

# Translating Music: Dubbing and Musical Strategies in Italian Cinema of the Early Sound Period

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Throughout the 1930s, the large majority of films distributed and eventually screened in Italy were dubbed. Dubbing practices inevitably had an impact not only on the way sound was experienced in film but also the configuration of the emerging Italian film industry following the introduction of synchronized sound on the one hand, and the consolidation of the Fascist regime on the other. In fact, drawing on the work of Andrew Higson, among others, I wish to argue that dubbing complicates the notion of national cinema in the Italian context of the 1930s. Higson was among the first scholars to theorize the concept of national cinema. In his work, he argues against production-centric conceptualizations, pointing out that a full understanding of national cinema begins from the assumption that it is a complex cultural aggregate, and that at its core lies the reception of films by popular audiences. Higson's approach "lay[s] much greater stress on the point of consumption, and on the *use* of films (sounds, images, narratives, fantasies), than on the point of production." This, in turn, encourages "an analysis of how actual audiences construct their cultural identity in relation to the various products of the national and international film and television industries, and the conditions under which this is achieved."<sup>1</sup>

The pervasiveness of dubbing in the 1930s needs to be addressed in these terms, and a film's dubbed soundtrack must be considered as a channel through which audiences construct their own identities—regardless of the geographical provenance of the film screened. Nevertheless, in the case of dubbed movies, the negotiation between the 'national' and the 'foreign' takes place in the film's soundtrack at the stage of production as well: for the original images of a movie are combined with voices, sounds, and often music that are conjugated in national, or at least nationally familiar, terms.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30, no. 4 (1989): 45–46.

For this reason, both the productive and receptive sides of dubbing ought to be considered when discussing its use in national cinema.

Martine Danan argues that “dubbed movies become, in a way, local productions,”<sup>2</sup> and Pierre Sorlin claims that, through the process of dubbing, a film becomes a different performance of the same text.<sup>3</sup> Considering that dubbed foreign movies accounted for the vast majority of cinematic screenings in Italy in the 1930s, it is no exaggeration to claim that these films significantly contributed to the shaping of Italian national cinema, even and indeed especially at a time when domestic productions were few and far between.

The way sound technologies were understood and used when cinema converted to sound indelibly oriented subsequent national filmmaking practices and aesthetics. For instance, in his foundational work on the introduction of sound in French and American film, Charles O’Brien contends that France’s preference for direct sound since the 1930s has shaped the development of French national cinema and defined its stylistic signature.<sup>4</sup> In Italy, by the same token, the preference for dubbing for both imported and domestic films had a significant impact on later filmmaking practices. Grasping the role of dubbing in Italian cinema of the 1930s is fundamental if we are to better understand Neorealism as well as the cinema of such auteurs as Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. These filmmakers’ style was defined by post-production sound techniques that crystallized during the first decade of sound cinema.

In recent years, dubbing has increasingly been approached as an audio-visual translation technique. In translation studies, a fair amount has been written on both dubbing and subtitling from the perspective of both cultural studies and linguistics.<sup>5</sup> Film scholarship on Italian dubbing has focused mainly on the leading personalities and their voices.<sup>6</sup> For her part, Antonella Sisto compiled a groundbreaking work on dubbing from the perspective

<sup>2</sup> Martine Danan, “Dubbing as an Expression of Nationalism,” *Meta* 36, no. 4 (December 1991): 612.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema, 1896–1996* (London: Routledge, 1996), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Charles O’Brien, *Cinema’s Conversion to Sound: Technology and Film Style in France and the U.S.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Irene Ranzato, *Translating Culture Specific References on Television: The Case of Dubbing* (London: Routledge, 2015); Maria Pavesi, Maicol Formentelli and Elisa Ghia, eds., *The Languages of Dubbing: Mainstream Audiovisual Translation in Italy* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mario Guidorizzi, ed., *Voci d’autore. Storia e protagonisti del doppiaggio italiano* (Sommacampagna: Cierre, 1999); Gerardo Di Cola, *Le voci del tempo perduto. La storia del doppiaggio e dei suoi interpreti dal 1927 al 1970* (Chieti: Edicola, 2004).

of sound studies.<sup>7</sup> This latter contribution traces the cultural trajectories of dubbing from its establishment under the Fascist government to its artistic legacy as a postproduction technique used in Italian films of the postwar period. In Sisto's work, however, the 1930s are considered only with respect to censorship and the discrepancy between the voice and its putative anchor, namely the image of the actor's body. Further scholarly research has pointed out that the choice of dubbing, including its institutional implementation, was indeed a reflection of Fascist politics of foreign anesthetization.<sup>8</sup>

### *New Directions in the Study of Dubbing*

The singular focus on the Fascist institutionalization of dubbing, however, overlooks the mechanics of the dubbing process itself. The political and ideological conditions that underpin the development of dubbing should be coupled with an understanding of it as a practical experience. Admittedly, the scarcity of relevant primary film sources—often no longer accessible or difficult to locate—hampers the study of the subject. Nevertheless, as I will illustrate, much archival material has survived, allowing for an investigation of dubbing that takes into account not only the final visual products but also the written documents that informed and accompanied their making.

The backbone of this research is an assortment of archival materials preserved at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin.<sup>9</sup> These documents are critical to the study of dubbing in the early sound era. They contain official instructions followed in the dubbing process of many early 1930s foreign movies released in Italy, and they illustrate that, as the dubbing process unfolded, the censors' choices were closely linked to technological constraints and artistic considerations.

In the following I illustrate my argument in three sections. In the first, I briefly chart the passage from so-called silent to sound cinema. The Fascist

<sup>7</sup> Antonella Sisto, *Film Sound in Italy: Listening to the Screen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> See Carla Mereu Keating, *The Politics of Dubbing, Film Censorship and State Intervention in the Translation of Foreign Cinema in Fascist Italy* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016); Mereu Keating, "Censorial Interferences in the Dubbing of Foreign Films in Fascist Italy: 1927–1943," *Meta* 57, no. 2 (2012): 294–309; Mereu Keating, "'100% Italian': The Coming of Sound Cinema in Italy and State Regulation on Dubbing," *California Italian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 1–24.

<sup>9</sup> Fondo Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga, Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin, Italy. A work-in-progress digital catalog is available at <http://pittaluga.museocinema.it/home>.

government did not take long to perceive foreign voices and sounds as threats to national identity. Film reviews of the time provide a rich taxonomy of the multifarious practices adopted in the transition to sound—multiple language versions of the same film, sound movies made silent again, movies with alternative Italian soundtracks, and films poorly dubbed abroad were in the forefront of Italian movie theaters before the arrival of dubbing around 1932. Sounds, like images, underwent all sorts of manipulations.

In the second section, I examine archival documents related to the earliest dubbed movies distributed by Cines-Pittaluga, the company which played a major role in the production and distribution of dubbed films during the early years of sound cinema in Italy. Here, I argue that since its origin, the dubbing process was an opportunity for experimentation with sound. In addition, the efforts revolving around dubbing made up for the lack of a robust domestic film industry and contributed to establish a technical and artistic framework that would inform Italian cinema's aesthetic outlook for decades to come. Fully aware of its impact on a film's narrative and consequently a film's reception, dubbing directors gave particular attention to every aspect of the soundtrack.

In the final section of the article, by foregrounding the collaboration of the Italian composer Romano Borsatti with the Cines-Pittaluga studio, I contend that music contributed to the 'domestication' of foreign movies dubbed in Italian. A close reading of letters sent by Cines-Pittaluga to Borsatti will also provide a framework to understand the role played by Italian composers in the dubbing process. As we shall see, dubbing not only shaped the minds of audiences and the *modus operandi* of composers but also public perceptions of language in its relation to the emergence of a national cinematic culture.

