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# “100% Italian”: The Coming of Hollywood Sound Films in 1930s Italy and State Regulation on Dubbing

Carla Mereu Keating

As scholarly research on Italian cinema has amply documented, during the first decades of the twentieth century, and more specifically between 1905 and the beginning of the Great War, early Italian cinematic productions had gained a reputable position in both the national and international markets.<sup>1</sup> However, after the end of the First World War and during the 1920s, domestic film production was in a critical moment: only a few domestic films were produced successfully and even fewer works were exported abroad.<sup>2</sup> Along with the production crisis, the domestic exhibition sector increasingly relied on the importation of foreign films: American film companies, in particular, had progressively taken a dominant position in Italian film distribution and programming.<sup>3</sup> Although large imports from the United States satisfied the demands of the domestic exhibition sector, this increased foreign presence on national screens was considered by some in the government and by many Italian film producers to be one of the causes of the stalling Italian production.<sup>4</sup>

From the early 1920s onwards, foreign cinema had also been under the more regular scrutiny of fascist film censorship, an office which had been inherited from the previous Liberal administration and developed from existing film regulation.<sup>5</sup> Envisioned initially to prevent “immoralities” on public screens,<sup>6</sup> state film censorship developed during the second and third decades of the twentieth century into a centralized preventive control and a taxation exercised by

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre. Fascismo e politica cinematografica* (Milan: Mursia, 1975), Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema muto italiano. Ambiente, spettacoli e spettatori (1896-1904)* (Rome: Laterza, 1982), and Giorgio Bertellini, ed., *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> As indicated by Mino Argentieri, in 1921 only sixty Italian films were produced, fifty in 1922 and about twenty in the year 1923. Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974), 26.

<sup>3</sup> On the role of Hollywood’s commercial strategies and film advertising in Italy between the 1920s and World War II, see Brunetta, *Il ruggito del leone. Hollywood alla conquista dell’impero dei sogni nell’Italia di Mussolini* (Venice: Marsilio, 2013). For the role of Italian popular magazines and periodicals in broadcasting Hollywood stardom, see also Raffaele De Berti, *Dallo schermo alla carta. Romanzi, fotoromanzi, rotocalchi cinematografici: il film e i suoi paratesti* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> See Lorenzo Quaglietti, *Ecco i nostri. L’invasione del cinema americano in Italia* (Turin: Nuova ERI Edizioni Rai, 1991), 7-35 and 61-78; and the filmography and critical excerpts discussed in Vittorio Martinelli, *L’eterna invasione: il cinema americano degli anni Venti e la critica italiana* (Gemona: la Cineteca del Friuli, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Theatrical screenings of films had been regulated and taxed by the Italian government since law No. 785 of June 25, 1913, entitled “Esercizio della vigilanza sulle produzioni cinematografiche e imposizione di relative tasse,” which authorized the monarch and his government to exercise control on domestic and imported moving pictures and tax ten cents for each meter of film. This regulation was published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale (GU)* on July 14, 1913, No. 163 and implemented with the overt act No. 532, May 31, 1914. This legislation was further elaborated during the late 1910s and early 1920s (e.g., royal decree No. 1953, dated October 9, 1919; royal decree No. 531, dated April 22, 1920).

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the political climate around the establishment of Liberal censorship, see Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano*, 9-22, and Sergio Raffaelli, “Un trentennio di censure linguistiche nel cinema in Italia (1913-1945),” *Comunicazioni sociali* 1, no. 4 (1979): 21-53 and *La lingua filmata. Didascalie e dialoghi nel cinema italiano* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1992), 163-216.

the Ministry of the Interior and forces of public security over domestic and foreign film production and exhibition. Royal decree No. 3287, dated September 24, 1923, was the first law promulgated under the fascist regime to regulate the theatrical screenings of films. It was put into force one year later with the “Regolamento per la vigilanza governativa sulle pellicole cinematografiche” No. 1683, dated September 18, 1924.<sup>7</sup> The fascist regulation confirmed centralized preventive control over the film industry, placing censorship in the hands of politically-aligned commissioners. Exploiting the fact that the film commission had the important role of controlling the content of every film prior to its screening on national cinemas, the examination of films gradually took a more defined political approach and was often deployed to make sure films did not raise questions of morality or undesirable political issues (e.g., offensive representations of Italy and Italians).<sup>8</sup> In the light of the present discussion, one should point out that film censorship regulations passed during the first half of the 1920s still allowed foreign language titles, intertitles and captions to be shown on Italian screens as long as a correct Italian translation was also provided.<sup>9</sup>

As far as the Hollywood film industry was concerned, US film producers were aware of the need to comply with the censorship requirements of the target country where the film was to be exported and often made contact with consular and embassy officials and ambassadors to discuss film representations (I shall come back to this point later on in the discussion). It will suffice here to mention an interesting example of this behaviour, documented by Maltby and Vasey: according to archival findings, by the close of 1929, Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) between the years 1922 and 1945, called upon American producers to give careful attention to “every film which has a foreign background or which in any way affects the nationals of any country in a desire to build up friendship between the nations as well as in the desire to remove any cause for agitation against our films. The foreign problem is chiefly an economic one.”<sup>10</sup> If Hollywood’s concerns were mainly driven by the financial damage resulting from a film’s rejection abroad, the MPPDA was indeed very careful not to displease those film commissions (e.g., in Italy, in the UK, in Germany, in France etc.) whose governments had already passed several contingency laws to protect themselves from Hollywood imperialism.

In fact, in the attempt to reverse the production crisis, from the mid-1920s onwards Mussolini’s government passed various quota laws restricting imports of foreign films; these were

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<sup>7</sup> This regulation was published in the *GU* on November 6, 1924, No. 259. Many reliable secondary sources on film censorship such as Ernesto G. Laura, ed., *La censura cinematografica: idee, esperienze, documenti* (Rome: Edizioni Bianco e Nero, 1961) give the number of 1682; however, the *GU* I have consulted at the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* (ACS) indicates No. 1683.

<sup>8</sup> For detailed information on the evolution of the film regulation system in Italy up to the present day, see in particular *Italia Taglia — La revisione cinematografica in Italia* [http://www.italiataglia.it/la\\_revisione](http://www.italiataglia.it/la_revisione); on censorship in Italian cinema, see the seminal Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano*, and *L’occhio del regime: informazione e propaganda nel cinema del fascismo* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1979). For some examples of political censorship of foreign films through translation see Carla Mereu, “Censorial Interferences in the Dubbing of Foreign Films in Fascist Italy (1927-1943),” *Meta: Translators’ Journal* 57, no. 2 (2012): 294-309, and “Italians in films: Opposing and Negotiating Hetero-constructed Images of Italianness,” in *Interconnecting Translation and Image Studies*, eds. Luc van Doorslaer, Joep Leerssen and Peter Flynn (Amsterdam: Benjamins Translation Library, 2013), in print.

<sup>9</sup> “I titoli, sottotitoli e le scritte, tanto sulla pellicola, quanto sugli esemplari della domanda debbono essere in corretta lingua italiana. Possono tuttavia essere espressi in lingua straniera, purché riprodotti fedelmente e correttamente anche in italiano” (art. 5).

