

Paola Valentini

Transmediality in Italy in the Fascist Era : Soundscape and Transmedia Resonances

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**Trans-
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Italy in the Thirties is the focus of a complex system of media convergences, in which sound plays a leading role. Starting from 1924 (the year of foundation of the system of public radio broadcasting in Italy), and 1930 (when viewers were able to see the first “Talkies”), the Italian media developed an extensive network of technological convergences, economic connections, aesthetic resonances, and, generally speaking, cross-media practices. The flow of content across multiple sound media during the Fascist era creates a fluid distinction between “convergence culture” and “consumer culture” (Freeman, 2014: 3–4). It sheds new light on the transition from an economics of industrial production to an economics of industrialised consumption (Lacey, 2001: 21–22), as well as on the growth of an industrial mass culture. Yet, not only does this consist of textual synergies and business relationships, in part already investigated, but it gives rise also to a specific dimension that, albeit for a limited period of time, also changes the texture of the sound itself (mechanical and recorded as actually perceived at the time), and its relationship with the image and the real world, making it the place of a marked transmediality.

Paola Valentini is Associate Professor at the University of Florence (Italy), where she teaches Film History, TV and Radio History and Theory and analysis of film and TV languages. In 2013 she gained Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale Prima fascia (i.e. she is qualified as full professor). Her researches focus on both television and film history and on the interactions between different media.

A complex system of media convergence

In Italy during the Thirties, the media soundscape had complex economic and financial interactions, technological connections, and textual convergences, already investigated elsewhere (Valentini, 2007: 1–51). However, some examples and documents provide a full picture of the magnitude of these phenomena and their relations – still very much to be examined – and demonstrate that the perspective opened up by transmediality can offer potential answers to unresolved historiographical questions. These especially relate to the technological area that, in Italy, is still too often subject to teleological and causal approaches.

The first point of observation is provided by the clear convergence between industries and their impact on the system of representation that accompanies the very technological conversion to sound. The Italian supremacy of the RCA Photophone system has raised many doubts among historians. The RCA Photophone optical sound “variable-area” system offered obsolete technology, compared to the variable density sound-on-film system by Lee De Forest Phonofilm and Western Electric (which was to show much greater compatibility with the technology of colour, first with Technicolor). Therefore, as is often the case in Italy and in national cinema in general, the simplest answer lies in the country’s backwardness, technology gap, and parsimony in general costs. In actual fact, by broadening the investigation to other media, there is a clear convergence with the radio system in Italy that, from the outset, was connected to the Fascist interest in developing the radio device market. There are many indications of where industrial interests and the cross-media attitude presiding over this economic strategy have been intertwined. One example is the study of the advertisements and their cross-media branding during this era. The full-page advertisement published by RCA in 1930 in *Radiocorriere* (the weekly magazine of EIR, monopoly of Italian radio broadcasts) brings together radio and cinema. It established a clear correlation among the most recent sound movies (where “everyone has admired [...] an unequalled technique”) and the newer devices such as Radio RCA 48 with its “purity”.

Showing a crowded movie theatre (watching on the screen the title of the first Italian talking picture made with an RCA apparatus)¹ next to the promoted radio RCA, the advertisement also reminds us that movie technicians are the ones who have created the major broadcasting stations, such as Rome “the most perfect in Europe” and Milan, which was under construction. Moreover, similar considerations should be made for the resistance in Italy of the old sound-on-disk system, the synchronisation of the film with the disc, which was more linked to cross-media strategies than to technological lags. In April 1931, this technology was no longer patentable, but in 1931 with the premiere of the sonorised international masterpiece *Cabiria*, the system selected by the director Giovanni Pastrone himself was the Bixiophone sound-on-disk system (Valentini, 2006). The technological delay is not a satisfying answer; yet it could be the link to the emerging recording industry in Italy at the time, and the replacement of the previous printed sheet music with records, as shown by Peppino Ortoleva (Ortoleva, 2001: 130–143). The not yet permanent nature of records (due to their very short lifespan), and the trend to anthologise and preserve visual supremacy opposing a continuous story conveyed by sound (the concept of the soundtrack came about only in the 40s), are both factors that can help to better understand the underlying reasons for the survival of this technology.

