Sounding Memories: Afterlives and Transmedial Reinterpretations of Italian (Post)Colonial Soundscapes

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Summary

This article investigates the trajectories of appropriation and reinterpretation of Italian (post)colonial soundscapes across a wide range of film products. Songs, melodies, and sonic tropes originally tied to the colonial experience re-emerged in different contexts, where they could evoke nostalgia, naturalise stereotypes, or serve as critical counterpoints. Adopting a transmedial perspective, the analysis traces how these auditory residues mediated shifting perceptions of empire, from the exoticising soundscapes of postwar documentaries to the critical re-significations evident in more recent films such as *La via dei babbuini* (1974) and *Asmarina* (2014). In so doing, I intend to highlight how colonial echoes persisted in the aural discourse as dynamic sites of nostalgia, memory, contestation, and reflection within Italian culture.

Non so se ti chiami Ciccirilli o Zazzà, sei nata in Asmara e sei un fior di beltà
Fanciulla asmarina sei più bella per me
ogni giorno alle tre suono e canto perché mi ricordo di te.

Asmarina Asmarina, di bellezza sei regina,
a vederti da lontano casca quello che ho in mano, asmarina guarda un po'?
Tu ti fai una risatina, io mi accascio alla panchina,
con un nodo nel canale che non scende e manco sale, inzuppato di sudor

Asmarina Asmarina, son deciso stamattina,
ma a vederti così bella a me vien la tremarella, Asmarina del mio cuor.[2]

When Pippo Maugeri premiered the above song titled "Asmarina" at the *Concorso Asmarino della Canzone* in 1956, its reception among the Italian community still living in Eritrea's capital city was immediate and enthusiastic.[3] The lyrics centre on an unnamed beloved girl

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referred to only as 'Asmarina', a nominalised adjective in which physical beauty is essentialised through the geographical provenance of Asmara. The piece follows a rather conventional popular idiom: An allegro marimba introduction in F-sharp sets a light-hearted tone, the verse then modulates to F-sharp minor to convey the melancholy of unspoken desire, and the refrain resolves again in the major mode, playfully narrating the protagonist's hesitation before confessing his love to the girl. In some respect, "Asmarina" represents a belated re-articulation of colonial-era imaginaries – an attenuated echo of explicitly colonial songs such as "Faccetta Nera" (1935) or "Africanella" (1894) – yet one that surfaced paradoxically in the aftermath of decolonisation. Its temporal displacement underscores the persistence of imperial echoes within Italian post-colonial music cultures (Chiriacò/Fusari 2026).

At a closer look, however, far from being a mere reiteration of previous (aural) discourses, the vicissitudes of "Asmarina" are a telling epitome of the complex trajectories and eclectic polarisations concerning Italian (post)colonial soundscapes. Broadcasted widely by Radio Marina[4] and by other local broadcasts, "Asmarina" indeed consolidated the sonic presence of the diminished but still influential Italian community in late 1950s Asmara (Del Boca 1984; Deninson 2003; Lucchetti 2012; Guazzini 2024).[5] The song's trajectory, however, soon exceeded the boundaries of the former settlers' community. From the 1960s onwards, Eritrean audiences appropriated the melody while discarding and resignifying the lyrics, transforming the piece into a vehicle for diasporic nostalgia and political activism. This act of resemanticisation exemplifies the original composition's re-routing across cultural and political contexts, shifting it from a projection of inhibited (post)colonial desire to an articulation of postcolonial resilience. Furthermore, as we shall see, the song's rearticulations provide the *fil rouge* of more recent films, hence exemplifying how songs, samples, and sounds originating in the colonial era continue to reverberate in its aftermath.

This brief overview of the transmedial and transcultural trajectory of "Asmarina" offers a telling example of the resilience and reconfiguration of colonial aural tropes that this article will examine. I employ the notion of a (post)colonial[6] soundscape to describe an auditory landscape featuring in some films shaped by the cultural, historical, and political legacies of colonialism, an environment encompassing sounds, music, noises, and broader sonic practices that simultaneously articulate nostalgia, resistance, and hybridity in postcolonial footage (Steingo/Sykes 2019). This article hence moves beyond Schafer's foundational theory of soundscape (1994) to examine the broader acoustic environments of Italian postcolonial cinema. While his original definition of soundscape referred to a composed, culturally situated sonic environment that shapes human perception and experience, his framework was primarily developed within Western contexts and focused on environmental sound ecology. Building on the concept of cinema soundscape (Ward 2019; Chion 1994), which recognizes that film sound extends beyond diegetic elements to encompass broader sonic cultures shaped by social power and listening practices, this study deploys soundscape as a methodological tool for revealing contested terrains where colonial memories negotiate meaning through what is heard, amplified, or silenced.

