

# READ MY LIPS

The Italian art of dubbing  
By Chiara Barzini

In the Thirties, when sound films were beginning to circulate, Mussolini prohibited the use of foreign languages in all movies shown in Italy. The Ministry of Popular Culture, which was responsible for overseeing the content of newspapers, literature, theater, radio, and cinema, censored all foreign words adopted into Italian usage, replacing them with creative or stunningly literal translations. (The word *cocktail*, for instance, changed to “*bevanda arlecchina*,” suggesting a drink as colorful as the *commedia dell’arte* fool Harlequin; Louis Armstrong became Luigi Braccioforte.) Only foreign-language *sonorizzati* films—those in which the spoken parts were removed and summarizing Italian intertitles added—could be shown in cinemas. While the rest of Europe was importing talkies from Hollywood, Italy was doomed to watch silent Italian melodramas known as *telefoni bianchi* (“white telephones”), so called for their motif of betrayed women weeping into stylish Art Deco receivers.

Audiences in Europe and the United States were finally hearing Greta Garbo in *Anna Christie* (1930)—the film’s tag line was GARBO SPEAKS!—but Italians were left in silence. MGM, in an attempt to circumvent Mussolini’s dictum, filmed a special scene just for

Italy. During the film’s climax, Garbo gave Italians a taste of her warm, husky voice with two uncensored words: “*Padre! Padre!*” But other Hollywood films passed quietly by. Most Italians were either illiterate or had difficulties reading, which made a visit to the movies feel more like sitting for a school exam than entertainment. With attendance dropping, the 3,200 movie theaters in Italy were falling into financial ruin.

Garbo was not the only actor American producers asked to speak in other languages. Italians adored the kooky British and American accents of Laurel and Hardy, who read from cue cards in phonetic Italian, and when, in 1939, Italian comedy icon Alberto Sordi began dubbing Hardy, he maintained the affectation of an American accent. Some major studios, such as MGM and Fox, meanwhile, created separate versions of the same movie with casts of different nationalities, as was the case with Raoul Walsh’s *The Big Trail* and Hal Roach’s *Men of the North*. As long as the actors on Italian screens spoke Italian, Mussolini approved.

To compete with these studios, a Paramount executive, the Austrian physicist Jacob Karol, introduced new dubbing technology at Joinville, Paramount’s studio near Paris. Cheaper than hiring several international casts and shooting several times over, the technique involved inserting a sound track to coordinate exactly with the moving image. The first

dubbers were working-class immigrants living near the studio who were called to record in their native languages. But who would want to hear Marlene Dietrich speak like a farmer from Calabria? Hollywood rethought its approach, using professional theater actors from Italy to dub American stars.

In 1933, the Fascists expanded the scope of censorship, banning all foreign films dubbed in Italian outside Italy—as if nervous that foreign producers might put revolutionary messages into the mouths of Italian actors abroad. To better control the process, Italy opened its first national dubbing houses—Fotovox, Fono Roma, and Itala Acustica—in Rome. Actors were hired, and also sound technicians, translators, script adapters, and dubbing directors, who tailored scripts to match the movements of the actors’ mouths. Lydia Simoneschi, Ingrid Bergman’s dubber, supposedly had so many projects on hand that she slept in the Fono Roma recording studios.

Being Italian, the dubbing industry quickly became a family affair. The actors who had taken their voices to Hollywood began to raise their children and grandchildren in Italian recording studios. Families of dubbers and *rumoristi* (those responsible for creating sound effects) became powerful clans; to this day, most of Italy’s best-known voice-over actors are descendants of the first generation of

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dubbers. Two of my elementary-school classmates in Rome, Marzia del Fabbro and Myriam Catania, who came from the dubbing family of the Izzos, went off after class to record parts in *Sheer Madness* (1983), *Heartburn* (1986), and *Fatal Attraction* (1987). (Myriam learned and spoke her first curse word in any language—"shit, shit, shit!"—as Michael Douglas's daughter.) In my eyes, they were prodigies, alter egos of the actors they dubbed and we revered.

It wasn't only foreign films that were affected by the proliferation of dubbing. Dubbers' voices rapidly developed to such high standards that Italian actors, including Claudia Cardinale, Gina Lollobrigida, Silvana Mangano, and Sophia Loren (whose strong regional accent was considered vulgar), were borrowing voices from Italian dubbers to create more sophisticated personae for themselves. Such modifications were carried out in complete secrecy, of course; thanks to dubbing, the stars spoke like a family of demigods.