A world of sound objects

Music anthologisation is the first test of the emerging recording industry. The first Italian records were compilations of arias from operas, significantly different, for example, from the United States where jazz was the first choice for records and for the option to establish music improvisations (Barnett, 2001). Moreover, the success of anthology records led to a second consideration. Separated from its textual unit, sound tends to offer itself as an autonomous standard and, seen in a broader perspective, the period of Italian transition to sound cinema appears to be the eruption of sudden awareness by modern man of his immersion in a powerful soundscape, being bombarded by sound objects.² Furthermore, sound becomes an element that challenges textual coherence and narration; it passes between different platforms creating cultural and narrative links, as well as challenging audience perception with its materiality, power, and subversive autonomy from the storytelling.

1 Moving to sound film, in 1929, Cines – the most important Italian film production company of the time – modernised its three studios in Rome with the RCA sound system and began production of first Italian Talkies in January 1930 with three movies. The sound film debuted in Italy on 8th October 1930 with *La canzone dell'amore* directed by Gennaro Righelli; this is another interesting subject for its cross-media promotion with the music publishing industry owing to the famous song *Solo per te Lucia* (by the well-known composer Cesare Bixio) mentioned in the movie title (see Valentini, 2007: 109–110; 127–130).

2 Of course, I take for granted here the contribution of Film Sound theory since the Eighties: the emancipation from visual restrictions, the lifting of constraints of grammar and aesthetic rules, and the acceptance of its natural heterogeneity against image. The goal is to study early Italian cinema sound, not for the arrival of a new component, but the rise of a new dimension (the idea of acoustics), a dimension that affects the performance, as well as – and especially – the audience (the idea of audiovision and a pervasive soundscape that surrounds the audience). Lastly, this shift in theoretical perspective makes it possible to understand the novelty of reproduced and re-transmitted sound (the idea of sound mediated by the machine and detached from its original source).

Again, cross-media practices in advertising and promotion are enlightening, as several quick examples can demonstrate. In the Italian film promotions of the Thirties, complex cross-media strategies were common, such as in 1933 in the Italian edition of *Queen Cristina* by Rouben Mamoulian – *La regina Cristina* – with Greta Garbo and John Gilbert in one of his last appearances before the harsh criticism of his voice. The Advertising Guide provided by MGM to Italian distributors and exhibitors, shows the use of a variety of platforms and synergies: posters, billboards, and advertisements with a precise display schedule, novels with suggestions for window dressings of bookshops. They appear like blockbuster promotions that reveal a close connection with the world of Italian industry: homonyms rag dolls by Lenci, the special cake by Motta (the famous *panettone* company) and so on. They also focus heavily on the fashion impact, from dresses to hairstyle, or to theatre décor, from the curtains to the theatre wings and scenes to decorate the movie theatre, billboards, etc. Lastly, sound has a leading role, since in this movie, it is common to link the promotion to anthology records of movie songs, due to industrial connections, as in the case of MGM Columbia and His Master's Voice records, or to elaborate specific formulae for radio advertising and promotion. However, in other cases, the impact of sound is even greater. Still in 1933, it was not unusual to have special dance contests and new records, not only for the music market, but also for the promotion in the lobby of the movie theatre or in shop windows, restaurants, hotels, or in dance halls, as in the Italian promotion of MGM *Dancing Lady* – Italian *La danza di Venere* – by Robert Z. Leonard, with Joan Crawford and Clark Gable. The promotion could also include the distribution of music, involving the music publishing industry (for example *Viva Villa*, 1934, which was responsible for the launch and worldwide success of the famous *Cucharacha*). Moreover, specific noise, sound samples, and musical cuts from the movies began to be used in theatres during the intervals of the screening (as requested by the MGM Advertising Guide for *Broadway Melody of 1936* in 1935, in Italy *Follie di Broadway*).³

Sound took on an autonomous dimension, separate from the image and secluded from the visual narration; it became something of a franchise, but also a sound object to be enjoyed independently by the viewer, through which the audience built their sound universe – a soundscape of entertainment and more.

