

# INTERMEDIALITY IN THE 1950s ITALIAN FILM INDUSTRY: THE CASE OF THE TITANUS' *FILM-CANZONE*

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The aim of this essay is to point out how, during the 1950s and the 1960s, the Italian film industry deployed cross-medial strategies in order to contrast the cinema's loss of leadership in the media scenario. I will use Titanus, one of the leading companies in the Italian post World War II cinema, as a case study. In fact, Titanus' films were often inspired by other popular media, like the Neapolitan *sceneggiata* – that is a local kind of singing stage-melodrama – the vaudeville, the pulp magazines or the *fumetti*. Furthermore, between the 1950s and the 1960s, Titanus also gave life to a short cycle of very peculiar musical comedies, whose plots were basically adaptations of the lyrics of successful songs from the contemporary Italian music industry. Finally, Titanus managed to expand its own activity to other sectors of the cultural industry, by starting a sheet music publishing house and even launching its own record label. In this essay, I will connect this phenomenon to the Italian media context, and in particular to the first major industry crisis which hit Italian cinema in 1956. In order to do that, I first have to introduce both the Italian post WWII film industry, and the role of the Titanus company.

## European and Italian film industry after 1945

As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith points out in the introduction to *Hollywood and Europe: Economics Culture, National Identity* which he co-authored with Steven Ricci,<sup>1</sup> in the late 1940s and in the early 1950s most western European governments enacted various measures which had the effect of increasing the national film production. In particular, Italian production companies could benefit from a wide array of governmental aids, including tax refunds, low rate public loans and some mild protectionist measure against foreign cinema. It is worth noting that the Italian aid system had the effect of fostering the birth of thousands of tiny film companies, which were usually established simply to exploit the state benefits and which mostly ceased to exist after having produced no more than a couple of titles. However, I maintain that the key phenomenon in this early phase of the post-war Italian film industry was instead the strengthening of the bigger existing companies, such as Riccardo Gualino's Lux Film, the companies related to the press tycoon Angelo Rizzoli, and finally Goffredo Lombardo's Titanus. In particular, through the 1950s, Titanus became one of the few, if not the only, vertically integrated film company on Italian soil. Titanus was born out of a previous silent-era medium range company, Gustavo Lombardo's Lombardo Film, and could therefore count on an already established distribution network. Through the 1930s and the 1940s Titanus focused mostly on acquiring means of production and facilities, thus becoming the Italian company with the most valuable physical assets. Moreover,

during the 1950s, Titanus was able to grow further due to the great success of popular genre films which represented the bulk of the company offerings, such as a series of melodramas directed by Raffaello Matarazzo and a few comedy cycles spawning from box office hits such as Luigi Comencini's *Bread, Love and Dreams* (*Pane, amore e fantasia*, 1953) or Dino Risi's *A Girl in Bikini* (*Poveri ma belli*, 1957), even though at the same time Titanus also released several ambitious film directed by already established *auteurs* such as Fellini or Visconti.

During the late 1950s Titanus noticeably increased both its production volume and its industrial assets, becoming so big to eventually crumble under its own weight in 1964. In fact, Titanus' development policy led the company to continuously produce bigger movies and to start new branches, until the company wasn't able to pay its loans anymore.

However, in 1956 the company was at its best, and therefore Titanus managed to survive the first major crisis which hit the Italian cinema since the end of the war. In fact, while other big Italian film companies completely shut down or simply closed their production branches, Titanus was still retaining a prominent market share.

I believe that an analysis both of the factors of the 1956 crisis, and of the strategies deployed by Titanus to overcome it, can shed a new light on the way the Italian film industry tried to deal with a changing media scenario.

