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# Sound in Visconti's *Bellissima*\*

G. Paola Pinna

## Introduction

Film sound is often perceived and discussed in relation to the image and acquires, as a result, a secondary status. Sound is considered to function as an 'aid', a kind of helper, whose function is to give the image authenticity and depth. The functional use of sound as a creator of spatiality and authenticity is emphasized by Bela Balazs in his *Theory of Film*: 'We accept seen space as real only when it contains sounds as well, for they give it the dimension of depth'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Arnheim, referring to early sound films, noted that 'sound arouses an illusion of actual space, while a picture has practically no depth'.<sup>2</sup> For Christian Metz sound is experienced not as an object but as an attribute, a characteristic of it: 'Ideologically, the aural source is an object, the sound itself a "characteristic"'.<sup>3</sup> For Metz the superior place given to the visible above the audible is a feature of our general culture and is not specific to the cinema. However, the new technological advances of the last ten or so years – Dolby digital systems, CD Rom, the Sony system, etc. – have affected sound recording and reproduction in the music and film industries to such an extent that a different general culture is being created, in which the expectations and experience of recorded sound are immensely more vivid and pronounced. Since the time when Metz expressed his view, the balance between the visible and the audible, in the auditorium, has shifted more towards the audible.

The recent advances in technology enhance the experience of the film spectator and widen the possibilities afforded to film directors and sound technicians. They have also made more obvious how important is the place that sound occupies in the composition of a film as a whole. As a result, in the last few years, there has been a willingness on the part of film scholars to single out sound and to study it not only as an extension of the image, but also as an independent element of composition. Amongst these recent studies, Rick Altman's work in particular opens up the field to new lines of

research. He draws attention to the complexity – which he also calls ‘multiplicity’ – of cinema seen as a macro-event, a point of continuing interchange amongst different aspects of our culture, a confluence of a variety of discourses. From this theoretical perspective it becomes easier to liberate sound from the yoke of the image and to stress its ability to construct its own discourses. To put it in Altman’s own words: ‘In a world where sound is commonly taken as an unproblematic extension of the image, within a comfortably unified text, the concept of multi-discursivity is bound to enfranchise sound, concentrating attention on its ability to carry its own independent discourses’.<sup>4</sup>

In this study I intend to examine the different ways in which the Italian director Luchino Visconti used sound in one of his early films, *Bellissima*. In discussing sound I shall consider the elements which comprise the soundtrack, namely, dialogue, voice, music, and sound effects. I shall also adopt the terminology defined by Gérard Genette in the early 1950s and normally used in film theory and criticism. Genette defined *diegesis* as everything that belongs to the narrated story, to the ‘spatio-temporal universe referred to by the primary narration’.<sup>5</sup> A *diegetic sound* is therefore a sound which belongs to and emanates from the narrated story. Conversely, when a sound is outside the world created by the story it is referred to as an *extra-diegetic sound*. What is normally known as ‘background music’ is an example of extra-diegetic sound. A *mimetic sound* is a sound which one would expect to hear because it is ‘attached’ to the image (I see the image of a flying helicopter and I hear the sound of its motor). Sounds are also described as being *on-screen* when the source of the sound is visible, or *off-screen*, when it is not. Finally, a *sound bridge* is a sound which crosses over a cut in the images.

The importance of sound in *Bellissima* was noted by two of the film’s early critics. In his article ‘Valore dell’opera di Visconti’, Giovanni Leto, referring to the film’s soundtrack, spoke in terms of the ‘deafening soundtrack [which] has no reason to be’.<sup>6</sup> The critic’s remark, negative as it may be, emphasizes, on the one hand, the distinct prominence of sound in the film, and, on the other, the fact that such sound is far from pleasing to his ear. As I shall attempt to demonstrate in the course of this article, the creation of an unpleasant soundtrack – and not all sound in the film can be described as unpleasant or ‘deafening’ – is a deliberate operation by which Visconti exposes, at least to some extent, the ‘illusion’ of the cinema. In his turn, another of Visconti’s critics, Pio Baldelli, noticed how the use of musical phrases taken from *L’elisir d’amore* work in contrast – in

contrapoint – to the varied sounds of the characters' voices.<sup>7</sup> Even though both Italian critics devote little attention to the soundtrack, the fact that it should have attracted their attention at all, at a time when very little was being written about film sound, indicates how remarkable is this aspect of Visconti's film.

Although the technology available to Visconti was, by our standards, rather primitive, sound has a place of primary importance in the construction of the film world of *Bellissima* and often functions as an independent element of composition. It co-operates with the image in developing the film's themes and in constructing a strong sense of formal and thematic cohesiveness. Furthermore it endows the film with its characteristic formal structure, what I would term 'cinematic *melodramma*' – and I deliberately use the Italian word to refer to the realm of the operatic, rather than to the genre of narrative that in English is called 'melodrama'.

