

## **Radioscreens. Radio *and* cinema in Italy, radio *on* Italian cinema**

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### **Abstract**

This paper tries to examine the relationship between radio and cinema, both from historic and aesthetic point of view. The aim of its first part is to consider the mutual impact of the two media and of their output on the specific terrain of Italian popular culture and media history. The second part is intended to outline a range of shooting aesthetic choices with regard to the radio medium. In particular, looking at Italian movies from the early stages of sound cinema in Italy to the present-day developments of national film production, the article would like to sketch a framework of possible uses of radio sounds, radio tales, radio programmes and stars within the cinema discourses and narrations.

**Keywords:** radio and cinema; media transition; aesthetics; media fantasy;

### **Premise**

The history of interferences between radio and cinema is deeply rooted in the common ground of the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a time of tight dialectics between audio and video media, searching for completeness of audio-visual expression. As maintained by Minganti (2000: 1483), 'radio broadcasting and cinema are two different forms of popular entertainment, but also two formal and aesthetic systems continuously adjusting to one another'.

Handicap-based definitions of both media have been frequent (from pre-1927 silent cinema, which several languages call 'mute' cinema, to a later definition of radio as television's 'blind sister'), but it is well known that they are powerful and complete languages, both of which have built their special roles in rendering reality: cinema, followed by television, with the power of image, the saturation (*à la* McLuhan) of the sense of sight and the primacy in representing reality, carried on especially by television; radio, with the dissolution of text and content, and their transformation into a flow, constant track of the passing of time, the becoming of memory.

Hence, the aim of this article will be to consider the mutual impact of the two media and of their output on the specific terrain of Italian film culture through different ages, from the beginning of sound cinema in Italy to the present-day developments of national film production. The choice of the Italian context is due to a specific concern for the role of radio sounds in Italian audio-visual history; it is supported by the hypothesis that, in spite of the delay experienced in the advent of sound film in Italy and the relative lack of an explicit connection among cinema and radio as media systems, clues of the cultural and aesthetic osmosis between the two media are dispersed throughout the century and might be used to portray the evolution of the role of radio and of its representation.

As Valentini (2001: 215-235) points out, there might be different ways to include radio in a feature film. First, as a technical source of sound and as a means of expression through the devices of words, noises and music; secondly, as a witness in the portrayal of specific moments in social and cultural history; and thirdly, as a lead character of stories that have the focus on the medium itself. My methodological approach for this article consists of a description of the reciprocal interchanges between radio and cinema, both in the American experience and in the particular case of early Italian media history. Now and then the analysis goes deeper into a sample of films, each one standing for a specific phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and tries to focus on the presence of radio in

the movies selected, according to the categorization suggested by Valentini and further discussed in the conclusions.

### **Radio and cinema. Drawing connections between media systems**

We won't review here the long and complex history of the two oldest mass communication media appeared in history, radio and cinema, as sources of information and entertainment for millions of people. Suffice it to say that their paths, separated from the start, have often times met. Although each medium seemed to have a defined range of characteristics and predetermined missions, they both have been dealing with the ever-shifting line between private and public sphere, between information and entertainment; moreover their models of content commercialization turned them both into major industries, social institutions and modern entertainment practices, as linked to advertising as the music-recording business and vaudeville shows, but with a greater vitality due to the possibility of sharing characters and stories that were easily recognizable, deeply rooted thanks to the power of cinema and accumulated by radio's serial persistence.

We know of the two media's complex relationship in the United States, where

the lowest common denominator of interest has probably been the cross-exploitation of talents: actors could replicate on the radio their most famous characters, serving their testimonial for movies (and possibly soundtracks), while the Studios could invest on radio personalities, trying at the same time to lure them into moving their programs to Hollywood, from historic radio cities such as New York or Chicago. (Minganti 2000: 1484),

With the advent of sound cinema, film production companies such as RKO Radio Pictures<sup>1</sup> and Paramount launched radio shows on the main stations, like the *RKO Hour* on NBC and the *Paramount-Publix Hour* on CBS (both since 1929) or *Hollywood on air* (NBC, 1932), while turning typical radio formats like variety theater into musical films. An example of this is *The Big Broadcast* (1932), a film formula with artists and comedians presenting their numbers, which got repeated in 1936, 1937 and 1938. We should also remind here the weekly show *Lux Radio Theater*,<sup>2</sup> a radio anthology series which adapted films to hour-long live radio-films, hosted by, among others, Cecil B. De Mille and featuring as many big-name stars<sup>3</sup> from the original Hollywood films as possible. This well-established and long-lasting experience may be considered a clear evidence for the linguistic merging<sup>4</sup> of radio and cinema in the USA.