Post-colonial films, and the analysis of their auditory environments, demand a more nuanced analytical approach that accounts for the complex layers of colonial memory and legacies, diaspora, and transcultural encounter and remediations embedded within their sonic textures (Stokes 2021; Born/Hesmondhalgh 2000). I hence foreground how certain songs, motifs, yet also sounds and noises featuring in old colonial footage underwent processes of re-mediation during Italy's long and complex decolonisation, shaping the soundscape that informed the recollection of the colonial past. This framework allows us to approach (post) colonial soundscapes not merely as historical artefacts but as active sites of negotiation. The circulation, reinterpretation, censorship, or revival of audio debris thus function as sonic markers of contested and polarised memory, shaping and reflecting societal attitudes toward the colonial past among former colonial subjects and former colonial powers alike.

Specific attention will be paid to the analysis of the soundscapes of documentary and fiction films dealing with the colonial past produced between the 1940s and 1970s, examined through a transmedial methodology that highlights how sound participates in the re-signification of filmic images. The term 'transmedial' designates a constellation of analytical methodologies that conceive each medium as indissolubly interconnected with others. Unlike intermedial analysis – which primarily traces adaptations from one medium to another – a transmedial approach examines the convergences and crossovers between different media formats, with particular attention to how processes of remediation (Bolter/Grusin 1999) unfold through changes in single or multiple media dimensions (aural, visual, and beyond). This perspective foregrounds how such intersections generate expanded narrative horizons and new layers of meaning (Jenkins 2006; Elleström 2010). In the context of (post)colonial soundscapes accompanying diverse kinds of footage, this perspective allows us to understand how sonic elements present in earlier footage are revived and re-mixed to interact with, and re-signify, a post-colonial visual imagery. In doing so, they generate layered and dialectical experiences of colonial memory, alterity, and hybridity within a complex palimpsest of messages and representations (Radano/Olaniyan 2016).

The Sound of the Empire's End

Within colonial Italy, sound was integral to the ways in which the imperial project was imagined and narrated. At a moment when technologies such as the gramophone record and radio were rapidly consolidating their presence in everyday life, music became an especially powerful vehicle of communicating the imperial conquest (Chiriacò/Tamburini 2022; Bussotti 2015). The widespread appeal of these media, especially during the Fascist *ventennio*, amplified the reach of songs whose lyrics and melodies fashioned an exotic and erotic imagery, securing their popularity and embedding them within the broader cultural fabric of the period (Chiriacò 2024; Deplano 2015). Indeed, when we apply the adjective 'exotic' to the aural spectrum accompanying Fascist imperial propaganda, we do not refer to an intrinsic property of the soundscape, but rather to the evocation of alterity – in relation

to places, peoples, or social milieux – perceived as deeply different from Western norms and musical discourses. Ralph P. Locke, for example, describes exotic music as the "borrowing" or imitation of elements from diverse cultures, not necessarily with accurate ethnographic fidelity, but instead to evoke an idealised or fantasised otherness (Locke 2009, 27-31).

In Italy, the rearticulation of this exotic, colonial-derived soundscape took shape during the protracted withdrawal from Italy's former colonies. Between 1941 and 1943 Italy lost its African empire *manu militari*: The territories passed under British Military Administration, while Haile Selassie regained sovereignty over Ethiopia. After the war, Italy's democratic governments tried through diplomacy to retain influence over its pre-1935 colonies, an initiative supported across parliament until 1948 but which ultimately proved unsuccessful (Morone 2019; Deplano/Pes 2024). The 1947 Peace Treaty forced Italy to renounce its colonies, but left unresolved their administration: Libya gained independence in 1949, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952, and Somalia entered a ten-year Italian Trusteeship (AFIS, 1950-60), an unprecedented case of a defeated power ruling its former colony (Morone 2011).

These political negotiations were paralleled by a dense field of cultural production. A propaganda campaign orchestrated by the Italian African Office, which remained active until 1953, sought to legitimise Italy's continuing presence overseas. At the same time, colonial lobbies, associations, and various cultural agents generated narratives that celebrated Italian 'civilising' achievements while eliding the violence of conquest and domination. Crucially, this cultural work was not confined to the visual or textual domain, it was also acoustic. Through radio broadcasts, musical compositions, and public ceremonies, colonial nostalgia was staged as a sonic experience that resonated across the peninsula (Mancosu 2023). These transmedial practices contributed to the formation and circulation of colonial memory, where sound not only accompanied but actively re-signified the public imagery in post-war popular culture.

A striking case is La Settimana INCOM 48 (1947), the first newsreel to address Ethiopia after the fall of the Fascist Empire, whereas earlier shorts had focused on colonies such as Libya or Eritrea.[7] The footage documents a military parade in Addis Ababa. The images alone dignify both the emperor Haile Selassie and the Ethiopian forces; any trace of the 'exoticism' or 'primitivism' that had characterised Italian depictions of African landscapes and peoples in earlier films is conspicuously absent. The soundscape, however, stages a counter-narrative. The extra-diegetic commentary and the soundtrack – dominated by marimbas and tribal-like percussion – reintroduce tropes of exotic alterity. The interplay between 'dignifying' images and 'exoticising' sounds exemplifies the frictions between visual and acoustic registers, highlighting the ways in which commentary and soundtrack dialectically contribute to the re-signification of (post)colonial imagery. Such orientalist traits – that is, Western musical representations that imagine the 'Orient' through a colonial-oriented, Eurocentric lens – do not authentically reflect non-Western musical practices. Instead, they rely on a stylised construction of cultural otherness, often laden with stereotypes of sensuality, mystery, or inferiority. Within this framework, exoticism is reframed through the intermingling

of these orientalist devices with nostalgic recollections of the past, thereby underpinning a desire for a renewed Italian presence capable of resuming the modernisation of the former colonial space (Revuluri 2016; Scott 1998).