### *The Transition to Sound, and the Consolidation of Dubbing*

We do not find it far-fetched to state that, when attending the screening of a foreign film, a large part of the audience does not perceive, recall, or know that the lines or voices they hear are not the original ones uttered and delivered when the film was shot—in short, they do not realize or recall that the film has been dubbed.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “Non crediamo sia azzardato affermare che una buona parte del pubblico nell'assistere alla proiezione di un film straniero non avverta, non ricordi o non sappia che le battute e le

This passage by film critic Tell O'Darsa (pseudonym of Dario Sabatello) suggests that in 1937, just a few years after the emergence of dubbing, the practice went mostly unnoticed by Italian audiences. However hyperbolic it may seem, this writing testifies to the quality of Italian dubbing. Indeed, foreign dubbed films could pass as local productions. To try and account for this seeming oddity, this section traces the convoluted trajectory of film sound as experienced by Italian audiences in the early 1930s. This critical transition has been documented in the weekly magazine *Cinema illustrazione* and will be discussed here with examples from specific sections devoted to reviews curated by film critic Enrico Roma. Although very little is known about Roma, he appears to be the only critic who, as Italian cinema made the transition to sound, devoted a few weekly lines to the quality of dubbing. Though less frequently and systematically than Roma, other commentators also expressed informed opinions about dubbing; in 1931, for example, Ettore Maria Margadonna wrote an extensive and skeptical review about it, despite foreseeing the potential of such postproduction technique.<sup>11</sup>

While in the US the official narrative of the history of sound cinema begins in 1927 with the release of *The Jazz Singer*, in Italy any such history would have to begin two years later, when the same film was screened for the first time in Rome. However, since the Italian film industry revolved around silent cinema, the establishment was reluctant to adapt to the new technology.<sup>12</sup> In every major Italian city, movie houses had their own professional orchestras with renowned conductors and pianists who carefully studied the scores to synchronize with the films to be screened.<sup>13</sup> An entire industry, including musicians, composers, and editors, gravitated towards an art form that would soon phase out permanently.

Having screened foreign sound films for only a few months, Italy made a quick turnabout. On October 22, 1930, a ministerial decree prohibited the screening of films that included speech in other languages, imposing the removal of any scene involving dialogue spoken in languages other than

voci che sente non sono quelle originali, pronunciate ed emesse quando il film è stato girato, che in una parola non avverta o non ricordi che il film è stato 'doppiato.' Tell O'Darsa, "Le voci del cinema," in *Cinema illustrazione*, September 22, 1937, 9. All translations from *Cinema illustrazione* and archival materials are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup> Ettore M. Margadonna, "Parabola del 'parlato': il 'dubbing,'" *Comœdia*, November 15–December 15, 1931, 17–18.

<sup>12</sup> Mario Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata: l'incredibile storia dei film stranieri in Italia nei primi anni del sonoro* (Gemona: La Cineteca del Friuli, 1986), 1–3.

<sup>13</sup> Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, 1.

Italian.<sup>14</sup> The result was catastrophic. Of the original soundtracks of foreign films, only music and sound effects were left intact, while intertitles in Italian were interpolated, constantly interrupting the images' rhythm. Those movies were termed "100 percent read films" by the satirists of *Marc'Aurelio* by way of contrasting them to the "100 percent spoken films" featured in other parts of the world.<sup>15</sup> The subsequent adoption of dubbing, while silencing foreign utterances, at least gave the voice back to Italian audiences.<sup>16</sup>

"Silencing" movies was not the only option. Hollywood production companies were already experimenting with alternative solutions to exploit the European markets. Although dubbing technologies were already available by the early 1930s, film companies embarked on the production of multiple-language versions (MLV)—namely, movies that were shot simultaneously, or in a staggered fashion, in more than one language, with different actors, directors, and crews.<sup>17</sup> One of the most emblematic MLVs was *The Big Trail* (1930, US), which was produced in four versions—Italian, French, German, and Spanish—each starring different actors. In his 1931 review of the Italian version (*Il grande sentiero*, 1930), Roma commented on it with irony, and criticizing MLVs produced in the United States for featuring Italian-American actors who mainly spoke Italian dialects influenced by American accents. Furthermore, as Roma noted, the actors' lines were too poetic and literate, in jarring contrast with the characters' or the plot.<sup>18</sup>

The European hub of MLV films was Joinville Studios in Paris. In his review of *Televisione* (Television, 1931, US) Roma describes it in harsh tones:

Joinville! That says it all. Only two days of programming, and the heckling resounds. It seems impossible. Anytime the Italian language is spoken in our cinemas, a storm quickly unleashes (aside from the Pittaluga company, which takes things quite seriously in this respect). And understandably so.

<sup>14</sup> Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Mario Quargnolo, *La censura ieri e oggi nel cinema e nel teatro* (Milan: Pan, 1982), 49–50.

<sup>16</sup> In Italy, the dubbing industry was inaugurated in 1932 by Cines-Pittaluga. For a short recollection of the early phases of the introduction of dubbing in Italy, see Mario Quargnolo, "Pionieri e esperienze del doppiato italiano," *Bianco e nero* 28, no. 5 (1967): 66–79; Paola Valentini, "La nascita del doppiaggio," in *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 4, 1924–1933, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Venice: Marsilio, 2014), 286–287.

<sup>17</sup> See Ginette Vincendeau, "Hollywood Babel: The Coming of Sound and the Multiple-Language Version," in *Film Europe and Film America: Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920–1939*, ed. Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 212.

<sup>18</sup> Enrico Roma, "Le prime a Milano," *Cinema illustrazione*, March 25, 1931, 13.

How could you expect a foreign *régisieur* to possibly judge the diction of our actors? I bet de Rochefort considers Orsini a great Italian actor, whereas his obvious Neapolitan accent (which at times is comical indeed) and his declamatory emphasis would make him a good addition to the Compagnia Scarpetta.<sup>19</sup> [...] Is this the end of Joinville's mishaps? I don't believe so.... But we could truly do without...<sup>20</sup>

Italian audiences, as it turned out, did not appreciate these efforts produced abroad. The scripts were written in a language detached from everyday speech, and while the actors had an Italian background they were still complete strangers to Italian audiences, who instead laughed at the combination of southern Italian dialects and English spoken with a contrived Italian accent.

Mario Quargnolo has written about another Italian experience crucial to this period of transition to dubbing, namely the *sonorizzazioni*. The process involved either the accommodation of old silent films to suit modern taste or the adoption of imported sound films stripped of all foreign-language dialogue.<sup>21</sup> In his work, Quargnolo uses the words *sonorizzazione* and *ammutilimento* (muting, i.e. "the process of making a film speechless by deleting all the dialogue") interchangeably. However, in 1931 Roma seemed to have identified them as two distinct practices:

Getting rid of *doublages* [dubbing]? Easier said than done! Which films could replace those with foreign speech, when experience suggests rejecting solutions like *ammutilimento* and *sonorizzazione*, which both strip a film of large sections of its footage, while the national industry is still in a swaddling blanket?<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> A Neapolitan theater company.