*Bellissima* appeared on Italian screens in 1951, three years after *La terra trema*. It is Visconti's third film. The film is based on an initial idea written by Cesare Zavattini, which underwent considerable transformation as more details were added.<sup>8</sup> The final screenplay, the result of a composite effort by Zavattini, Visconti, Suso Cecchi-D'Amico, and Francesco Rosi, retained the theme of the original story: the great influence of the world of the cinema on the lives of many Italians, which in the early 1950s was becoming a dominant feature of Italian life.

In Visconti's words

[*Bellissima* è] la storia di una donna, o meglio di una crisi: una madre, che ha dovuto rinunciare a certe aspirazioni piccolo-borghesi, tenta di realizzarle attraverso la figlia. Poi si convince che, se un miglioramento si può raggiungere è in tutt'altra direzione. E alla fine del film ritorna a casa pulita come è partita. Con la consapevolezza di aver amato male la sua bambina e con in più l'amarezza per certe pratiche attraverso le quali è stata costretta a passare per arrivare a un mondo che credeva meraviglioso, e che in sostanza non era che deplorabile.<sup>9</sup>

The film's narrative is tightly woven around the figure of Maddalena Cecconi, a lower-middle-class woman who lives with her husband Spartaco and daughter Maria in a basement flat in a Rome suburb. When she hears on the radio that at the Cinecittà studios they are looking for 'la bambina più bella di Roma' to star in a new film, Maddalena, together with hundreds of other mothers and some fathers, rushes to the studios, with her

six-year-old Maria. Maddalena is depicted as a woman who uses all her energy, wit, physical and emotional resources to achieve the greatest dream of her life. Her quest ends when she finally realizes how cruel, shallow, and inhuman is the world of the cinema. When her daughter Maria is eventually chosen for the part, Maddalena refuses to sign the contract.

*Bellissima* is a film about the cinema, a critique of the cinema and its corruptive influence on the lives of ordinary people. It is addressed, as I shall demonstrate in the course of my analysis, to a female audience – in fact it could be seen as an appeal to a vulnerable sector of society to protect itself from the negative power of the film industry.

## Dialogue

Dialogue is usually considered to be, together with the image, one of the main vehicles through which a film's narrative is articulated; it conveys important information to the spectator about the action or the characters. Its importance is such that in Hollywood films the entire sonic ambience recedes to the background so as not to impinge on the clarity of the spoken word.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to this practice, there are sequences in *Bellissima* where the sonic ambience refuses to fade away to give dialogue greater prominence. Visconti uses this method in the early part of the film to construct the overpowering and confusing world of the cinema. As the narrative proceeds, this device is repeated to depict the auditory and psychological world of the child. We notice this in the sequence at the hairdresser where Maddalena, determined to get the part for her daughter, has left Maria to have her hair cut. Maria's distress is depicted first through her crying and then through the sounds of other voices – the hairdresser's and a customer's who loudly complains about the child's crying. The visuals show a close-up of Maria sitting at the mirror and an apprentice cutting her plaits. The sound of the customer's voice becomes louder and indistinct covering the words that the boy is saying to Maria. What we hear is what the child hears: a blurred, unfocused mix of voices – sounds devoid of meaning. The way the sounds are organized in the soundtrack stresses the child's point-of-audition:<sup>11</sup> in her distress at having been left by her mother and having her plaits cut, she cannot hear the words spoken to her and is overwhelmed by the sound of the voices in the background. Dialogue as such is therefore almost entirely suppressed in order to stress the separation and isolation of the child, and meaning is achieved not by virtue of the

symbolic significance of the words, but by treating them as a vehicle of sound and juxtaposing them to the image.

There are other sequences in *Bellissima* where dialogue is treated less as a vehicle for dramatic action than as a musically organized sound. The voice, in particular the female voice, is orchestrated in such a way as to create purely auditory patterns, which are made up of rhythm, repetition, different levels in pitch and volume. While not being dissociated from the images, sound functions as an independent element – less as a narrative feature than as a stylistic one, whose main function is the construction of the film's genre: the comedy and the 'cinematic *melodramma*'.

In one such sequence, which occurs in the first half of the film, a group of mothers, grandmothers, and children are waiting for the second round of auditions. The women, dressed in their Sunday best, display their excitement by fanning themselves rather frantically. One of the women recounts an episode that happened the day before when, having come for the audition on the wrong day, she witnessed an episode of professional malpractice: a selected group of *raccomandate* had been given priority and were being auditioned a day early. The sequence is not void of narrative value, it shows the first seeds of 'corruption' being implanted in Maddalena's mind – if a *raccomandazione* is what it takes to get what she wants, then she too can pull a few strings. But it is the orchestration of the different voices which prevails over their meaning and which helps give the film its operatic quality. Alongside the visuals, which alternate shots of the woman who is telling the story with shots of the group to which Maddalena belongs, we have an interplay of voices between the woman and the group. This reproduces the experience of listening to an ensemble of voices, with a leading 'soloist' and a 'chorus', which comes in repeating and echoing the same sounds. Here is a brief extract taken from the sequence. The repetitions are in italics:

S[oloist]: Dunque ieri io sono venuta perchè mi *ero sbagliata* di giorno.