A revealing aspect of this discourse is the use of two highly significant words within Italian colonial aural culture: "Faccetta Nera". These are the title of a well-known marching song, composed in 1935 by Giuseppe Micheli to celebrate the anticipated conquest of the empire by Fascist troops, which epitomises the figure of the Ethiopian woman as a 'little black face'. The lyrics exalted the invasion of Ethiopia as the moment in which Italian (male) soldiers would set the *faccette nere* free from backwardness and slavery. Written prior to the promulgation of the racial laws, which prohibited interracial unions, the song contained thinly veiled allusions to the sexual availability of Ethiopian women for Italian men. These overtones, however, were deemed inappropriate by Mussolini, and the lyrics were subsequently modified to align with the new racial legislation.[8] The original meaning of the song was, however, never entirely forgotten, neither during nor after the Fascist imperial period. From the 1950s onwards, it came to evoke a form of imperial nostalgia – particularly within certain right-wing circles – by recalling the 'good old days' of a virile and predatory conception of the national ethos (Chiriacò/Fusari 2026; O'Healy 2009; Mastrangelo 2006; Pinkus 1995). In the film under discussion, although the camera portrays a military parade, the voice-over says that "i soldati vogliono far colpo sulle 'faccette nere' occhieggianti tra il pubblico". The use of the word 'occhieggianti' associated with the 'little black faces' meant to replicate the trope of African women as loose and tempting the white males. Nevertheless, the sarcastic mockery with which the voice-over describes the Ethiopian soldiers aims to portray them as incapable of properly satisfying the gazes and flirts of the *faccette nere*. As a result, the ogling of Ethiopian females very much addresses the Italian audience.

Another and in some respects more telling example of the aural rearticulation of colonial tropes appears in the documentary *Una lettera dall'Africa* (1951), directed by Leonardo Bonzi and Maner Lualdi. The film reworks the loss of the colonies – both visually and aurally – through a resilient narrative centred on national qualities (Dotto 2024; Zinni 2016). Bonzi and Lualdi were among the last representatives of the adventurous travellers who, during the 1950s, documented their exploits in Africa according to a travelogue format and within an exoticising aesthetics. The footage documents a 12,000 km journey from Libya to Kenya (following the Nile through Egypt, Sudan, and Uganda, but diverting in Eritrea and Somalia), making the film very much a "mappa sentimentale legata all'incontro con 'gli italiani o il loro ricordo'", as Liliana Ellena notes when quoting the film's opening words (Ellena 2015, 19). Orientalist traits and nostalgic recollection of the past intermingle in order to reframe a form of exoticism that, in fact, underpins the desire for a new Italian presence able to resume the modernization of the former colonial space.

Although *Una lettera* tries to leave behind the colonial past and, especially, its Fascist phase, it nonetheless advocates a subtle patronising control over those populations and cultures that are still depicted as out of the time of Western modernity. The analysis of the film's intricate sonic dimension confirms this reading, as voices, noises, and music actively

convey this nostalgic yet exotic discourse. The opening scene is particularly telling: The camera pans across a marina in Tripoli when the loud blast of a ship's siren abruptly shatters the silence. Added extra-diegetically, the horn's explosive volume softens as the camera shifts to a group of people, later revealed as the film crew. The interviewer addresses Leonardo Bonzi and Maner Lualdi: As soon as Lualdi describes their reportage as "un racconto sentimentale, quasi una lettera dall'Africa", timpani roll and horns blare loudly, introducing an ominous symphonic passage where sharp, dissonant violin legato contrasts with the severe low notes of the wind instruments. This sonic juxtaposition between the ship's siren and the subsequent raspy string symphony is a powerful metaphor that enables us to read the ambiguous agenda of the film. On the one hand, the siren is reminiscent of the numerous scenes through which previous Fascist films used to show the departure of Italian settlers to the colonies, a connection made explicit in the subsequent scene, shot on a boat that is approaching Tripoli's harbour. On the other hand, the hazy soundscape evoked by the symphonic music conveys a sense of mysterious adventure, as it accompanies the camera and the voice-over in the re-articulation of the Western, dominant gaze over the 'exotic' African landscape. The passages filmed at the Villaggio Bianchi (al-Zahrā, south-west of Tripoli – an Italian agricultural settlement) epitomise, in an even clearer way, the tension between exoticism and praise of the Italian presence. Scenes of a Libyan farmer drawing water from a well with a cow are interspersed with close-ups of a pulley, whose mechanism allows large quantities of water to be lifted. As the camera slowly zooms in on the device, the combined sounds of the pulley and the water stream rise above the background flute melody. While the pulley's intrusive noise signals Western technological superiority, the murmuring water evokes the familiar trope of the Italian presence 'making the desert bloom'. This crescendo of sounds thus underscores the tension between recalling the Italian colonial past, new forms of exploitation, and the crafting of renewed exoticism, reinforced through the conventional 'orientalist' scales of the symphonic arrangement.[9]