<sup>20</sup> "Joinville! È detto tutto. Due soli giorni di programmazione e fischi sonori. Pare impossibile. Quando, nei nostri cinema, si parli italiano, la tempesta non tarda a scatenarsi (la Pittaluga a parte, che da questo lato fa le cose sul serio). E si capisce. Come volete che un *régisieur* straniero possa giudicar la dizione di attori nostri? Scommetto che per il de Rochefort, l'Orsini è un ottimo attore italiano, mentre il suo spiccato accento napoletano (in certi momenti decisamente comico) e la sua enfasi declamatoria, ne farebbero un buon elemento per la Compagnia Scarpetta. [...] Son finite le malefatte di Joinville? Non credo... Ma potremmo anche rinunziarvi..." Enrico Roma, "I nuovi film," *Cinema illustrazione*, September 9, 1931, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> "Farla finita con i *doublages*? È una parola! Con quali films sostituire i parlati stranieri, se l'esperienza induce a scartare altri ripieghi come l'ammutilimento e la sonorizzazione, che sottraggono a un film buona parte del metraggio più utile, mentre l'industria



Although Roma does not clearly explain the two different processes, I would argue that *ammutilimento* applies to those instances in which the whole soundtrack (including music, sound effects, and dialogue) was wiped out, thereby leaving the original film literally “silenced.” On the other hand, *sonorizzazione*—in addition to the widespread practice of synchronizing afresh films from the silent era—could be understood to describe the process of rendering a sound film speechless, while retaining music and noises whenever possible (or remaking them for the occasion). Both systems relied on Italian intertitles to replace original dialogues. In 1930, Roma described the *sonorizzazione* process as follows:

It must be noted that this time the transposition *from sound with full speech to sound only*—save for the handful of harmless French lines—has turned out better than it has in previous foreign works released since the start of the season. The cuts go almost unnoticed and the intertitles, inserted to substitute speech, are well written and suffice for comprehension and effects.<sup>23</sup>

Arguably, the decision to either silence a film (*ammutilire*) or maintain/remake it as a speechless sound film (*sonorizzare*) also depended upon the kind of production to be adapted. *Il principe consorte* (1929, *The Love Parade*, US), discussed in the review cited above, was a musical comedy. Silencing this production (*ammutilimento*) would have ruined the film and compromised its success; thus, the *sonorizzazione*—“from sound with full speech to sound only”—was deemed a better option.

In the early years of sound film other peculiar solutions were adopted in an attempt to overcome both political and national barriers:

The film is spoken in Italian (i.e., *doublé* [dubbed]) in the same manner as *Morocco*. That is to say, there were insertions of footage shot in Paris with Italian actors. The trick, this time, worked out less badly. It is still annoying, though,

nazionale è ancora in fasce?” Enrico Roma, “I nuovi films,” *Cinema illustrazione*, September 16, 1931, 12.

<sup>23</sup> “Si deve inoltre osservare che questa volta la riduzione da sonoro-parlato integrale a sonoro, salvo le poche battute di dialogo in francese, che non guastano, è riuscita meglio che nei precedenti lavori stranieri pubblicati dall’inizio della stagione. Le amputazioni quasi non s’avvertono e le didascalie, messe a sostituire la parola, sono scritte a dovere e bastano alla comprensione e agli effetti.” Enrico Roma, “Le prime,” *Cinema illustrazione*, October 29, 1930, 12. Emphasis mine.



because we can tell that the actors are different, and the disconnect between the two parts is inevitable. Oh, well.<sup>24</sup>

Cutting scenes with English speech and replacing them with new footage of Italian actors speaking their own language was a practical (though not fully successful) solution adopted in films such as *Marocco* (1930, *Morocco*, US) and *Disonorata* (1931, *Dishonored*, US, the actual subject of the review). Interestingly enough, *Marocco*, dubbed and released in France as *Coeurs brûlés* in 1931, was well received by the critics and as such must be considered one of the first well-judged examples of dubbing.<sup>25</sup>

The convoluted cinematic jungle through which an Italian spectator had to move in the early thirties is aptly described by Roma in the following passage:

The old production reluctantly engages with the new one, and the latter with the brand-new one. Every film undergoes modifications and adaptations depending on the market, the country, the screens where it is sent to by the distributors. We have killed the silent film, but we are now forced to mute the spoken ones because no one would understand them, and censorship would prohibit their distribution anyway. Of a “100-percent-talkie” film we are now offered a version in which voices have nearly disappeared.<sup>26</sup> Kilometers of intertitles replace these voices; yet amidst this silence, there suddenly appears a line in German or English, a song, a choir, or an insignificant noise. Of a scene featuring fifty people moving, silently, we hear but the single blow of a stick, the slamming of a door, or knuckles tapping on a wall. Puerility. Confusion.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> “Il film è parlato italiano, intendo dire *doublé*, con lo stesso sistema di *Marocco*. Cioè vi sono stati intercalati pezzi girati a Parigi con attori italiani. Il trucco, questa volta, è riuscito meno male. Ma disturba lo stesso, poiché riconosciamo gli attori inseriti fuori testo, e lo stacco tra le due parti è inevitabile. Pazienza!” Enrico Roma, “I nuovi films,” *Cinema illustrazione*, January 20, 1932, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Barnier, “The Reception of Dubbing in France 1931–3: The Case of Paramount,” in *The Translation of Films: 1900–1950*, ed. Carol O’Sullivan and Jean-François Cornu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 229–231.

<sup>26</sup> The label “100-percent talkie” identified movies with audible dialogue throughout, distinguishing them from the “synchronized” films and the “part-talkie” ones.

<sup>27</sup> “La vecchia produzione s’innesta suo malgrado alla nuova, e la nuova alla novissima. Ogni film subisce modificazioni e adattamenti, a seconda del mercato, del paese, delle sale cui è avviato dai produttori. Si sono uccise le ‘mute,’ ma poi si è costretti ad ammutolire le parlate, perché nessuno le capirebbe e la censura ne impedirebbe lo smercio. Di un’opera, originalmente parlata al cento per cento, ci si offre un’edizione in cui le voci sono quasi scomparse.

As Roma points out, the situation for film critics over this period was more difficult and frustrating than ever. The edited movies presented in Italy made it impossible for a critic to judge a piece of work impartially, and it is hardly surprising that films “received with shock in Milan or Rome had been completely successful in Berlin or New York.”<sup>28</sup> It is also not surprising that in 1931, Roma—having already been exposed to a few years of spoken movies—wished for a kind of cinema with little to no room for spoken dialogue, resulting in what he called “the cinematic symphonic poem” (*Il poema sinfonico cinematografico*).<sup>29</sup> In Roma’s nostalgic imaginary, music and images work together in perfect harmony, whereas speech is “a ball and chain” (*Una palla al piede*) to the music. This vision falls within a widely shared opinion at that time which considered the use of dialogue as unaesthetic (i.e., too similar to everyday conversation) and condemned the talkies for abolishing the difference between art and reality. In this view, “Silence and music were excellent vehicles for achieving the poetic prominence of pure form, understood as a sort of rhythm—visual, oral, or both.”<sup>30</sup>

Although Roma’s prediction did not materialize, his descriptions and responses offer a frame of reference for the understanding of the Italian situation at the time and reconstruct the *Zeitgeist* of the early sound period. Moreover, Roma’s reviews represent a litmus test for the quality of sound technology from the dawn of sound cinema throughout the early thirties. The number of critical notices decrying the poor quality of Italian versions of foreign films would gradually decrease. For example, in the reviews published in 1933, almost no reference is made to dubbing, accents, quality of scripts, etc. This would seem to indicate that by that time dubbing techniques had improved and audiences had become habituated to the new status quo.

Chilometri di didascalie prendono il posto delle voci, senonché, tra tanto silenzio, ecco a un tratto una ‘battuta’ in tedesco o in inglese, una canzone, un coro o un rumore insignificante. Di una scena dove si muovono in cinquanta, silenziosamente, non ci giunge che un colpo di bastone su una tavola, lo sbattere di un uscio, un picchiar di nocche contro una parete. Puerilità, confusione.” Enrico Roma, “Le prime a Milano,” *Cinema illustrazione*, October 22, 1930, 6.