These days, practically all foreign films in Italy are dubbed, while the actors in Italian films are most often left to speak for themselves. To Riccardo Rossi, a well-known actor, comedian, and self-described "dubbing

enthusiast," this development only gives actors an excuse not to project their voices, to get away with bad acting disguised as "underacting." The dubbing of Italians into Italian is now generally reserved for TV actors, particularly the female protagonists of soap operas that air on the Berlusconi-owned Rete 4 and Canale 5. As Rossi confided, actresses in Italian soaps are not always chosen for their elocutive talent. They stand there, and the dubbers speak for them.

When, in the Seventies, independent cinemas in Italy began to show foreign films in their original languages, the development was not well received. "The only time people got interested in them was when they heard that Robert De Niro in *The Godfather Part II* actually spoke Italian," Rossi told me. Rossi, who collects dubbing memorabilia, has lined his bedroom wall with hundreds of black-and-white autographed photos of American and Italian actors, including one of Sean Connery laughing with his dubber, Pino Locchi, at a *bevanda arlecchina* party. In *The Godfather Part II*, De Niro was imitating Marlon Brando, whose voice Italian audiences had nev-

er heard. "They were so disappointed, they screamed in unison: No! No! No! Give us Giuseppe Rinaldi [Brando's dubber] back! And I couldn't agree more. To us, a certain actor means a certain voice. John Wayne could be no other than Emilio Cigoli, and Sean Connery could be no other than Pino Locchi."

It wasn't just the voices of the actors that Italians grew to love, but the entire language that the dubbing industry was inventing. Jokingly called *Doppiaggese* ("Translationese"), dubbed speech had neither the loose cadences of Neapolitan, Roman, and Sicilian Italian nor the strict vowel sounds of the

North. This language, filled with new idioms and Italianized American words, at first existed solely in the film world. (The word *fanculo*, a shortening of *vaffanculo*, "fuck you," was supposedly created by dubbers to sync with the lips of an actor pronouncing the English phrase.) Riccardo Paladini, the first national-television news broadcaster for Radiotelevisione Italiana, whose daughter Roberta is now a well-known voice actor herself, was hired for the job in 1952 because he spoke with the timbre and impeccable diction of the earliest dubbers. Later, screenwriter Ennio Flaiano said the "language spoken by dubbers" was the true Italian—something like the standardized national language Mussolini had hoped to introduce. Dubbers had done for film and television what Dante Alighieri did for literature.

By the Eighties, a whole segment of Italy's pop culture existed in *Doppiaggese*. As children, my friends and I took pleasure in calling one another the absurd phrases Italian dialogue-adapters had invented. We became *pollastrelle* ("chicks"), exclaiming "*Grande Giove!*" ("Great Scott!") like Doc from *Back to the Future*. We pretended to be the Blues Brothers running away from the *pie-dipiatti* (cops, in *Doppiaggese*, are the

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### SOLUTION TO THE APRIL PUZZLE

#### NOTES FOR "ONE ACROSS"

Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov.

Note: \* indicates an anagram.

The "clueless" clue answers are synonyms for CLUELESS.

			C	L	U	E	L	E	S	S		
M	E	L	O	N	S	I	V	A	C	A	S	
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R	A	M	B	O	G	E	L	D	L	G	U	
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C	F	B	E	S	M	M	U	E	S	L	I	
S	O	U	T	H	E	R	N	M	O	S	T	
A	I	R	H	E	A	D	E	D	D	A	L	
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E	L	E	C	T	L	O	I	T	E	R	S	
P	E	R	C	H	Y	A	N	A	N	A	S	

ACROSS: 6. me(lo)ns; 8. VA-CA-s(cores); 11. O-v(erro)an; 12. e(r)h-C.O., rev.; 13. Ram-B.O.; 14. hidden; 17. n(ational)-consent seen\*; 19. inter-(policema)n; 26. \*; 28. sou(the)rnmost\*; 31. (qu)easy; 32. go(a)ded\*; 33. hidden in rev.; 34. l(o)iters; 35. per-ch; 36. (b)ananas.

DOWN: 1. c(L)ement; 2. reborn-u(nion), rev.; 3. \*; 4. love(rev.)-ve(terans); 5. sch-lock; 7. rev.; 9. \*; 10. s(even)-sues, rev.; 15. hidden; 18. these\*-E; 20. \*; 22. \*; 23. reg.-rub, rev.; 24. hidden; 25. two mngs.; 27. sod-den; 28. salep(riced); 30. (Vi)Agra.

"flat-footed") and answered to our parents' demands with "Oh yeah, *puoi giurarci, amico*" ("you betcha, buddy"), which was the American actor's self-confident reply to just about any question. We kept those unlikely, wonderful phrases alive to build bridges between ourselves and our on-screen heroes.

