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Developing Middlebrow Culture in Fascist Italy: The Case of Rizzoli's Illustrated Magazines

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Developing Middlebrow Culture in Fascist Italy: The Case of Rizzoli's Illustrated Magazines

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ABSTRACT

Angelo Rizzoli was one of Italy's leading publishers in the interwar period and beyond, thanks to his business intuition and daring investments in the popular periodicals sector. In the 1920s and 1930s he published a galaxy of illustrated magazines aimed at the urban middle classes, which prove paradigmatic of a new form of Italian weeklies. The article posits that Rizzoli's *rotocalchi*, based on entertaining content and photojournalism, were mediators par excellence in three areas. First, in publishing middlebrow fiction. Second, in translating short stories from linguistic and cultural milieus with a deliberate selection of specific literary genres, settings, and character types — a *branding* that emerges from investigating the weeklies *Novella* and *Lei*. Third, in the creation of a platform for interchange between literature, photography, and cinema, mainly in *Cinema Illustrazione Presenta*. Notwithstanding the obstacles put in their way by the Fascist regime and the censorship system, Rizzoli's illustrated magazines introduced and spread models of female conduct that did not coincide with those proposed by the Fascists, while adapting them to common Italian cultural values and exploiting them for commercial purposes. As a typical expression of middlebrow culture based on leisure, respectability, and consumption, they repurposed messages from other media and foreign contexts, facilitating the penetration of modern behaviour patterns in Italy.

KEYWORDS

Rizzoli, illustrated magazines, middlebrow, popular culture, Fascism, translations

RÉSUMÉ

Angelo Rizzoli fut un des principaux éditeurs italiens dans l'entre-deux-guerres et au-delà grâce à son flair commercial et à ses investissements audacieux dans le secteur des périodiques populaires. Entre les années vingt et trente, il a créé une pléiade de magazines illustrés, exemplaires de la nouvelle forme des hebdomadaires italiens destinés à la classe urbaine moyenne. L'article postule que les *rotocalchi* de Rizzoli, fondés sur un contenu divertissant et le photo-journalisme, étaient des médiateurs d'excellence dans trois domaines. Premièrement, dans la publication de fictions *middlebrow*. Deuxièmement, dans la traduction de nouvelles issues de milieux linguistiques et culturels renvoyant à un choix délibéré de genres littéraires, de décors et de personnages spécifiques — une sorte de marquage (*branding*) qui ressort de l'enquête sur les hebdomadaires *Novella* et *Lei*. Troisièmement, dans la création d'une plate-forme pour des échanges entre littérature, photographie et cinéma, principalement dans *Cinema Illustrazione Presenta*. Malgré les obstacles que leur opposèrent le régime fasciste et le système de censure, les magazines illustrés de Rizzoli ont présenté et diffusé des modèles de comportement féminin qui ne coïncidaient pas avec ceux proposés par les fascistes tout en les adaptant aux valeurs culturelles italiennes communes et en les exploitant à des fins commerciales. Expression typique de la culture *middlebrow* fondée sur les loisirs, la respectabilité et la consommation, ils réutilisaient des messages provenant d'autres médias et de contextes étrangers en facilitant la pénétration de comportements modernes en Italie.

MOTS-CLÉS

Rizzoli, magazines illustrés, *middlebrow*, culture populaire, fascisme, traductions

Few Milanese are unaware of the existence of the historical care institution for orphans in Milan called in dialect *Martinit*. One of its residents was Angelo Rizzoli (1889–1970), born in poverty in 1889, later founder of a dynasty to make the headlines for political and financial scandals in the last decades of the twentieth century. Trained as a typographer, the ambitious and enterprising Rizzoli went into business just after adolescence, immediately realizing the need to move with the times. In the mid-twenties he bought a rotogravure machine from abroad, perfect for the reproduction of photos, and transformed himself from printer to publisher willing to take considerable business risk in 1927 when, without any real previous knowledge of this sector, he acquired from Mondadori — his slightly higher-end competitor-to-be — a few loss-making periodicals. These were *Novella*, established in 1919, which had always published authors with high cultural capital such as Gabriele D’Annunzio or Luigi Pirandello, *Il Secolo Illustrato*, a weekly supplement to the famed newspaper *Il Secolo* already skilfully using big pictures of current events printed in rotogravure, the monthlies *La Donna*, an old-fashioned cultural periodical explicitly targeting women, and the theatre journal *Comoedia*. Thanks to his entrepreneurial ability to sniff the wind, Rizzoli realized that cinema was becoming the main medium. He shaped his periodicals as a platform for an interchange between literature, photography, and cinema itself, and became a major player in the publishing industry of the time. Able to foster the right friendships, he became a film producer, clearly aiming at popular products that would ensure commercial success, in partnership with the son of the Duce, Vittorio, although in private he always adopted a sceptical attitude towards Fascism.¹