This leads to the second key aspect, which could be named the addition of a soundtrack to the world. Emily Thompson quotes a *New York Times* editorial on 25 July 1930 that draws attention to the fact that Americans are now “sound conscious” in a way that they have never been before. This gives her the opportunity to talk about the emergence of a *modern sound consciousness*, an acceptance and familiarisation with a variety of new sound experiences. Including in film, these experiences affect the perception of sound itself, its consistency (mechanical and recorded, as it was perceived at the time), and change its relationship with the image and with the real world (Thompson, 2002: 246–248). This awareness also determines what Barry Truax called an *acoustic community*⁴: a community which is also referred to by its way

3 MGM Advertising Guide for Italian distributors and exhibitors and other promotional guides and brochures have been consulted at Bologna Cineteca's Graphics Archive (Italy).

4 Briefly, acoustic communication means for Truax that if one wants really to understand how a sound functions one must necessarily consider it in communicational terms and then in its interrelationship with the listener and with the environment. This does not mean to fall into a totally empiric perspective, but to prefigure the chance to speak precisely of a historically and geographically determined acoustic community.

of perceiving the sound, a community that is characterised by these sound objects, shared, experienced, recognised, and appreciated in various media (Truax, 2001: 159). These sound objects create and, in turn, demonstrate – as Bruce Smith would say – a complex process that leads one to legitimately assume a particular system of sound representation of the time, conditioned by the listening mode (by *protocols of listening* as they are called by this scholar, who gives them an explicit political connotation), different from those of today and typical of a period of intense experimentation and media interactions (Smith, 1999: 8).

On the one hand, we must therefore reset the studies on sound cinema by seeing those continual references and contact points that occur between film and other media as something deeper than mere coincidence of dates or protagonists: crossovers affecting institutional history media, but also involving forms of representation and audience perception. On the other, it is permissible to recognise in some way a device at the beginning of this Italian season in which a particular soundtrack was added to the world. At the intersection of media, there is the rise of a *soundscape* – to use the terminology applied to the movie by Rick Altman (Altman, 1992; Schafer, 1977), a sound environment where (Italian) people are immersed and surrounded. At the same time – to use a definition by Michel Chion (Chion, 1999) – there is also a *paysage sonore*, a noise artefact constructed by the media for the modern man.

Italian features: adding a soundtrack to the world

The distinguishing and typically Italian features of this phenomenon (heirs of a particular cultural background, from Futurism through to Fascism) lead us to talk about a sort of “*sonorizzazione del mondo*”, a season where a particular soundtrack is added to the world. This new experience of sound (and through it of the various media), modern in itself, oscillating between soundscape and artefact, has in the cinema one of the key players and one of the places where it is possible to reconstruct these “transmedia resonances”. A crucial aspect for example is, of course, noise, which I have already been able to address in my studies (Valentini, 2007: 83–104). As noted by Jacques Attali, noises are the key to a society and its time (Attali, 1977): they are subject to constant change; they undergo continuous oscillations, reaching the extreme possibility of not being heard at all. Noise is something in relation to which a society takes place and in relation to which the attitudes of listening are subject to change. At the same time, noise shapes our world, as noted by Bruce Smith with his protocols of listening: the church bell or the sound of the factories built the landscape of the twentieth century.

Italian cinema of the time, thanks to the tradition of Futurism, took the form of a very noisy experience, with acoustic scenes from the airport, the zoo, the stock exchange, and crowded restaurants in *O la borsa o la vita* (directed by Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, Cines, 1933), or train compartments in *Treno popolare* (Raffaello Matarazzo, Safir, 1933) accompanied by noisy and disharmonic soundtracks by Nino Rota. Other examples are the chaotic Italian urban landscapes, usually in Milan, depicted by various directors from Alessandro Blasetti to Mario Camerini. According to the radio plays of the period, from drama by Gino Rocca or Alessandro De Stefani to Ettore