When I moved to the United States in 1994, I realized that there was a lot I had been missing. The first film I saw in America was *Forrest Gump*, in a dingy theater in the San Fernando Valley with my grandmother. She spoke no English, and I had a hard time understanding American accents, yet when we saw Tom Hanks run across the country that day, we both had tears in our eyes. The purity of the original voices, the experience of watching every facial expression match a true sound, was magical. From then on, for me there was no reverting to *piedi-piatti* and *pollastrelle*.

Filmmakers have debated the respective merits of subtitles and dubbing since the earliest sound films. In "The Impossible Life of Clark Costa," published in 1940 in the film journal *Cinema*, director Michelangelo Antonioni wrote that Romolo Costa, the actor who dubbed all of Clark Gable's performances, was a "hybrid individual born out of a chemical combination." This "half Clark, half Costa" was unbearable to Antonioni, who considered dubbing to be a mere "acoustic surrogate" of acting. To him, dubbing compromised the intention of the director, leading to an artificial product that lacked artistic unity. Pier Paolo Pasolini, who called both dubbing and subtitles "evils," said that, between the two, dubbing was the less harmful, since it allowed you to see the picture in full. Alfred Hitchcock claimed a film would lose 15 percent of its original power when subtitled and 10 percent when dubbed. Jean Renoir called dubbing a "monstrosity, a challenge to human and divine laws."

Federico Fellini didn't agree with any of them. Dubbing was an extension of his shoots, a technique he would use to retouch and rewrite.



He mercilessly dubbed over his actors, changing dialogue in postproduction, sometimes having worked without a script. (He reportedly instructed his actors to count aloud in front of the camera so that he could insert new dialogue afterward.) Renato Cortesi, a veteran Fellini dubber who has also voiced Gérard Depardieu, told me that, during the filming of *Amarcord* (1973), he witnessed Fellini ask an old Neapolitan lady to tell him a sad story. Over footage of this woman recounting the tragic tale of her grandson's drowning, Fellini added a new sound track about war and hunger recorded by an actor from Emilia-Romagna, combining the vivid expressiveness of the South with his favorite northern accent.

Cortesi started out, like many other dubbers, as a *brusiante*, or muttering background voice, but was promoted because he could speak English and French and had a gift for Spanish and Italian dialects. (In private, Fellini always had Cortesi speak in a northern Italian dialect because it reminded the director of the overnight trains he took as a boy that hummed with the chatter and singing of boozed-up Alpine soldiers.) Cortesi also claims to be "amazing" at playing gay men, the general rule being that real gay people should always dub straight roles and vice versa. "We're Italians," he concluded, "a country of *sbruffoni* [braggarts], and like to feel that we add something to the original actors."

If you visit a dubbing studio, the over-the-top zest of the actors is evident in everything from their melodramatic speech to their movements; standing in front of the microphone, they coil and twitch as if suffering from facial tics and convulsions. I asked Cortesi whether this was a consequence of having to focus one's lifelong talent into the few centimeters between mouth and microphone, a kind of bodily rebellion to the condition of being heard but not seen, and he laughed. "Of course it isn't easy to spend a life in the darkness, but this is hardly the reason why they twitch and turn! Dubbers are used to reciting while trying to

re-create the bodily sensations of what they see on the screen before them. If there is running in the film, they will run on their feet. The jerking," he explained, "is the result of re-creating large movements in small spaces."

There are still few options for those seeking to watch original-language films in Italy. The Metropolitan cinema on Via del Corso closed early last year after a long battle involving intellectuals, show-business people, and American and British expats in Rome, to be replaced with a Benetton store. Original-language movie houses do terrible business, and subtitles are paid much less than dubbers. One of the few groups to champion subtitling is ITA-SA (Italian Subs Addicted); they work for free, providing and posting online Italian subtitles for American TV series, and they offer their subtitles to independent filmhouses like the Kino, a cinema, bar, and indie filmmakers' hangout in Rome.

Despite such efforts, Italians remain hooked on dubbing—perhaps because of simple affection. Familiar voices yield emotional attachment. Ferruccio Amendola was probably the most recognizable voice in cinema during the Seventies and Eighties; to most viewers, the actors he dubbed (Sylvester Stallone, Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman, occasionally Al Pacino) were, in some way, all the same person. Riccardo Rossi, who becomes dreamy and nostalgic when he talks about Amendola, describes his voice as "warm, pasty ... not necessarily well behaved, a relevant voice: the voice of a people's man. ... When we heard him screaming *Adriana!* [in *Rocky*], that's exactly what he was, and that's why we loved him."