Everything started with the changes introduced by *Novella*’s director Guido Cantini: the magazine was transformed from a refined highbrow periodical into a middle-class product, specifically targeting female demographics, full of pictures of Hollywood film stars and middlebrow short stories by prolific authors, and proposing correspondence by writer Mura (Maria Volpi Nannipieri) as a tactic to increase readers’ loyalty. It also published a monthly supplement, ‘I Romanzi di Novella’, a well-selling romance series. The immediate success of *Novella*’s new formula was actually the work of a team mainly composed by talented men of letters (Mario Buzzichini, Filippo Piazzi, Giuseppe Marotta, Eugenio Gara, and the humourist and later neorealist screenwriter Cesare Zavattini). It allowed Rizzoli to tackle financial commitments and further invest in a sector whose opportunities he was eager to seize. Within a decade, he became one of the richest men in Italy, indirectly demonstrating the strong desire of Italians for entertainment and perhaps also for escapism, and created an entire galaxy of magazines, all influenced by American and French photojournalism. Apart from the new *Novella* and *Il Secolo Illustrato*, there were the cinema magazine *Cinema Illustrazione Presenta* (later simply *Cinema Illustrazione*), the first editorial initiative by the Rizzoli team, the popular variety magazine *Piccola*, the women’s weekly *Lei*, the sports periodical *Il Calcio Illustrato*, and the humorous bi-weekly *Bertoldo* with its desecrating nonsense often interpreted as indirect — but unintentional — criticism of the Fascist regime. In the mid-thirties, Rizzoli also sensed the need for a new editorial product and published *Omnibus*, directed by Leo Longanesi, which would become a major contribution to Italy’s journalism, since it focused on political current events and on the cultural debate, displaying evocative pictures that often supplanted the text. *Omnibus* was too

1 All translations from the Italian are the author’s. On Rizzoli publishing house, see Alberto Mazzuca, *La erre verde: Ascesa e declino dell’impero Rizzoli* (Milan: Longanesi, 1991). On its industrial development, see Marcella Forni, ‘I modi della produzione grafica in Italia nella prima metà del Novecento: Il Caso Rizzoli’, *Storia in Lombardia*, 31.1 (2011), 84–111.

straightforward and unconventional and therefore a victim of the Fascist regime.² Its substitute *Oggi* also had a short life span: as a matter of fact, the space for freedom and creativity was further restricted during the Second World War.³

Rizzoli, though unquestionably leading the way, was not the only publisher interested in the illustrated press in the thirties. Other publishing houses that were transforming themselves from artisanal small businesses to big-scale industries, such as Mondadori — already ahead in book production — but also Bompiani, Garzanti, Mazzocchi, and Vitagliano, contributed to the expansion of the sector. Illustrated magazines were identified as *rotocalchi* because of rotogravure, which made it possible to reproduce low-priced, high-quality photographs. The term covers a large variety of periodicals, all characterized by an entertaining and elegantly evasive content. Regardless of their main topic, which could be literature, female fashion, sports, or current events (within the limits of Fascist censorship), *rotocalchi* were aimed at the middle class and urban *petit-bourgeois* readers and had a wide circulation, selling hundreds of thousands of copies.⁴ Real circulation was even higher, because copies were passed from hand to hand. For this reason, *rotocalchi* played a pivotal role in the mass cultural industry's take off along with cinema, sports, and radio.⁵

Rotocalchi were fruit of the 'irruption of the visual'⁶ that characterized the early twentieth century: readers became familiar with narrative imagery and the rapid change of scenery typical of cinematographic language. They did not consider images as an aesthetic phenomenon, as they were rather image *consumers*. Publishers took advantage of this form of cultural consumption and had no cultural mission, let alone a political goal: *rotocalchi* were for them a mere commercial enterprise. Nevertheless, those pioneering products were not just a reflection of a business strategy. They showed that in Italy too a new 'media ecology'⁷ had taken form in the first decades of the twentieth century, although with specific characteristics due to delayed industrial development and lower literacy rates compared to other European countries, but also to the general lack of freedom under Fascism. In this context, illustrated weeklies, which can be considered as precocious examples of *polymedia*,⁸ contributed to the modernization of the country acting as mediators: first, by being middlebrow periodicals where high and low culture contaminate each other or even mingle; secondly, by publishing plenty of translated literature and therefore mediating foreign cultures at a time when Fascism insisted on the protection of Italian cultural products and later even advocated Italy's cultural autarchy; thirdly, by mediating Hollywood imagery into the Italian context. Illustrated

2 Ivano Granata, *L'Omnibus di Leo Longanesi: Politica e cultura (aprile 1937–gennaio 1939)* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2016). See also Giovanni Turra, *Continenti stati d'animo: Letteratura di viaggio e letterature straniere nell' 'Omnibus' di Leo Longanesi* (Venice-Mestre: Amos Edizioni, 2017).

3 On Fascist culture, see at least Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Giovanni Belardelli, *Il ventennio degli intellettuali: Cultura, politica, ideologia nell'Italia fascista* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2005).

4 Irene Piazzoni, 'I periodici italiani negli anni del regime fascista', in *Forme e modelli del rotocalco italiano tra fascismo e guerra*, ed. by Raffaele De Berti and Irene Piazzoni (Milan: Cisalpino-Monduzzi Editore, 2009), pp. 83–122.

5 David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era 1880–1980: Cultural Industries, Politics and the Public* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007). On the Italian publishing industry, see Nicola Tranfaglia and Albertina Vittoria, *Storia degli editori italiani: dall'Unità alla fine degli anni Sessanta* (Rome: Laterza, 2000).

6 Astrid Deilmann, *Bild und Bildung: Fotografische Wissenschafts- und Technikberichterstattung in populären Illustrierten der Weimarer Republik (1919–1932)* (Osnabrück: Der Andere Verlag, 2004), p. 78.

7 Anne Ardis, 'Towards a Theory of Periodical Studies', MLA Convention 2013, Special Session 384 [accessed 8 February 2019].