<sup>28</sup> “Non è raro il caso di leggere che un film, clamorosamente caduto a Milano o a Roma, ha trionfato a Berlino o a New York.” Enrico Roma, “Le prime a Milano,” *Cinema illustrazione*, December 9, 1930, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Enrico Roma, “Esperienze del sonoro e del parlato,” *Cinema illustrazione*, April 15, 1931, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Giorgio Bertellini, “Dubbing *L’Arte Muta*: Poetic Layerings around Italian Cinema’s Transition to Sound,” in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 39.

Foreign experimentations came to an end as the process of dubbing found a permanent home in Italy. The earliest dubbing efforts made in Italy date back to late 1931 and involved primarily German films,<sup>31</sup> including, for instance, *Salto mortale* (1931) and *Fortunale sulla scogliera* (*Menschen im Käfig*, 1930). According to Roma, these movies—dubbed by Cines, an Italian film company founded in 1906—were technically well made. Roma also points out that director Ewald André Dupont shot them with dubbing in mind, allowing images to better fit would-be dubbed voices:

*Il fortunale* is an Italian spoken film presented by Cines. And even from this angle, it is a good film. The voices are well chosen, and the acting is excellent. Dupont, in shooting the German edition, must have taken into account the needs of the other versions, thus minimizing the difficulties. But the main reason for the laudable result is that the actors are not known and are therefore credible even when speaking Italian. A *doublage* is therefore not a bad option as long as it does not involve celebrated film stars.<sup>32</sup>

According to this review, dubbing influenced filmmaking techniques to the point where certain angles, shots, or montages were preferred to others so as to accommodate future versions. Thus, cinematic aesthetics and techniques were often subordinated to a potential for dubbing. O'Brien analyzes the aesthetic consequences of dubbing on shot composition in Hollywood films, highlighting many of the techniques used to keep the viewer's gaze away from the actor's lips.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Roma points to the practice of famous American stars speaking Italian as a cultural constraint that dictated the failure of several dubbed movies. According to Joseph Garncarz, however, the cultural acceptance of dubbing must be considered as a learn-

<sup>31</sup> Antonio Catolfi, "Censura e doppiaggio nelle forme narrative del cinema italiano, nel cruciale passaggio al sonoro degli anni Trenta," *Between* 5, no. 9 (2015): 11, <https://doi.org/10.13125/2039-6597/1396>.

<sup>32</sup> "Il fortunale è un parlato italiano, per opera della Cines. E anche da questo lato, è buono. Le voci sono ben scelte e la recitazione è ottima. Il Dupont, nel girare l'edizione tedesca, deve aver tenuto presente la necessità delle versioni, limitandone al minimo le difficoltà. Ma la ragione principale del lodevole esito è nel fatto che gli attori non hanno alcuna notorietà tra noi e perciò, anche parlando italiano, sono credibili. Non è quindi escluso un possibile *doublage*, purché non si tratti di star famosi." Enrico Roma, "I nuovi films," *Cinema illustrazione*, November 4, 1931, 12.

<sup>33</sup> See Charles O'Brien, "Dubbing in the Early 1930s: An Improbable Policy," in O'Sullivan and Cornu, *The translation of films*, 177–189.

ing process through which audiences began to embrace the discrepancy between bodies and voices that are out of sync with one another.<sup>34</sup>

Following these early experiments, the dubbing industry permanently settled in Italy in Spring of 1932, thus becoming the only avenue to screen foreign films. Not only was dubbing in Italy more in tune with the national taste than the imported films dubbed abroad, but its increasing frequency was also due to a 1933 measure by the Fascist regime which prohibited the screening of Italian versions produced abroad.<sup>35</sup> At that point, the Fascist government had become aware of the potential role dubbing could play in shaping, through cinema, the understanding of anything “foreign.” Dubbing finally “provided an ‘acoustic roof’ over the native soil, a linguistic barricade whether against the encroaching Babel of generalized modernity or against regional political expansion.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, censorship could be smoothly disguised simply by adjusting the soundtrack over a cut sequence.<sup>37</sup> According to Sisto, the “clash of the ordinary sonic with the unfamiliar visuals” engenders a “psychic resistance in the reception of the moving/sounding image,” and in so doing, “dubbing destroys any possibility and real empathic believability of the other into a fictitious domesticity that perceived as such becomes just an untrue and dismissible spectacle.”<sup>38</sup>

This interpretation neatly applies to early audiovisual translation attempts, when the foreign and the national (“mock” national, in the case of productions made abroad for the Italian market) clashed visually and orally in the audiences’ minds. However, and following O’Darsa, I would argue that dubbing became widely accepted. The general audience no longer questioned the national character of the cinematic body with the same urgency, and eventually accepted the films as genuine Italian products. Of course, these audio-visual dissonances were more difficult to accept when well-known foreign stars were involved. Nevertheless, the association of specific actors with their respective Italian voices throughout their career—aided by the fact that their original voices had never been

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Garncarz, “Made in Germany: Multiple-Language Versions and the Early German Sound Cinema,” in Higson and Maltby, “*Film Europe*” and “*Film America*,” 259.

<sup>35</sup> Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Nataša Đurovičová, “Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic *translatio*,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), 102.

<sup>37</sup> Sisto, *Film Sound in Italy*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Sisto, *Film Sound in Italy*, 77.

heard—gradually eliminated the perception of them as “foreign-national others.”

To summarize, the development of sound cinema in Italy unfolded, from its inception, under the rubric of nationalism. Unlike other European countries, the spectrum of different solutions adopted to accommodate increasingly stringent Fascist policies was very wide. The common denominator, however, was to wipe out possible ‘threats’ from abroad and within the country. Dubbing was recognized as the perfect formula for both carving a strong national identity and controlling the intrusion of the foreign into the native soil.

### *Cines-Pittaluga’s Dubbing Process: Between Routine and Experimentation*

Cines-Pittaluga was the main player in the transition from silent to sound cinema in Italy. Founded as Cines in Rome on March 31, 1906, the company was then acquired by SASP (Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga) in 1926. Cines-Pittaluga produced the first Italian sound film, *La canzone dell’amore* (1930), directed by Gennaro Righelli, and became one of the main distribution companies in the country. The group was also the first to experiment with dubbing in Italy, and it went on to establish the first Roman dubbing production in the Spring of 1932. The arrival of sound cinema in Italy is indeed intertwined with the figure of Stefano Pittaluga himself, who was also responsible for the first screening of *The Jazz Singer* in Italy.<sup>39</sup> The historical significance of Cines-Pittaluga in Italy is connected to the development of a state-owned cinema and its vertically integrated model. Importation, production, and pervasive distribution was the company’s *modus operandi*, as described by Steven Ricci: “While Pittaluga built his position of strength by importing American films, his production studio (Cines) was supported by a chain of first-run theaters in every major Italian city.”<sup>40</sup>

Drawing on archival documents related to a number of foreign-language movies dubbed by Cines-Pittaluga in 1931, this section examines the company’s dubbing procedures in the 1930s. As I will demonstrate, dubbing

<sup>39</sup> Paola Valentini, *Presenze sonore: il passaggio al sonoro in Italia tra cinema e radio* (Florence: Le lettere, 2007), 30.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922–1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 66.

grew into more than just a technical chore in that it tied into sound design, the choice of voices, and the use of music. This state of affairs, in turn, impinges on the relationship between dubbing and censorship.