The same cannot be said about Italy, where the Fascist government meddled with the licensee of public radio service (EIAR) and with the production of the main feature films and newsreels. This, as well as the two media's limited expressive development, did not promote any kind of media synergy that was not designed to serve régime propaganda. However, synergy was not forbidden either, at least until the reasons of ideological policy prevailed. For instance, the majority of

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<sup>1</sup> Jewell (1984: 126) underlines that 'RKO, like NBC, was part of the RCA family. RCA president David Sarnoff orchestrated the deal that brought RKO into existence in 1928'; that's why radio has always been pivotal in its film production

<sup>2</sup> It premiered in 1934-1935 on NBC, then was aired by CBS between 1935 and 1954 and than came back to NBC in the 1954-1955 season.

<sup>3</sup> Among them, Lauren Bacall, Ingrid Bergman, Humphrey Bogart, Gary Cooper, Bing Crosby, Ava Gardner, Cary Grant, Bob Hope, Vivien Leigh, Vincent Price, Frank Sinatra, James Stewart, John Wayne, Orson Welles and many others.

<sup>4</sup> It might be interesting to draw the attention to a possible direct-line relationship between the *Lux Radio Theater* and the weekly magazine *Hollywood Party: il cinema alla radio* aired by the Italian public service Rai Radio Tre since 1994, which simply broadcasts the soundtrack of the most successful and best known feature films.

technicians and directors of the rising film industry were in fact chosen from EIAR studios [...], actors and authors often went back and forth between radio and cinema productions [...] but what is more significant is the continuous convergence or, at least evident assonance, between voices and acting styles, noises and sound effects, genres and textual models. (Valentini 2001: 217)

Nevertheless, at the turn of the fourth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian cinema industry was going through times of frailty and organizational inability. No matter how attractive American cinema was to the Italian public, the situation didn't allow for any kind of alliance or integration of the Italian cinema with the world of radio in the same forms experienced in the United States.

One single example of synergy, compared to the several Hollywood titles, can be found in the cinema transposition of the first cult show<sup>5</sup> in the history of Italian radio, that is Nizza and Morbelli's *I Quattro Moschettieri* (*The Four Musketeers*, 1934 and 1936), a pastiche that parodied Dumas's renowned novel. To exploit the huge success of the radio show, in 1936 Carlo Campogalliani directed a film bearing the same title, while in 1937 a second film, Mario Bonnard's *Il Feroce Saladino* (*The Ferocious Saladin*), celebrated the boom of collectible cards linked to the program's sponsors.

Also the Istituto Luce, the State agency that produced documentaries and newsreels, showed an interest in the role of radio in education and entertainment in domestic and rural contexts, and co-produced with EIAR a feature film on a screenplay by Fulvio Palmieri, a famous radio speaker and manager<sup>6</sup>, and Giacomo Gentilomo, the director of the movie. Apparently a promotional film on radio *genres* and programmes, *Ecco la radio!* (*Here's radio!*, 1940) is the visualization of what a daily radio schedule might offer to the listeners, from the gym lessons to the cooking recipe, from the commentary of a football match to the light music concert. This movie is considered by Valentini (2007: 215) the single operation of plain cooperation and economic convergence between radio and cinema in the 1930's, but also a visualization of that specific image of the radio system and stardom supported by the Fascist régime: the authoritarian voice that was able to impose its power on the lives of the listeners.

Nonetheless, the relevance of these examples to our analysis is minimal and it still does not give account of the actual contamination between the two media, into which we are trying to inquire in this paper.

### **Imagery, language, voice and storytelling. The aesthetics of media in transition**

The question that should be asked is how cinema was able to take over, among others, the aesthetics of radio, assimilating it to its own conventions. This issue might be discussed looking further at the relationship of the two media with the *vaudeville*, which definitely has lent both certain formal features such production modes, focusing on single actors and their numbers as primary creative and comic resource. In the United States,

cinema and radio contrasted openly, especially on comedy; for example, radio could easily 'vampirize' Hollywood and overturn its imagery: many dialogs and little narration, quickness and absence of frills allowed for extraordinarily effective, often surreal parodies. [...] On the other hand, the quickness and the slogan-like effectiveness of radio language [...] has found much support in cinema, which was always ready to exploit the audience's familiarity with certain gags and recurring phrases that become part of common language. (Minganti 2000: 1487)

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<sup>5</sup> The radio show is widely analyzed by Fausto Colombo (1998).