8 Daniel Miller and Mirca Madianou, *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia* (London: Routledge, 2012).

magazines were therefore able to establish relations of different kinds to their readers, mainly acting as an educational tool, as a parable, or as a mere source of entertainment.

Italian-Style Middlebrow

Rotocalchi were a cultural product meant for a wide and cross-class audience. A look at *Il Secolo Illustrato*, one of the forefathers of this kind of publication, suffices to recognize features such as large cover pictures, the primary use of photography, and photomontages inspired by foreign models to provide documentary evidence of the facts of the world and comment on them,⁹ the balance between serious and trivia, the significant presence of advertisements, and low price.¹⁰ A magazine of this kind can be regarded as a representative of a middlebrow culture. Although the term *middlebrow* has hardly been used in Italian historiography, it can be implemented to label a certain kind of literature,¹¹ but also a particular type of *petit-bourgeois* culture whose pillars are leisure, respectability, and consumption. Middlebrow culture also emerges as mainly a feminine feature (though not being gender-specific),¹² both because there was the tendency to attribute to women a lower intellectual commitment to reading and because ‘women’s behaviour outside of the home [was] often taken as a barometer of the respectability of the wider community’.¹³

The typical female reader of Rizzoli’s illustrated magazines was indeed a middle-class woman likely to be active in the service sector as salesgirl, secretary, typist, hairdresser, or even lower-level civil servant.¹⁴ According to the magazines she read, she led or more probably aspired to lead a dynamic life centred not only on her daily employment, but also on leisure. She played sports, regularly went to the movies, and read romantic novels. At the same time, she was constantly reminded that bourgeois respectability was the optimum, adjusted though to the demands of modern life. This task was entrusted to the correspondence between the readers and an authoritative person — the popular writer Mura in the case of *Novella* and *Lei*. Mura or her anonymous collaborators answered dozens of letters every week, giving pieces of advice that ranged from good mother hen reassurance (‘But yeah, a woman with glasses can be attractive to a man: love goes above and beyond a pair of glasses’) to more challenging recommendations, for instance to a woman who had previously abandoned marital life to later return to her husband (‘Just think of yourself, of your husband, who in time will tenderly love you again, and be a good mother for that little orphan, who will reward you for all your sacrifices’). Advice on appearance was not lacking either (‘For the ankles, get a long bottom-up massage at night and in the morning; for the breasts, wait a few more years. You are so petite that large breasts would not agree with you’). The readers’ affection for Mura

9 Paolo Rusconi, ‘La divulgazione dell’arte contemporanea nelle riviste popolari illustrate di Rizzoli (1931–1934)’, in *Forme e modelli del rotocalco*, pp. 527–73.

10 Raffaele De Berti, ‘“La settimana del mondo su un metro quadrato di carta”: la fotografia in “Il Secolo Illustrato” tra la fine degli anni Venti e gli anni Trenta’, in *La fotografia come fonte di storia*, ed. by Gian Piero Brunetta and Carlo Alberto Zotti Minicini (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2014), pp. 129–54.

11 Elke D’hoker and Sarah Bonciarelli, ‘Extending the Middlebrow: Italian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century’, *Belphegor. Littératures Populaires et Culture Médiatique*, 15.2 (2017) [accessed 8 February 2019].

12 Consider at least Kate Macdonald, ed., *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880–1950: What Mr. Miniver Read* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

13 Belinda Edmondson, ‘Making the Case for Middlebrow Culture’, *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 2.1 (2010), para. 31 of 40 [accessed 8 February 2019].

14 On Italian women, see Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992). On their magazines, Silvia Salvatici, ‘Il rotocalco femminile: una presenza nuova negli anni del fascismo’, in *Donne e giornalismo: Percorsi e presenze di una storia di genere*, ed. by Silvia Franchini and Simonetta Soldani (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2004), pp. 110–26.

was such that the writer herself received unsolicited advice from correspondents, for instance regarding her hairstyle, but she was careful not to confuse her person with her persona ('Thank you for the reformed hairstyle, unfortunately I cannot adopt it [...]. If you knew me, you would realize that no picture of me has actually to do with me'.¹⁵

Women reading Rizzoli's *rotocalchi* in the thirties were encouraged to both better themselves and to fit in, that is, to evolve without emancipating themselves. The magazines' background appeared roughly half-progressive and half-conservative, since fashion, fitness, and body image can be considered as a way to both look after oneself and be accepted by men or the community as a whole. Such illustrated periodicals mediated between desire and an enhanced status quo.

The trend for consumption, mirrored by the commercial announcements, is a further proof of this. There were ads for classic cosmetic products, for non-surgical breast expansion, for basic foodstuffs, indicating that the aim was to help women lead better lives. Women probably *did* benefit from those products, but the magazines in which the ads were published were neither 'innocent arenas of pleasure'¹⁶ nor instruments of political and social intervention because of their distinctive commercial purpose. Interwar Italy was slowly becoming a consumer economy: some upper-bourgeois women could already afford the advertised products, while others could only afford the magazine and rather aspired to a social status that common people would achieve only in the fifties.