<sup>10</sup> In Hays to W. Parkes Cadman, December 20, 1929, MPPAA. The passage is discussed in Richard Maltby and Ruth Vasey, “The International Language Problem,” in *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony*, eds. David W. Ellwood and Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), 68-93 especially 81, n. 39.

explicitly or implicitly directed to reduce Hollywood's expansion into the Italian market. Notable examples of this intervention are the screen quota laws of 1925, according to which domestic cinema theaters were required to show an all-Italian program every two months, and the screen quota of 1927, which decreed that ten percent of screen time be dedicated to Italian films. Yet these protectionist policies on foreign distribution taken by the fascist administration—and similarly adopted by other Western European governments such as Germany and France—could not be regularly implemented due to lack of a domestic backup of films that could replace the exhibition of American pictures in domestic theaters.<sup>11</sup> In other words, these policies could not be successfully implemented because they lined up against the need to sustain the exhibition chain. The situation of the Italian film industry worsened when, towards the very end of the 1920s, Hollywood rapidly developed sound patents and techniques (and a monopoly on this recording equipment), and started exporting early English-spoken films abroad (the so called “talking films” or “talkies”), thus preventing other European film industries from entering into competition with them right from the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Transition to Sound*

Scholarly research has already documented how the advent of synchronised sound technologies in cinema presented few problems in the US but spurred diverse reactions in Europe and worldwide.<sup>13</sup> In Europe, the largest foreign market for Hollywood's new sound films, it took several years between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s for the technological conversion to be completed: larger theaters in Europe's biggest cities were equipped first with Western Electric and RCA sound equipment (although the wiring was done later than in the US); many small cinemas had to wait until 1935 to be able to show “talking” films. At the beginning of the conversion, Hollywood's trade practices in Europe seemed to be confronted once and for all with the linguistic diversity of its international audience: sound and short dialogues, diegetically synchronised with the moving images, had altered the relation between the film, now perceivably foreign, and its transnational spectatorship. As pointed out by Maltby and Vasey, in comparison with silent films, the question of audible foreign languages in cinemas became a potentially important barrier to the films' international distribution. However, as Gomery has rightly pointed out, “the studios which

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<sup>11</sup> Similar results followed the quota laws of the first half of the 1930s. Compare Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Market, 1907-1934* (London: BFI, 1985), 211 and Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby, eds., “*Film Europe*” and “*Film America*”: *Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920-39* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 1-31 for the protectionist strategies adopted in these same years by the French and German governments to counterbalance Hollywood dominance in their markets.

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive and well-documented discussion of the technological developments, sound patents, cartels and distribution “battles” between US and European film producers during the late 1920s and early 1930s, see especially Douglas Gomery “The Coming of Sound: Technological Change in the American Film Industry,” and “Economic Struggle and Hollywood Imperialism: Europe Converts to Sound,” in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, eds. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 5-24; 25-36. Refer also to the comprehensive *The Coming of Sound: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> For a critical analysis of the historical and industrial development of sound in US motion pictures see Gomery, “The Coming of Sound: Technological Change in the American Film Industry,” 5-24 and *The Coming of Sound*. For the diffusion of Hollywood sound films throughout Europe see the brief discussion in Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 105-114 and Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 418-44.

survived to become producers and distributors of talkies, despite the opening which seemed to come because of language barriers, grew even more powerful as distributors around the world.”<sup>14</sup> In the next few pages, we shall briefly observe how various film translation solutions played an important part in this process of diffusion of Hollywood’s sound films in Europe. After a general overview, we shall then focus on why dubbing was preferred in the Italian case.

### *Multilingual and Dubbing Experiments: Hollywood sound films in Europe*

The diffusion of Hollywood sound films in Europe has already been documented by scholarly research.<sup>15</sup> As these seminal works have revealed, one of Hollywood’s first attempts to export its sound films to Europe was the “versioning” of English-spoken films into multi- (or foreign-) language versions (MLVs or FLVs). These experiments with foreign languages were initially implemented by Paramount in new studios of Joinville, in France, and soon after by Metro Goldwyn Mayer in its studios of Culver City in Los Angeles, both specially built for this purpose.<sup>16</sup> As Ginette Vincendeau has described, the MLVs were versions of the same film shot simultaneously in different languages. When two or three language versions were shot, the same director was maintained; for more language versions, each version might have had a director of the same nationality as that of the new film version. The acting cast could be different according to different language versions, but polyglot actors were also often used to shoot more than one language version. These experiments, however, were soon to fail expectations, both on an economic and an artistic level. As Vincendeau has clearly pointed out, the failure of the MLVs

can be understood if MLVs are seen as symptoms of one of the basic characteristics of the film industry (as of all capitalist industries): the constant tension between the necessity for standardisation to increase profitability on the one hand, and on the other the need for differentiation to ensure the renewal of demand. MLVs were, on the whole, too standardised to satisfy the cultural diversity of their target audience, but too expensively differentiated to be profitable.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the practice of film dubbing actually preceded the multilingual versions. As explained by Stephen Handzo, “*dubbing* in the sense of voice replacement was originally called *vocal doubling*. Just as there were stunt doubles for fight scenes—or body doubles today for nude scenes—voice

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<sup>14</sup> Gomery, *The Coming of Sound*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Gomery, “Economic Struggle and Hollywood Imperialism,” 25-36, and *The Coming of Sound*; Nataša Đurovičová, “Translating America: The Hollywood Multilinguals 1929-1933,” in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Robert Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 253-58; Maltby and Vasey, “The International Language Problem”; Crafton, *The Talkies*; and Ginette Vincendeau, “Hollywood Babel: The Coming of Sound and the Multiple-Language Version,” in Higson and Maltby, eds., 207-224.

<sup>16</sup> The arguments surrounding the different approach of the two major studios are discussed in Vincendeau, “Hollywood Babel,” 212-13. On the subject refer also to Gomery, “Economic Struggle and Hollywood Imperialism,” 27.

<sup>17</sup> Vincendeau, “Hollywood Babel: The Coming of Sound and the Multiple-Language Version,” 210-12.

doubles turned non-singing actors into vocalists by performing just outside of camera range.”<sup>18</sup> Yet despite initial efforts, and despite the fact that the dubbing operation was economically more favourable than the multilinguals, since it minimized language conversion costs by replacing voice actors, rather than on-screen actors, dubbing had not been immediately implemented on a large scale by the Hollywood film companies because of technical deficiencies and the struggle to improve lip-synch credibility.<sup>19</sup> In coincidence with the failure of MLVs and following the invention of the sound Moviola in 1930, which facilitated the synchronisation of sound with picture, US majors soon resorted mainly to dubbing films in various target languages (at the beginning mainly Spanish, German and French) in an attempt not to lose their foreign revenues and to standardise their means of producing films.<sup>20</sup> Paramount and MGM first, gradually followed by the other companies, resorted to dubbing the majority of their films for the European market.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Dichotomy of Dubbing vs. Subtitling*

In coincidence with the failure of the Hollywood and French-based MLVs, many countries, sustained by the US majors for the latter's commercial reasons, seemed to find satisfactory different audiovisual translation modes. As Maltby and Vasey have highlighted, in larger European countries Hollywood had to deal with stronger local competition, and the performance of their subtitled pictures was often unreliable. Outside Europe, subtitled versions were preferred in Spanish-speaking South American countries, where it appears that the public disliked dubbing into Castilian Spanish.<sup>22</sup> Gradually, in the larger markets where subtitled films did not perform well, Hollywood preferred to export dubbed pictures, which were more generally understood by the public and could compete on the same linguistic level against local sound productions. While dubbing soon became the preferred mode in Italy, Spain, France and Germany, subtitling was continued in countries with smaller populations, including Holland, Denmark, Portugal, and Greece; voice-over dubbings were instead employed in Poland and Russia. Indeed, there were (and

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Handzo, “Appendix: A Narrative Glossary of Film Sound Technology,” in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, eds. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 407. On the subject see also Ďurovičová, “Local Ghosts: Dubbing Bodies in Early Sound Cinema,” in *Film and its Multiples*, ed. Anna Antonini (Udine: Forum, 2003), 83-98.

<sup>19</sup> See Vincendeau, “Hollywood Babel: The Coming of Sound and the Multiple-Language Version” and Ďurovičová, “Local Ghosts.” For a technical description of the sound Moviola and sound recording systems in the 1930s, see Barry Salt, “Film Style and Technology in the Thirties: Sound” in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, eds. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 39-43.

<sup>20</sup> Ďurovičová, “Translating America,” 153-58, and Vincendeau, “Hollywood Babel,” *Screen* 29, no. 3 (1988): 24-39, and “Hollywood Babel: The Coming of Sound and the Multiple-Language Version,” 207-24.

<sup>21</sup> See also Gomery, “Economic Struggle and Hollywood Imperialism,” 27-28 and Martine Danan, “Hollywood's Hegemonic Strategies: Overcoming French Nationalism with the Advent of Sound” in Higson and Maltby, eds., 239.