<sup>6</sup> Palmieri was a controversial personality, close to Mussolini's family and a loyal backer of the Fascism, up to the last days of the regime; after being temporarily removed, he later occupied again important positions in RAI, both in radio and in television;

Again Minganti (1997: 101) notices that the ‘comedy of language’ in radio is the opposite of the ‘scripted language’ of a film. As Nachman underlines,

radio jokes had to be verbal: the early or lesser shows were heavily dependent on puns, malapropisms, double-talk, mangled syntax, tongue twisters, and spoonerisms; [...] there was an entire school of spoonerists, who would pop into comedy shows and dish out five-minute nonsense monologues comprised of inverted syllables recited at a dizzying speed, a guaranteed laugh-getter. (Nachman 1998: 30)

The use of radio and advertising slogans slipped in the way some extraordinary cartoon-cinema characters express themselves, with memorable results: the radio voice of Mel Blanc, at first second-order comedian in *The Jack Benny Program*, moved to film as the voice of, among others, Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny, Speedy Gonzales, Tweety, but also as the most persistent ‘beep-beep!’ of the history of cinema: the Road Runner.

An Italian example of an actor who has built his popularity on the coupling of the two media with his surprising voice is Alberto Sordi, who also used to dub Oliver Hardy. He premiered in 1947, entertaining ‘Italians on the radio with *I compagnucci della parrocchietta*<sup>7</sup> and *Mario Pio*, while at the same time building his own movie mask’ (Ortoleva *et alii* 2003: 824). Radio was his creative boot camp, where he practiced his acting skills and tried out ‘those many characters that would make up Albertone’s successful repertoire, a gallery that analysed the many vices and the few virtues of the average, conformist, vernacular, working class Italian man’ (Ortoleva *et alii* 2003: 825), the typical radio listener, as well as film viewer.

Again, authors and actors as Cesare Zavattini and Vittorio De Sica have both been working, also in association, in the two media industries between the 1930’s and the 1950’s.<sup>8</sup> An additional example comes from the career of one of the best known Italian film-makers, Federico Fellini, whose radio works and scenes correspond to his debut in the show business. With some renowned radio sketches – *Cico e Pallina* – featuring his future wife Giulietta Masina, Fellini depicted with immense poetry the simple and delicate life of a young married couple and he somehow experimented with the features of radio drama that caustic and bitter-sweet spirit of investigation of human condition that would have made amazing his movie masterpieces.

Furthermore, as far as concerns the aesthetic forms that cinema has inherited from radio, it should not pass unnoticed that one of the main features of the radio medium since the arrival of broadcasting has been the storytelling device, its ability to tell and put on stage little intimate stories, dark and invisible tales to be experienced in domestic settings, relying on the constituent peculiarity of the radio voices and sounds that quoting Minganti (1997: 92) we could call *acousmatic*.<sup>9</sup> Minganti himself highlights how the impact of radio drama and its language’s power to sustain dramatic tensions and orchestrate emotions through sounds on the proliferation of film noir has remained completely unexplored; in particular, he considers the noir’s liaison with ‘radio serials of the 1930s and the 1940s, like *5 Minute Mysteries*, *Innes Sanctum*, *Suspense* [...] and their use of *voice-over* [original emphasis] narrative strategy together with the use of an immediate-engaging first person narration’ (Minganti 1997: 102).

### Postwar mediascapes and the arrival of television

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<sup>7</sup> This is one of his most famous jokes and could approximately be translated as ‘The dear little mates at the little parish’.

<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Zavattini will write the screenplay of *Darò un milione* (*I’ll give a million*, M. Camerini 1934) where De Sica will play the lead role.

<sup>9</sup> Beck (1998) says ‘Acousmatic is a sound heard but without the cause being “seen” by the listener’. Moreover, Young (2006: 49) reminds us that Chion calls *acousmètre* the cinematic voice-over, ‘a sonic ghost that, merely by speaking, performs its absence from the image track’.

Anyway, in many cases, radio and cinema have strengthened or reinforced each other, especially in specific historical moments and times of media change, like during World War II. As Chapman points out, at that time

total war involved a war of words by all available means, including the microphone. While fulfilling a national need, both film and radio increased in importance and scale. Within two years of the outbreak of war, most European broadcasting stations were under Nazi control. However, radio was used for entertainment, information and propaganda by all sides. Equally, as the biggest mass-entertainment medium, feature films appealed to propagandists for their hidden potential, and Hollywood was the master of movies for democratic propaganda. (Chapman 2005: 181)

In her work on radio and imagination, Douglas (1999) affirms that the two media systems have been cooperating, both involved into the daily commentary of the war, being one the live, human and vivid voice of the events and the other the impressive and spectacular newsreel footage, which actually came always afterwards. 'We see World War II through newsreels and think of it as a visual war, when this was, first and foremost, a radio war that millions listened to and imagined' (Douglas 1999: 9-10).

After the years of the war, the relative balance of power between media had changed: radio had become more important than the newspaper industry, while cinema fiction was able to manipulate 'emotions and feelings as part of the war effort' (Chapman 2005: 180). But a focus on competition between media systems might weaken our attempt in recognizing significant aesthetic forms emerging during times of media transition. Actually, it's more noticeable to consider how cinema and radio happened to converge after the historical juncture of World War II and the successful takeover of another mass medium: television.