C[horus]: Ah, *s'era sbagliata!* L'ha fatto apposta per arrivare prima di noi!

S: No, Signora, m'*ero proprio sbagliata. Insomma, insomma, c'erano le chiamate speciali, sì, le raccomandate di ferro.*

C: *Hai visto?*

S: Sì, *le raccomandate di ferro*. *L'ho visto proprio io con gli occhi miei!* Dunque c'era una signora con una ragazzina, *non ha mica chiesto del regista*.

C: No, *eh, e di chi ha chiesto?*

S: No! No! No! *Ha chiesto di quell'altro...*

C: *E chi è quell'altro?*

S: *Quell'altro, quello brutto, quello grosso quello che parla sempre dentro le trombe, quell'antipatico.*

C: *Quell'antipatico!* Florio!

The repetition of the words, the way in which they are uttered in a form of 'staccato' and delivered at high pitch and volume emphasize their sound, reducing their conceptual contents to a minimum and maximizing their musical qualities. The result is highly humorous.

As well as functioning as a conveyor of humour, dialogue deepens and widens the space of the diegesis, not so much through the concepts it expresses, but through the sound of different accents. These convey the historical positions of the characters, their geographical and class origins and their placing in the social hierarchy. The Roman accent is the dominant lilt, it is used by Maddalena, her husband and his family, and by the chorus of the proletarian women who live in the same block of flats as the Cecconis. The wider world that Maddalena encounters as a result of her desire to have Maria chosen for the film is geographically broadened by the variety of Italian accents. The dressmaker speaks with a broad Tuscan accent, the dance teacher with an accent from the Romagna region, and the drama teacher, Tilde Sperlanzoni, who initially adopts an artificial, neutral, stage-type of accent, reverts to her native Neapolitan in an outburst of anger. By contrast, the chorus of bourgeois women, the middle-class mothers, equally keen to have their daughters chosen as the film's protagonist, speak an unaccented, neutral, colourless Italian, a mark of their social class. The world of the cinema and its men also show regional variations – the northern Italian accent of the producer and Annovazzi contrasts with the prevailing *romanesco* spoken by Florio and other minor characters. The Director Blasetti speaks standard Italian. The range of accents has important narrative functions: on the one hand, it points to the limitations of Maddalena's familial environment, on the other, it becomes an important signifier in constructing the cinema industry as an activity which attracts, with its promise of easy money and fame, people from different regions and social classes. The appeal and influence of the cinema is not limited to

lower-middle-class women like Maddalena. The middle and upper classes are similarly allured. It is this appeal which the film purports to deconstruct.

### ***L'elisir d'amore* and its function**

In his analysis of the film, the Italian film critic and historian Lino Micciché constructs a dichotomy between *inner subjective order* (the world of Maddalena and her family *before* she started to actualize her fantasy of the cinema) and *outer objective disorder* (the world of the cinema).<sup>12</sup> I agree with the view that the film portrays the cinema as a bearer of disorder. However, Micciché's identification of order with Maddalena's world *before* she becomes involved in her 'madness' does not seem to be supported by the film's narrative. First, *Bellissima* does *not* depict or even allude to Maddalena's life *before* her venture. Unlike Giovanna in *Ossessione* who talks to Gino about her life before she met and married Bragana, Maddalena has no past, she exists only in the here and now of the narration, and the narrative is in the present tense. In other words, the film does not concern itself with a comparison between life *before* and *after* Maddalena's involvement with the cinema. Second, Maddalena's proletarian world, far from being portrayed as a world of order, is a noisy, chaotic, matriarchal space where excess dominates and communication is virtually non-existent. This would justify, in psychological terms, Maddalena's desire to leave it behind in order to follow what she believes would be a better, perhaps more glamorous, life as the mother of a child actress. (I shall return later to the film's treatment of Maddalena's desire.)

Order as antithesis to cinema-disorder, on the other hand, is signified in the film by means of musical motifs taken from Donizetti's *opera buffa*, *L'elisir d'amore* (1832). A piece for orchestra, chorus, and soprano from *L'elisir* introduces the film and a number of shorter musical motifs are interspersed throughout the narrative. Far from being used as background music, *L'elisir* is integral to the construction of the film's meanings and form. At the opening of the film, the credits roll over shots of a string and wind orchestra with chorus and soprano giving a concert performance of *L'elisir d'amore*. We learn soon afterwards that the opera is being broadcast live on the radio. Visconti chose a passage from the second act. Giannetta (the soprano) and the chorus of peasant girls are commenting on the extraordinary fortune that has befallen Nemorino. Giannetta announces

that Nemorino's uncle has died leaving him 'cospicua, immensa eredità'. At the same time she urges the girls to keep quiet about it:

Non fate strepito; parlate piano;  
non anco spargere si può l'arcano;  
è noto solo al merciaiolo,  
che in confidenza l'ha detto a me.