As a consequence, everything that these periodicals — *Lei* in particular — highlighted as elegant, refined, and fashionable, was never glamorous or trendy *per se*, but always linked to respectability, even paradoxically genuineness. Photographs and columns, apart from being entertaining, disseminated alleged best practices for those women who actually needed advice, for instance on what to wear on a special occasion, but allowed them to dream of a different reality they had no access to. *Rotocalchi* turned out to be a two-faced product, since they presented an urbane and non-provincial model that could ensure respectability and be accepted or at least tolerated by the Fascist regime. Indeed, sophistication 'crosses boundaries between high and low',¹⁷ linking different social and cultural levels together and underlining middle-class signs of distinction and 'participatory rituals like reading certain kinds of books, dressing in certain kinds of clothes, and attending certain kinds of public events'.¹⁸ Middlebrow culture was for most women primarily *aspirational culture* — an expression that tells far more than being linked to the middle class, because it entails the ideas of contamination and desire. It follows that the editorial market drove publishers to promote products fuelling collective imagination but also to adapt to a specific and pre-existing cultural taste. Publishing *rotocalchi* was an on-going mediation between different demands and a challenge to the highest levels of society; it meant willingly contaminating high and low culture and creating hybrid forms between media — an approach characteristic of Rizzoli publications throughout the thirties and destined to set a standard in the post-war period too.

The Literary Aspects of Mediation

One of the aspects of middlebrow culture that more directly points to the target of a periodical is certainly its literary corpus. The presence of literature in Italian illustrated

15 Quotations from 'Lettere a Mura', *Novella*, 15.17 (23 April 1933), 15.

16 Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 8.

17 Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 22.

18 Edmondson, para. 23 of 40.

magazines has scarcely been studied so far; nevertheless, it played a key role, given the amount of short stories and novels per issue. This is particularly evident in two flagship Rizzoli products, *Novella* and *Lei*. When Rizzoli acquired the former from Mondadori, the magazine was selling only 7 000 copies per week, but within a few years it achieved considerable peak sales, declaring 170 000 copies per week already in 1933. The new editorial formula, in which the literary section was always predominant, encompassed not only a rich iconography based on Hollywood film stars and movie stage pictures, but also a different kind of literature: no more D'Annunzio and Pirandello, but middlebrow authors such as Bruno Corra, Luciana Peverelli, Salvator Gotta, and so on.¹⁹ *Lei*, instead, mixed short stories with fashion, housekeeping, and good manners columns, and displayed the same luxuriant Hollywood-based iconography. Founded in 1933 and directed by Filippo Piazzzi, it made more and more room for literary fiction, confirming that short stories were appreciated by the readers, but also that brilliant columns and articles proved troublesome as the regime increased its surveillance on the periodical press in the late thirties.

Novella and *Lei* were very similar in many respects and the readers could discriminate them mainly through the different colour of the ink: violet for the former, sepia for the latter. They both hosted novelists, screenwriters, librettists: *rotocalchi* were indeed at the crossroads of popular literature, cinema, and theatre, therefore in a position to promote a crosscutting modernity for women. They encompassed a wide range of literary genres, from romance to short stories tinged by detective and mystery to somehow harmless comic novels, but were marked by a specific taste that derived from the representation of the upper and middle class, an indirect attention to sexuality, the prevalence of domestic settings — all features of middlebrow literature.

In the short stories by Italian authors, readers could hardly avoid encountering kitsch and emphatic passages, inherited by a long-established melodramatic style. A curtain is 'velvety', a gust of wind a 'cold and mellow caress', and joy 'a delicate shadow'.²⁰ The style is generally empathetic and sentimental ('Even she could not tell in that very moment whether she was happy and if the love she had had for Franco could last entirely and profoundly').²¹ Men are usually mature, serious, proud, and hardworking, even though they sometimes yield to Cupid's arrows (he was in love 'not like an engineer, but like a poet, like an artist').²² Italian novels display in general a higher literary quality that can be out of tune compared to standard fiction, but in some cases tend to imitate a screenplay with intense dialogues, set in the film world or inspired by American movie leitmotifs.²³ Didactic style is frequent, and involves instructions given through fiction by somebody that had some kind of authority earned in the literary field, such as Milly Dandolo with her weekly column 'Teresa e suo marito' ('Teresa and Her Husband') published in *Lei* in 1934. Complex social situations are reduced to individual destinies; the settings are almost exclusively domestic, or conventional such as the work place or the theatre, and sometimes exotic — a luxury train, a colonial mansion with black servants as distinguishing mark. The protagonists are mainly middle- or upper-class women, or women struggling against an unfair destiny who usually improve their social condition through marrying up and not a career of their own.

Fiction in *rotocalchi* is the reign of romance with all its genre clichés: a hero and a heroine in love, an antagonistic situation or person, a happy ending, unproblematic

19 *Novella* had its own book series. See Gian Carlo Ferretti and Giulia Iannuzzi, *Storie di uomini e di libri: L'editoria letteraria italiana attraverso le sue collane* (Rome: minimum fax, 2014), pp. 51–56.

20 Valentino Piccoli, 'Le stelle d'Orione', *Novella*, 14.20 (15 May 1932), 11–12.

21 Cosimo Giorgieri-Contri, 'Commedie della vita', *Novella*, 17.15 (14 April 1935), 5–6 (p. 5).

22 Bruno Corra, 'L'altra Marisa', *Novella*, 18.6 (9 February 1936), 3–4 (p. 3).

23 For instance, Luigi A. Garrone, 'La frana', *Novella*, 15.3 (15 January 1933), 2.

(above all in translated short stories) or puzzling. Nevertheless, in this vast literary corpus (*Novella* issued every year more than 300 short stories, *Lei* more than 200), high and low mixed. This coexistence of different literary levels was due to the fact that ‘the middlebrow woman reader [...] ranges widely in her interests, encompassing many genres of literature, and combining high and lowbrow interests in a daring disregard for conventional judgements’.²⁴ Both the background of the average reader and the adaptive approach to the market contributed to hybridization. Furthermore, many authors collaborating to these magazines did it for profit, and could not risk ruining their literary careers. This is why they did not totally surrender to popular culture, which was specifically biased at the time. Angelo Rizzoli himself, although he aimed exclusively at high profits, likely to occur when selling pure romance, was eager to involve contributors with a distinctive cultural capital as a source of legitimation.

