascape, and an ideoscape glorifying democracy and universal suffrage.

Postwar Italian music featured two other processes: the return of melody, which, consistently favoured by the growing media industry,²¹ consolidated the notion of a national singing tradition; the discovery of a folk music, collected with the support of the reborn state radio.²² The traditional song was often glorified as the expression of local identities, and as such it was depicted in films as *It's Forever Springtime* (*È primavera*, Renato Castellani, 1950), *Down with Misery* (*Abbasso la miseria!*, Gennaro Righelli, 1945) and in its clearest form in *Christmas at Camp 119* (*Natale al Campo 119*, Pietro Francisci, 1947). The film displays several renowned actors from variety shows, cinema and the musical scene. They play the role of war prisoners in an American camp, each of them coming from a different city; thanks to a gramophone that plays local songs, each of the actors tells a different story set in a pre-war past. It is not surprising that the author of this film's script, building a national popular identity through record listening, i.e. medial consumption, was none other than Michele Galdieri: one of the most successful song writers and playwrights of variety theatre.

Parallel to this conservative use of national musical tradition was the attempt to recover the folk heritage, and thus to compose musical scores that were allegedly close to the diegetic characters. Two major contradictions seem obvious: this process amounted to a *gentrification*, as described by Gans: a revaluation by the upper classes of a cultural phenomenon abandoned by its original producers, the Italian rural classes.²³ Moreover, it could be applied both to Resistance or contemporary society, as to non-realistic films, as was the case of the score signed by Enzo Masetti for *Outlaw Girl* (*Il brigante Musolino*, Mario Camerini, 1950); or to narratives set in a remote past, as was the case of the score by Goffredo Petrassi for *La pattuglia sperduta* (Piero Nelli, 1952), resembling the work done for *Bitter Rice* or *Under the Olive Tree* (*Non c'è pace tra gli ulivi*, Giuseppe De Santis, 1950), but set in the 19th century. On the other hand, this attempt to rework a folk tradition defined an alternative musical tradition, based upon Resistance and folk songs, one that was ideologically connoted. A heritage belonging to the Italian Left, but unfortunately far from its intended target. Probably, the only way to reach it, was to counterfeit a popular origin and thus build it through medial practices: which is precisely what happens with the recurring theme of *Vitti 'na crozza* in *Path of Hope* (*Il cammino della speranza*, Pietro Germi, 1950): still believed to be a Sicilian folk song, it was on the contrary specifically written for the film by Franco Li Causi.

The sole stable national value, before and after WWII, was opera. Italian melodrama constituted a national identity abroad, since the end of the 18th century;²⁴ it played an important political role in the national uprising, in 19th century; and since the end of that century it circulated among the popular classes, through small town musical bands, mechanical reproduction systems, and radio programmes.²⁵ Since the fascist era, this tradition was identified as the most apt to be adapted for the screen and represent Italy.²⁶ The most prolific director in this genre, Carmine Gallone, during a conference on film and music held in 1950 in Florence, declared: "It was almost a duty, or a duty without any almost, for us to dare. [...] Without any doubt, bringing the masses closer to the work of our geniuses we made possible a better national understanding and unity."²⁷ Secondly, opera together with pop music was the type of music that was mostly broadcast in the

postwar era, thus permeating the national mediascape. Finally, it was this tradition that was mostly present in the training of the composers that worked for neo-realism. And whether or not they were aware of this, they perpetuated a national musical heritage through the decades. As declared in a late interview Cicognini, the composer for *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, Vittorio De Sica, 1948) and *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952): “We have somehow perpetuated a tradition that changed according to the films. [...] What is sure is that in a bulk of films [...] there is a score that, even if not deeply linked to the image, still preserved some values that are above all national.”²⁸

It is not surprising that soon after Carlo Rustichelli or Renzo Rossellini wrote the scores of film-operas as *Puccini* (Carmine Gallone, 1953), or *House of Ricordi* (*Casa Ricordi*, Carmine Gallone, 1954).

The national and popular identity sought in neo-realist movies emerged in a musical tradition, acknowledged both within and without the nation. Therefore, in *Before Him All Rome Trembled* (*Avanti a lui tremava tutta Roma*, Carmine Gallone, 1946), one of the biggest postwar hits, a narrative of partisan battles frames and doubles none other than the story of Tosca and all the typical features of Italian identity abroad – Roman ruins, opera and passion – mark the film.

In conclusion, the most advanced figures of neo-realism ended up overlooking the emergence of that broad media environment we identified as mediascape. Nevertheless, radio,²⁹ popular theatre and musical traditions shaped both neo-realism cinematic imaginary and popular media consumption. In the end, the wildest poetic dreams filled only the stage of an imaginary theatre, something that was first and also most brilliantly understood by Luchino Visconti.

- 1 The present contribution owes much to the many suggestions that generously my colleagues Roberto Calabretto and Saverio Lamacchia gave me. I am also grateful to Paolo Noto, for soliciting my attention upon the article of Carmine Gallone later mentioned.
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- 4 Alberto Farassino, “Neorealismo. Storia e geografia,” in Id. (ed.), *Neorealismo. Cinema italiano 1945-1949*, cit., pp. 21-36.
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