The soprano (Giannetta in *L'elisir*) sings: 'Non fate strepito; parlate piano'. The words *piano*, *zitto*, *piano* are repeated several times. The performance is then interrupted to leave space for the announcer's appeal inviting mothers and fathers to bring their daughters to Cinecittà where they are looking for a girl to act in a new film. As the music and singing of *L'elisir* resumes, the image cuts from the radio studio to Cinecittà to show the crowd of women and men streaming into the Studios there, while, on the soundtrack, the singing from the opera is juxtaposed to the shouting and general uproar of the crowd. The two contrasting types of sound are then merged creating a sort of duet between the opera singer and the women outside the Cinecittà studios. The RAI singer (Giannetta) appears to address the clamouring women inviting them to be quiet. The same appeal to silence is then made by Blasetti when he addresses the crowd in Stage 5: 'Silenzio, per favore', and is re-echoed in Spartaco's words towards the end of the film when he urges the women from the neighbourhood to be quiet: 'State zitte, stateve zitte, c'è la bimba che dorme. Fateme el piacé, portatevele via tutte queste balene, stateve zitte, stateve zitte, c'è la bimba che dorme'. Finally Maddalena herself, when order is indeed established in her psyche, will repeat the message to Spartaco: 'Fa' piano, sta zitto, non sveglià la ragazzina'. The invitation to be quiet runs through the narrative as a connective thread, adding formal cohesiveness to the film's structure.

The passage from *L'elisir* introduces one of the film's main themes. *L'elisir* in this instance is not so much 'd'amore' as the unexpected miracle every poor person hopes for: a sudden change in status brought about by success and money, the magic potion which will solve all life's problems. *L'elisir* is equated to the cinema. Taking part in a film would be, for the women in the narrative, equivalent to a sudden change of fortune like that brought about by a magic potion. In Donizetti's opera the potion – which is in fact wine – is traded by the quack doctor Dulcamara whose arrival is heralded by the sound of trumpets. This is the theme which will introduce Blasetti in the sequence at Stage 5 of Cinecittà, connecting the character of the film director with that of the charlatan, and strengthening the idea of

cinema as an industry selling illusion and deception. In opening the film with a passage from a comic opera about illusion and manipulation, Visconti foregrounds the themes of illusion, manipulation, and artifice while the narrative sets out to uncover what lies behind the illusion of the cinema.

The impact of the opening passage is created largely by the contrast between the harmony of the music and the disharmony of the shouting. The visuals reflect the contrast by showing the musicians sitting in straight lines while the singers, in simple black and white, a string of pearls round their necks, look like a paradigm of well-ordered femininity. The sudden cut to the next shot reveals the crowd chaotically running towards the gates of Cinecittà in an uproar. While the contrast is highly humorous, and places the film within the genre of comedy, it also invites a comparison between the discipline expressed in the performance of *L'elisir* and the unruly energy of the crowd. The question of training is echoed later in the film at the ballet school where Maddalena has taken the child. When the mother voices her surprise and outrage at the ballet teacher for keeping Maria at the barre while the other girls dance, the teacher's reply is 'Studiare e sudare, sudare'.

Leaving aside the irony and caricaturesque stance taken by Visconti in this sequence, questions of effort, discipline, and professional preparation come to the fore which are 'invisible' to Maddalena and, by implication, to the audience, in the same way as the effort and discipline involved in the making of the illusion of a film are invisible.

### **Magnani/Maddalena and the 'cinematic melodramma'**

In an interview with Manlio Maradei for *L'eco del cinema* Visconti said: 'Maddalena poteva essere soltanto la Magnani'.<sup>13</sup> Anna Magnani was the much loved diva of neorealism, the great protagonist of Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta*, a proletarian woman – *una popolana* – who started her career as a cabaret singer and became a famous actress. She was the embodiment of the kind of success the cinema can offer to the lucky few. In addition, she brought into her style of acting the full force and vitality of her personality.

The figure of Magnani towers above the myriad of female figures who fill the story. She is the soloist in the midst of the chorus. Not only is her physical presence palpable, but her voice dominates the soundtrack. She is constantly uttering sounds: singing, shouting, or simply talking to herself, often against a background of other voices. The character of Maddalena represents the total externalization of an inner world, crafted into the

conventions of music-hall comedy, the world from which Magnani had emerged. Maddalena's voice is a sort of running commentary which is used for comic effect and, at the same time, creates, alone and with other voices, a form of *melodramma* made up of natural utterances, of ordinary proletarian voices. Quiet scenes are contrasted with loud dramatic sequences where emotions are displayed with full force.

I am going to examine two sequences as a way of exploring this contrast. First I shall comment on a 'quiet' scene which is particularly significant in the construction of the psychology of Maddalena as a mother. Then I shall analyze a 'loud' scene where Maddalena enacts her *melodramma* in pursuit of her ambition.