<sup>22</sup> And the situation does not appear to have changed today: only recently (July 2013) the Argentine government, presided over by Cristina Fernandez, has decreed that foreign-language TV series, films and commercials transmitted on broadcast television must be dubbed in the local dialect of Spanish (and not in Mexican Spanish, like the majority of US films distributed in South America). Any TV station or content provider that does not comply with this regulation will be fined and the funds go to subsidize Argentine filmmaking. <<http://www.argentinaindependent.com/currentaffairs/newsfromargentina/argentine-terrestrial-television-to-be-dubbed/>> (accessed September 25, 2013). We shall see this is a situation not unlike the Italian case discussed in this paper.

remain) nations or geographical areas where different techniques were experimented at the same time to target different linguistic or age groups (e.g. Belgium, Finland, the Baltic States, etc.).

Questioning the assumption that economic factors were the essential reasons for the choice between dubbing or subtitling in Europe, in her ground-breaking essay, “Dubbing as an expression of nationalism,”<sup>23</sup> Martine Danan points out:

There appears to be a clear dichotomy in film translation practice between larger and smaller countries. [...] The reason for this dichotomy has often been explained in terms of economic differences: dubbing, a far more expensive and time-consuming practice, is used in larger, wealthier countries that expect high box office receipts. Subtitling, on the other hand, is the economical solution reserved for the restricted markets of smaller countries. [...]

The question remains how a preference for one translation method was established originally. Since dubbing is a more expensive and complex process, one might wonder what justified the additional cost and effort involved. Were some nations less willing than others to accept subtitling? Was there any governmental pressure put on distributors to encourage dubbing in some countries? Were there, beyond profit, some political or nationalistic considerations at stake?<sup>24</sup>

In the following pages I will try to respond to the questions posed by Danan, focusing on the Italian case and exploring why dubbing was originally preferred in Italy and how the fascist government encouraged and later prescribed this version of film translation.

### *Italian Dubbings in the US*

A series of documents kept at the *Ministero degli Affari Esteri* (MAE) in Rome attests that, in 1929, US film companies were not particularly interested in producing in Hollywood sound films spoken in Italian to target the Italian market.<sup>25</sup> This position is clearly documented in a letter dated July 31, 1930, prepared by the vice-consul of Los Angeles, Mellini Ponce de Leon, first sent to Luigi Sillitti, the general consul of the Italian Kingdom in San Francisco, and then forwarded to the offices of MAE in Italy.<sup>26</sup>

In the first part of the letter, the vice-consul describes the situation relating to other European markets and language groups; he then goes on to discuss details more specifically concerned with the Italian case. Allegedly, the major studios did not initially contemplate productions in Italian because they were aware of the fascist government’s intention to concentrate on the domestic market and boost domestic production to the exclusion of foreign films. Americans also considered the Italian market a small one. The consul then underlines the tardy interest and relative disorganisation of Hollywood companies with regard to the production of films spoken in

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<sup>23</sup> Danan, “Dubbing as an Expression of Nationalism,” *Meta: Translators’ Journal* 36, no. 4 (1991): 606-614.

<sup>24</sup> Danan, “Dubbing as an Expression of Nationalism,” 606.

<sup>25</sup> MAE, USA 1931-1945, b. 5, 1931, f. 12, 88/13.

<sup>26</sup> The letter is filed as “Rapporto del Regio Vice Consolato d’Italia in Los Angeles di California No. 1371.”.

Italian; he further complains of the scarce consideration given to Italian editions of sound films and the extremely poor quality of the work of improvised translators (some “not even of Italian nationality”). Then the consul refers to the initiation of Italian dubbings produced for the Italian market in Hollywood at the cusp of the 1930s. The early production mentioned in the letter is a film entitled *Married in Hollywood* and known in Italy as *Maritati a Hollywood*, by David Butler and Marcel Silver, commissioned by Fox Film Co. and translated and adapted by Louis Loeffler, an American film editor and director married to an Italian woman.<sup>27</sup> As the letter confirms, Loeffler also employed Alberto Valentino, brother of the actor Rodolfo (Rudolph), to prepare the Italian translations of Fox films’ dialogues.

MGM began to produce Italian dubbings only in 1931. Originally, Metro employed Carlo Boeuf as dub director, and translators such as Giovanni del Lungo and Maria Carolina Antinori. Soon MGM’s dubbing cast also featured the collaboration of the Italian director Augusto Galli, who had been in the US since 1922. For dubbings into Italian, Italian-American actors, as well as Italian actors who had immigrated to the US, were often employed. The MGM and Fox Italian-American dubbing casts included respectively theater actors such as Rosina Fiorini Galli, Argentina Ferrà, Francesca Bragiotti, Franco Corsaro, Luisa Casellotti, Agostino Borgato, Guido Trento and others.

A curious attestation of this early dubbing practice has also been furnished by Goffredo Alessandrini, Italian screenwriter and film director beginning in the early 1930s, who was called in 1932 to the US by MGM to replace Carlo Boeuf in the direction of some Italian dubbings:

In genere [...] (anche gli attori erano italo americani) ed era un guaio. [...] Gli altri attori erano tutti presi dalla colonia italiana di Los Angeles o fatti venire da New York. C’erano delle compagnie italiane diciamo dialettali, e quindi siciliane o napoletane, e per cui parlare l’italiano, quello vero, era un problema. E quando non bastavano loro si andava giù nella down town di Los Angeles, cioè nella città bassa dove c’erano, oggi sarebbero degli appartenenti a Cosa Nostra, ma allora erano insomma dei buoni gangsters con la fedina non troppo sporca, e si pigliavano per delle parti di generici. Ora, in un film comico [...] andava benissimo, anzi più parlavano male l’italiano più era divertente, ma quando si trattava di fare i film con la Garbo e con John Gilbert, i film sentimentali o drammatici [...] Io continuavo a dire a questi signori che *io lavo* e *I love* non andavano d’accordo, che conveniva loro, perché non era più possibile andare a cercare la gente giù down town, di fare la sincronizzazione in Italia. Il che hanno fatto dopo pochi mesi.<sup>28</sup>

From Mellini and Alessandrini’s accounts, it appears that made-in-US dubbings neglected almost completely the question of the linguistic adequacy of the editions made for the Italian market, as the Italian American actors had problems with “parlare l’italiano, quello vero.” As early

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<sup>27</sup> Compare Mario Quagnolo, *La parola ripudiata: l’incredibile storia dei film stranieri in Italia nei primi anni del sonoro* (Gemona: la Cineteca del Friuli, 1986); and Orio Caldiron and Matilde Hochkofler, “I Signori degli Anelli,” in *Il doppiaggio. Profilo, storia e analisi di un’arte negata*, vol 1., ed. Alberto Castellano (Rome: Aidac, 2000), 82-83.

<sup>28</sup> The whole interview with Alessandrini is reported in Francesco Savio, *Cinecittà anni Trenta: parlano 116 protagonisti del secondo cinema italiano (1930-1943)* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979), 6-56. Alessandrini’s interview was recorded on November 6, 12 and 16, 1973.



experiments of film translation, these dubbings were not standardised and *target-oriented* enough to satisfy the needs of the Italian domestic market and, in particular, the nationalist policies of the government in matters of language usage and of cultural production in general.

Before moving on to discuss the reaction of the Italian government to these American initiatives involving Italians and Italian Americans, I must return to the last part of the letter sent to the foreign office by the San Francisco and Los Angeles consuls. In fact, in the last part of this document, Vice-Consul Mellini requests the advice of the fascist offices on how the Italian consulate should act with regard to two initiatives which were originally launched to guarantee and support the quality and organisation of film productions spoken in Italian but produced in Hollywood (in particular he refers to a cooperation between both the Camera di Commercio Italiana and the newly-born Associazione Italiana del Cinema in LA with the US film majors). His request reads: “Mi è riuscito sinora difficile assumere un chiaro e preciso atteggiamento di fronte a queste due iniziative in quanto non so quali siano le intenzioni della industria cinematografica e del R. Governo in proposito.”<sup>29</sup> The response to this letter, initially sent by the Ministry of Corporations to the MAE on October 20, 1930, attests clearly to the “intenzioni” of the Italian government with regard to the American production of films spoken in Italian. This document was then forwarded to the Italian embassies and offices in the US. A short passage from the letter is quoted below:

Indubbiamente la produzione in America di films sonori in italiano assume particolare importanza tanto dal punto di vista della *concorrenza alla produzione nazionale* che si sta iniziando, con gravi sacrifici, in tal nuovo campo, quanto per ciò che concerne *i notevolissimi riflessi d'ordine morale, culturale artistico, e, soprattutto, linguistico, che la diffusione del film sonoro non può a meno di portare fra le numerose comunità italiane del Nord e del Sud America.*