Francesco Vairano, a dubber and dubbing director known for adapting foreign films considered to be "undub-able," such as the French box office hit *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* ("Welcome to the Sticks," 2008), which relies on linguistic misunderstandings for much of its comedy, explained that actors become just as attached to their parts as audiences do. Vairano has been one of the few directors to break the habit of matching the same Italian dubber to a foreign actor for all his films, prefer-



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ring instead to select the dubber ac-  
cording to the requirements of the role,  
and, he admits, he was hated by all the  
prima donna dubbers for this. "If you  
take that actor away from them," he  
told me, "they will insult you."

In 2007, I met dubber Luca Ward,  
who provided the voice of the narra-  
tor for a romantic comedy I co-  
wrote, *Scusa ma Ti Chiamo Amore*  
("Sorry but I Love You"). He had a  
*Top Gun* look—tall and tanned,  
wearing tight jeans and Ray-Bans  
lifted over his shiny hair. What I  
didn't then know was that everyone  
he met wanted him to recite Samuel  
L. Jackson's Ezekiel 25:17 passage  
from *Pulp Fiction*, and that I should  
consider it an honor that he would  
offer a performance to a stranger.  
When he finally did recite the  
monologue, it was astonishing, every  
dramatic pause carefully timed and  
every word perfectly enunciated. I  
understood that, if anybody took  
Samuel L. Jackson away from Ward,  
it would have meant taking away a  
part of his soul; he was, as Antonio-  
ni would say, half Ward, half Jack-  
son. Leaving the day's recording ses-  
sion, Ward told me he was off to  
have dinner with Meg Ryan, before  
raising an eyebrow and clarifying,  
"With Meg Ryan's dubber ... I am  
having dinner with Meg  
Ryan's voice."

As the number of channels on  
Italian television grows, the bar for  
dubbing lowers. The grandparents of  
today's dubbers were scrupulous the-  
ater actors, but the same cannot al-  
ways be said of some of their descen-  
dants; the dub world has even  
invented a term, *cagaparole* ("word-  
shitters"), for those who recite their  
lines fast and get out. But Italy sticks  
to its traditions. Like masks in the  
Carnevale, voices in Italian film  
have lives of their own that, if not  
immortal, often outlive Hollywood  
stars, following the paths of fictional  
characters. When Sean Connery's  
James Bond was replaced by Roger  
Moore's, dubbing producers rejected  
a change to what Rossi calls the  
"WASP, blond, democratic voice" of  
Cesare Barbetti, who usually dubbed  
Moore; it went without saying that  
Pino Locchi would continue to dub

the part. "With his modern, mascu-  
line voice, he was perfect for James  
Bond. He was the only man who  
could say 'Mi chiamo Bond, James  
Bond,'" Rossi told me, without a hint  
of irony.

Locchi's is not the only voice that  
might be irreplaceable. Since the death  
of Oreste Lionello in 2009, Italians  
have been in a state of panic. Who will  
be the next Woody Allen? And will we  
ever be able to love him as we loved  
Lionello's Allen? Lionello, who dubbed  
most of Allen's films and adapted sev-  
eral scripts himself, translated Allen's  
Jewish humor as well as captured his  
neuroses, and became such an icon that  
Allen recorded a poignant elegy for  
Lionello that was shown at the Gran  
Premio Internazionale del Doppiaggio  
soon after the dubber's death. "My en-  
tire popularity in Italy is owed in such  
a great part to him," said Allen. "He did  
an incredible job making me into a  
better actor than I am, a funnier person  
than I am ... I was fortunate enough  
after many years to get a chance to  
meet him, and I was very, very taken  
with the fact that he looked like me,  
and how attractive he was ..."

Dubbers are, as Claudio G. Fava  
puts it, the "submarines of acting."  
Fava is the man responsible for im-  
porting to Italy the frantic mania of  
*The Bold and the Beautiful*, the U.S.  
soap opera that was retitled for Italians  
with a single English word everyone  
would understand, *Beautiful*. He is  
also artistic director of Voci  
nell'Ombra ("Voices in the Shadows"),  
the longest-standing national dubbing  
festival in Italy (yes, there is more than  
one!), which is created in the image of  
the Academy Awards, with red car-  
pets, and prizes given to best male and  
female protagonists, supporting actors,  
and character voices. It's an occasion  
to give dubbers, if only for a night, the  
thrill of *feeling* glamorous, rather than  
simply sounding the part.

Fava once planned to work on origi-  
nal-language films but has devoted his  
life to dubbing. "I guess this is exactly  
the duplicitous quality of cinema," he  
said. "Cinema itself implies a continu-  
ous lie, a game of shadows ... And in  
any case it has been in our genes since  
the Thirties, so I don't think there's  
much we can do about it. It's in the  
veins of Italians." ■