The first sequence occurs after the first round of selections has taken place. Maddalena and Maria are in Maddalena's room getting ready to go to the photographer. The mother sits at her dressing-table, combing her hair. She speaks to her daughter and, at the same time, muses to herself revealing her inner thoughts – thoughts she does not allow herself fully to acknowledge. The quietness draws attention to the details of the *mise-en-scène* which are particularly revealing in constructing Maddalena's psychology. The screen is taken up by the double image of Maddalena reflected in two mirrors. Referring to the earlier, unsolicited, visit of the actress Sperlanzoni, who is after a job as drama teacher to the child, Maddalena says to Maria: 'Ti insegnava a recità', and then to herself, 'E già a recità, in fondo che è recità. Se mo' me credessi d'esser n'altra, ecco che recito [then looking towards the photographs of Spartaco, her husband, which are tucked in the mirror frame], a te non te va, eh!'; and later, once again to the child, she remarks 'A Ní, tu sì che puoi fare l'attrice. Anch'io se avessi voluto...'.

The sequence establishes that Maddalena's wish to have her daughter selected for the film is a displacement of her own desire to become an actress. It also suggests that becoming an actress is not necessarily an end in itself, but the expression of a wish to be 'other' than herself, 'essere un'altra'. She identifies in Spartaco the obstacle to the fulfilment of her desire. However, the images suggest a different reason for her dilemma: the double reflection of Maddalena in the mirrors indicates that the difficulty may also be located in her own psyche, in her inability to be whole – mother (and therefore also wife) and woman. The mirror images give a visual representation of her own inner split, her own inner separation. In the larger reflection her face is contained in the same space as her husband's. It is Maddalena the wife and mother. In the smaller mirror is the woman's face, alone, wishing to be

'another', the 'other' that she hopes Maria might become for her. The projection of Maddalena's desire on to the daughter would indicate that Maddalena is unable to find self-realization in her own right, and also that she is unable to consider her daughter as separate, but regards her as an extension of herself. The sequence beautifully constructs a sense of oneness between mother and daughter, particularly in the dialogue where Maddalena, who tries to correct Maria's pronunciation, ends up speaking like the child.<sup>14</sup> It is one of the very few private and peaceful scenes where sound is reduced to a minimum, and the simple words are quietly spoken, and its function is twofold. It widens and deepens the character of Maddalena, hinting at some of the 'hidden' motives that fuel her ambition, but also showing her as a loving, tender mother to the child. The sequence also acts in counterpoint to the 'loud' scenes, and in this way contributes to creating the 'cinematic *melodramma*'.

From the sequences at the 'loud' end of the spectrum, one is particularly noticeable for the way the voices are orchestrated to reach a crescendo first and then a resolution. The sequence occurs at a crucial point in the narrative, when Spartaco begins to realize that Maddalena is up to something with which he does not agree. It happens at the apex of Maddalena's folly, when, having left Maria at the hairdresser, she allows herself to 'bribe' Annovazzi – someone who hangs around Cinecittà searching for opportunities to make money – in order to obtain from him a *raccomandazione*. The episode begins in the open-air theatre, next door to the block of flats where the Cecconi family lives.

The first shot is of a cabaret performance and shows a singer on stage, singing *Verde Luna*, a song popular at the time. The song is accompanied by orchestral music and a third-rate dance. A few seconds into the sequence, the sound of shouting voices is introduced into the soundtrack alongside the music and singing. These continue to be heard when the camera moves to the audience, and then across the auditorium to the neighbouring courtyard, to reveal the source of the shouting voices to be Spartaco and the 'actress' Tilde Sperlanzoni, Maria's drama teacher. Spartaco is enraged with the woman and tries to boot her out of the apartment. Maddalena's arrival fuels Spartaco's anger even further, his shouting voice becomes more prominent in the soundtrack, while the singing of *Verde Luna* diminishes in volume. The shouting duet between Spartaco and Sperlanzoni continues while *Verde Luna* can be heard high in volume, then low, and is finally cut off the track. At this point another high-pitched voice is introduced, that of the dress-maker's assistant, who arrives to deliver Maria's ballet dress.

Spartaco manages to get rid of Sperlanzoni by giving her the money she is asking in payment for her 'lessons'. He then directs his anger towards Maddalena. The two voices dominate the soundtrack, so great is their volume, when a third voice, the shop assistant's, comes in high in pitch and volume, as she calls the concierge for help. As the fat woman slowly descends the stairs, she adds her voice to the uproar. The neighbours' voices join in. While Spartaco and Maddalena continue their row, the sound of the child crying and the neighbours shouting build up into an uproarious chorus of proletarian voices. In the midst of this Maddalena enacts her solo piece. She is silent for a moment, then starts her lament with a deep, low voice which rises to a crescendo. She obtains the desired effect. Once Spartaco has left the house on his own, Maddalena reveals her deception. Her lamentations and accusations of being badly treated by Spartaco were a ploy to prevent him from taking Maria away just before her final audition.