[...] Pur non disconoscendo che, sotto certi aspetti, l'attuale esigua ed insufficiente produzione italiana di film sonori, potrebbe consigliare, per un certo tempo, di non contrastare le iniziative che taluni gruppi di capitalisti e di attori soprattutto italiano americani, residenti negli Stati Uniti, fossero per prendere in materia, tuttavia, *altre ragioni di maggior peso inducono a non incoraggiare dette iniziative.*<sup>30</sup>

The letter from the Ministry of the Corporations is of pivotal importance for the present discussion because it reveals how the Italian government very carefully positioned itself between the need to “discourage” these Italian American and American productions without explicitly “hindering” them. The document explicates very precisely the economic and political reasons behind the cautious, however substantially negative, attitude of the Italian government towards American-based competitors (never mind whether Americans or Italian-Americans): first of all because of the need to protect the home production from this foreign competition, i.e. a “seria e dannosa concorrenza”; secondly, due to awareness of the remarkable “economic, moral, cultural, artistic and especially linguistic” influence that sound productions could have at home and within Italian communities abroad. Specifically underlined is the “negative” cultural, linguistic and moral

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<sup>29</sup> MAE, USA 1931-1945, b. 5, 1931, f. 12, 88/13.

<sup>30</sup> MAE, USA 1931-1945, b. No.5, 1931, f. 12, 88/13. My italics.

propaganda regarding Italian language and traditions that could arise from these foreign-based productions. Interestingly, the document also reveals that since the early days of Italian sound production in the US (1930) the government had the strong intention to “incitare, per non dire costringere” the Americans to relocate in Italy the production of films spoken in Italian. A specific reference to dubbing or post-synchronisation is not yet made, but the term “edition” was preferred at this stage.

*Towards “100% Italian” Dubbings  
The Silencing of Foreign Language Films*

On October 22, 1930, almost simultaneously with the letter discussed above sent by the offices at MAE, the S.A. *Agenzia Cosmos*<sup>31</sup>—which worked in cooperation with the film censorship office at the Ministry of the Interior—released a circular that banned the screening in Italian cinemas of any films spoken in a language other than Italian. The notice read:

Il Ministero dell’Interno ha disposto che da oggi non venga accordato il nulla osta alla rappresentazione di pellicole cinematografiche che contengano del parlato in lingua straniera sia pure in qualche parte e in misura minima. Di conseguenza tutti indistintamente i films sonori, ad approvazione ottenuta, porteranno sul visto la condizione della soppressione di ogni scena dialogata, o comunque parlata, in lingua straniera.<sup>32</sup>

The instructions provided in the censors’ reports stipulate the removal from the film soundtrack of any dialogue or line spoken in a foreign language (“Togliere ogni scena dialogata o comunque parlata in lingua straniera”). Therefore, foreign films were rendered speechless and subsequently *sonorizzati*, adding music and sound effects. In my research at the Italia Taglia archive of the Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali (MiBAC) in Rome, I have found that between November 1929 and August 1933, 486 foreign sound productions (including short, medium, and feature-length films, newsreels, and commercials)<sup>33</sup> were released in Italian theaters in a silent version by

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<sup>31</sup> This agency was based in via Viminale 58, Rome. According to Luigi Freddi, “Tutte le pratiche per la presentazione delle domande di revisione al Ministero dell’Interno, Ufficio centrale di censura cinematografica, erano svolte dalla Società anonima di rappresentanza per la censura cinematografica e teatrale «Cosmos» di Roma, che risultava di proprietà del gr. Uff. Giulio Cosmelli” *Il Cinema* (Rome: L’Arnia, 1949), 103.

<sup>32</sup> The disposition is documented in the anonymous article “*La Censura cinematografica e il mercato delle pellicole in Italia*” in *Lo Spettacolo Italiano* 1, no. 10 (October 1930): 222-23. The whole text is available in Quargnolo, *La parola ripudiata*, 87-88. For a discussion of the silencing of films in the early 1930s, see Quargnolo, “Pionieri ed esperienze del doppiato italiano,” *Bianco e Nero* 28, no. 5 (1967): 68-69 and *La parola ripudiata*, 20-24, and Raffaelli, *La lingua filmata*, 191. According to Quargnolo, Mussolini’s undersecretary at the Ministry of the Interior Leandro Arpinati could be responsible for directing such a disposition. Personal research at the ACS, MAE and CSC has proven unfruitful in tracing the original documentation.

<sup>33</sup> Quargnolo (*La parola ripudiata*, 21) calculated the silencing of 419 feature-length films between 1929 and 1933. Raffaelli (*La lingua filmata*) gave 480 films, 420 of which were feature-length. For purposes of the present discussion, I have not considered it necessary to distinguish between short and feature-length films.

over-writing the muted dialogues with Italian intertitles.<sup>34</sup> This operation would be initially accepted, as the public was already accustomed to watching silent films; on the other hand it could not last long, given the progressive technological improvements of recorded sound and the increasing complexity of film dialogues.

The silencing had been ostensibly motivated with the justification that foreign dialogues would encourage Italians to learn idioms other than their own. Reasonably, this disposition was also adopted in order to protect the fragile rise of Italian sound productions and so guarantee a controlled national product viewable on domestic screens. This censorial intervention should be considered as a further attempt to limit the foreign presence within the national film market and should be seen in light of contemporary documents produced by various ministerial offices (discussed above), which record the negative stance of the Italian government towards American competition. It also related, as I will discuss below, to the nationalistic language policies of the fascist government.

In fact, on a technical level, the practical reason not openly stated by the Italian government for the silencing of foreign sound films was the fact that many cinemas nationwide had yet to be supplied with the new synchronised sound system technologies. Until the mid-1930s, the only option for many cinemas was still a silenced version with intertitles. The technical equipment was put in place during the first half of the 1930s, while Italian sound films also made their appearances on the national screens.<sup>35</sup> According to Lorenzo Quaglietti, in 1929 no cinema in Italy was wired with the new sound technologies; in 1930 only 4% of cinemas (Stefano Pittaluga's); in 1931, 15%; in 1932, 32%; in 1933, 43%.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, only very gradually was the Italian domestic exhibition sector able to adjust to programming Italian or foreign talkies, with the majority of small theaters throughout the country still showing silent films until the mid-1930s.

Some contemporary examples of the critical transition to sound experienced by the Italian public in the early 1930s have been recorded, for example, by the weekly film magazine *Cinema Illustrazione* (issues from 1930-1931) which provides information about the MLVs produced at Joinville and advertises the first talkies produced in Italy (e.g., the film *La canzone dell'amore* directed by Gennaro Righelli, which received the *nulla osta* by the film censorship office on September 30, 1930 and premiered at the *Supercinema* in Rome on October 7, 1930; and *Resurrectio*, by Alessandro Blasetti, which was completed before *La canzone* but whose premiere was delayed, as confirmed by the film's screening authorization dated May 31, 1931).<sup>37</sup> For example, in an article entitled "L'imminente futuro," published in *Cinema Illustrazione* in October

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<sup>34</sup> The data concerns film censorship of foreign cinematic releases in the national territory. Unfortunately, because part of the censorship files has not been retrieved or has been partly destroyed, these calculations cannot be totally representative of the situation. Five out of seven volumes of files were found at the former fascist Registry Office and may be digitised by *Italia Taglia*. The missing documents pertain to the second volume, January 1915 - September 1915 (files from No. 6750 to No. 10481), and to the sixth volume, June 1927 - January 1936 (files No. 23579 to No. 29128). For more information on the *Italia Taglia* project consult <http://www.italiataglia.it/home>.

<sup>35</sup> For a groundbreaking investigation of the economic and political strategies governing the industrial conversion to sound in Italy and leading to the production of early "*films sonori cantati e parlanti*" see in particular Riccardo Redi, *Ti parlerò... d'amor. Cinema italiano fra muto e sonoro* (Turin: ERI, 1986). Redi also discussed several examples of Italian MLVs and early Italian dubbings based in the US (*Ti parlerò... d'amor*, 94-107), confirming the analysis and data given by Quargnolo in "Pionieri ed esperienze del doppiato italiano," 68-69.