In fact, it is in the postwar TV series development that the two realms of radio and cinema find the final meeting point and their mutual fertilization. Ortoleva (2003: 172) notices how, in the United States, radio series and soap operas of the 1930's

had been a source of inspiration for the most 'serial' branch of cinema production, the so-called *B movies* [original emphasis] made to be shown jointly with more attractive ones [...]. These low-budget movies [...] didn't focus on stars' notoriety or on special effects, rather on identifiable genres or characters, exactly like such radio series as *The Shadow* or *Buck Rogers*

in a tradition that would have been taken on by the following growth of serial narratives on television. *The Shadow*, for instance, is frequently mentioned as a radio series which has been seminal in the evolution of action-adventure, fantasy and sci-fi TV dramas, 'pivotal in the development of popular narrative [...] and highly influential in producing the success of the most recent hits, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost* included' (Stefanelli 2007: 212).

As far as concerns Italy, radio started losing its power as a mainstream medium during the 1950's, while cinema still preserved its role of a well-established public entertainment experience, deeply-rooted into the fabric of Italian social life. However, the arrival of television (1954) soon created imbalances that slowly but constantly changed the situation: the continuous growth of the number of admission tickets sold came to a standstill in 1955<sup>10</sup> and started its fall, although the relative limited diffusion of TV sets. As Valentini (2002: 96) highlights, the new medium was able to inform and entertain, assembling the social role of radio and the technical combination of sounds and images that cinema had invented: as a result, since 1956 the movie-theatre managers were forced to 'house TV sets in the theatres, in order to assure the viewers that they won't have missed

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<sup>10</sup> Source: Siae (1996) *Lo spettacolo in Italia. Statistiche 1995*. Roma: p. 103.

the weekly appointment with Mike Bongiorno<sup>11</sup> and the TV quiz *Lascia o Raddoppia?*, which was the Italian adaptation of *The 64.000 dollar question*.

While radio was suffering a deep and sudden crisis from the rise of television, which had appropriated its live programmes, its stars, its language and production modes, in Italy the influence of the arrival of the new audio-visual medium on cinema has been less effective and less rapid; what is more, Italian filmmaking culture was in the middle of a very healthy and creative season, innovating itself after Neorealism and under the influence of postwar social developments and economic growth, whose first outcome would have been the 'Italian Comedy Style'. Hence, we might put forward the hypothesis that, starting from the 1950's and with the passing of the years the aesthetic links between radio and cinema seem to be more and more occasional and hindered by television; as a result, the hidden relationship that we have been trying to backtrack in this article turns into a one-way connection, a discourse – sometimes nostalgic – of cinema on radio, its presence, its role in social and cultural revolutions, its audiences.

Audiences are indeed what radio and cinema, and television too, shared right from the start. Different media's audiences, in the end, converged and in many ways coincided:

the 'small-business saleswomen' who, according to a well known essay by Siegfried Kracauer, in the late 1920's were already the core of the cinema audience, were also a crucial segment of mass radio audience, which at the time consisted, also in Germany, of lower-middle-class rather than working-class individuals. (Ortoleva *et alii* 2003: 172)

This sharing itself highlighted, more or less directly, common grounds and opportunities of mutual fertilization, which we tried to examine in the first part of this article.

### **Pictures of radio in Italian cinema**

Investigating the peculiarities of the representation of the radio medium in a sample of Italian movies is the aim of the second part of this work. As I have already described in the premise, there might be various approaches to the use of radio sounds, radio tales, radio programmes and stars within the cinema discourses and narrations: a diegetic use, considering radio a mere narrative subject; an event-like use, where radio supports the dramatic development of a plot based on a true story and on History (with capital H); a sound-oriented use, exploiting the acousmatic property of radio in a dramaturgic sense. In the following pages I'll try to show how these three dimensions may be read, alone or in combination with one another, in a selection of Italian movies.

#### **The media dimension**

Several films have the medium itself as their main character: who describes it depicts at times its power as first mass media;<sup>12</sup> at times its interstitial role in a much more complex media system, dominated by television;<sup>13</sup> at times its antagonizing the dominant powers. Italian Cinema

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<sup>11</sup> Mike Bongiorno is a Italo-American host of Italian radio and television, one of the best known since the early days of television.

<sup>12</sup> In Orson Welles's masterpiece, *Citizen Kane* (1941), radio amplifies the main character's fame, who 'in its glory, held dominion over thirty-seven newspapers, thirteen magazines, a radio network. An empire upon an empire.' Welles, who surely had kind-heartedly taken advantage of the medium in the staging of *The War of the Worlds*, tends to highlight radio's pervasiveness over its potential in informing and entertaining the audience.