The idea of manipulation is often associated with censorship, dictatorship, power, or ideology. Within the field of Translation Studies, Jorge Díaz Cintas distinguishes two types of manipulation: technical (“changes and modifications to the original text are incorporated because of technical considerations”) and ideological (“*unfair* changes that unbalance the relationship between source and target products take place on purpose and *unscrupulously*”).<sup>41</sup> Under the Fascist regime, the suppression of a film’s scene, song, or speech prior to it being dubbed—and after its examination by the censors—clearly falls in the second category. However, when considering the final product of dubbing, it is important to ponder the dialectic between these two forms of manipulation. In fact, the lack of a technologically-informed reading of dubbing might at times bolster the common assumption that any deviation from the original resulted from the ideological agenda or political climate of the era. For instance, a pioneer of dubbing studies in Italy, Mario Quargnolo, reported on the dubbed version of a 1930s French film with the following words:

The main attraction of *Feux de joie*, made in 1938 but released in Italy only in 1942, was the popular band *Ray Ventura et ses collégiens*. Well, Ray Ventura’s orchestra was completely dubbed over with an Italian orchestra which remained anonymous. ... Probably they did not want to propagandize French music, which was carefully avoided even on the radio.<sup>42</sup>

Although censoring French music might well have been part of the Fascist regime’s agenda at the time, a deeper understanding of French film sound technology helps us complicate such a reading. Over the first decade of the sound era, the tendency in France was to simultaneously record images and sounds (*son direct*), as opposed to the Hollywood practice of separating sound production from image production.<sup>43</sup> To retain the original music, the Italian version would have had to rerecord the original music, which was otherwise impossible to separate as a distinct track from the imag-

<sup>41</sup> Jorge Díaz Cintas, “Clearing the Smoke to See the Screen: Ideological Manipulation in Audiovisual Translation,” *Meta* 57, no. 2 (2012): 284–285.

<sup>42</sup> Quargnolo, *La censura*, 52, quoted and translated in Sisto, *Film Sound in Italy*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> O’Brien, *Cinema’s Conversion to Sound*, 111.

es and dialogue. Understanding sound technology provides the basis for a more accurate reading of censorship and its manifestations.

The first archival testimony for our survey of Cines-Pittaluga is a file on the dubbing of *Hôtel des étudiants* (*Student's Hotel*, 1932, France). The film, translated into Italian as *Vita goliardica*, was released in a dubbed version in 1933. The document “Notes related to the dubbing of the movie” features a list of instructions on how to dub the film.<sup>44</sup> Some of the guidelines—“dub all the dialogue”—are obvious enough. Instead, other annotations testify to how the technical and the ideological are intertwined.

At this early stage in the history of dubbing, the need to manipulate the original music was purely technical, since it was impossible to split the dialogue track from sound effects and music. Only the physical separation of the different elements of the mix would have allowed producers to mix noises and music with the newly dubbed Italian dialogue track. In its absence, an alternative kind of music had to be mixed with the dubbed dialogue. Sometimes the original music track was sent to the distribution company for use alongside the dubbed track. Occasionally there may have even been the opportunity to record the music again. Yet this was not the most common scenario. In most cases, the Italian dialogue was mixed either with newly recorded music similar to the original, or with a musical track taken from the dubbing company’s library of pre-existing music.<sup>45</sup>

One possible reason for the removal of original songs or music from a film was that song lyrics were in a foreign language, or that the lyrical content had not been considered appropriate by the censors. It was therefore necessary to address these issues in the process of dubbing, as shown by the following excerpts taken from the aforementioned document:

Having suppressed the *canzonetta* sung by Odessa as she cooks eggs, it would be useful to have a musical commentary on all the following scenes up until the end of the reel [...].

Dub the dialogue until the end—when the three teenagers go down the stairs singing, replace the singing with a simple vocal hint of the motif, i.e. a “trallalla, trallallera,” etc. ...

<sup>44</sup> “Note relative al doppiaggio del film *Vita goliardica*,” undated, SASP0093, Fondo Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga, Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin.

<sup>45</sup> For a detailed discussion on the issue of mixing dialogues with music, see Ermanno Comuzio, “Quando le voci non appartengono ai volti,” *Cineforum* 224, no. 5 (1983): 23–32.



In the coffee scene, remove the French students' singing and leave only their vocal "trallalla, trallallera"—or, if possible, use any local goliardic chorus to these scenes and dub Gianni's lines.

When Odetta and Massimo leave, replace the mocking French tune with the well-known goliardic chorus "È morto un bischero," or something of that nature.<sup>46</sup>

In each of the above scenarios, musical editing was a necessary technical expedient to accommodate the modifications requested by the censors, rather than an ideologically driven choice per se. Moreover, many changes in *Vita goliardica* were not due to technical constraints; rather, they reflected specific cultural and aesthetic values:

Underscore with soft musical accompaniment those dialogue scenes that imply and thus call for it.

Underscore dialogues with music, and fill the transitions with the original score, if available, or a new piece.

All scenes after Odetta and Gianni hug until the end of the reel will require a musical comment, to be mixed with the dialogue but without overwhelming the lines spoken by the actors ... and ending on the header "End of Part Two."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> "Essendo stata soppressa la canzonetta che canta Odetta quando si cuoce le uova, converrà commentare musicalmente tutte le scene che seguono da questo punto sino alla fine del rullo [...]"

Doppiare il dialogo sino alla fine – quando i tre giovani scendono le scale cantando, sostituire il cantato con un semplice accento vocale del motivo – cioè un trallalla, trallallara, ecc. ecc.

Nella scena del caffè, abolire il canto francese degli studenti limitandosi a riprodurre il 'trallalla, trallallera' vocale degli stessi – oppure, se è possibile, applicare a queste scene un qualunque coro goliardico nostrano, doppiando le battute di Gianni.

Quando Odetta e Massimo vanno via, al coro canzonatorio francese sostituire il famoso coro 'È morto un bischero' di carattere goliardico o qualche cosa del genere."

"Note relative al doppiaggio del film *Vita goliardica*."

<sup>47</sup> "Sottolineare con accompagnamento musicale in sordina le scene dialogate che lo comportino e lo richiedono.

Sottolineare con musica i dialoghi e commentare quei passaggi di tempo riproducendo la musica originale dove esiste o applicandone della nuova.

Si ritiene che tutte le scene che si svolgono dal momento in cui Odetta e Gianni si abbracciano sino alla fine del rullo comportino un commento musicale, prendendo in mixage le bat-

As these instructions make clear, the changes to the music are dictated by choices that have less to do with technological limitations than a purely aesthetic evaluation.

Another aspect worth exploring is the use of preexisting music. Following Tom Gunning and Martin Miller Marks, Emilio Sala distinguishes a “music of attractions” from a “music of narrative integration” to describe the different uses of music in the context of silent films. Sala cautions against strictly adhering to the assumption that “music of attractions = preexisting music, while music of narrative integration = music composed *ex novo*,” and he opposes considering this dichotomy from a teleological perspective, that is to view the music of narrative integration as a step forward in film music history.<sup>48</sup> Both tendencies have coexisted and interacted with each other throughout the history of cinema. As dubbing instructions illustrate, preexisting music was extensively employed in the early years of dubbing. The sources point to two scenarios. The first, as mentioned earlier, is the use of well-known Italian goliardic songs such as “È morto un bischero,” a method which operates dramaturgically by activating a musical memory and drawing on the collective imagination.<sup>49</sup> The second case is the use of preexisting repertoire drawn from musical libraries, as evidenced by another dubbing instruction:

Replace the tune Massimo plays on the gramophone with an Italian record from the Pittaluga musical library suitable to that scene and to the scenes that will follow, overdubbing the Italian lines.<sup>50</sup>

In this case as well, the indications corroborate an attempt at narrative and aesthetic integration. The preexisting Pittaluga track must match the scene’s mood but must also interact narratively with the scenes that fol-

tute, senza che per altro disturbi le battute... chiudendo sul titolo ‘Fine della Parte Seconda.’”