The whole soundscape functions here as a technology of spatial imagination, whereby the former colonial power mapped territories sonically, using musical differences and contrast to naturalise a new form of political domination (Stokes 2004). Accordingly, the noisy spectres of colonialism continue to resonate across Libya's landscape and soundscape. The short circuit between the modernity evoked by vivid Ferraniacolor[10] images and the nostalgic/orientalist soundscape does not engender any critical awareness concerning the colonial past. Rather, it is revealing of the attempt to offer a consistent memorialisation of the Italian colonial period, which is simultaneously distanced from the present time of the viewer, yet considered to show the unaltered qualities of former Italian settlers still working there.

The AFIS and the Return of Exotic Soundscapes

Post-war documentary films set in Somalia during the AFIS (1950-1960) crafted a selective colonial memory, portraying Italy's impact in Africa as beneficial, while depicting local people and landscapes as 'backward', so to justify 'redemption' via independence or trusteeship (Mancosu 2021; Zinni 2016). Sound effects, music, and voices reinforced racialised, exploitative narratives of spatial domination, while 'exotic' scales and 'primitive' noises bolstered colonial stereotypes, framing Africans as needing Italian guidance. The aural dimension hence subtly harmonised discourses of taming and 'civilizing' African landscapes with alluring and attractive aesthetics for Western audiences.

Especially the documentary *Somalia d'oggi* (1955) features an aural dimension that is still imbued with resilient forms of colonial imagery. This 1955 colour film is about the activities of the Italian Trusteeship administration in the former colony, five years from its beginning. *Somalia d'oggi* adopts a travelogue-oriented style, addressing political issues only briefly, while exoticising and orientalist traits remain pervasive. This becomes clear from the opening sentence, which highlights the fact that Somalia is truly far away from Western modernity, an 'exotic' and 'genuine' land full of adventurous surprises. The political impetus for the claims over the former colonies that characterised the cultural production of the 1940s is receding, by giving way to a form of post-colonial exoticism, which is nonetheless domesticated and tailored for the Italian audience. Music and sound effects epitomise this shift from political stances to the commodified spectacle of African alterity (Falcucci/Mancosu 2024; Ponzanesi 2014; Chrisman 2003; Huggan 2001). Wide-angle pan shots of Mogadishu's buildings are backed up by an adagio, symphonic piece of music, in which an oboe and a flute play double harmonic, major scale melodies that are supported by a diminished and consequently dissonant, fixed-chord background orchestra of cellos. While the flute melody outlines a rather standard 'orientalist' tune,[11] the diminished chords in the background convey a sense of dramatic and persistent tension, making the subsequent resolution to the consonant chord more impactful.

This resolution leads the viewer to the core section of the film, which is about the education of Somali pupils. Here the background music speeds up and becomes joyful: The pizzicato arpeggios and trills of violins accompany this section's subplot, about a shy boy who is secretively looking into a classroom from the outside of the school. The staged nature of this passage becomes obvious when the camera takes a close-up shot of a smiling student inside the classroom, who invites the shy boy to join the lesson. A quick cut takes the viewer outside the school again, where the teacher – a Somali native who, according to another passage, has been trained by Italians – suddenly grabs the shy boy's arm and brings him into the classroom. Although the hilarious background music makes these scenes resemble an innocent farce, the so-called 'dolce violenza del maestro' forcing the child into the classroom is an embodied debris of the violence characterizing the imposition of the former settlers' epistemic order.

As soon as the documentary reaches its last section, the music becomes remarkably exotic, featuring melodies using African wind and percussion instruments. These stylistic choices point the audience to an uncritical and exotic narrative about the presence of Italy in Somalia, avoiding any explicit reference to the memory of the colonial past. The score and sound effects act as the ubiquitous thread that attunes the film narrative consistently to the need to show the inevitability of the Italian presence. The diverse sonic forms that the films use to 'return' to exoticism aim to place Africa back in an atavistic and atemporal dimension, which compels the Italians to continue to depict themselves as the bearers of civilization and modernity. As a result, despite the attempt to offer a renewed exotic perspective that is disentangled from political contingencies, these films on AFIS, in fact, resonate with the discourse through which the Italian governments claimed back a new and direct role in the former colonies between 1946 and 1949. Those claims assumed a positive recollection of the pre-Fascist colonial period, during which orientalist, adventurous, and 'civilizing' narratives dominated as opposed to the subsequent, aggressive and technological aesthetics typical of Fascist imperial propaganda (Ugolotti 2024; Mancosu 2022; Fidotta 2016).