Not only contamination, but also attempts to mediate between different cultural levels and forms of communication taking advantage of a middle-class taste marked the presence of fiction in Rizzoli’s *rotocalchi*. The result was the publication of literary texts with an ‘ambiguous cultural status’,²⁵ in which commercial and artistic aspects came together. Middlebrow culture and the creation of a parallel imagery to Fascist myths and models were set in motion by illustrated magazines (and cinema) rather than by books as for instance in Great Britain.²⁶ This was the result of a certain educational backwardness, a general lack of book reading habits, fewer economic opportunities for women, as well as publishers’ business strategies.

Branding Foreign Literatures

Translation was a well-discussed issue in Italy in the thirties²⁷ and Christopher Rundle has confirmed on the basis of the *Index Translationum* that in no other Western country was there such a large volume of translated books — especially fiction — as in Italy.²⁸ The phenomenon exemplifies the desire for distraction and escapist literature such as romance, detective, and adventure stories, which could not be quenched by the relatively small number of Italian popular literary fiction authors. In the thirties, a real ‘translation industry’²⁹ was born thanks to low copyright rates and the fact that the Fascist regime did not put obstacles in the way of publishers loyal to it until the end of the decade. Also a significant part of Rizzoli’s *rotocalchi* short stories consisted of works by foreign authors, namely an average of 20% to 30% of published literature in *Novella* and *Lei* in the mid-thirties, reaching a peak in 1934. While French and German translated short stories prevailed at first, American ones rapidly took over around 1935, and almost a fifth of *Lei*’s literary corpus consisted of translated novels by American authors.³⁰

24 Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 8.

25 Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 11.

26 See Kristin Ewins, “‘Revolutionizing A Mode of Life’: Leftist Middlebrow Fiction by Women in the 1930s”, *English Literary History*, 82.1 (2015), 251–79.

27 Only translations in book form have been already well investigated. See Francesca Billiani, *Culture nazionali e narrazioni straniere: Italia, 1903–1943* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2007), and Christopher Rundle, *Publishing Translations in Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010).

28 Christopher Rundle, ‘Stemming the Flood: The Censorship of Translated Popular Fiction in Fascist Italy’, *Perspectives*, 26.6 (2018), 838–51.

29 Christopher Rundle, ‘The Censorship of Translation in Fascist Italy’, *The Translator*, 6.1 (2000), 67–86 (p. 72).

30 Fabio Guidali, ‘Tradurre in “roto”. Periodici popolari e letteratura straniera (1933–1936)’, in *Stranieri all’ombra del duce: Le traduzioni durante il fascismo*, ed. by Anna Ferrando (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2019), pp. 87–103.

Substantial changes occurred from 1937, when the regime began to intervene also in the magazine sector, establishing a clearer orientation for content in periodicals. This new policy and growing cultural nationalism restricted the space for foreign cultures; nevertheless, until the outbreak of the Second World War, *rotocalchi* could more easily escape strict controls compared to books and newspapers.³¹

Translation as mediation was particularly true in Italy at that time, when poetic licence in translating was the norm. According to Benedetto Croce's idealism, translations manifest the adapter's and not the author's view and creativeness.³² Moreover, Fascist censorship compelled publishers to cut or alter undesired text passages, concerning not only political elements, but also morality and crime reporting, for instance suicides, which Mussolini considered a symbol of weakness to be banned.³³ Nevertheless, the mediation of foreign literature was not limited to translations, but was anticipated by prior selection of foreign short stories. Based on what could be called a *vertical close reading*,³⁴ i.e. the analysis of texts with the same origin in search of recurring features, it appears that every cultural and linguistic context was selected for a specific kind of short story, revealing a small number of settings, narratives, and character types. *Novella* and *Lei* homogeneously cut the foreign literary reality and pasted it onto their pages: they branded translated foreign literatures per country of origin.

In the corpus of French short stories by such middlebrow authors as André Birabeau, Claude Boutet, Antoine de Courson, Henri Falk, or Claude Gevel among others, the setting is always Parisian high society, and the protagonists are invariably perky, frivolous bankers' or ministers' wives, obsessed by ageing and continuously looking for a flirtation with younger men; protagonists have to deal with the most unlikely coincidences; Gevel even tells the love getaway of a young married yet unsatisfied woman with a man she has been observing from afar, without even exchanging a few words.³⁵ Notwithstanding dramatic twists in the plots sometimes — the betrayed man often contemplates killing his wife — these short stories are staged not as drama plays but as light comedies through the author's irony and his extra-diegetic interventions.