“Note relative al doppiaggio del film *Vita goliardica*.”

<sup>48</sup> Emilio Sala, “Dalla ‘compilazione d’autore’ al ‘poema lirico-sinfonico,’” *Archivio d’Annunzio* 4, no. 10 (October 2017): 147–148. The reference is to Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3/4 (1986): 63–70, and Martin Miller Marks, *Music and the Silent Film: Contexts and Case Studies, 1895–1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 61.

<sup>49</sup> The song’s melody is the same as “Qual mesto gemito” from the finale of act 1 in Gioachino Rossini’s opera *Semiramide*.

<sup>50</sup> “Sostituire invece con un disco italiano di musica Pittaluga adatto alla scena e alle scene che poi seguiranno il disco che Massimo mette sul grammofofono, eseguendo in mixage le battute italiane.” “Note relative al doppiaggio del film *Vita goliardica*.”

low. In Hollywood, the use of musical libraries and preexisting music at the time was typical of low-budget productions.<sup>51</sup> By contrast, the use of preexisting music in Italian cinema was often the result of an attempt to culturally adjust the original product for the local audience.

One last aspect emerging from the documentation on dubbing concerns the attention paid to sound design (I deliberately use an anachronistic term here to highlight the keen awareness of the filmic soundscape on the part of the practitioners of the time). Instructions such as “reproduce such sound effects as strictly necessary” (*Riproducendo quei rumori che sono strettamente indispensabili*), for instance, raise a series of questions that are difficult to answer without having access to copies of these early dubbed films: Which sound effects were deemed necessary to a film scene, and which were not? Were they necessary for the sake of realism or narrative comprehension?

Dubbing instructions for several other films also showcase a similarly holistic understanding of the sound mix. The following example from the files on *Febbre di vivere* (1932, *A Bill of Divorcement*, US) testifies to the great care put into the construction of the mix:

After the opening titles (with the original music), play an English waltz (on the header: “Christmas night in the old England”) mixed with the buzz of the conversation. Continue with the waltz, in accordance with the appropriate sound perspective of the various settings, up until the moment when it joins the original.<sup>52</sup>

The original music was likely an English waltz that had to be substituted because it could not be blended in. The new musical track had to be adjusted according to space and sonic context, and had to fade back into the original one. These instructions demonstrate an already clear and innovative awareness of the sound’s power to shape cinematic space.

<sup>51</sup> Ronald Rodman, “The Popular Song as Leitmotif in 1990s Film,” in *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film*, ed. Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 121.

<sup>52</sup> “Dopo il titolo di testa (sul quale rimane la musica originale) attaccare (sul titolo ‘Notte di Natale nella vecchia Inghilterra’) un waltzer inglese, mixato col brusio della conversazione. Continuare questo waltzer, nella debita prospettiva sonora a seconda del variare degli ambienti, fino al punto a cui esso giunge nell’originale.” “Dispositivo per la sincronizzazione del film *Febbre di vivere*,” 1934, SASP1363, Fondo Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga, Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin.

From the same file, we can see another example of “substitution of narrative integration” (i.e., a change that takes into account the film narrative):

We cannot use the piano sonata composed by the protagonist included in the original [track].<sup>53</sup> It is therefore necessary to choose a sonata that we own, keeping in mind that:

- 1) This new sonata must have with a closing allegro movement which will start a few moments before Sydney’s final line, when she talks about joyful music.
- 2) The sonata must be in D major because the dialogue explicitly refers to a D major sonata.

For the ending, the theme developed by the piano during the last scene must transition to the full orchestra.<sup>54</sup>

It is unlikely that Italian audiences would have noticed the exact key of the sonata (beyond perhaps recognizing whether it was in major or minor). Nevertheless, such a method testifies to the meticulous, even fastidious care devoted to every aspect of the film during the dubbing process in order to strengthen the realistic quotient of dubbing itself.

In *Notte di fuoco* (1932, *Radio Patrol*, US), the dubbing director was given the freedom to silence the music to highlight a particularly salient moment:

At the discretion of the dubbing director, for a few segments of the action it will be possible to use the original soundtrack, only without music—only noises and sounds. That is because the absence of music seems to enhance the meaning of those sounds intrinsic to the action—for instance, in the scene in which the two police officers chase Kloskey in the slaughterhouse, or when the baby emits his first wails.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> This might suggest either a copyright/licensing issues or technical limitations in the replacement of the original track with dialogue and noises/sounds.

<sup>54</sup> “La sonata per pianoforte composta dal protagonista, non può essere utilizzata dall’originale. Bisognerà quindi prendere un’altra Sonata di nostra proprietà, badando soltanto:

1°) che questa Sonata termini con un movimento allegro che attacchi qualche momento prima dell’ultima battuta di Sydney, la quale parla d’una musica di carattere gaio.

2°) che essa sia nella tonalità di Re maggiore, perché nel corso dei dialoghi si parla esplicitamente di una Sonata in Re maggiore.

Per il finale, lo stesso tema sviluppato dal Pianoforte durante l’ultima scena deve passare in piena orchestra.”

“Dispositivo per la sincronizzazione del film *Febbre di vivere*.”

<sup>55</sup> “Per alcuni brani dell’azione potrà pure, a giudizio del Direttore di sincronizzazione, essere utilizzata la colonna originale composta di suoni e rumori, ma senza musica. E ciò

In this case, as against the original version, the subtraction of the music is a narratively motivated choice that enhances the soundscape while simultaneously drawing attention to a salient moment in the action. Such interventions testify to a keen awareness of the soundtrack's power to enhance a film's narrative as well as the acknowledgment of the audience's potential reception.

The following example, referring to *La pericolosa partita* (1932, *The Most Dangerous Game*, US), further supports this perspective:

It is necessary to reproduce all the noises and voices which bear great importance in this film as they serve to create a particular atmosphere of fear and emotion—i.e., the screams of castaways, calls and screeches of birds, knocks on doors, a cup toppling over, the crashing of a piano, a vase falling, doors closing, dogs barking, water rushing, etc., etc., in accordance with the original.<sup>56</sup>

In conclusion, dubbing in the 1930s was not simply a routine operation, but rather a process involving artistic and culturally sensitive choices. In this connection, it is worth pointing out that between 1930 and 1935, out of 1,700 talkies distributed for release in Italy, only 128 were Italian—a mere 7 percent of the total.<sup>57</sup> The remaining mass of foreign-language films constituted a vast field of experimentation and crystallization as regards dubbing and other post-production techniques. Companies such as Cines-Pittaluga, which produced most of the early Italian-language movies, also acted as one of the major distribution companies. The same technical staff, then, would work on both fronts, allowing for interactions and innovations across the Italian-language / foreign-language divide. One could contend that dubbing in the 1930s represented a laboratory to test film sound techniques—a space

perché l'assenza della musica sembra in tali brani valorizzare maggiormente il significato dei suoni inerenti all'azione. Così, ad esempio, per la scena in cui i due poliziotti inseguono Kloskey nel mattatoio, e per il momento in cui il bimbo emette i primi vagiti." "Dispositivo per la sincronizzazione del film *Notte di fuoco*," 1932–1933, SASP1721, Fondo Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga, Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin.

<sup>56</sup> "È indispensabile riprodurre tutti i rumori e le voci che in questo film hanno una grande importanza in quanto servono a creare una particolare atmosfera di paura e di emozione. E cioè: grida di naufraghi, stridi e starnazzar di uccelli, colpi alle porte, tazza che si rovescia, fracasso del pianoforte, vaso che cade, porte che si chiudono, latrati di cani, fragore di acque, ecc. ecc. attenendosi all'originale." "Note relative al doppiaggio del film *La pericolosa partita*," 1933–1934, SASP1375, Fondo Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga, Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin.