Giannini, Italian movies offered a range of acoustic panels which run from one media to the other. They offered a paratactic sequence of tableaux clearly identified and differentiated for their noises (the crowd, the restaurants, the zoo, the department stores, the stock market, and of course, as shown by Futurism, towns, airports, and the sound of war, etc.). These acoustic (radio or filmic) tableaux are a sonic artefact:⁵ the sounds in both film and radio are valuable not for their truth, but for their ability to be recognisable, the noise in particular at the time is the result of a process of creating sound more than of recording it. Moreover, it also creates an acoustic environment that allows modern man to dominate the sounds, but also to be struck by their radical autonomy. Films and radio plays compel the listener to confront the uncertainty and complexity of noise and sound, with its continuous oscillation between meaning and meaninglessness, between a purely sensory experience and significance, between sensation and perception. The radio and movie listener is located in space, he recognises the time and the flux of modernity, but also dips into mere perception, absorbed by a “*spirale di rumori*” (spiral of noises) to use the definition that the futurist Luigi Russolo used for his innovative disharmonic compositions, symphonies of noises created by his *Intonarum* or instrument. As Mikael Dufrenne noted, the modern listener is like a *promeneur* in the landscape, he finds “the innocence of sense” (Dufrenne, 1987); not only does he experience sensorial possibilities – not yet crystallised by the codifications of classic cinema – but also the essence of his very perceptions. Italian movies, like that of Bragaglia, or radio dramas, offer a paradigmatic example: on one hand, the noise marks the transition between different locations, it has a leading role in storytelling and provides the opportunity to manage the succession and simultaneity. At the same time, the viewer touches upon the sensitive, the matter of the sound, he experiences and lives the presence of sound without merely being subject to its representation.

The other important aspect to consider is that of the voice. Its nature as an artefact is clear, yet in a more complex way than a simple voice of authority; it is hypnotic, persuasive, binding, and marked by a strong power – often reinforced by off-screen or voiceover narration – that can have a profound influence over the audience and, in turn, citizens. The Italian situation has its own specificity and was all too quickly compared to that of other totalitarian regimes (Hitler or Stalin) or strong powers (Roosevelt), starting from a long sense of discomfort and resistance that Mussolini showed towards voice and sound comparing visual scenery (Valentini, 2014).

This authoritarian dimension that makes the sound of the world not only the creation of a landscape and environment, but more directly a world in which you have to believe, goes hand in hand with a de-corporealisation of the voice. In Italy in fact, the voice quickly gained a stature that was not only autonomous, but also somewhat *anonymous*. During the early Thirties, voices are presented as highly interchangeable and, once again, as a sound object travelling from one media to another, moving especially between the movie, radio, and record industries. There are many cases already investigated in my studies: starting from the use in Italy of post-synchronisation and dubbing for the very first time, the voice emerged as a sound object autonomous both from the visual (and body) and from narration, establishing strong sonic resonances between media. In *La signora di tutti* by Max Ophuls (Novella

5 We must say that sound technicians in both media often had the same training, like Vittorio Trentino, the most famous Italian Sound Director, who arrived in cinema after several years working at E.I.A.R.

Filmproduction, 1934), the protagonist (Isa Miranda) is just a young girl swallowed up by the mechanisms of the recording industry and film stardom. The film begins with the closeup of a record playing the song of the title that made her famous; the audience is captured by the sad song of an “everybody’s Woman” and by the clear voice singing from a mysterious place. In fact, in addition to the record playing, we instantly know that she had attempted suicide and is now undergoing a desperate and ultimately useless surgical operation. Reconstructing the audience of the time, the viewer is subject to many other additional acoustic provocations; the voice singing from that record framed so closely actually belongs to another body and to another character: that of the singer and supporting actress Nelly Corradi, the young sister of the protagonist destined for a simple yet happy life. This interchangeability of the voices and their transformation into a sound object disconnected from the narrative text and media – offered purely to please the senses – is never hidden. During the preview of the movie in Milan, in December 1934, we know from the newspapers that the screening was preceded by a concert that included, among other things, a singing performance by Nelly Corradi. Her talent and potential, which was quickly put to the test in film opera, is still praised, and so is the promotion of her records on the magazines of the time. The Italian soundscape of the Thirties, therefore, offers a voice which is anonymous, autonomous, separated from its body, and which asks viewers to construct this audiovisual relationship, joining sound and image, and to give it credibility and storytelling. At the same time, sound offers a formula that links various media one to another and offers a purely sensory experience of sonic resonances.