<sup>36</sup> Lorenzo Quaglietti, *Storia economico-politica del cinema italiano 1945-1980* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1980), 25. According to Freddi, in 1934 there were 4,221 cinema theatres in Italy, only 2,724 of which were equipped for sound.

<sup>37</sup> See the documented discussion of Cines/Stefano Pittaluga's early sound productions in Redi, *Ti parlerò... d'amor*, 11-25.

8, 1930, an anonymous author portrays the fragmentary nature of recent domestic experiences and impatiently looks forward to the arrival of new sound films:

La nuova stagione cinematografica che in questi giorni s'inizia con la presentazione di lavori nuovi e l'annuncio dei nuovissimi, resterà, credo, una delle più memorabili e decisive nella storia cinematografica. L'invenzione del film parlato data da circa tre anni, *ma sono mancate, almeno per noi italiani, le prime e importanti esperienze*. Le prove frammentarie alle quali s'è assistito non potevano fornirci apprezzabili elementi per i nostri giudizi; e lo sconvolgimento della tecnica, la revisione di tutti i criteri della critica sono ancora in fieri perché non si debba attendere questa nuova stagione con legittima impazienza.<sup>38</sup>

The first dubbing studio in Italy was opened during the summer of 1932 by the Cines-Pittaluga film studios, which had been recently renovated (the inauguration, presided over by the Minister of the Corporations Giuseppe Bottai, took place on May 23, 1930) and equipped for the production of sound films (with the RCA Photophone sound-on-film system which the proactive Stefano Pittaluga had acquired during his trip to London in October 1929).<sup>39</sup> The dubbing of foreign films at the Cines studios was under the direction of Mario Almirante. Other dubbing studios such as Fotovox, Fono Roma, Itala Acustica and the Italian MGM dubbing studio opened soon after between 1932 and 1934, all based in the capital.<sup>40</sup>

If Italian dubbing studios were not functioning until late 1932, the majority of US talkies produced before that date could only be released in their silenced version—or in a spoken Italian version, prepared abroad—in those few cinemas already wired with the requisite sound equipment. However, as we shall see in the following pages, made-abroad dubbings (in Hollywood and in Joinville) were soon not simply discouraged but prohibited by Mussolini's administration, in the ambivalent attempt to sustain the domestic sound film industry as well as to reinforce the nationalistic, cultural and linguistic propaganda promoted by the regime. In relation to this subject, and before discussing more in detail the state intervention in the development of film dubbing practices, it is important to address the question of language usage in Italy.

### *Standardising Italian in Films*

From the late 1920s on, the use of Italian in translated films became an important component of the public debate about language, literacy and national identity.<sup>41</sup> In her 1986 study of the language policies promoted during Fascism, Gabriella Klein explains clearly how the debate about the unification and standardization of Italian turned on three principal attitudes: the first attitude

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<sup>38</sup> Anon., "L'imminente futuro," *Cinema Illustrazione*, October 8, 1930, 5. My italics.

<sup>39</sup> Redi, *Ti parlerò... d'amor*, 20-23.

<sup>40</sup> See Quagnolo, "Pionieri ed esperienze del doppiato italiano," 72, and Mario Guidorizzi, *Voci d'autore: storia e protagonisti del doppiaggio italiano* (Verona: Cierre, 1999), 17. See also further discussion later in the present analysis.

<sup>41</sup> This debate has been outlined by James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 86.

consisted of the fascist hostility towards the use of dialects and regionalisms in the national language; the second attitude similarly opposed the use of minority languages; the third attitude consisted of a xenophobic reaction against any foreign “intrusion” in the Italian language.<sup>42</sup> Klein also points out that the government’s goal was to exalt the purity and unity of Italian, eliminating any element hindering the spreading of a standard language over the national territory.<sup>43</sup>

The examples offered below could therefore be viewed as elements of the nationalistic climate of the 1930s, which pushed for the use of a standard and grammatically correct Italian in the press, radio and cinema. These examples present a series of corrections requested by the commissioners of the film censorship office in Rome (whose office is still located at the Ministry of the Interior): example 1 confirms the pressure to reject the use of foreign languages (even if in written form) on the screen; examples 2 and 3 reveal the routine request to substitute adapted calques or word loans:

1) *Sogno di Tien-Tchong* (1926)

“Esprimere in lingua italiana tutte le diciture in francese.”<sup>44</sup>

2) *Tigre e l’asino* (1927)

Sostituire la parola “guardia” a quella di “metropolitani.”<sup>45</sup>

3) *Beato fra le donne* (1932)

Cambiare la parola «chauffeur» in quella di «Autista».<sup>46</sup>

Contemporary concerns about the use of a unitary language emanating from the mass media can also be explained by taking into account the high degree of illiteracy in the country. During the regime, dialects and regional varieties of Italian were still the main means of communication among a vast percentage of the population. According to the Italian language scholar Tullio De Mauro, in 1931 Italian illiterates made up less than 50% of the population in Umbria, the Marches, Campania, Apulia, Sardinia, Calabria and Basilicata; less than 25% of the population in Emilia, Tuscany and Latium; and less than 13% only in Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Trentino, Venezia-Giulia and Veneto.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Italian literacy rates did not correspond to rates of Italian language speaking, i.e., to the actual, every-day use of the language, and the majority of the literate population would still resort to the informal spoken use of local dialects or regional varieties of Italian. To clarify the point further, De Mauro also distinguished between the potential use

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<sup>42</sup> Gabriella Klein, *La politica linguistica del fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), 28.

<sup>43</sup> Strongly defensive concerns over the standard use of the national language existed also in France, Spain and Germany, which also resorted to several protectionist interventions in this regard. Unsurprisingly, as in Italy, these western European countries resorted to dubbing foreign films.

<sup>44</sup> French title unknown. This film was an Azur production initially submitted with the Italian title *Sotto l’influenza dell’oppio*, but the title was rejected and changed by the Italian commissioners, who also censored any reference to drug use in the film. The film was submitted for the *nulla osta* on January 13, 1926 [*Italia Taglia*, censorship file No: 22365].

<sup>45</sup> The title of the film does not appear on the censorship application. However, this US production was probably the short silent film entitled *The Tiger and the Donkey*, produced by the Aesop’s Fables Studio and released in the US in 1922. *Tigre e l’asino* was submitted to the Italian censors on January 19, 1927 [*Italia Taglia*, censorship file No: 23246].

<sup>46</sup> France, *La Bande à Bouboule*, 1931. Application date unknown. The film obtained authorization on June 30, 1932 [*Italia Taglia*, censorship file No: 27299].

<sup>47</sup> Tullio De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell’Italia unita* (Bari: Universale Laterza, 1979), 95-98.

(*potenzialità d'uso*) of Italian and its effective, real use (*uso effettivo*) arguing that the more the public was exposed to the “lingua comune,” the more it was put in the position of acquiring an active competency of it.<sup>48</sup>

### *Why Dubbing?*

This discussion of the protectionist environment surrounding the use of standard Italian in 1930s Italy provides a logical interpretation to the points discussed by Danan and cited above. Indeed, I argue that there was in Italy a strong preference on the part of the government for dubbing over subtitling, beyond reasons of financial profit. Arguing that the government’s view of cinema was one that considered it an economically profitable activity, generally intended to entertain the masses but at the same time also capable of exercising political, cultural and linguistic influence over them, I outline below three main reasons, educational, political, and economic, for the Italian government’s preference for dubbing. Let us take each in turn.

#### *Dubbing as a language educational policy*

Dubbing was preferred because of its potential educative function. In other words, the re-voicing of foreign dialogues into standard Italian could be exploited as a tool to educate the public in the standard pronunciation of Italian and extend its potential and effective (or passive and active) use.<sup>49</sup> This reason for dubbing as a means to spread the active and passive command of Italian is supported by the fact that a good percentage of the population was illiterate or semi-illiterate: Because cinema audiences were aggregates of people of every age, class and geographic provenance,<sup>50</sup> they were possibly not competent enough, in terms of either literacy or reading speed, to follow quickly-disappearing subtitles written in Italian, which only partially reproduced the original dialogue. It is probable that audiences were literate enough to have a passive competence in Italian—that is, they could more easily understand and appreciate spoken dialogue, rather than read long intertitles. This latter aspect surely was not underestimated by either foreign or domestic distributors of dubbed movies.