Short stories by Richard Arvay, Wilhelm Lichtenberg, Dinah Nelken, or Jo Hanns Rösler, translated from the German, were mostly related to the *neue Sachlichkeit* — the New Objectivity genre — and displayed documentary-style realism, urban settings, and fast cuts as in action movies. In these, women always determine their own fate. This kind of literature, typical of the Weimar epoch, vanished after the Nazi takeover. Not by accident, German fiction almost disappeared from Rizzoli's weeklies in the middle of the thirties, demonstrating that German literary products had lost interest in the eyes of Rizzoli's editorial boards. This was not a political decision: as long as the axe of Fascist censorship and autarchy did not fall on Italian periodicals, Rizzoli's *rotocalchi* indifferently published authors despised by the Nazis, such as Vicki Baum or Gina Kaus, or openly supporting Hitler's regime like Johannes Richter. Illustrated magazines aimed merely at publishing captivating short stories that could please the public and respond to its demands.

31 Irene Piazzoni, 'I periodici italiani negli anni del regime fascista', in *Forme e modelli del rotocalco*, pp. 85–87.

32 Benedetto Croce, 'Intorno a un'antologia di traduzioni italiane delle liriche del Goethe', *La Critica*, 37.1 (1939), 59–67 (p. 60).

33 On Fascist censorship, see Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Giorgio Fabre, 'Censorship and Translation', in *Modes of Censorship: National Contexts and Diverse Media*, ed. by Francesca Billiani (London: Routledge, 2007), 27–59.

34 Fabio Guidali, 'A Historian's Approach to Quantitative Analysis: The Case of Translated Short Stories in Italian Women's *Rotocalchi* (1933–1938)', essay, forthcoming.

35 Claude Gevel, 'Andata e ritorno', *Lei*, 2.25 (19 June 1934), 5.

It appears that this is why translated German short stories were seamlessly replaced in the middle of the decade by translated American fiction. The latter had various features in common with pre-Nazi German popular literature: urban settings, fast-cut editing, documentary realism, and sexual disinhibition.³⁶ American short stories, mostly authored by humourists or middlebrow writers (such as Octavus Roy Cohen, Richard Connell, Alice Duer Miller, Dorothy Parker, Damon Runyon, Matt Taylor), are all set in an urban context and characterized by realism, concerning either sexual matters or crime reporting. In a short story by Laurie York Erskine, for instance, the female protagonist is nothing less than an unconvicted poisoner.³⁷ Several short stories authors (George S. Brooks, Emmet Crozier, MacKinlay Kantor, Leonard Lyons, Rutherford 'Rud' Rennie, and so on), indeed, also worked as journalists and were inclined to write fiction about homicides, robberies, and frauds. The presence of short stories openly dealing with sexuality and crimes shows that for years the Fascist regime did not closely supervise illustrated weeklies, underestimating the power of the myths they contributed to create. There were also many short stories set in the film world, mainly written by screenwriters such as Frederick Hazlitt Brennan, Mary C. McCall Jr., or Harlan Ware, in which the real protagonist is cinema itself in a reference game between illustrated magazines and Hollywood.

The branding of translated fiction can also be verified for less represented literatures: Russian fiction was restricted to ingenious tales mainly by writers who had passed away or had never lived in Soviet Russia, such as Anton Chekhov and Arkadij Averčenko, while Hungarian short stories (by Ferenc Herczeg, Gyula Pekár, Ferenc Molnár, Jenő Heltai), constantly published as a result of the mass diffusion of Hungarian theatre, were all about either brave soldiers, countesses, and castles — in full respect of the nostalgic nineteenth-century stereotype — or shrewd women, axiomatic of a pleasure-loving and disengaged milieu. This selection of foreign fiction by cultural, linguistic, and national origin (which also encompasses a series of methodological challenges I deal with elsewhere)³⁸ determined a form of seriality based on the public's recognition skills: the branding was an ever-fulfilling promise, and the coherent structures of short stories must already be known by the readers — daughters and granddaughters of nineteenth-century devout lovers of serials — so that the new was 'always tempered, regulated within a formal framework that readers have seen before'.³⁹

Through the branding process various female role models coexisted in *Novella* and *Lei*. These were not necessarily compatible with each other, and hardly compatible with the official Fascist female model. The women that crowded translated fiction in Rizzoli's weeklies were secretaries, or even actresses or dancers, not used to staying at home. Moreover, only a couple of the translated short stories in *Novella* and *Lei* mentioned the fact that the female protagonist has children; in just one case, maternity is considered in a traditional and frustrating way as the sole ambition of a woman,⁴⁰ whereas in the other few occurrences by the previously mentioned Austrian-born authors Vicki Baum and Gina Kaus children seem not to stand in the way of their mothers' emancipation.⁴¹ All these features conflicted with the conservative image of women

36 Mario Rubino, 'Literary Exchange between Italy and Germany: German Literature in Italian Translation', in *Translation Under Fascism*, ed. by Christopher Rundle and Kate Sturge (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 144–77.

37 Laura I. Ersine [sic], 'Un te intimo', *Lei*, 4.14 (7 April 1936), 9.

38 Guidali, 'A Historian's Approach'.

39 James Mussell, 'Repetition: Or, "In Our Last"', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 48.3 (2015), 343–58 (p. 347).