Racialising Sounds: Black/White Noises

Alongside the political stance outlined above, the representational mechanisms concerning the former Italian colonies began – slowly but inexorably – to shift from the mid-1950s onwards. This shift was marked by the erasure of traces of both the old and the ongoing Italian presence. As a result, newsreels and documentaries increasingly emphasised an atavistic, timeless, and exotic dimension, presented as the defining feature of the former colonial space (Pratt 1985). *Dahlak* (1953) by Vittorio Carpignano and *Danze dall'Eritrea* (1953) by Guido Manera are two examples of ethno-anthropologic footage that mentions neither the colonial past nor the Italian communities still living in the former colonies.[12] In such documentaries, produced by small and independent companies, diegetic sounds recorded while shooting Dahalik and Kunama people and their habits are paired with 'tribal' percussions added extra-diegetically, a choice meant to enforce the claim made by the footage, namely that these populations contain a wild authenticity. The condescending role of the voice-over, the ubiquitous use of 'tribal' sounds, the close-ups of smiling black faces, and the details of poor and handcrafted tools are all elements that 're-orientalise' and 'retribalise' the former colonial space (Lau/Mendes 2011; Boehmer 1998).

The artificial reconstruction of exotic backwardness through aural practices can be spotted in films like Giorgio Moser's *Kumula e il leone* (1953) and Adriano Zancanella's *Caccia grossa in Somalia* (1955). *Kumula* is about two Somali boys who try to hunt a lion in order to sell it. With the exception of the first scenes, where Moser explains the plot, the film strives to adopt the viewpoint of the two local boys, but without succeeding. This is because both the commentary and the editing – as a result of which the film features slow-paced scenes of wild landscapes populated by crocodiles, lions, and monkeys – engender a portrayal that

indulges the audience's taste for 'exotic' and safari-like cultural products, rather than offering a perspective of the lives of local people. The soundscape of these films is enriched by animal calls, like the lion's roaring or the monkey's cry, all samples synchronized during the editing. The scene in which the camera gets particularly close to a small monkey is revealing of the attempt to evoke a wild atmosphere; although the chimpanzee is eating, the audience hears its non-diegetic cry. Such an artificial synchronization foregrounds the former colonial space as an exotic commodity, a horizon that elicits exploratory and exploitative desires while indirectly removing the traces of Italy's presence in Africa.

The portrayal of the wild landscape assumes a farcical tone in some scenes of *Caccia grossa in Somalia* where a group of elephants, while they quietly graze, are 'dubbed' by a trombone emulating their trumpeting. A very similar use of brass sounds in order to mimic local animals engenders a more deliberately comical tone in the *Settimana INCOM* 424 (1950).[13] The film depicts an 'ordinary' afternoon in Mogadishu. It opens with boys playing in the street, their voices framed by a commentary likening them to Italian teenagers after homework. A tonal shift occurs as the camera lingers on a camel "ruminating kilometres of track", then on a white man handling a snake, underscored by a languid, orientalising score. The commentary later sighs "occhi di gazzella! dicono gli innamorati alla loro donna", while gazelles eat from a girl's hands. Here, the music changes abruptly. The relaxed and 'orientalising' score gives way to a comic trombone melody as the same girl bottle-feeds a baby hippopotamus. The scene's covert eroticisation of the Somali setting slides into a comic, yet racist, conflation of animals and Black humans (Falcucci 2024).

This racialising use of the soundscape opens a preliminary reflection on the complex aural dimension of Italian post-colonial non-fiction films. As observed by Louise Meintjes, recording technologies became instruments of colonial knowledge production, reflecting hierarchies between European 'civilization' and African 'rawness' (Meintjes 2003). Despite the visual continuity with previous colonial propaganda we have been noticing so far, a more ethnographic, travelogue-oriented perspective became increasingly prominent. The footage epitomises an attempt to construct an 'ethno-realistic' aesthetics, presenting certain areas as virtually untouched by Western colonialism. This, of course, entailed the erasure of any trace of the previous Italian presence. Yet the dominant perspective on Africa remained unchanged, grounded in the artificial authenticity of the soundtracks. Their soundscapes often lack the raw, unpolished texture of on-site diegetic recording that typically characterises formats aspiring to represent reality – which is all the more striking in a decade when debates on truth and reality in documentary film were already circulating, debates that would eventually culminate in the definition of *cinéma vérité* (Bruzzi 2006; Corner 2002). Instead, voices, music, effects, and noises did not simply illustrate, but actively shaped post-colonial reality in line with the agenda of the former colonisers.

The combination of visual tropes and sound modules, often taken from the colonial period, created a discourse that was hardly synchronized with the global decolonial transitions of the 1950s. This out-of-synchness between aesthetic choices reminiscent of the past and decolonial momentum refers to contrasting temporalities, which were aurally substantiated

in the shrilling juxtaposition of several musical styles: symphonic marches and joyful motifs recalling the 'good old days' of the formal colonial presence and previous imperial propaganda; 'orientalist' melodies that tended to reframe an exotic portrayal of African human and geographical landscapes; mechanical noises embodying Western technological industriousness and supremacy; local instruments epitomising African backwardness and triviality; jazzy and oneiric nuances triggering (post)colonial desires. This cacophony reflects the ambiguous discourse about the transition from the former colonial presence to a new, and indirect, form of hegemony over Africa. In fact, the aural discordance of the narratives about the future of Italy in Africa is at odds with the contrapuntal strategy of critical thinking suggested by Edward Said, that is, "a different kind of reading and interpretation […] both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse act" (Said 1994, 50; Bartine 2015).