The skilful orchestration of voices coming in either together or alone, the shifts in volume and pitch, the full blast of emotions, as they are projected out, conjure up a sense of a proletarian *opera comica*, with Maddalena the unrivalled *prima donna*. The fact that the sounds of the row-duet between Spartaco and Sperlanzoni are mingled with the music of the cabaret, overwhelming it, and reach the audience next-door, adds to the quality of 'performance', the one that takes place in Maddalena's home in the film *Bellissima*. Spartaco's words to Maddalena stress the point: 'A Maddalé, la facciamo finita con questa commedia?'. The sequence thus becomes a vehicle for the film's primary discourse – namely, that the illusion of the cinema is the result of technological manipulation and that a film is an art-form, a representation and a performance. A discourse reinforced by orchestrating the voices in an operatic fashion, which foregrounds the film's form: a comedy which echoes the qualities of an operatic *melodramma*, a rendering in cinematic form of an *opera buffa*, like *L'elisir*.

### **The critique of the cinema**

Visconti's film constructs the world of the cinema that Maddalena and many other mothers aspire to enter with sounds which, by highlighting distortion and manipulation, foreground, to a point at least, the existence of the technological apparatus. This is done, at times, by disconnecting sound from its source. The result is often a disconcerting world where acoustic anarchy reigns. An early sequence which introduces the figure of the director

Blasetti, as he starts the process of auditioning the girls, is a case in point. The trumpets from the theme of *Dulcamara* from *L'elisir d'amore* open the sequence, heralding the arrival of the director at Stage 5 in Cinecittà, where a crowd of mothers, children, and photographers is eagerly waiting for the initial stages of the selection process to begin. The music, which is played loudly from no visible source within the *mise-en-scène*, takes up the entire soundtrack. The absence of mimetic sounds is noticeable: the voices from the crowd are cut off. Blasetti himself enters, picks up a child to pose for the photographers, and speaks into the microphone but no voice can be heard. Only the music continues to play loudly from an invisible orchestra, off-screen. Then Blasetti's voice is faded in and the word *silenzio* can be distinctly heard. His invitation to the crowd to be silent achieves instead the unexpected result of stopping the music. By disconnecting sound from its source, the sequence foregrounds the process of mechanical manipulation and distortion (the microphone produces a remarkable amount of 'noise' and hissing sounds) involved in the process of making a film. This theme is further articulated by the narrative: Blasetti is a film director preparing to make a new film. The film-making process is depicted as one which causes intolerable confusion and chaos to the point that simple communication is impossible. The film is punctuated with sequences, particularly those showing the mothers at Cinecittà while they wait for the auditions, which reinforce the theme of cinema being the bearer of confusion, chaos, and disorder.

Visconti plays with sound's ability to go across space and break normal physical boundaries in order to emphasize the intrusiveness of the cinema. An early sequence introduces this theme. The sequence sets both Maria and Maddalena in their familiar environment, and constructs the social context where the child is growing up. In a film whose attention is mainly on the mother, this sequence stands out because it privileges the point-of-view of the child, stressing her vulnerability. The sequence opens with the sound of a rehearsal (music playing and a voice counting in time: 'Un-o, du-e, tre-e, quat-tro') in the acoustic foreground. As the camera pans from right to left, moving from a panoramic view of an open-air theatre to reveal the courtyard next door, Maria's shouting is inserted in the track against the loudness of the music. The camera reveals Maria attempting to talk to a woman on a balcony in one of the upstairs flats. Her voice and the woman's can be barely heard, the words are unintelligible. Maria is trying to attract the neighbour's attention so that she can tell Maddalena (who will appear later from a balcony further up) that there is a lady in their house

who is asking for a cup of coffee. When the music stops, the voices of the women on the balconies become clearer to the audience. However Maddalena and Maria cannot hear each other, their voices drowned by the high level of surrounding noise originating from the theatre next door. The acoustic ambience remains unfocused for a while and is perceived by the spectator from the point-of-audition of the child whose world is made up of a mass of undistinguishable noises. The world of show business (the cabaret rehearsal next door) is seen as being, in part, responsible for this confusion.

In both the sequences described, confusion and acoustic chaos are achieved by inserting in the soundtrack layers of diegetic sound coming from different sources, removing the sound of dialogue which one would normally expect to hear, and manipulating the volume levels of the different layers. The courtyard sequence stresses the absence of boundaries between the cabaret rehearsal and the privacy of the individuals. The acoustic space of Maddalena's house is the same as that of the theatre next door. When, later in the film, Maddalena and Spartaco are shown watching, from their own courtyard, Howard Hawks's *Red River* (a sequence I shall return to in the next section), the theme of cinema's intrusion into people's lives becomes articulated even more clearly. Just before the film ends, even the privacy of their own marital bedroom is intruded upon by the sound of Burt Lancaster's dubbed Italian voice. Sound thus becomes the major vehicle to express the discourse of the power that the cinema can have to intrude into the lives of ordinary people and colonize the minds and feelings of the most vulnerable.