<sup>13</sup> The advent of television questions such perspectives on radio, as demonstrated by Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), which moves its critical eye from radio to television. The film strongly criticizes the media system, indirectly comparing the world of radio journalism and opinion-making television barkers, and casting light upon the connections, old and new, between radio and television, in the common feeling of the users, but above all of those who make them.

has closely followed the evolution in the relationship between broadcast media and other mass media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Movies mirror early expansion of radio as a ‘magic box’ (1929-1935), status symbol in bourgeois living room (*Darò un milione*, M. Camerini 1935), but also toy for radio pioneers and hobbyists (*L’uomo che sorride*, M. Mattioli 1936), or novel fireside able to gather the whole family (*La famiglia impossibile*, C.L. Bragaglia 1940) and the new working communities like the office (*Rubacuori*, C. Brignone 1931); cinema doesn’t neglect the following phase of radio as a microphone of the régime (1935-1940), celebrating it (*Il grande appello*, M. Camerini 1935), radically stigmatizing it (*Una giornata particolare*, E. Scola 1977), or forgetting it in order to describe clandestine listening (*Il sole sorge ancora*, A. Vergano 1946); then cinema ratifies the popular acceptance of radio (1941-1954), as a mass communication medium (*Botta e risposta*, M. Soldati 1950) and official source of the news (from *Caccia tragica*, G. De Santis 1946 to *Tutti a casa*, L. Comencini 1960); and finally cinema witnesses the decline of radio against the advent of television (*Mille lire al mese*, M. Neufeld 1939) but also its revival in the new formats of free radios (from *Ecce Bombo*, N. Moretti, 1978, to *Radiofreccia*, L. Ligabue 1998). (Valentini 2001: 216)

Between the ‘70s and ‘80s, radio changes its skin and becomes a personal medium, with strong identity – and community-related functions – a unique case in the media system: since then, cinema has gone back to looking at it with interest, admiration, sometimes with complicity. Italian cinema has plenty of these ‘participating’ views, with various films that recount of the free-radio era and the role these stations played in spreading alternatives to the official voices (public radio and television and the press). One in particular seems interesting, not only because it tells a story that actually happened, but also because it clearly expresses the reach of certain actions through the media.

Marco Tullio Giordana’s *I Cento Passi* (*The Hundred Steps*, 2000) recalls the life and courage of Peppino Impastato, who, on the microphones of Radio Aut in Cinisi (Palermo), reports the speculations of mafia boss Tano Badalamenti – ‘uncle Tano’ – who lives only ‘one hundred steps’ away from his house. Among readings of Pasolini’s works and satirical interpretations of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Impastato’s long live shows are filled with mocking irony: a continuous provocation to the local powers’ corruption and abusiveness, which tries to unmask the culture of silence in which Cosa Nostra proliferates. On May 8, 1978, the same day in which Aldo Moro (leader of the Christian Democratic Party, formerly kidnapped) is found dead in Rome, killed by the Brigade Rosse, Peppino Impastato gets blown up by a charge of TNT tied to his belt. His death goes unnoticed because of Aldo Moro’s death, and is soon cleared as suicide.

Cinema’s tribute to this unusual witness of Sicilian reality, able to speak to specific audiences and exploit at best the physical closeness between radio and its listeners, is evident up to the smallest details of the movie: from the recreation of the radio studio, sacred place where Impastato’s most cutting speeches were brought to life, to the portrait of his audience, to the rock soundtrack, on the same line with the style of free radios and kept up until the end, even in the final scene of Peppino’s funeral, accompanied by Procol Harum’s *A Whiter Shade of Pale*. It seems that cinema is placing in radio its hopes that its productive and stylistic modes be an on-screen representation of the alternative media’s possibility of being a counterculture, spreading in an invisible but diffuse way; being an element of rupture, innovation, subversion of the established order; finally, gathering success among audiences of many kinds.

Finally, several films deal mainly with radio audiences rather than radio itself. They talk about the connective tissue, the identity of some community of listeners and

it’s interesting to consider those films where images are supplied to sound events that would take place no matter what, apart from the images themselves, which is very true

about works that include pop and rock music as the core of radio, [...] real examples of mixtures of film and radio programs. (Minganti 2000: 1490)

Cinema highlights the liaisons between radio personalities and tribes of listeners, both celebrating the charisma of the microphone stars<sup>14</sup> and revealing the backstage of their success, their private lives: the speakers become, for better or for worse, points of reference to the listeners, non mainstream, thus fascinating, lifestyle models.

DJs are modern *bricoleurs* who select their favorite cultural contents and engage them within a personal communication flow so to create new messages and new forms of art and communication. Their freedom of expression, no matter how banal or based on streams of self-consciousness that are almost the opposite of radio communication, it's what some listeners most need to experience a full emotional (and sometimes ideological) sharing with the radio: it's an enticing freedom, that at times accompanies the listeners' dreams of self-realization, at times produces only a caricature of radio, accidental fellow sufferer of anonymous listeners.