## New entertainment-media hierarchy after the 1956 crisis

The 1956 Italian cinema crisis was determined by a sudden decrease of ticket sales, after a decade of almost vertical growth. There are many contrasting explanations for this phenomenon, such as an uncontrolled rise in the admission price,<sup>2</sup> the inflation of Italian films due to governmental aids or the lack of renewal in the generic formulas. However, I maintain that the key cause regarded not just the film industry, but the Italian cultural industry as a whole. In fact, as the Italian economy was facing its so-called "boom," which lasted roughly from 1957 to 1963, the minimum working wages were rising and therefore more people had money to spend on entertainment. Hence the media offerings were multiplying, especially in television, in the printed media and in the music sector. For instance, the Italian television broadcastings started only in 1954, and although the sales of appliances were still limited, the TV consumption in public spaces started to become a serious threat to cinema. Moreover, for the first time, the sale of 7" single discs and of portable record players became widespread in Italy as well, and the sales of comic books were also doing well. Even though, as Casetti states in his *Eye of the Century*,<sup>3</sup> cinema held the center spot in the media arena throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 1950s the media hierarchy was beginning to change and cinema was starting to lose its supremacy, not just at the economic but even at the cultural and at the symbolic level.

I maintain that the stronger relationship between cinema and the recording industry that we can observe in the late 1950s, can be interpreted as a reaction to the cinema's loss of leadership. In fact, in the late 1950s the new competition among different media is addressed by Italian cinema through the enhancing of the cross-media strategies of the films themselves. It has to be stressed that post-war Italian cinema has always been a cross-medial one. For instance, if we examine neo-realist movies, we can see how they already include a depiction of almost every popular media which were then available. Furthermore, even popular genre films such as comedies or melodramas were also keen on showing excerpts of other media such as vaudeville, television or pulp magazines. What changed after 1956 is that the relationship between cinema and its competitors is often explicitly addressed within the films' plot.

In this respect, the two cycles of musical comedies released nation-wide by Titanus in the latter half of the 1950s represent a very interesting case. In fact, these films try to blend the cast and the atmosphere of the most successful of Titanus' comedies with the structure of a very peculiar Italian musical genre, the already existing Neapolitan *film-canzone*. But at the same time, they also aim at re-envisioning the relationship between cinema and the cultural industry as a whole.

The *film-canzone* (Italian for "song-movies") are musical comedies or musical dramas which take their title from that of a successful song, but most importantly they adapt the lyrics of that song to the plot of a feature-length film.<sup>4</sup> It has to be highlighted that the *film-canzone* is very different from the Hollywood musical as it has been described by Rick Altman:<sup>5</sup> in fact, in the *film-canzone* the musical numbers aren't most important than the film narration and they aren't sung by the main cast of characters, but by a star singer who has just a supporting role. Most importantly, these song numbers usually don't feature the diegetic to extra-diegetic shift typical of the Hollywood musical, but they are just envisioned as diegetic performances which are being witnessed by the main characters. In many of these films the eponymous song is never performed from the beginning to the end, but bit by bit as the story unfolds, and that's because the audience is already familiar with it, has listened to it over and over at the radio or has bought the record during the previous months, and then has gone to the theatre to enjoy something that has been built around the tune, rather than the tune itself.

Through three years, from 1957 to 1959, Titanus released seven *film-canzone*,<sup>6</sup> split into two cycles of films, one directed mostly by Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia (except for the last one, *Cerasella*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo in 1959) and the other directed by Turi Vasile. The latter cycle is composed of three films built around a single original song, written by the jazz composer Lelio Luttazzi and repeatedly sung onscreen along with other pre-existing compositions. The former cycle is instead the most important one and features four films which are all taken from finalist songs at the two then most followed Italian song contests, the Festival of Sanremo and, most importantly, the Festival of Naples. For instance, the song *Lazzarella* won the second place at the Festival of Naples in March 1957, and was already turned into a movie in November, less than six months later. In both cycles, however, the main characters are young people who are constantly surrounded by the new entertainment media environment. For instance in *Io, mamma e tu*, directed by Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia in 1958, Renato Salvatori of *A Girl in Bikini* fame, is a young man who can't seem to find a way to deal with the obtrusive mother of his fiancée. In fact, not only is his future mother-in-law very jealous of her daughter and never lets the two young people stay together alone, but she's also a TV enthusiast, a kind of person who Salvatori's character, being a film theatre manager, strongly despises. In *Tuppe-tuppe marescià*, also directed by Bragaglia in 1958, we can see modern entertainment machines invading the film's idyllic southern-Italy countryside setting, as the peasant singer Maria has to compete with the brand new jukebox which has been installed in the little town's inn. Finally, in *Promesse di marinaio*, directed by Vasile in 1959, the main characters, three sailors, spend their leisure time in the parlor of a record shop buying 7" discs, playing instruments and singing, flirting with the young female clerks and kissing them while hiding inside the record shop booths. Remarkably, in these movies the new media are constantly compared to cinema, as the main characters are usually in search of a shelter in shady and comfortable movie theatres where they can spend some time with their love interests.