The conflation of diverse sound narratives might be synthesized via the *white noise* paradigm.[14] White noise maintains a constant amplitude across the audible frequency range, as it combines all audible frequencies. Its texture can mask other sounds, which is why it is often used to induce relaxation or sleep. The dissonant sonic stimuli in the films discussed above operated in a comparable way. The overwhelming blend of aural discourses, tones, and harmonies metaphorically drowned out any critical discourse or contrapuntal reading of the colonial past, by instead reinforcing exoticising narratives as well as neo-colonial epistemologies. Within this framework, the adjective 'white' associated with 'noise' acquires further methodological significance, exposing the racialising discourses embedded in (post)colonial soundscapes of the film production about the former colonies. African 'black' noises were accentuated through 'orientalist' melodies, animal calls, and the deployment of so-called 'tribal' instruments. These sonic elements reactivated entrenched colonial-era preconceptions, portraying Africa and its inhabitants as inherently atavistic and backward. At the same time, they catered to the expectations of Italian audiences while reinforcing the white-Western markers of their own identity. In this way, the films' soundscapes helped re-signify Africa as a distant yet familiar space, one in which Italy could perform its post-fascist/post-colonial racial identity and project new forms of economic, political, and cultural authority.

Critical Resignifications

The footage discussed above provides a compelling example of how non-fiction films – aligned with the broader politics of colonial memory shaped by government and hegemonic groups (Pes 2024; Mancosu 2023) – used soundscapes to construct an acritical discourse on Italy's past and ongoing presence in Africa. From the 1960s onwards, however, the sonic debris of the empire began to articulate a more complex engagement with the past, one that sought critical reflection yet often perpetuated exoticising narratives about Africa's struggle for independence. A case in point is the widely known film *Africa Addio* (1966) by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi. Despite ostensibly celebrating decolonisation, the film has

been criticised for its colonialist representation of local cultures, portraying African peoples as incapable of self-governance. Here, the soundscape actively reinforces this misconstruction, as recurring 'tribal' sounds frame images of local peoples and cultures, shaping audience perceptions in line with longstanding colonial tropes (Colliva 2024; Giuliani 2018; Loparco 2014).

Although (post)colonial soundscapes are deeply rooted in earlier modes of representation, the use and shaping of aural memories of Italian colonialism resists neat interpretative categories – such as nostalgic/racialising versus critical. The liminal and creative treatment of older colonial tunes and sounds, for example, becomes especially evident in the analysis of the distinctive 1974 feature film *La via dei babbuini*. Directed by Luigi Magni, the film is a comedy with exotic-existential undertones, in which the protagonist Fiorenza (Catherine Spaak) abandons her comfortable yet monotonous life in Rome to visit her dying father, an old Italian colonialist who has remained in Eritrea (Lionel Stander). Her encounter with the African reality and with the living memory of the Italian presence – embodied above all by the *insabbiato* Getulio, interpreted by Pippo Franco[15] – enables the film to move beyond the conventional theme of a generic return to the exotic and to situate this narrative within the broader framework of memorialising Italy's expansionist venture, while also engaging with it in a critical manner (Mancosu 2023).

The soundscape of the movie indeed reinforces this oscillating mechanism between nostalgic evocation and criticism. In one of the first scenes, when Getulio escorts Fiorenza from the airport of Asmara to Massawa, he begins to hum the opening verse of "Faccetta Nera": "se tu dall'altipiano guardi il mare…". However, Getulio immediately cuts himself off, almost in embarrassment, in an interplay of sonic nostalgia and unease that resurfaces in the second part of the film. Orazio (Fiorenza's husband), while travelling across Eritrea in search of his wife, is captivated by a seductive Eritrean woman and chases after her exclaiming, "Africanella cara, Africanella bella, l'Italia resta in Africa, tu rieste mpiett'a mme", quoting the 1894 song by Roberto Bracco and Carlo Clausetti. Yet Orazio, too, a cultured and elegant character, feels ashamed of this memory ("ma che sto dicendo, siamo impazzati?!"), though he nonetheless redirects his desire towards an exotic-erotic imagery that was widely circulated in the commercial and cinematic imagination of the 1970s (Giuliani 2018). According to the director's notes, there was also meant to be a reference to another famous colonial song – "Carovane del Tigrai" (1936) – during the scene of Fiorenza's father's funeral; however, the song ultimately did not appear in the scene.

The film's precise evocation of colonial memories – through these songs and various passages directly referencing the Italian presence in Eritrea – is partially offset by extended, largely decontextualised sequences with a documentary-like texture, depicting animals such as lions or baboons mating or grazing in the savannah, accompanied by the 'inevitable' African rhythms and melodies. The final sequence shows a 'classic' walk through the savannah at sunset with Fiorenza, symbolically shedding her past and, in fact, prompting the viewer to forget the many remnants of Italian colonialism and its sonic propaganda. Therefore, the recollection of the aural and visual memories of colonialism featuring in the first section of

the film somewhat has corrupted of the 'pristine' and 'atavistic' African landscape, the aural description of 'primordial' nature is meant to accompany Fiorenza's awakening, guiding her towards a rediscovery of her inner, and primordial, nature.