Two anonymous listeners' point of view is the basis for a recent Italian film about Radio Alice, the most famous Italian free radio, and station of the student movement: Guido Chiesa's *Lavorare con lentezza* (*Working Slowly*, 2004). Two friends about twenty years old, Sgualo and Pelo, can do no more than dream about escaping from their humdrum daily life. They hang around the neighbourhood cafés and to remedy their chronic lack of money, at times do little 'jobs' for the local mobster who this time proposes they dig an underground tunnel in the city centre. Not entirely convinced, the pair accept the undertaking. Well, sure, work makes you tired. So to liven up the long night hours of work, they take a transistor radio down into the tunnel. Against all logic, they find a station, Radio Alice, which is playing a song called *Working Slowly*.

Pelo and Sgualo start listening to this station, which broadcasts, apart from music, yoga lessons, readings of Majakovskij, descriptions of homosexual intercourses, bedtime stories, and many phone calls from listeners. One night they decide to personally go to the station, where they meet an extremely heterogeneous group of people of about the same age, college students, unemployed, learned, more or less into politics, very different from them but apparently ready to share the experience up until the end: the live broadcast of the police breaking in, a fragment of 'real radio' handed over to the grounds of radio mythology.

While the newspapers headlines, misunderstanding it, read, 'Radio Alice is as obscene as class struggle!' (Collettivo A/traverso 2000: 13), this station, which belongs to no one (no party, no movement), becomes a point of reference to a many-sided audience, made of everyday people, maybe as alienated as the Southern-Italy policeman, who follows orders by listening to the radio and keeping a minute transcript of the most provocative and suspicious details, maybe as desperate as the two main characters whom the radio, somehow, saves from delinquency.

Just as Radio Alice draws on 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-gardes, Dadaism, the Russian revolution, so *Lavorare con Lentezza* is an explicit tribute of today's cinema to silent cinema, to a culture whose expressive fullness and revolutionary reach is celebrated. It's also a light narrative, comics-like, which is able to represent a climate of creative anarchy, culture of simultaneity and political commitment in words that the experience of the radio was capable to spread in Bologna in 1976 and 1977.

### **The history dimension**

Many directors assign radio the task of supporting the narration of events, from the smallest and most insignificant happenings to the most important and affecting ones for the development of a story – a war, an alien invasion, an approaching hurricane. This resource serves two purposes: on the one hand, radio is a common listening experience, present in all home environments throughout the world and in many contemporary mobility contexts; radio lives in all everyday-life scenes that cinema can set up, just like or even more easily than television – since radio doesn't need to be in

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<sup>14</sup> As in Barry Levinson's *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987).



the frame to prove its presence –, so it helps in giving credibility to the story, reporting actual facts that might affect the lives of the characters. On the other hand, it is easy to reproduce a believable radio background, be it just music, that is functional to the film's soundtrack, or as a narrative device, necessary to rebuild and represent a glimpse of the particular time in which the story is set.

In Ettore Scola's *Una Giornata Particolare* (*A Special Day*, 1977), what reconstructs the political climate of a certain historic period (the day of Hitler's visit to Rome on May 6, 1938) is the constant presence of radio sets all over the city, which spread the commentary of the great parade. Radio sets are places also in the working-class apartment building where the two main characters live, and who are not taking part in the celebrations: Antonietta (Sophia Loren), frustrated wife of a fascist fanatic and mother of six, and Gabriele (Marcello Mastroianni), former radio speaker, removed from his post for being homosexual, and destined to confinement. To these two 'victims' of the Fascist régime, the history of Italy remains, at least for one day, boxed inside a radio set. It falls back, becoming a constant background of their intense encounter, but it can still be quite invasive, due to the passionate tones of the announcer who covers the parade.<sup>15</sup>

Another movie by Scola (*Concorrenza Sleale, Unfair Competition*, 2001) is set in the same time and place of *Una Giornata Particolare* (Rome in 1938) but deals with a different story and also a different kind of radio soundscape. The friendship between two families, one of which is Jewish, is affected by the political climate and by the full impact of the racial laws, which among other discriminations dispose the confiscation of radio sets to all Jewish people. The damage is material and symbolic at the same time: radio sets were the time not only a luxury item, but mostly an instrument of entertainment and connection with the rest of the world to be enjoyed in the intimacy of the private sphere. So the confiscation of the radio set to the family of the main character damages all the members and gives rise to various complains: the grandfather goes to the Police to report the abuse; the father is worried about his sons ('what will happen to them without *I Quattro moschettieri?*'), he asks himself) and the mother is sad because she won't listen to the Opera anymore.