### ***Bellissima* and the spectator**

The film's critique of the cinema and of some of the practices adopted by neorealist cinema, particularly the ever-growing practice of involving ordinary members of the public as actors to increase the sense of realism, extends to include an exploration of the relationship of the female spectator with the cinema. As Micciché aptly notes, the film aligns the feminine with 'wrong ambitions/love of the cinema/failure', whilst the masculine is associated with 'realistic concreteness/detachment from the cinema/capacity to create and preserve order' (p. 20).

Half-way through *Bellissima* there is a short sequence showing Maddalena and Spartaco watching the American film *Red River*. The film

is being shown at the open-air cinema right next door to their apartment block and the couple are sitting in their courtyard. This detail is important not only because it underlines the intrusive nature of the cinema, as I have already noted, but also because it facilitates the blurring of boundaries between the fictional and the real. The short conversation between the husband and wife, however, clarifies that it is only Maddalena who over-identifies with the images on the screen. Spartaco exhorts Maddalena to 'lasciar stare il cinema', to forget about the cinema. Maddalena answers: 'Spartaco, non me capisci tu, guarda che bei posti, guarda noi n'dove vivemo. Io quando vedo 'ste cose...'. Spartaco: 'Maddalé, so tutte favole...'. Maddalena: 'No so favole'.

Maddalena's love for and over-identification with the cinema is, in other words, an expression of her dissatisfaction with her present existence, her living conditions. A similar theme was explored by Woody Allen in his *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. Commenting on this film, Mary Ann Doane observes that it signifies 'the peculiar susceptibility to the image – to the cinematic spectacle in general – attributed to the woman in our culture. Her pleasure in viewing is somehow more intense'.<sup>15</sup> What Doane seems to ignore is that this susceptibility may be born of a desire to escape from an intolerable situation in real life into a fantasy. Visconti's film avoids a deeper exploration of the reasons for Maddalena's discontent, but emphasizes that the relationship of the woman with the cinema is an unhealthy one.

We see this again in the sequence showing a small crowd of women waiting outside Stage 5 in Cinecittà, where the director Blasetti is auditioning the girls. The soundtrack is here made up of the voices spoken into a microphone inside Stage 5, and relayed with a considerable amount of 'noise'. The result is a mass of often incomprehensible words mixed with hissing sounds. It is this cacophony that the mothers outside are eagerly listening to. Further layers of sound are made up by the women's voices outside the theatre at varying volume levels, and by dialogues. The juxtaposition of these layers of sound and the interplay of the sounds heard as they are coarsely processed, recorded, amplified, and distorted produces a painfully strident effect. Yet, on recognising Blasetti's voice in the midst of this cacophony, one of the 'bourgeois' mothers faints, overwhelmed: 'La voce del commendator Blasetti! Oh Dio, mi sento male'. Maddalena herself laughs at the woman, showing the absurdity of the woman's reaction, while, at the same time, indicating that she, as a member of the proletarian class, is still 'healthy', still grounded in common-sense reality. Maddalena is taken in by the cinema only when the cinematic apparatus is totally hidden. This

is the case with the American films she is, to some extent, forced to watch or hear from her own home.

Visconti's film capitalizes on the power of the cinema to create a sense of reality and identification. The female viewer of *Bellissima* will derive great pleasure from watching Magnani's acting, from her gestures, her 'physicality', energy, wit, and her Romanesque language. She is bound to identify with Maddalena, herself a film viewer with a tendency to blur the boundaries of the real and the fictional. To the woman in the audience the character of Maddalena acts as a mirror in which she can project her love for the cinema, her ambition, determination, and finally her painfully acquired catharsis. Underneath the comic opera is a didactic message addressed to the female spectator, a warning not to sublimate her ambition and desire through her children's achievements, by making them easy prey to the cinema industry. The message, which is carefully, albeit subtly, constructed throughout the film by exposing some of the workings of the industry and through the irony and satire of the comedy, is finally clearly articulated by the character of Iris, played by Liliana Mancini, a non-professional actress, who, having once achieved fame in a film by Castellani, is here cast as a technician working in the editing room and who also is the editor's assistant on the film *Bellissima*. 'Sa che le dico? – she says to Maddalena – 'o si è attori di professione o è meglio non illudersi per niente e avere un mestiere'.