<sup>57</sup> Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema*, 56.

to develop awareness of the role and potential of the soundtrack—which in turn influenced the production of domestic films. The post-production of the cinematic voice began in those very years. At the same time, work on accent, timbre, and interpretation—at first along the same lines as in the theater—was also precipitated by dubbing and its extensive use in the early years of sound cinema. It is certainly true that cinema developed through its constant interaction with radio and other media, too.<sup>58</sup> Yet, dubbing too played a primary role in shaping the cinematic landscape, as corroborated in its use in subsequent eras (e.g., Neorealism). Such an outsized role would be unthinkable had dubbing been limited to domestic productions. As Ricci points out, the mutual relationship between dubbing foreign films and the growth of a national cinema was due primarily to the sharing of the same infrastructure:

To this day, this institutional regulation [i.e., dubbing instead of subtitling] affects the Italian mode of production. It supports a small dubbing industry and encourages film producers to take advantage of its technical infrastructure.<sup>59</sup>

By the same token, I would argue that the dubbing infrastructure enabled the Italian film industry to develop a repertoire of post-production, sound techniques which contributed to the emergence of a national sound-film style.

### *Cines-Pittaluga and the Composer Romano Borsatti*

As shown by the dubbing instructions, music for dubbed films was often a mixture of both preexisting tracks available in musical libraries and original compositions. As dubbing was delegated to dedicated staff, in most cases composers played a rather marginal role. Yet it is still worth asking: what was the role of composers in the dubbing process? And how much new music, if any, was composed specifically for dubbed productions?

In the following pages, I explore the relationship between Cines-Pittaluga and the Italian composer Romano Borsatti. Drawing on letters sent by the company's musical department to the composer, I provide a more detailed picture of the world of dubbing. This includes the way Cines-Pittaluga built its own musical library, and how this happened. Due to a fire at the

<sup>58</sup> See Valentini, *Presenze sonore*.

<sup>59</sup> Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism*, 61.

Cines-Pittaluga headquarters in 1935, which destroyed all their documents, these surviving letters are of great value to understand the development of sound cinema in Italy in the early thirties.

Romano Borsatti (1892–1962), born in Trieste, began to study music at an early age. He studied both violin and piano, as well as counterpoint and composition. He taught violin at the Conservatory of Music in Trieste before deciding to focus exclusively on composition and performance. During the silent cinema era, he also worked as a piano accompanist, providing music for screenings of films. As a violinist, he participated in various opera and symphonic seasons at the Verdi and Rossetti theaters in Trieste. His work as a composer ranged from operas, operettas and several compositions for cinema, up to an array of popular songs interpreted by renowned local artists such as Mario Latilla, Nino Marra, Dina Evarist, and Gabré.<sup>60</sup>

This brief biography foregrounds aspects of Borsatti's career that might have been of interest to a film company like Cines-Pittaluga. First, Borsatti had a solid musical education and a strong background as an established performer, conductor, and composer. Second, Borsatti was a popular composer, and his songs were successful among Italian audiences, indicating his familiarity with the listeners' tastes and expectations. These aspects of Borsatti's career may well account for why Cines-Pittaluga decided to turn to him not only to take care of the music in its dubbed films but also build a musical library for the studio.

I have been able to locate six letters from the company addressed to Borsatti.<sup>61</sup> They were written between May 1932 and May 1933 (the same time frame of the documents presented in the second section of this article). As previously mentioned, film dubbing by Cines-Pittaluga began around the spring of 1932, but it is likely that some practices such as the *sonorizzazioni* continued for a while. In the first letter addressed to Borsatti (May 18, 1932), Cines-Pittaluga shows appreciation for the composer's choice to release his compositions with their own publishing company, in line with the typical synergy between cinema, editors, and record labels of the time.<sup>62</sup> The music featured in popular films was then distributed by Cines-Pittaluga as part of an effective commercial strategy, and had to follow specific requirements:

<sup>60</sup> These biographical notes draw on a brief biography written by Borsatti's daughter and various press articles collected in the personal archive of the film critic Quargnolo (Fasc. 108, Fondo Mario Quargnolo, La Cineteca del Friuli, Gemona).

<sup>61</sup> Fasc. 108, Fondo Mario Quargnolo, La Cineteca del Friuli, Gemona.

<sup>62</sup> See Valentini, *Presenze sonore*, 189.



We inform you that, for our immediate needs, we would like some pieces of joyful character, but not dances. Simple and graceful musical interludes, to be adopted for scenes featuring little movement, such as a living room conversation, an easy stroll, a house gathering, and the like. We would like to point out that these interludes should not be stylized, and they should preferably be in one tempo only.<sup>63</sup>

Recorded and stored in the company's musical libraries, these compositions were likely utilized as backing tracks for producing dubbed dialogues in several films. The company also requested Borsatti to limit himself to their list of instruments when orchestrating his compositions. This was likely due to the orchestral resources available at Cines-Pittaluga.

On September 10, Cines-Pittaluga informed Borsatti that one of his compositions had been used in the film *L'ultima squadriglia* (1932, *The Lost Squadron*, US), and asked the composer to arrange additional descriptive music for love scenes and dramatic scenes. In the letters from October 29 and November 9, respectively, Cines-Pittaluga notified Borsatti that his compositions *Momento erotico* ("Erotic Moment") and *Agitato drammatico* ("Dramatic Agitation") had been accepted. One of the letters included a royalty form to be filled out and signed by the composer. The compositions were thereafter stored by the company and registered at the Italian copyright collecting agency SIAE (Società Italiana degli Autori ed Editori) to allow Borsatti to receive the requisite royalty each time they were featured in dubbed films.

In the last two letters from the collection, Cines-Pittaluga informed the composer about the recording arrangements put in place in various dubbed movies. The first part of the letter (13 May 1933) is particularly relevant for our discussion:

We have been informed by our Maestro Tamanini that you serve as musical conductor of several small orchestras in public venues, and that it would not be difficult for you to include our works for such ensembles in your programs. While we strongly recommend you make use of our repertoire, we kindly ask

<sup>63</sup> "Vi comunichiamo che per il n/ fabbisogno immediato ci sarebbero utili pezzi di genere gaio, ma non ballabili. Intermezzi semplici, graziosi da poter adottare a scene di poco movimento come conversazione da salotto, passeggiatina flemmatica, un ricevimento in casa ecc. Vi facciamo notare che tali intermezzi non debbono essere stilizzati e preferibilmente di tempo unico." Cines-Pittaluga to Romano Borsatti, 18 May 1932, Fasc. 108, Fondo Mario Quargnolo, La Cineteca del Friuli, Gemona.

you inform us if you are in possession of any of our publications, and that you kindly provide us with the names and addresses of those “chef d’orchestre” [conductors] who currently perform with small orchestras in public venues.<sup>64</sup>

Cines-Pittaluga, aware of Borsatti’s activity as a conductor, openly suggested the use of its own musical repertoire published by the Società Anonima Stefano Pittaluga. Furthermore, the composer was asked to provide the names of conductors performing in public venues. The company’s goal was to enlarge its distribution network to music venues, outside the realm of movie theaters, by asking conductors to play Cines-Pittaluga’s repertoire. The company was seemingly attempting to impose the pieces it featured in its dubbed or domestic productions on concerts and musical events all over the country, and to distribute them in its own editions. Emilio Audissino argues that the Fascist attempt to strictly control the sound of Italian cinema through dubbing was not only an effort to ban foreign voices, but also to help establish a homogeneous spoken language, analogous to standardized written Italian, in preference to the predominant regional dialects.<sup>65</sup> This offers tantalizing points of similarity with the way in which Cines-Pittaluga attempted to spread its repertoire onto the concert stage to develop a standard soundscape that would be recognizably Italian. The ramifications of this operation are significant, as the viewers’ musical imagination was thus shaped by the very same body of music produced by Italian composers and which was heard both on the screen and in live concerts in public venues. In this sense, the early 1930s bear a continuity with the silent period, when many compiled scores featured in movie theaters were based on the *orchestrine* repertoire.<sup>66</sup> In the years of sound cinema, however, the *orchestrine* repertoire appears

<sup>64</sup> “Dal ns/maestro Tamanini veniamo informati che Voi dirigete orchestre in pubblici ritrovi e che non vi riesce difficile poter inserire nei programmi di esecuzione la ns/produzione per orchestra.”