40 Ferenc Herczeg, 'Lorsacchiotto bianco', *Lei*, 2.11 (13 March 1934), 4.

41 Vicki Baum, 'Sosta di ballo', *Lei*, 3.53 (31 December 1935), 6–7; 4.1 (7 January 1936), 6–7; 4.2 (14 January 1936), 6–8; Gina Kaus, 'Il nuovo zio', *Novella*, 17.30 (28 July 1935), 6.

promoted by the Fascist regime in the thirties, which involved both a 'stay-at-home mum' standard and large families. Nonetheless they were likely to be accepted by conformist or even sanctimonious readers, since narratives, as assumed by Brian Boyd, allow 'a comparatively disengaged attitude' and create a space for arguments that would be rejected outside the fictional framework.⁴²

The branding of foreign literatures was a way to simplify the complexity of reality. The various women character types were national stereotypes that performed the function of masks in the *commedia dell'arte*: they hid individual characteristics, rapidly outlined personalities, and could be introduced again story after story, allowing the reader to associate every character with an information stream concerning social background, attitudes, and feelings, skipping the explanatory part and focusing rather on the action. This procedure was linked not just to repetition as a distinctive feature of genre fiction that guarantees an immediate interaction with the text, but mainly to the aforementioned cut and paste of reality. Rizzoli's *rotocalchi* mediated reality; they acknowledged both its common and disturbing aspects, and tried to make them understandable to the public or to suggest paths to follow in life through comprehensible and widely accepted patterns.

In the middle-class culture expressed by *rotocalchi*, narration was a key to interpret reality: it is no coincidence that there were advice columns by writers — like the aforementioned Milly Dandolo's 'Teresa e suo marito' in *Lei* — that acted as exempla by simply telling stories, and providing ways to interpret various situations (through emotions and empathy) that could be imported into everyday experience. In this way, 'the range of [...] vicarious experience and behavioral options'⁴³ could be increased and fiction could even play a social role, showing various possible reactions to real-life situations. Through specific national character types, Rizzoli's magazines chose to identify those features of contemporary women that were too intriguing to be cast out, because they helped to sell many copies, but needed to be softened in the Italian context. Such an approach was at its best *in-between* through a selection of a mix of Italian and foreign middle-class literature.

Cinematic Mediations

Rotocalchi also played a crucial role as mediators of cinema and its imagery. In the interwar period, cinema became a mass medium in Italy. Despite a major boost in the national film industry, about 80% of the projected motion pictures came from Hollywood.⁴⁴ Several illustrated magazines, performing as 'cinematographic paratexts',⁴⁵ oriented the interpretation of the movies and contributed to the spread of American models of behaviour, which from the late nineteenth century onwards were slowly but inevitably becoming symbols of modern urban and industrial life.⁴⁶

42 Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 193.

43 Boyd, p. 193. See also Friederike Wolfrum, 'Mightier than the Sword? The Countercultural Agency of Literary Fiction', in *Counter | Culture: Literature, Language, Agency*, ed. by Friederike Wolfrum and Désirée Kriesch (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2018), pp. 11–28.

44 On Italian cinema under the Fascist rule, see Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo, eds, *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922–1943* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

45 Raffaele De Berti, *Dallo schermo alla carta. Romanzi, fotoromanzi, rotocalchi cinematografici: il film e i suoi paratesti* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2000), p. 3.

46 On the reaction against the American way of life, see Michela Nacci, *L'antiamericanismo in Italia negli anni Trenta* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989).

Rizzoli's *Cinema Illustrazione Presenta* was a bestseller magazine⁴⁷ in blue ink with photographs and articles on American movie celebrities' lives, movie reviews, film adaptations, and a fake Hollywood correspondence by Zavattini, alias Jules Parme ('Cronaca di Hollywood'). Apart from these popular ingredients, the weekly presented also ironic sections, such as 'Consigli alle esordienti' ('Suggestions for Female Beginners') again by Zavattini — now signing Zeta — according to whom 'Knowing how to put stockings on must be considered by female beginners as one of the most difficult issues in cinema',⁴⁸ but also the serious 'Piccola Enciclopedia del Cinema' in instalments. Both these indicated that the magazine had a socially crosscutting public that did not necessarily identify emotionally with the stars on the screen, but could maintain critical distance. As the Fascist regime stopped the distribution of American movies in Italy, the weekly became almost pointless and closed.

In *Cinema Illustrazione* mediation was also a question of layout. The magazine's pages were cut as in a movie. An article speculating on Thelma Todd's death presented a close-up of the actress at the bottom of the page and, on the right-hand side, one above the other, six small pictures (with captions) forming a film strip and acting as an information box on her life and career.⁴⁹ Photographs did not illustrate the article, but were autonomous: they intercut it, making the reading dynamic and giving more or different information than the text.

The result was a hybrid page with both verbal and iconographic elements: this is why we can talk of the target of these *rotocalchi* as a 'reader-spectator'.⁵⁰ In *Cinema Illustrazione*, iconography was in competition with the printed word and facilitated the fruition of the content for a popular public. It was therefore a work of remediation in Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's terms (although they explicitly refer to digital media),⁵¹ as photography, a relatively 'old' medium, and cinema, the 'new' medium par excellence, integrated and complemented each other into another medium (the magazine itself) giving rise to new cultural expressions. The reader was not misleadingly confronted with a unitary and coherent world, but continuously reminded that he or she was contemplating an artifice through the montage of different elements (photos, cinema, texts). Immediacy was lost, but the reader was actively involved in the creation of the message. As in the case of Thelma Todd's filmstrip, the magazine repurposed the single pictures, giving them new shape and meaning that actively required the reader's interpretation.