## Conclusion

The role played by the soundtrack in constructing the film's message is central. It is through the use of sound that some of the workings of the cinematic apparatus, the 'deceptions' involved in cinema are revealed. The insertion of *L'elisir d'amore* into the very fabric of the film accentuates the themes of deception and performance while, at the same time, exemplifying harmony and order. The opera acts as an overture and at the same time a commentary on the behaviour of the women in the story. Giannetta's plea to silence is finally heard by Maddalena. The invitation to the women to be quiet, to silence their voices, initially inserted in the soundtrack as a quotation from *L'elisir*, is then spoken by Blasetti, later by Spartaco, and finally, having learnt her lesson, by Maddalena herself. The repetition of the words *zitte, piano, stateve zitte* functions as an echo, a leitmotif, in the narrative, encircling and containing Maddalena's story, endowing the

narrative with formal and thematic cohesiveness, and contributing to the film's discourse.

Sound is the major signifier for the cinema's capacity to intrude and invade the lives of ordinary people. The power that the cinema has to blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional is strengthened by Visconti's use of sound. The distorted voice of Blasetti is overpowering for one of the women, and Maddalena herself, at the very end of her ordeal, continues to be fascinated by the dubbed voice of Burt Lancaster. In a last analysis, the film addresses the question of boundaries (order) in a society where these are being eroded. Thus the music and singing of *L'elisir* are contaminated and, finally, overwhelmed by the sounds coming from the disorderly crowd. The sounds from the shows at the open-air theatre enter the living space of the Cecconi's family and viceversa. Maddalena's physical space is constantly intruded upon (Sperlanzoni enters her house uninvited, opens the kitchen cupboards, and helps herself to some fresh eggs; Maddalena's bedroom looks out on the street and a boy is shown watching her as she changes her clothes; she is often in her underwear; the neighbouring women flow into her flat). Maddalena stops short of having an affair with Annovazzi, avoiding, but only just, the breaking of her marriage boundaries.

By skilfully exploiting the power of sound and connecting it in imaginative ways to the image, Visconti has produced a representation of some of the trends of the changing Italian society at a time when, after the reconstruction, the 'masses' started breaking their social boundaries and pressing at the gates of affluence. The humour of the comedy and the pathos of Maddalena's catharsis do not entirely hide, however, a sense of distaste for the resulting disorder. The fact that this distaste comes to the fore in the way many of the proletarian female characters are represented: obese, dishevelled, loud – Spartaco's *balene* –, raises questions which are beyond the scope of this essay. In striving for the re-establishment of boundaries, for harmony and order, the film appears to advocate a return to the status quo and the message of the film appears to be quietist. However, in successfully bringing together cinema and opera, Visconti shows an unparalleled ability to harness disorder and use its vitality to create harmony out of chaos. The film's form points thus to a different interpretation: the dichotomy order-disorder is dialectically resolved by creating a new order and a new harmony which includes and overcomes both polarities.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> B. Balazs, *Theory of Film* (New York, Dover, 1970), pp. 206-7; quoted in L. Fisher, 'Applause: The Visual and Acoustic Landscape', in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, edited by E. Weiss and J. Belton (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 233-46 (p. 237).

<sup>2</sup> R. Arnheim, *Film* (London, Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 235; quoted in Fisher, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> C. Metz, 'Aural Objects', *Yale French Studies*, 60 (1980), 24-32 (p. 26).

<sup>4</sup> R. Altman, 'General Introduction: Cinema as Event', in *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, edited by R. Altman (London, Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-14 (p. 10).

<sup>5</sup> C. Gorbman, 'Narrative Film Music', *Yale French Studies*, 60 (1980), 190-202, (p. 194).

<sup>6</sup> G. Leto, 'Valore dell'opera di Visconti', *Bianco e Nero*, 11 (1955), 3-17, (p. 12).

<sup>7</sup> P. Baldelli, *Luchino Visconti* (Milan, Mazzotta, 1983), p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed study of the screenplay in its various phases, see Baldelli, pp. 102-13.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Baldelli, pp. 101-2.

<sup>10</sup> R. Altman, 'Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism', *Yale French Studies*, 60 (1980), 67-79 (p. 68).

<sup>11</sup> This term, first coined by Rick Altman, refers to the experience of hearing from within the diegesis, normally the hearing of a character. The term has the advantage of recalling its visual equivalent, point-of-view, which refers to the seeing of a character.

<sup>12</sup> 'Accade cioè che il film sia la storia di un *ordine interno e soggettivo* – quello di Maddalena e del suo mondo prima della "pazzia" del cinema – incrinato dal *disordine esterno e oggettivo*': L. Miccichè, *Visconti e il neorealismo* (Venice, Marsilio, 1990), p. 198.

<sup>13</sup> The full quotation reads: 'La cosa veramente importante è la scelta dell'attore perchè l'attore che può interpretare un certo personaggio è uno solo (così Maddalena poteva essere soltanto la Magnani)'; quoted in M. Maradei, 'Luchino Visconti e l'elemento umano', *Eco del cinema*, 15 June 1952, pp. 12-13 (p. 13).

<sup>14</sup> Mother-daughter identification is also emphasized by their names: Maria-Maddalena.

<sup>15</sup> M.A. Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1988), p. 1.