Against the argument that the public was already accustomed to watching silent films and reading their intertitles, it can be claimed that these intertitles were characteristically short, lesser in frequency than sound dialogues, and did not carry information essential to the understanding of

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<sup>48</sup> De Mauro, *Storia linguistica*, 99.

<sup>49</sup> To be more precise, considering that the dubbing studios and their personnel were based in Rome, probably this standard pronunciation was closer to a variety of Italian in between the Roman and Tuscan varieties. On the educational aspect of spoken standard Italian on the radio see Raffaelli, “La pronuncia alla radio nel periodo fascista,” *Quaderni di comunicazione dell’Università di Lecce* 2, no. 2 (2002): 90-99.

<sup>50</sup> This is true even if, during the first half of the 1930s, most of the Italian filmgoers who could watch sound films were urban audiences, who attended film screenings in cinemas of *prima visione*, which were mostly found in largest cities and provincial towns of the North and Center, and which had first been equipped with sound facilities. For cultural consumption and film market in Italy during and after the fascist regime see in particular David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

the story. Indeed, for those who could not read (the elderly, children), the *imbonitore*, a speaker or commentator often positioned behind or next to the movie screen, would fill in the gaps by providing a synopsis of the story and comment on the images accompanied by live music.

Extremely indicative for understanding the practical potential of dubbing on an educational level is an article signed by Massimo Alberini in *Cinema* (December 25, 1940) with the title “Il pubblico si abitua.”<sup>51</sup> Alberini’s account refers to the early experiences of Italians in cinemas as they came to grips with silenced and intertitled sound pictures:

Il grande problema per noi in Italia, era quello di trovare il modo di rendere comprensibile il dialogo dei film stranieri. In principio, si andò avanti con la vecchia ricetta, inserendo le didascalie e lasciando il dialogo originale [...] Siccome le scritte non avevano commento sonoro, *il film procedeva a sbalzi*, fra silenzio e musica. Poi, anche per effetto di un decreto che proibiva le pellicole in lingua straniera, si sopresse il parlato, si ristampò la musica e si misero le didascalie, dando così origine, causa i lunghi dialoghi, a quei film che i giornali umoristici [here referring to the satirical magazine *Marc’Aurelio*] chiamavano “letti al cento per cento.”

Infine, venne il doppiato [...] *il pubblico si adattò a questo nuovo mezzo perché lo trovava più comodo delle didascalie*. Molte figure caratteristiche di spettatori sparivano: il bimbo che si faceva “leggere forte” e chiedeva infiniti e spesso scabrosi perché (“E adesso perché la bacia?”), la persona che non riusciva a vincere il bisogno di compilare ad alta voce, sbagliando gli accenti delle parole “più difficili,” la vecchia signora che, sedutasi accanto a noi, chiedeva “Per favore, io ci vedo poco. Volete leggermi?”<sup>52</sup>

The public’s difficulty in following silenced talkies, and their subsequent “adapting” to watching dubbed films, have to be related also to aesthetic considerations. It is not surprising that silenced sound films, having lost their aural (verbal) component, failed to meet with the Italian public’s expectations: they did so not only because of the large amount of written text, but especially because the silenced film had largely lost its spectacular sensory aura, conveyed in this case by the synchronised use of the human voice. In other words, silenced talkies failed to reveal the synchronicity of the image and sound in speech that was the *raison d’être* of early sound film productions. With dubbing, that sought-after (and much advertised) synchronicity between image and sound was re-instated, and could therefore be appreciated even by the “still inexperienced” Italian filmgoers. At this point, the fact that the voices were added afterwards, or that they came from Italian actors and therefore did not belong to the foreign actors on the screen, might have had little importance. Borrowing Alberini’s expression, it might have been easy for the inexperienced public “to get used to” liking dubbed films, considering that the only other significant alternative was “the 100% read film” or the very few examples of Italian sound productions. Soon after the opening of the first dubbing studios in Rome and the employment of Italian theater and cinema

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<sup>51</sup> Massimo Alberini, “Il pubblico si abitua,” *Cinema*, December 25, 1940, 468-69. The editorial board of *Cinema* assumed a very critical stance against dubbing during the last years of the regime, unleashing a popular debate pro and against dubbing.

<sup>52</sup> Alberini, “Il pubblico si abitua,” 469. My italics.

actors to give their “Italian voice and soul” to the glamorous American film stars,<sup>53</sup> dubbed films made their official way into a larger circuit of domestic cinemas (now increasingly wired for sound). Although the re-voicing operation is not exempt from heavy criticism,<sup>54</sup> we shall see how the large financial and political support of the US film distributors and of the Italian government, combined with powerful strategies of advertising directed now also to popularize the “Italian factor” in the domestic edition of foreign films, ensured the flourishing of the Italian dubbing industry.

### *Dubbing as a political instrument of nationalist cultural propaganda*

The political concerns over language and the image of the nation adopted by the Italian dictatorship at home and abroad represent a focal point for understanding why dubbing, and not subtitling, was preferred by the Italian regime. As mentioned above, the purist attitude toward the Italian language and a sort of xenophobic inclination towards the foreign resulted in the banning by the government of foreign words, regionalisms and dialects (which culminated with the institution of the special commission for the Italian language at the Accademia d’Italia in the early 1940s), and in cinema also with the silencing of foreign talkies in the early 1930s. As discussed above, it was necessary for the government to spread the use of Italian over the national territory in order to communicate successfully with the *new Italians* and enhance mass consensus. With the advent of synchronised sound technology cinema, now developed into a more influential form of audio-and-visual communication, could help (together with radio programming) transmit the regime’s ideals in a powerful way. Mussolini and his collaborators seem to have been well aware of this potential (remember for instance the fascist slogan “La cinematografia è l’arma più forte” at the opening of the Cinecittà studios in 1937).

Although not specifically focusing on the Italian case, Danan arrived at a similar conclusion. Her essay has indeed acknowledged that

Dubbing results from a dominant nationalistic system in which a nationalistic film rhetoric and language policy are promoted equally. Suppressing or accepting the foreign nature of imported films is a key to understanding how a country perceives itself in relation to others, and how it views the importance of its own culture and language.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> I found the original phrase “*voce ed anima italiana*” in the Italian brochure of Columbia Pictures’ sound film *Forbidden* (1932, dir. Frank Capra) starring Barbara Stanwyck, Adolphe Menjou and Ralph Bellamy. This leaflet advertised the Italian edition of the film, which was released in Italy in 1934 with the title *Proibito*. The Italian dubbing or voice actors were Romano Calò, Marcella Rovena, Lina Triccerri and Giovanni Cimara. An illustration of the Italian brochure can be found in Brunetta, *Il ruggito del leone*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> I have discussed the several positions for and against dubbing, published during the 1930s and early 1940s in *Bianco e Nero, Cinema, Cinema Illustrazione, Film and Lo Schermo*, in “The Dub Debate: Film Censorship and State Intervention in the Translation of Foreign Cinema in Italy 1923-1963” (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Danan, “Dubbing as an Expression of Nationalism,” 613. Unfortunately, in this seminal piece, the scholar does not discuss the Italian situation specifically, and, for what concerns the Italian case, she mainly looks at the post-war period. It is my opinion, instead, that in order to understand and analyse the Italians’ preferences for dubbing, it is of fundamental importance to observe attentively the Fascist intervention in the early 1930s.



As scholarly research in film history has revealed, especially during the first half of the 1930s large nations such as Germany, France and Spain tried to fight against what was perceived as an attempt by the American government to strengthen its political and cultural influence through Hollywood films.<sup>56</sup> Although Hollywood's imperialism was also criticized in Italy, its political character and cultural influence were often regarded and treated in ambivalent ways.<sup>57</sup> In 1930s Italy, as explained by Emilio Gentile, the position taken by many fascists in relation to American cultural products was contrasting, neither uniform nor static, and swung between "fanatical revulsion and fascinated attraction."<sup>58</sup> As Gentile has also pointed out

For many fascists [...] American economic and political imperialism was less dangerous than the moral contagion engendered by the fascination which the 'American way of life' exerted on Europe. This was the main target of moralistic anti-Americanism, which was perhaps the most widespread. It denounced the imitation of the American lifestyle or the preference for American products, considering these alarming symptoms of an incipient infection, which corrupted Italian customs and had negative economic consequences.<sup>59</sup>

Taken these reactions to the "morally dangerous" influence exercised by American cultural products, the dubbing of Hollywood films with "Italian voice and soul" might have been perceived by many as a powerful way to contain their cultural influence, because dubbing domesticated the audible American-ness of the films and somehow limited or filtered their cultural "contagion."