Mentre Vi raccomandiamo caldamente tale ns/repertorio, Vi preghiamo di volerci far sapere se siete in possesso delle ns/pubblicazioni e di volerci cortesemente fornire il nome e gli indirizzi di quei ‘chefs d’orchestre’ che attualmente dirigono orchestre in pubblici ritrovi.” Cines-Pittaluga to Romano Borsatti, 13 May 1933, Fasc. 108, Fondo Mario Quargnolo, La Cineteca del Friuli, Gemona.

<sup>65</sup> Emilio Audissino, “Italian ‘Doppiaggio’ Dubbing in Italy: Some Notes and (In)famous Examples,” *Italian Americana* 30, no. 1 (2012): 22–32.

<sup>66</sup> Marco Targa, “Reconstructing the Sound of Italian Silent Cinema: The ‘Musica per Orchestra’ Repertoires,” in *Film Music: Practices, Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives. Studies around Cabiria Research Project*, ed. Annarita Colturato (Turin: Kaplan, 2014), 135–167.

to be shaped by film scores featured in both foreign and domestic films. Furthermore, the similarity of musical themes heard in concerts outside movie theaters raises the question of whether dubbed productions were truly perceived as foreign products, or whether they could have been experienced, to a certain extent, as domestic. The answer is not clear-cut, and additional factors such as the growing network of stars further complicate this perspective. To conclude, I would argue that the Italian practice of compiling scores for films—the main *modus operandi* in the silent period—survived to some extent into the sound era, when sound for dubbed films was produced by compiling pre-existing pieces and the composition of original scores was still limited to a few domestic productions.

### *Conclusion*

Locating and gaining access to the original films is one of the major difficulties in the study of dubbing. In this article, I have attempted to make up for the lack of audiovisual sources by inspecting alternative documents that provide insights into the early practice of dubbing and open new paths of research on the subject, and coupling them with studies on fascism, censorship, and propaganda as well as considerations on technology, film aesthetic, local adaptation, and the domestic production system. Further complications to the study of conversion-era cinema springs from what O'Brien calls a "historiographical prejudice" in film history—a prejudice that privileges the international *film d'auteur* at the expense of other films that while commercially and technically significant were and continue to be viewed as lacking in historical resonance.<sup>67</sup> Because dubbing has traditionally been considered an anti-artistic practice that degrades an original product for the sake of profit, dubbed movies pay an even higher price in the history of cinema. However, as Jean-François Cornu contends, in many countries the practice of dubbing brought talking cinema to every social class, a phenomenon which "can also help us better understand the development and standardization of film-sound processes and practices."<sup>68</sup>

O'Brien points to two additional limitations of film historiography on dubbing. First, the supremacy attributed to the role of the visual over the

<sup>67</sup> O'Brien, *Cinema's Conversion to Sound*, 40.

<sup>68</sup> Jean-François Cornu, "The Significance of Dubbed Versions for Early Sound-film History," in O'Sullivan and Cornu, *The Translation of Films*, 191.

sonic in film studies. While image techniques experienced a standardization by the late 1930s, O'Brien argues that "the sound accompaniment may well vary substantially from one national cinema to the next to thus condition national approaches to *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing."<sup>69</sup> In other words, the uniqueness of a national cinema must be sought in the soundtrack, especially when discussing the first decade of sound cinema, and particularly, I would add, when considering dubbed movies. Second, the tendency of film historiography to associate stylistic changes in films with specific directors or movements does not apply to the conversion era because "when style seemed so obviously a function of technical constraints, explanations in terms of filmmakers' intentions seem applicable to only a small portion of the film industry's output."<sup>70</sup>

Although here I have focused mainly on the practical applications of dubbing, we are still left with a series of key questions concerning the way this technology made sense within the Italian cinematic industry. To grasp the effect of postproduction on film style, one must analyze the Italian national cinema in Higson's terms; that is, considering both filmic production and consumption. Within this larger framework, we can begin to answer questions such as why Italian domestic cinema wound up preferring the use of postproduction sound as opposed to direct-recorded sound. Furthermore, how did the transition from dubbing-as-a-mode-of-audiovisual-translation to dubbing-as-a-mode-of-domestic-production develop? Was it determined by sharing the same infrastructure, or was it driven by an aesthetic and stylistic outlook?

Further research might move along two lines. First, an investigation of the superseding of original music with music arranged by Italian composers for dubbed versions of films would be welcome. Although in many instances the companies drew on their own musical libraries, it was not unusual for new soundtracks to be composed with a specific production in mind.<sup>71</sup> The second research direction should involve an extensive inves-

<sup>69</sup> O'Brien, *Cinema's Conversion to Sound*, 42.

<sup>70</sup> O'Brien, *Cinema's Conversion to Sound*, 102–103.

<sup>71</sup> An interesting case I am currently working on is the Italian edition of Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934, US; it. *Accadde una notte*). While the original American talkie does not present much music aside from the opening and ending titles, the Italian version makes abundant use of a score composed by Amedeo Escobar. Such a clear scoring strategy posits the idea of a direct involvement of the composer in the making of the Italian edition. The result is two completely different movies, and two different ways of consuming films in Italy and America.

tigation into the reception of dubbing. Because the need for manipulation arose from a Fascist decree and left an indelible mark, the point of emphasis should ultimately be the *effect* of such manipulations on audiences, regardless of their producers' motivations. This is not a purely theoretical reservation, as this process had material consequences which become apparent when we recall the writings of Roma and O'Darsa: the increasing perfecting of dubbing techniques, the experimentation with sound design, and the construction of an Italian soundscape might have been necessary for Italian audiences to accept dubbing as such, and hence to an uncritical embrace of such an anesthetizing view of the foreign, which the Fascist government was so keen to promote.

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## Abstract

A few years after the arrival of sound cinema in Italy, the technology of dubbing emerged as an optimal solution to transfer films across national borders. This seemingly simple artifice had enormous cultural and political ramifications transnationally. For example, in the early 1930s, dubbing became the only way to screen foreign films in Italy, and the fascist government transformed the technology into a filter to bolster national identity and limit internal and external “threats” such as local dialects, foreign words, and music. Thus, under Mussolini’s regime, a film’s soundtrack (including music, sounds, and noises) underwent significant manipulation once it crossed the Italian border. This article examines Italian dubbing in the 1930s through the lenses of national cinema and local production. Additionally, it aims to explore early soundtrack manipulations before the establishment of dubbing as a practice, as well as the nationalist roots of dubbing itself. Finally, by analysing archival documents, this study posits that dubbing was not merely a matter of mechanical translation, but also a locus of sound experimentation in a time of stagnation for Italian cinema. Investigating dubbing, a phenomenon so profoundly ingrained in Italian society, opens up new interpretations of Italian culture, political history, and film production from the 1930s throughout the twentieth century.

Keywords: Early Sound Cinema, Dubbing, Italian National cinema, Archival Research, Censorship.

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