If the resignification of images and sounds coming from the colonial past featuring in *La via dei babbuini* is still imbued with exotic and erotic references, most recent productions have used (post)colonial soundscapes to sustain an overtly critical discourse on Italian colonial legacy. This is the case of "Asmarina", the song which inspires the same-name documentary. *Asmarina* (directed by Alan Maglio and Medhin Paolos, 2014) evolves in three intertwined sections, all aimed at giving voice to people moving from the Horn of Africa to Italy. The first part situates these stories within the legacy of the Italian colonial past. The second explores how the Ethio-Eritrean community has redefined its identity in Italy, while the final section examines the articulation of the Habesha community and the complex integration of African refugees. The documentary unfolds like a family album, with still images, songs, and voices narrating migration and settlement experiences in the city (Mancosu 2018; Camilli 2016). The interplay between 'official' and private memories is evident in the use of the song "Asmarina", which inspires the title of the film, and which stands as the example of (aural) hybridisation and critical re-signification.

The hybridisation of musical forms is a foundational element of Eritrean cultural and diasporic identity. Following 1941, the expansion of Asmara's Kagnew Radio Station – the above-mentioned Radio Marina – facilitated unprecedented access to American musical genres including rock and roll, soul, and jazz, which local ensembles rapidly assimilated. The establishment of Mahber Tiyatr Asmera (MaTA – a theatrical and music association) in 1961 marked a significant institutional development, serving as the principal incubator for Eritrean musical talent. MaTA's productions increasingly articulated Eritrean cultural specificity, though escalating repression following Ethiopia's annexation (1962) and the socialist coup in 1974 led to its dissolution in 1974. Coeval formations like the Zerai Deres Band exemplified an aesthetic syncretism, blending Western influences – from Italian musicians, including saxophonist Gaetano Raimi – alongside local styles and instruments (Berhe 2020).

The 1974 regime change in Addis Ababa triggered a major reconfiguration. Musical production moved from urban centres to territories controlled by the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, which established cultural sections to craft narratives and media about their struggle and vision of national identity. This 'front music' integrated local instruments and melodies while serving as a powerful tool for political mobilisation, reinforcing national consciousness both within Eritrea and across the diaspora through systematic distribution abroad. Music thus became an indispensable instrument of transnational resistance (Warwick 1997). Against this backdrop, we can infer the multifaceted purpose of using the song "Asmarina" as the leitmotif of the 2014 film. The original Italian lyrics celebrated a beautiful girl from Asmara; yet, the film shows how the song was translated into Tigrinya, acquiring a new meaning that reflects not simply Eritreans' nostalgia for Asmara abroad, but also their struggle against what they perceived as new forms of imperialism – namely the Ethiopian subjugation of their country.

Asmarina central section uses footage showing the Eritrean singer Wedi Shawl performing the Tigrinya version of Maugeri's song at the Eritrean Convention in Bologna in the late 1970s. From 1974 onwards, Bologna regularly hosted the congresses of the EFLE (Eritreans for Liberation in Europe), which attracted thousands of militants and supporters. The success of these events inaugurated a fertile tradition that lasted until the early 1990s; afterwards, the festival was moved to Asmara after its liberation. The festival drew audiences mainly from across Europe (Italy, Germany, Sweden, the UK, Switzerland), while speakers and musical groups came primarily from Eritrea, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia. It hence offered diaspora communities a rare opportunity to experience Eritrean music and interact directly with performers – while advocating political agency and transnational solidarity with liberation movements (Berhe 2020). Therefore, we can now fully understand why the *Asmarina* places particular emphasis on this event and on the re-signification of its title song. While the original lyrics reinforce Italian colonial myths, the film shows how the Eritrean diasporic community has layered new meanings onto the song, transforming it into a complex palimpsest of critical memories. In doing so, by using the song's re-articulations as the film's *filrouge*, *Asmarina* engages both with Italy's colonial past and with the contemporary diasporic realities of Eritreans abroad, making it a central lens through which the film explores memory, identity, and political reflection.

Conclusion

The transmedial analysis of Italian (post)colonial soundscapes across film, music, and media reveals the persistent yet malleable presence of imperial echoes in postwar and (post)colonial Italian culture. The trajectories of music, sounds, and sonic tropes show how the colonial past has been both evoked and reconfigured during different phases of Italy's peculiar decolonisation. In early postwar productions, colonial nostalgia was often reproduced through exoticising soundscapes, orientalist melodies, and the amplification of so-called 'tribal' noises, reinforcing racialised hierarchies and presenting Africa as a distant, atavistic space yet to be tamed. At the same time, the reuse and translation of colonial-era songs created opportunities for critical resignification. Films like *La via dei babbuini* and documentaries such as *Asmarina* demonstrate how sonic materials could be reappropriated, introducing tension between nostalgic memory and critical reflection. In particular, the transformation of "Asmarina" from its original Italian lyrics to a Tigrinya version exemplifies how postcolonial communities creatively engage with inherited cultural artifacts, turning instruments of colonial representation into vehicles of diasporic memory and counter-narrative. Likewise, the interplay between 'official' and private memories highlights the liminal space in which Italian colonial soundscapes continue to circulate, oscillating between exoticisation and critique. Ultimately, these transmedial trajectories show that colonial soundscapes are not static relics but dynamic frameworks through which past and present interact. By tracing the persistence, adaptation, and contestation of these sonic forms, we can better understand