Remediation of movies was even more complex and multi-layered. It could provide additional information on a movie that the reader might have watched, but it could also be either a substitute or an alternative vision of it, grounding on the recreation of short stories inspired by the movie plot and on movie stage pictures. This so-called novelization was a kind of manipulation that suggests a specific way to interpret the story. An example could be the movie *Private Number* (in Italian *Difendo il mio Amore*),⁵² a love story hindered by social differences, as the protagonists are the scion of a rich family and a maid. The related novel in *Cinema Illustrazione Presenta* cannot avoid dealing with thorny matters such as divorce, but adapts the narration to the Italian context, even adding a religious reference absent from the movie. Indeed, keeping her marriage to her boss's son secret is for the girl 'a sacrifice that, as she seemed to feel,

47 De Berti, *Dallo schermo*, pp. 44–53.

48 Zeta, 'Consigli alle esordienti. Come la diva infila le calze', *Cinema Illustrazione Presenta*, 11.1 (1 January 1936), 7.

49 G. Valle, 'Hanno ucciso Thelma Todd?', *Cinema Illustrazione Presenta*, 11.1 (1 January 1936), 5.

50 Raffaele De Berti, 'Il nuovo Periodico. Rotocalchi tra fotogiornalismo, cronaca e costume', in *Forme e modelli del rotocalco*, 5.

51 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

52 Roy Del Ruth, dir., Twentieth Century Fox, 1936.

sanctified her love'.⁵³ The interpretation of the movie in the magazine is therefore moral, whereas the original meaning was socially oriented. Indeed, as De Berti has highlighted, most of the novelization of the time attempts to reach 'an accommodation between the radical or "scandalous" points of view internal to the movie and those external to it, which belong to the spectator with his or her expectations, lifestyles, social rules, and literary preferences'.⁵⁴ Novelizations thus provided a conservative and reassuring reading of a storyline — exactly the typical mediation performed by the editorial board of *rotocalchi*, which, as already pointed out in translations, always intended to soften foreign cultural influences, not giving them up, but adapting them to the target culture. A novelization, inserting a narrative into a literary context (especially if repetitive and thus recognizable), legitimized a movie and even its most prickly issues.

In a magazine such as *Cinema Illustrazione*, mediation could also emerge from the romanticized biographies of American actors, in which the stars emerge 'as figures that distinguish themselves from the others through some physical features that correspond to superficial psychological attitudes'.⁵⁵ Once again, stereotypes or masks, as requested by the typical mass-cultural simplification, guaranteed a mediation of values and trends.

In 1933, Rizzoli had the idea of creating a film company named, not by chance, Novella Film, the first production of which was the melodramatic movie *La signora di tutti* (*Everybody's Woman*) directed by internationally known director Max Ophüls and starring newcomer actress Isa Miranda. The script, based on a novel by Salvator Gotta serialized in *Novella*, tells the story of a charming *femme fatale* who ruins the lives of her many admirers and eventually dies without marrying the one she truly loved. Through stage pictures and previews, the readers of *Novella* could also follow the making of the movie, and this process was not only a modern multimedia marketing strategy but also part of the mediation of international models, being an attempt to create national stardom.⁵⁶

Some Final Remarks

The investigation above proves that Italian *rotocalchi*, in particular Rizzoli's illustrated weeklies, were not only a typical expression of middlebrow culture under Fascism, based on leisure, respectability, and consumption, but also mediators of foreign models of the very best kind as far as literature and cinema were concerned. They 'translated' foreign cultural products into the Italian reality, directing their interpretation through either a careful selection, a smart hybridization with other media, or irony. In so doing, they were certainly not alternative to the Fascist attitude to culture, femininity, and foreign politics, but did not blindly follow the regime's directives either. Even though from the late thirties they were obliged to propagandize more and more openly Fascist role models and patterns of behaviour, discrepancy was always present, and foreign cultures resisted all attempts to erase them in favour of cultural autarchy. Even in October 1938, when the regime had already gained control of almost every aspect of Italy's official cultural life through the Ministry of Popular Culture and a series of limiting measures, *Lei* could celebrate on its cover young Fascist athletes ('Purest Blossoms of Italian Youth')

53 'Difendo il mio Amore. Capitolo III', *Cinema Illustrazione Presenta*, 11.49 (2 December 1936), 13.

54 Raffaele De Berti, 'Leggere il film', in *La novellizzazione in Italia: Cartoline, fumetto, romanzo, rotocalco, radio, televisione*, ed. by Raffaele De Berti, *Bianco e Nero*, no. 548 (January–April 2004), 19–25 (p. 21).

55 De Berti, *Dallo schermo*, p. 43.

56 See Stephen Gundle, *Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2013).

and publish alongside a short story by American author Hughie Call and another by Dutch writer Jozias Pieter Baljé.⁵⁷

Rizzoli's illustrated magazines suggest the existence of at least three different forms of mediation. First, a failed mediation either caused by the actual impossibility of conciliating incompatible elements, as shown by a *Lei* photoshoot on the religious weddings of Duce's son Vittorio and nephew Vito Mussolini in February 1937, encircled by a short story by D. Decker (probably the American author Duane Decker) set in Broadway.⁵⁸ Second, the invention of a new cultural product, such as the fake Hollywood correspondence by Zavattini, indirectly conveying foreign cultural models for the purpose of pure entertainment. Third, the search for a point of equilibrium, either through irony, an accurate selection (what I called branding), or novelization.

Rotocalchi therefore appear to be a composite platform and Rizzoli's magazines possibly had a great influence on the cultural structures of interwar Italian society, a delayed rather than an immediate one, prefiguring and anticipating a more carefree, authentically consumerist, and relatively liberated post-war era.

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⁵⁷ *Lei*, 6.41 (11 October 1938).

⁵⁸ D. Decker, 'Critica teatrale', *Lei*, 5.7 (16 February 1937), 5.

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