It is also worth noting that these films connect the new entertainment media environment with the modernization process that is affecting Italy in the late 1950s. For instance, in *Lazzarella* the two young lovers meet each other at a small inn on the idyllic green hills of Posillipo and, while sitting at an outdoor dining table surrounded by grape vines, they pretend to be a married couple enjoying their lunch together. However, while having their meal, the two look repeatedly down

the hill, staring with hopeful and longing eyes at the ugly and polluting steel plant of Bagnoli, which has risen on the shores of the Naples Gulf: in fact, the male lead has just been employed there as a mechanical engineer, and therefore he has the opportunity to provide for his own needs and those of his fiancée's future family. Instead of being perceived as a menace to the traditional Italian landscape, the Bagnoli steel plant is thus being treated as a marker of the modernization process, even capable of softening the differences of class, as the male hero (a working class young man) will be able to marry the heroine (a socialite from the high bourgeoisie, albeit in dire financial straits) thanks to the new job he has just found there.

Therefore these movies aren't just taking advantage of an existing product, that is the adapted popular songs, nor are they simply representing other media onscreen. These films are instead showing a new possible relationship between the cinema and the new media scenario of the Italian economic "boom," namely a hierarchical one in which cinema still has a leading position.

## The music branch of Titanus

The *film-canzone* cycles were mainly aimed at the Italian second and third-run theatres, the peripheral exhibition circuits mostly located in the small towns and in Southern Italy, which at that time represented the core audience of Titanus' low budget films. However, while *Classe di ferro* and *Lazzarella*, the initial entries in the two Titanus' cycles, were both close to being smash-hits, the films they spawned clearly had a descending box office performance. This downward trend is probably related to the major changes occurring in the Italian exhibition sector during the late 1950s, when most of the film producers and distributors moved on to cater mostly to the wealthier audience of the first-run circuit and, as a consequence, the second and third-run theatres entered into a deep crisis which would have eventually led to their extinction.<sup>7</sup> Thus, since 1960, Titanus completely dropped the genre.

However, the involvement of Titanus in the music industry doesn't stop at the *film-canzone* cycles, as the company also tries to become part of the music business. First, Titanus starts a sheet music publishing label already in the mid 1950s: in fact, although in most of the western world the 1940s marked a boom in record sales, in Italy music continued to be sold primarily as paper sheets until the late 1950s. Titanus started by publishing the music scores of their own films, but eventually moved on printing original songs, with which the company was able to compete both in the Festival of Naples and in the Festival of Sanremo.

Moreover, in 1960 Titanus also started a record label, which was shut down just before the company's demise, in 1963. Even though nowadays the major film companies and the major record labels are owned by the same groups, as is the case of SONY, Warner Bros. or Universal,<sup>8</sup> it has to be stressed that in the 1960s a film company having its own record branch was a relatively new phenomenon. In fact, before WWII only MGM had a record company, while Warner Bros. and United Artists both started their own label only in 1958. The case of Titanus therefore shows a European company taking the cues from the strategies of some Hollywood major – strategies which in America would have led the way to the multi-media concentrations of the 1970s.