the complex ways in which Italian colonialism has been remembered, reinterpreted, and problematised. In this sense, the study of sound – in its complex interaction with other media and aesthetic forms – provides a vital lens for grasping the enduring legacies of empire, showing how sonic debris can at once evoke nostalgia, reinforce stereotypes, yet also foster critical reflections and contrapuntal narratives and histories.

Endnotes

1 Gianmarco Mancosu is tenure-track associate professor in Modern and Contemporary Italy at the University of Macerata, Department of Political Science, Communication, and International Relations.

2 "I don't know if you're Ciccirilli or Zazzà, you born in Asmara, you're beauty writ large | Asmarina girl, you're the brightest to me, every day around three, I play and I sing 'cause you're still in my heart |Asmarina, Asmarina, you're a queen of sweetest splendour | when I see you from afar, I drop whatever I hold, Asmarina, don't you know? | You just give a little giggle, and I sink onto the bench | with a knot inside my throat that won't go down or up, and I'm drenched in my sweat | Asmarina, Asmarina, I was bold a while ago | but you're so dazzling when you pass that I tremble, lose my stance, Asmarina of my heart."

3 *Ricordi in musica (Omaggio all'indimenticabile Pippo)*, in: https://www.maitacli.it/canzone (last access 01.09.2025).

4 Since 1953, Radio Marina was controlled by the US Navy, becoming Kagnew station; nevertheless, it maintained its original Italian name because it used to be the radio station of the Italian Navy in the 1930s, cf. http://www.kagnewstation.com (last access 01.09.2025).

5 The capital of Eritrea was still home to ten thousands of Italians. While most settlers had left between 1941 and 1943, many remained. Under the British Military Administration (BMA) in the 1940s, political and cultural life was de-fascistised, yet much of the socio-economic structure persisted: Numerous shops, bars, restaurants, music halls, and cinemas continued to be run by former colonisers. With Eritrea's federation to Ethiopia in 1952, however, the rise of a cosmopolitan middle class began to erode the divide between former rulers and subjects, forcing many ex-colonists to renegotiate their (post)colonial identity.

6 In this article, 'post-colonial' (hyphenated) will be used to indicate a temporal fracture, in this case the period which comes after the formal colonial presence. '(Post)colonialism' (with the prefix in round brackets) will instead designate the continuity of political and cultural processes which started during the colonial season, and which continued in its aftermath. Postcolonialism/postcolonial (not hyphenated) refers to the political, ideological, and scholarly critique of colonial history, practices, and knowledge, whose temporalities may or may not be consistent with the political events which brought about the end of the empires.

7 La Settimana INCOM (1946-65) was a weekly newsreel series that, de facto, took over the role previously held by the fascist *Istituto Luce*. Shown in cinemas before feature films, it reported on politics, culture, and everyday life while promoting an optimistic and capitalist vision of recon-

struction and modernisation. Backed by the Christian Democrats governments, it functioned as a key instrument of consensus-building and soft propaganda in postwar Italy, ensuring continuity with earlier models of audiovisual nation-building.

8 http://www.lorien.it/X_INNI/Pg_Canzoni-D/Faccetta-Nera.html (last access 04.09.2025).

9 The background music of newsreels and documentaries about the former colonies often featured melodies based on the double harmonic major scale. This scale has two augmented seconds (an interval of three semitones). They arise from flattening the second and the sixth note of the major scale. Augmented seconds are common in the music of North Africa and the Middle East, and may therefore sound 'exotic' to a Western audience (Hewitt 2013).

10 Ferrania was an Italian industry that produced films for video and photo cameras. It introduced several technologies, including colour film (Colombo 2004).

11 The double harmonic major scale is common in the music of North Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, but sounds 'exotic' to a Western audience. In a diminished triad, the middle and two top notes of the chord – called the third and the fifth – are flattened.

12 *Dahlak*, dir. by Vittorio Carpignano (1953); *Danze dell'Eritrea*, dir. by Guido Manera (Corona Cinematografica, 1953). These rare films have not yet been digitized. The original reels are held at the AFCB.

13 'Dalla Somalia fiere in libertà', La Settimana INCOM 424 (5 April 1950).

14 White noise can be heard here https://mynoise.net/NoiseMachines/whiteNoiseGenerator.php (last access03.06.2019).

15 Italian soldiers and workers who arrived in Africa, particularly during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-36), and who – for various reasons (desertion; romantic relationships with local women that contravened the racist laws) – distanced themselves from the white community and lived among Africans, were labelled with the derogatory term "*insabbiati*" (Le Houréou 1996).

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