*Tutti a casa* (*Everybody go home*, L. Comencini, 1960) tells the story of the chaos that pervaded Italy in the final days of WWII, when the radio officially announced the armistice and the soldiers (among them, Alberto Sordi as second lieutenant) were at first thrilled about the good news, then had to deal with several risks on their way back home. Radio here is used as a means to depict the importance of reliable information during times of conflict. Also *Una vita difficile* (*A Difficult Life*, D. Risi, 1961) is placed in the context of important events of Italian history as reported by the media of the time (right after World War II), that is radio and daily papers. The exact historic placement of events and characters is reaffirmed using newspaper headlines and radio voices as witnesses of high adherence to reality; moreover, radio highlights the most grotesque moments of the story itself, such as when the main character (again Sordi playing a former partisan, now left-wing activist) has dinner with a group of monarchists, when the radio announces the victory of republic over monarchy in the 1946 referendum.

Hence, radio is an interesting dramatic instrument, because 'having a radio set announce a piece of news essential to the plot allows for the natural introduction of the news itself, without the disturbance of a read-out text' (Ortoleva *et alii* 2003: 305). The radio message is the practical device that allows to keep the point of view on those who are listening and on their reactions, following the actual growth of suspense and emotion, and accompanying the grotesque effect of the moment.

### **The sound dimension**

If we actually want to backtrack the liaison between sound and cinema, also drawing from Chion's studies on audio-visuals, to understand how cinema exploits radio's power of suggestion, it

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<sup>15</sup> References to Fascist radio programmes and style are embedded throughout the whole movie, especially when Antonietta asks Gabriele why he's not a radio speaker any more and he answers 'my voice was not as the EIAR as the internal set of rules prescribes: solemn, martial, resonant of Roman pride.'

could be useful to focus on how often the radio-based soundtrack of the movie is committed to representing different dimensions of experience. Radio sounds are those that Chion (2001: 73) calls ‘on-the-air’, because they are at a middle point between on-screen sounds, whose source is visible, and off-screen sounds, whose source is beyond the place and space of the narrative action. Therefore, all the voices and sounds that come from a radio set detach themselves from the situation in which they occur, although being enunciative of some kind of content in a very immediate and effective way.

The familiarity with sound techniques appears to be a constant characteristic of the movies of the 1930’s:

from the talking machines of *La canzone dell’amore*<sup>16</sup> (G. Righelli, 1930) to the television loudspeakers of *Mille lire al mese* (M. Neufeld, 1939), the whole Italian film production of that time, in fact, steadily puts on stage the devices of a modern world, glorified as a huge sound factory. (Valentini 2007: 46)

In *La signora di tutti* (*Everybody’s Woman*, M. Ophüls, 1934), a cold and visionary melodrama about a famous film star and *femme fatale*<sup>17</sup> who commits suicide, the radio set is on and plays music in the very first sequence of the movie. Its high volume is a sort of inciting incident of the story and will drive the lead character to destroy the radio set, while the music of the opera broadcasted will come back to her as a sound hallucination in the darkest moments of her agony.

Likewise, in *Darò un milione* by Camerini (1935), the movie starts with the voice of a radio speaker announcing a gossip news that catches the attention of a group of people gathered around a table playing cards, on board a multi-millionaire’s yacht. Here,

the camera passes with a single movement from a close-up of the radio set to an establishing shot of the guests around the table, completely following the verbal instructions of the announcement. While the close-up of the radio set is necessary to confirm its function as a source of sound [...], when the voice says the word ‘worldly’, the lens moves gradually away from the radio set towards some expensive furnishings, until the wide-angle shot ends focussing on the ‘kind guests’. So Camerini is immediately aware of the *désancrage* of sound: he pastes it to the radio set image but straight after he uses it to make the radio voice a sort of guide of the visual. (Valentini 2007: 211)

Finally, the aforementioned movie *Ecco la radio!* may be considered the symbol of the convergence between media voices and, at the same time, a *summa* of the different auditory experiences that several movies of the 1930’s the 1940’s have put on stage. A voice begins the movie by hailing ‘Dear listeners’ – and not ‘Dear viewers’: it is a narration voice which fades alternately in and out, dressing up as a radio announce or as a more classic voice over, so that ‘the primacy of the visual is thrown into crisis and the vision is dragged into a kind of radio-listening experience’ (Valentini 2007: 221): the deepness and spatiality of sound, then, allow for something that is beyond the mere visual experience.

Moving fifty years forward, we could find out a similar creative use of the radio sound appearing in a small recent movie, *Radiofreccia* (*Radiofreccia*, 1998), directed by the Italian songwriter Luciano Ligabue, which tells the story of free radio stations and early local radio broadcasting in the 1970’s.

*Radiofreccia* is an attempt to review a time of great changes in the social and media systems (the end of public monopoly in radio and TV broadcasting), engaged with the individual transformations of a group of youths in their passage from adolescence to adulthood. The

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<sup>16</sup> *The Love Song* is the title of the first Italian ‘talkie’. As occurred in the US with *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first talking film to appear deals with music and the act of singing.