On the other hand, the de-corporealisation of male voices immediately involved the Duce and his relationship with radio broadcasting. If we consider different media, Mussolini’s theatricality appears more clearly, as emphasised from the outset by many historians and scholars (Berghaus, 1996; Milza, 1999). In fact, there is a clear and constant attempt to remove the sound of the dictator’s voice. Consider that the Italian record collection and musical archive, *Discoteca di Stato* – set up in those years by Rodolfo De Angelis based on the model of the museums of the voices of Berlin and Paris – not only failed to obtain institutional legitimacy from the Duce, but in the extensive *Voci dei grandi* collection (Voices of great figures), Mussolini’s voice is not included. In the same way, it can be said that any attempt to use the voice of the Duce within a fictional context was heavily hampered, both in movies and in broadcasts like radio sintesi *In linea* by Renato Castellani, censored in 1935 due to the presence of some words uttered by Mussolini. This attempt to remove the source of the voice was legitimated by radio praxis. The male radio voice was marked by a strong censorship of the visual and of the male body and imposes an anonymous announcer. A symbol of this anonymous voice is Guido Notari, a voice that was imposed in the radio news (*Giornale radio*) in 1930, when fascism decided to replace female voices altogether. Until then, the female radio voice had played a very strong role: it was a female voice that gave the official broadcasts on 6th October 1924, and it was usually a woman reading the most important news (including the stock exchange, weather, etc.) during breaks in concerts and show schedules. The female voice was strongly embodied: one example is the voice of Maria Luisa Boncompagni, a radio announcer par excellence, which could not be separated, even in her simplicity, from the female face that dominates many covers of “Radiorario” magazine. The decision to cut female voices and switch to male news read-

ers⁶ is not only due to man's more authoritative, militaristic voice, but also to a denial of his body and his individuality. This voice is the opposite, for example, of the experience of Roosevelt's broadcasting in the US, where it is the symbol of an unmistakable identity – that of the President – with which the listener has an intimate relationship. The typical male voice of Italian news programmes is of an anonymous newsreader; it does not tie in with any body or coincide at all with the body and person of the Duce. At best, it relates to an anonymous and indistinct alter ego whose substance is made up purely of sound. This voice is very often the same, a sort of franchise from one media to another, well-known and much-loved by audiences, recognisable not for the link to a body, but for its pure sound. Not surprisingly, the voice of Guido Notari is the authoritative voice of the radio news, but it is also the actor in the fiction drama by Mario Bonnard or Ferdinando Maria Poggioli. His is the voice that dominates the newsreels of *LUCE*, as well as the voice of competing information by newsreel *Incom*. It is the voice that tells of the phases of imperialist fascism in documentaries and short films, and the voice that dubbed actor Douglas Fairbanks. It is not the only case,⁷ and the tendency of voices in Italy to become independent from the image and body demonstrates the strength of sound objects, modelled on various platforms, which make up the soundscape of the Thirties. These are sound objects that move between one medium and another, revealing different listening practices, and, by giving sound to the world, show a clear plan to conquer and appropriate the world – that of sound and beyond.

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6 The cancellation of the female voice can be reconstructed only indirectly: in August 1931, two French magazines talk about EIAR's decision to remove female announcers. On Italian magazines, one can see only a sort of *excusatio non petita*, which reveals a great deal: the front page of "Radiocorriere" said that there was no intention of removing women from the microphone, but that the decision to increase the number of male voices is merely due to the need to introduce a variety of tones. Yet it then immediately added that the breaks in transmission will continue to be filled by the "delicate and sounding female voices", legitimating the separation from news programming.

7 However, in the Forties, the voice of actor Giulio Panicali is the symbol of another well-known sound object: he dubbed Rodolfo Valentino for as long as his antagonist Tyrone Power; he is the voice of melodramas and adventure movies and, at the same time, provides the voiceover for many masterpieces of Neorealism, such as *Paisà* by Roberto Rossellini.

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