On the other side of the coin, one should observe that, even before the Italian film office banned foreign languages on Italian screens in October 1930, it was Hollywood that first introduced dubbed films into the Italian market as an economic strategy to maximize its profits on the Italian peninsula. I have previously discussed how during the phase of transition to sound, and after the failure of the MLVs, both dubbing and subtitling were introduced by the American film companies to target different markets in the attempt not to lose American film's dominant position. Dubbing as a popular mode of film translation was thus sustained in the largest Western European countries by the Hollywood majors, who were aware of the influence that a film's adaptation would have on pleasing the target public who watched a film. More importantly, the US film studios intended to guarantee themselves high revenues from films distributed abroad, which could have been seriously damaged by the intensification in the late 1920s and 1930s of European film censorship regulations and import quotas. American companies soon realized that the Italian

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<sup>56</sup> See Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*; David W. Ellwood and Rob Kroes, eds. *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994); Rob Kroes, Robert W. Rydell and Doeko F. J. Bosscher, eds. *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions. American Mass Culture in Europe* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993).

<sup>57</sup> Of particular interest to the present study is the historical analysis offered by Emilio Gentile, "Impending Modernity: Fascism and the Ambivalent Image of the United States," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 1 (1993): 7-29. For discussions concerning Hollywood imperialism in Italy see at least Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy*; Quaglietti, *Ecco i nostri*; Martinelli, *L'eterna invasione*, and De Berti, *Dallo schermo alla carta*.

<sup>58</sup> Gentile, "Impending Modernity," 25.

<sup>59</sup> Gentile, "Impending Modernity," 10.

government (and the German, French and Spanish as well) would favour the dubbing method because this mode of translation could easily conform to their political and cultural expectations, i.e., a localised, “user-friendly” version which would domesticate Hollywood films according to the public’s needs and taste while also not conflicting with these governments’ protectionist and nationalistic measures (film censorship, quota laws, language policies).<sup>60</sup> At the same time, dubbing would maintain the prestige of Hollywood films, although this operation would “corrupt” their original communicative input. Hence domesticated dubbings assured that US majors kept their dominance in these markets, offering a mainstream product available to all, or, in other words, a very promising alternative to subtitles that guaranteed high revenues. This last point brings us straight to the third reason why the Italian government preferred dubbing.

### *Dubbing as a means to fund the domestic film industry*

I have highlighted above that the dubbing operation was initially advanced by US film companies at the dawn of the talkies to distribute their sound films in non-English-speaking countries. The protectionist laws regarding foreign film importation and translation prescribed by the Italian government confirm the financial exploitation of the dubbing procedure as a way to strengthen the domestic industry via the imposition of dubbing taxes and “vouchers” (the so-called *buoni di doppiaggio*) on film producers and distributors. These same actions also saw the flourishing of the dubbing industry in the national territory. This point deserves to be clarified in the following pages.

### *Made-in-Italy: State Regulation of Dubbing*

I have initially mentioned that to control the entry of foreign films into the country and limit the crisis of the Italian cinema, the fascist administration resorted to a series of commercial agreements on importation during the second part of the 1920s. Another screen quota, law No. 918, was enforced on June 18, 1931 specifying that at least one Italian film had to be shown for every three foreign films imported to the country. The law also prescribed that foreign films could not be screened in their original versions, adding a dubbing tax of 25,000 Italian lire to be paid by foreign distributors for every foreign film dubbed and then programmed in Italy. In his memoirs, published in 1949, Luigi Freddi, one of the most important state figures of the second half of the 1930s as far as cinematic activities were concerned,<sup>61</sup> indicated that the dubbing tax (which had gradually increased during the 1930s from 25,000 lire to 30,000, then from 50,000 to 75,000 lire during the Monopoly years) brought the state high receipts which could be used to finance domestic production: Freddi documented 2,850,000 lire in 1934; 3,690,000 in 1935; 2,700,000 in 1936; 5,480,000 in 1937 and 9,800,000 in 1938.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, while permitting foreign films to be distributed—and thus sustaining the economy of the exhibition sector—the dubbing tax also

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<sup>60</sup> Maltby and Vasey (“The International Language Problem”) provide a very clear analysis of how the US majors “negotiated” their hegemonic position within European markets by “conceding” a domesticated dubbing of their English-language films.

<sup>61</sup> He had been at the direction of the *Direzione Generale per il Cinema* (DGC) between 1934 and 1939.

<sup>62</sup> Freddi, *Il Cinema*, 224.

guaranteed Italian producers access to state funding. Italian producers and distributors did not have to pay the dubbing tax if they produced and programmed an Italian film for every three foreign films they dubbed. The dubbing vouchers thus had the great advantage of funding Italian production. For example, for three films dubbed, 75,000 lire could go to domestic production; for four films dubbed and one produced, the producer/distributor could obtain up to 200,000 lire.

With the royal decree No. 1414, dated October 5, 1933, meaningfully entitled “Provvidenze a favore dell’industria cinematografica nazionale,”<sup>63</sup> Mussolini and his administration dictated Italian-based dubbings as the only permitted mode for screening foreign films in Italian cinemas (see articles 1 and 2 below). We have already seen that Americans had in the meantime been importing into Italy their already-dubbed films, but that the quality of these versions (with their substandard pronunciation and poor translation) did not satisfy the political policies of the government. The law No. 1414 reinforced what had been already prescribed by the 1931 act and the previous screen quotas. Article 5 of the law reads:

A decorrere dalla entrata in vigore del presente decreto, chiunque effettui nel Regno l’adattamento supplementare in lingua italiana di pellicole cinematografiche sonore estere è tenuto al pagamento di una tassa di L. 25.000, per ognuna delle pellicole estere predette, per le quali dal Ministero dell’Interno sia rilasciato il nulla osta. [...] I proventi della tassa suddetta saranno versati in apposito capitolo del bilancio d’entrata.

Clarifying the subject further, Article 6 reads:

I produttori di pellicole nazionali, i quali *eseguano*<sup>64</sup> adattamenti supplementari in lingua italiana di pellicole sonore estere, sono esonerati dalla tassa di cui all’articolo precedente in ragion di tre adattamenti per ogni pellicola nazionale prodotta e proiettata in pubblico dopo la pubblicazione del presente decreto. L’esonero suddetto verrà concesso dietro esibizione di un certificato rilasciato dal Ministero delle Corporazioni, dal quale risulti che la pellicola italiana presentata, per ottenere l’esonero dalla tassa per tre adattamenti supplementari, è stata riconosciuta nazionale.

Ai fini e per gli effetti di cui ai precedenti comma sono considerate nazionali le pellicole che rispondono ai seguenti requisiti:

- a) il soggetto sia di autore italiano o almeno sia stato ridotto o adattato per la riproduzione in Italia da autori italiani;
- b) la maggioranza del personale artistico ed esecutivo sia di nazionalità italiana;
- c) gli interni e gli esterni siano stati girati in Italia.

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<sup>63</sup> Published in *GU* on November 11 1933, No. 261.

<sup>64</sup> The passage is then significantly modified in “eseguano o facciano eseguire in Italia” in law No. 320, February 5, 1934, published in *GU* on March 10, 1934, No. 59.

Per quanto riguarda gli esterni potranno essere ammesse eccezioni per particolari esigenze inerenti al soggetto delle pellicole.<sup>65</sup>

This regulation encouraged the flourishing of the dubbing industry in Italy. From the sparse indications found within foreign film credits reported in film journals and periodicals of the time (such as *Cinema*, *Bianco e Nero*, *Film*, *Cinema Illustrazione*, and *Lo Schermo*), it is possible to establish that by 1936, when the market consisted only of sound pictures, many dubbing studios were fully functioning in Italian territory, mainly based in Rome. As mentioned earlier, these were the Cines-Pittaluga (the first to open in 1932, directed by Mario Almirante); the Fono Roma studios (directed by Ruggero Barni), where Paramount, Warner Brothers, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox films were dubbed; the Itala Acustica (opened in 1933 and directed by Vincenzo Sorelli), where Universal and United Artists dubbed their films; Fotovox (directed by Franco Schirato); the LUCE studios (Enic films); and the MGM studios in Rome (in 1933, directed by Augusto Galli).