<sup>17</sup> Played by the ‘Italian Marlene Dietrich’ Isa Miranda.

characters, five promoters of a small radio station bearing quite a bizarre name, Radio Raptus, go through many initiation rites, the remains of which are all musical memories that the director chooses among the songs most played by the free radios of the era: David Bowie's *Rebel Rebel*, Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Sweet Home Alabama*, Lou Reed's *Vicious*, Iggy Pop's *Passenger* – only to cite a few. In a road scene of this movie, the five friends wander around the little town in search for their radio station's signal. The soundscape created by the music broadcast by their station and listened through the car radio has all the characteristics of Chion's music 'on the air', which is alternately offscreen when the sound is clear and well-received and onscreen, when we here interferences and the sound is jammed: here, radio sounds have a deep influence on the perception of space and demonstrate their ability to saturate and short-circuit our sensitivity, adding values to the meaning of the image.

Sometimes radio sounds are used to recreate memories. Several directors<sup>18</sup> have explicitly elaborated in a film their own or someone else's universe of sound memories, populated by radio sounds, and *Radiofreccia* is one of those movies which explore the relationship between visual and sound memories. After all, hearing plays a fundamental role in human relations and the human ear is by definition the organ of communication: its damage potentially damages all categories of knowledge. The spatial immersion in the world is always an acoustic immersion as well, a dipping in a sound flow, measure of an all-round comprehension of the environment. Sounds configures and shapes space and space is such for it's filled and shaped by sound. Radio, according to Scannell,<sup>19</sup> is an instrument that can configure in a strong way the vital world of the listeners. Therefore, what we've heard from the radio, and that cinema picks up, bites onto a warm intimate sphere, where the viewers can rediscover the sound bricks of their own egos: a past made of voices, noises, sounds that would hardly be found inside a drawer, as it happens with photographs.

### Conclusion

Cinema and radio travel on parallel tracks through grounds that are often common. As far as concerns Italy, this article has pointed out that this phenomenon appears more on the continuity of cues and ideas rather than on the language side – although there have been moments of mutual influence, sharing of talents, understanding of each other's peculiar traits, as Chion witnesses by highlighting the sound's potential in the dramatic development of a story.

Besides, the findings of this article demonstrate that it is possible to reflect what Paul Young (2006) calls 'media fantasy films' and to study in particular radio fantasy films, where radio appears as a 'character', playing different roles according to different kinds of narration. In fact, in many cases radio has been considered just as part of the soundtrack; in others, it is a tool of realistic representation of a particular historical period or social background. Sometimes it becomes a means to express the authors' dreams and imagination and is more and more a language to recreate a nostalgic setting and atmosphere. There are also examples in which radio offers the opportunity to reveal lights and shadows of media powers and society at large; furthermore, it happens to recognize the influence of radio on particular lifestyles and subcultures that many movies have often shown.

This paper points toward an overlooked aspect of theoretical approaches to media studies and popular culture in Italy: the reason for this theoretical vacancy is partly due to the difficulties of

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<sup>18</sup> So did Woody Allen in 1987 (*Radio Days*), with his anecdotic, celebrative reconstruction, which focuses more on radio *as remembered* than on real history, but still an important document, true synthesis of national memory of the medium. So did Terence Davies in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), a very suggestive film that brings memories on stage through a complex score made of radio songs, noises and programs, that unwinds over three generations of a Liverpool family, before and after the war. So did Robert Altman in *Thieves Like Us* (1974), where the sound dimension of the Great Depression in rural United States surfaces from radio loudspeakers; of this movie we can recall the well known love scene between the two main characters (played by Shelley Duvall and Keith Carradine), entangled with the love story told by the radio program they are listening to.

<sup>19</sup> As Scannell points out (1996: 161), 'into this monotony comes a good radio set and my little world is transformed. It worlds for me. Radio worlds for this and countless other listeners'.

applying methodologies, values and categories in a cross-media perspective. However, the objects of our research have been classified into a categorization which, although the methodology might be refined in order to discover additional levels of analysis beyond the diegetic, referential and expressive dimensions, appears to be useful to detect the ways into which radio is included in feature films and suggests further applications of the framework to international examples both from Hollywood and from non-mainstream cinema.

For the moment, the particular glance of Italian cinema on radio is a clear marker of cultural and aesthetic osmosis between the two worlds. The importance given by Italian cinema to radio reflects the deep role the medium has played and still plays in the life of the country: cinema and radio keep on flirting with each other, creating a sound and visual imagery that possesses the cinema's expressive strength and radio's capillarity, and produces local, precise answers to such general questions as why make radio, why listen to it, why study it.

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