Titanus' label wasn't actually manufacturing its own discs – it had an arrangement with an already established Italian recording company, Durium – and its catalogue was very small: 43 7" discs, 4 LPs and a couple of EPs. Among the singles we can find mostly soundtracks from the company's films, but also some original songs. In hindsight, it's not a very appealing catalogue: classical Neapolitan songs performed by Nilla Pizzi – a female singer who already had her heyday in the previous decade – the final outings of Giuseppe Negroni – a minor performer who gave

up singing in the early 1960s – but also the debut record of the popular jazz performer Nini Rosso. It is therefore not surprising that Titanus music branch didn't set a trend in the Italian film industry; however, its example shows a European company which was shortly able to follow in the footsteps of the Hollywood majors and to try to build a multi-media empire.

## Conclusions

In the introduction of his book about the Italian cultural industry from 1880 to 1990, David Forgacs lamented the fact that he had been unable to also include an analysis of the Italian recording industry.<sup>9</sup> I maintain this is also the case of most of the studies focused either on the Italian cultural industry as a whole or just on the cross-medial strategies in Italian cinema.<sup>10</sup> However, focusing on the recording sector shows how the music business was regarded by the film industry not just as a competitor, but as a suitable area where the interests of the film companies could be expanded. In this respect, the history of the strategies of Titanus in the late 1950s is the story of a failed attempt to create a media concentration empire which, unlike Rizzoli's, expanded from cinema to other sectors and not vice-versa. I think that broadening the perspective from Titanus to other companies in the whole European market could shed a new light on the relationship of European cinema with the cultural industry.

- 1 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Introduction," in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Steven Ricci (eds.), *Hollywood and Europe: Economics Culture, National Identity*, Bfi, London 1998, pp. 1-17.
- 2 As pointed out by Vittorio Spinazzola, *Cinema e pubblico. Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia 1945-1965*, Bompiani, Milano 1974.
- 3 Francesco Casetti, *L'occhio del Novecento. Cinema, esperienza, modernità*, Bompiani, Milano 2007 (eng. ed. *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008).
- 4 See Sergio Bassetti, *Il cinema dei cantanti e delle canzoni*, in Sandro Bernardi (ed.), *Storia del cinema italiano 1954-1959*, Marsilio/Edizioni di Bianco & Nero, Venezia-Roma 2004, pp. 148-162, and Valerio Caprara, *Il cinema sotto il Vesuvio*, in Sandro Bernardi (ed.), *Storia del cinema italiano 1954-1959*, cit., pp. 372-387.
- 5 Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1987.
- 6 In release-date order, the seven Titanus *film-canzone* are the following: *Classe di ferro* (Turi Vasile, 1957), *Lazzarella* (Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, 1957), *Io mammata e tu* (Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, 1958), *Gambe d'oro* (Turi Vasile, 1958), *Promesse di marinaio* (Turi Vasile, 1958), *Tuppe tuppe mare-scìà* (Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, 1958) and *Cerasella* (Raffaello Matarazzo, 1959).
- 7 See Mariagrazia Fanchi, *La trasformazione del consumo cinematografico*, in Giorgio De Vincenti (ed.), *Storia del cinema italiano 1960-1964*, Marsilio-Edizioni di Bianco & Nero, Venezia-Roma 2001, pp. 344-357.
- 8 For a brief history of the mergers and acquisitions in the recording industry see Geoffrey P. Hull, *The Recording Industry*, Second Edition, Routledge, New York-London 2004 (first edition Allyn & Bacon, New York 1998), pp. 125-131, and Pekka Gronow, Ilpo Saunio, *An International History of the Recording Industry*, Cassell, London-New York 1998.
- 9 David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era 1880-1990. Cultural Industries, Politics and the Public*, Manchester University Press, Manchester-New York 1990. As a matter of fact, some years later Forgacs was actually able to accomplish this task, albeit just for the 1936-1954 period, in David Forgacs, Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2007.
- 10 However, among the most complete and thorough studies which deal with Italian popular cinema from a cross-medial perspective, I'd like to mention at least Alice Autelitano, *Il cinema infranto*.

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*Intertestualità, intermedialità e forme narrative nel film a episodi italiano (1961-1976)*, Forum-Aléas, Udine-Lyon 2011 and Lucia Cardone, *Con lo schermo nel cuore: Grand Hotel e il cinema 1946-1956*, ETS, Pisa 2004.