Even if the legislation on dubbing was reinforced to economically support the national film industry through the introduction of dubbing fees and vouchers, in actual fact this legislation did not change the critical decline of Italian film production and did not limit, but rather increased, the Italian market's dependence on foreign distribution.<sup>66</sup> In 1934, the proportion of foreign films to Italian films was much higher than that prescribed by law (three-to-one): nine foreign films were imported to the country for every Italian film produced (nine-to-one). As documented by film historian Jean Gili, the Ciano-Hays agreement of the same year still allowed the Hollywood companies to export into the Italian market the considerable quantity of 250 films per year.<sup>67</sup>

The situation of the domestic market and of foreign imports would not change substantially in the following four years: the Italian film industry was not only incapable of competing with other industries on the international market but also struggled to survive at home. The vertically organized structure of the US industry and the benefits provided by their huge home market backed up the American majors in their investing in Europe and made it hard for Italian and other European industries to oppose this hegemony in their own domestic markets. As indicated by Elaine Mancini, between 1930 and 1939, a total of 2,434 foreign films (of which 1,513 were American) were shown in Italian cinemas against the much more modest Italian production for the same period (319 films).<sup>68</sup>

Decree law No. 1414/1933 (later converted into law No. 320/1934) specifically banned non-national feature-length sound films that had been dubbed into Italian abroad. Articles 1 and 2 read:

Art.1—È vietata la proiezione nelle sale del regno delle pellicole cinematografiche sonore non nazionali ad intreccio di metraggio non inferiore a 1000 metri, il cui

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<sup>65</sup> See also the adjustments to this law in the further regulation of the subject, law No. 320/1934, also discussed in Quaglietti, "*Storia economico-politica del cinema italiano 1945-1980*," 18.

<sup>66</sup> The "spirit" and downfalls of the dubbing tax have been underlined by Freddi (*Il Cinema*, 223).

<sup>67</sup> Jean Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia: Repressione e promozione* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1981), 8. See also the personal account of the "Italian trip" given by Will Hays in *The Memoirs of Will H. Hays* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1955), 511-20.

<sup>68</sup> Elaine Mancini, *Struggles of the Italian Film Industry During Fascism, 1930-1935* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981), 66, table 2; the scholar mostly cites Lorenzo Quaglietti, "Il cinema degli anni Trenta in Italia: primi elementi per un'analisi politico-strutturale," *Materiali sul cinema italiano. 1929-1943* (Pesaro: Quaderni informativi della Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema, 1974), 289-331.

adattamento supplementare in lingua italiana—doppiaggio o post-sincronizzazione—sia stato eseguito all'estero.

Art.2—Le pellicole sonore non nazionali potranno essere ammesse alla proiezione nelle sale del Regno, purché il rispettivo adattamento supplementare in lingua italiana—doppiaggio o post-sincronizzazione—sia stato eseguito in Italia con l'osservanza delle seguenti condizioni:

- a) *che l'adattamento supplementare sia stato effettuato in studi o stabilimenti situati nel territorio del Regno;*
- b) *che la totalità del personale artistico ed esecutivo impiegato per realizzare tale adattamento sia di nazionalità italiana.*<sup>69</sup>

The Italian government was not being original in imposing “100% Italian” dubbing on national screens, for other Western European countries such as Germany and France had already regulated and localized dubbing practices with the same aim of counteracting Hollywood's hegemony in their own domestic markets. In fact, the restriction was formalized in Italy more than a year later than in Germany and France: Germany restricted dubbed imports to 50% and prescribed the dubbing of films in German territories from July 1, 1932 onwards; the French government banned dubbed versions made abroad from July 29, 1932 onwards, but it also permitted foreign-language screenings in national cinemas (although restrictions were declared on the number of theaters in which original language versions could be shown).<sup>70</sup> Indeed this was a protectionist strategy, both political and economic, with considerable cultural and semiotic implications. But rather than limiting, it consolidated Hollywood's presence in Western European screens.

As already pointed out by Gili, dubbings made in Italy represented a very good political solution to the problem of controlling film content.<sup>71</sup> In comparison with what was customary in the silent era, it is quite clear that with the advent of sound the modifications specified by the censors became increasingly difficult to perform without compromising the results. The required censorship changes had to be performed on the audio-visual track of films, not anymore on printed intertitles (which could be more easily replaced). To re-edit soundtracks required a complicated and expensive adjustment of visual content and thus this intervention *a posteriori* needed to be limited as much as possible.

In this sense, by prescribing that dubbing had to be performed in the Italian territory by native speakers of Italian, the law ensured not only the standard of the language but also the acceptability of filmic content. Film scripts (written translations) and dubbings of foreign films made in Italy would ease the task of the film censors because, in this way, the film censors could exercise their control on the original foreign film scripts and versions as they arrived in Italy, intervening right at the preliminary level of translation and before the dubbing operation. In addition, this strategy of translating and dubbing in the territory (in Rome, mainly, with the dubbing studios also geographically close to the Ministry) had some economic advantages in itself, preventing the expensive procedure of applying possible cuts and changes—as requested by the censors to obtain their authorisation—to versions which had been dubbed abroad.

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<sup>69</sup> Law No. 1414/1933, my italics.

<sup>70</sup> Compare Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment*, 211-212 and Gomery, “Economic Struggle and Hollywood Imperialism,” 32.

<sup>71</sup> Gili, *Stato fascista e cinematografia*, 36.

## *Concluding Remarks*

This investigation has attempted to document how the fascist administration interfered in the distribution of foreign cinema in the early 1930s by regulating the mode of theatrical reproduction and by centralizing film translation practices. State regulation of the dubbing operation eventually caused the Italian film production and exhibition sector to rely on the financial support guaranteed by taxation on the dubbing of US films.

Apart from economic issues, however, I have argued that dubbing was also embraced by the Italian government (and by most of the general public) because it is a domesticating *mode* of film translation. Dubbing as a mode of film translation privileges the aural/vocal/performative components of a film and guarantees a very accessible audio-translation of a foreign product (which could consequently be consumed by everyone in the audience more easily than subtitles). Subtitles, on the other hand, were rejected by the government because they rendered “foreignness” evident—and, more specifically, because they rendered foreignness *audible*. Early sound films’ subtitles were not liked by the general public because of their reductionist characteristics (i.e., not every dialogue was translated and printed on the screen, and the public was eager to understand every single part of the film) and, because written subtitles demanded greater visual attention and more developed reading competence than diverse Italian audiences possessed. Additionally, even educated mainstream audiences did not necessarily want to pay such “intellectual” attention when going to entertain themselves at the pictures.

Dubbed foreign dialogue went through a profound process of linguistic homogenisation. In fact, not only did the dubbing practice guarantee complete neutralization of linguistic foreignness, it also standardized spoken Italian excluding Italians’ linguistic diversity. Let us not forget that, according to the Liberal acts of 1913/1914 and the fascist regulation of 1923/1924, Italian film translators *had to* translate foreign intertitles, employing a correct and standard language which would not incur film censorship intervention (e.g., Art. 5 of decree No. 3287/1923). Italian dubbing actors, for their part, followed regulated and standardized scripts and employed a conventional, perfectly enunciated Italian when re-voicing foreign actors. Their dubbed Italian represented a variety of Italian that was phonetically and morphologically standard (a medium between the Tuscan and Roman varieties). This recited, homogenized Italian, which has been studied by scholars of the Italian language such as Sergio Raffaelli and Fabio Rossi,<sup>72</sup> however artificial, was, together with that used in radio broadcasts arguably one of the most standard varieties of Italian that many audiences—during the years of the regime and beyond—would hear during their daily lives.

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<sup>72</sup> On this subject refer at least to Raffaelli, *La lingua filmata* and *L’italiano nel cinema muto* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2003), and Fabio Rossi, *Il linguaggio cinematografico* (Rome: Aracne, 2006) and *Lingua italiana e cinema* (Rome: Carocci, 2007).

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