

**«Nimm mich mit ans himmelblaue Mittelmeer (wenn du Lire hast)»:
German Schlagerfilme as example of cultural exchange and diplomacy in Italian-German
relationships of the post-war period**

Description

The post-war period saw the emergence of a new film genre in West Germany, which portrayed Southern Europe, and Italy in particular, as idyllic, ideal, postcard-like settings. Music plays a central role in these comedies, which focus mainly on the songs and dances the actors perform as the plot unfolds. Indeed, the stars of these films were mostly famous singers of the time, such as the Austrian Peter Alexander, or the German Peter Kraus; but some of them were also Italian singers such as the actress and singer Caterina Valente. *Schlagerfilme*, as they became known in German, and especially their music, often revolved around the most trivial stereotypes about Italy, which is depicted as the country of sun, love, relax and happiness.

The history of these clichés can be traced back to a long tradition of travels around Italy, as described by writers and artists for centuries; in the post-war period, however, they acquired a new social dimension, as they ceased being confined to aristocratic and cultivated circles and were effectively incorporated into the imaginary of the middle class. Significantly, the same years also witnessed the growth of mass tourism, and its spreading throughout Western Europe. *Schlagerfilme* were tightly connected with this new trend in terms of their locations, but they also played on common dreams and desires of the time. In fact, by constantly featuring Italian beach resorts, monuments and tourist landmarks, they acted as *de facto* promoters of the *Bel Paese* as a holiday destination. The question then arises as to whether *Schlagerfilme* should be seen as a merely mechanical, passive response to the desires of the emerging middle class, or if they took a more active role, directing the desires of German society towards a suitable object.

That tourism should be used as a policy instrument was not unheard of at the time; in fact, Italy and Germany had begun implementing such policies in the late 1930s, as the two newly allied regimes sought to strengthen the bond between their respective populations. It is no coincidence that *Schlagerfilme* were first produced only a short time after the end of the Second World War, as West Germany suddenly found itself to be once more on the same political side with Italy, after years of war and occupation. Furthermore, the political elites were at that time perfectly aware of the persuasive power of cinema: in addition to the well-known use of films as a tool for propaganda under the Nazi regime, a German-Italian governmental project to co-produce films about German history in 1953 provides further evidence for the continued use of cinema for political goals. This latter project had two aims: to engender a sense of mutual trust among Western Europeans, and to promote liberal Western values in contrast to those of the communist bloc (DI MAIO 2014).

Main questions and Hypothesis

In this project I will seek to address the following question: to what extent is it possible to identify a political aim in *Schlagerfilme*, namely the strengthening of the relationship between Germany and Italy, possibly in an anti-Soviet perspective? My hypothesis is that *Schlagerfilme* could be considered as instrumental to a policy of cultural diplomacy, aimed at re-establishing a sense of mutual trust and understanding between the two nations. Their task was also to show and promote a modern, European and capitalistic lifestyle, which could be only possible thanks to the *Pax Americana* that West-European countries were experiencing after The Second World War. The Italian context, depicted as happy and friendly, showed a kind of domesticated exoticism: landscapes and habits were unusual to the German public, but were not accompanied by a sense of mystery or fear. *Schlagerfilme* do not try to reconcile Germany and Italy by promoting a sense of common identity; rather, they play on well-distinct, opposed and complementary national cultural

identities, depicted as colourful, spectacular and ultimately inoffensive. In this particular framework, two other questions are of particular interest: first of all, what role did music play within this diplomatic framework? While the persuasive power of music in this context can be given for granted, it could be of particular interest to investigate the particular ways in which the music was geared by film producers in order to convey the political message of *Schlagerfilme* more effectively. Since music is a central element in these films, I plan to qualify the role played by songs and to place it, together with other elements of these comedies, in the context of the cultural diplomacy of the time. I also intend to pay close attention to the way stereotypes about Italy evolved as they left the aristocratic and cultivated environment they had originated in, and became part of the popular culture of the middle and lower classes, at which *Schlagerfilme* were ultimately aimed. Finally, it is also essential to investigate which role the increasing mass-tourism played in this process of cultural diplomacy. Therefore, political issues, musical and cinematic strategies and tourism policies will form a triangle of connections and mutual references.

Aims

With this project I intend to shed some light on a rather neglected sector of cinema and music production, and to underline its political and cultural role in both German and Italian society in the first decades of the Cold War. Combining musical cinema, political strategies and touristic phenomena will also offer a wider and more complete historical and cultural insight into the relationship between Germany and Italy during the first two decades after the end of the Second World War. From a musicological point of view, the main focus of my interest will be the musical component of these films, seen not merely as a medium to convey and emphasise visual images, but rather as the core part of the message; indeed, it is the filmed scenes which take on a secondary role in accompanying and emphasising the musical score.

I also intend to investigate the process of cultural transfer concerning the collective consciousness and stereotypes about Italy among Germans. If the tradition of these stereotypes in the literature and art of the last centuries has been already explored, with my project I would like to extend this field to popular culture of the Twentieth Century, observing how the image of Italy changed after this temporal and cultural shift. I also expect to put into relation the older stereotypes concerning Italy in literature (e.g. the homeland of music) with the newer prejudices about Italians which emerged during the last years of the Second World War.

This research will be the core of a project that could include other national contexts in the future: since also the GDR had its own – albeit smaller – production of *Schlagerfilme*, it would be of great interest to investigate if Italy (but also other countries) was also portrayed in films of the same kind, and with what similarities or differences. I will also consider if *Schlagerfilme* were ever exported to Italy, and if there was an Italian equivalent of such films, in which Germany was depicted in a similarly stereotypical manner. In this particular framework, it could be of great interest to compare the cultural process involving *Schlagerfilme* to the contemporary literary production concerning both Italy as described by Germans and Germany as depicted by Italians, which developed in the same years *Schlagerfilme* were produced.

Importance of the project

It is my intention to contribute to that branch of musicological studies which regards music as a social, cultural and historical, as opposed to merely artistic, phenomenon. It is worth noting that, while musicology and film studies largely overlap when it comes to *Schlagerfilme*, the latter are, at the present time, being neglected in both disciplines. Their music is considered as a complement to the films, while, at the same time, the movies themselves are seen as merely providing a pretext for the singers to perform; the somewhat paradoxical result is that *Schlagerfilme*, as a whole, continue to be largely overlooked by researchers. Considering these movies not just as a commercial and

economic phenomenon, but as part of a network of political and diplomatic strategies, will contribute to shed new light on *Schlagerfilme*, and to enhance their reputation in a scientific context.

Furthermore, with this project I contribute to the growing branch of studies on music diplomacy, which stemmed from the wider field of cultural diplomacy. Even if contributions about musical diplomacy are still relatively few, they show how this field can offer an extremely valuable source for future investigations. Many of the published books and articles relate – at least partially – to the use of music for political aims during the Cold War (Thacker 2007; Gienow-Hecht 2015; Kodat 2015; Urbain & Tauris 2015; Fosler-Lussier 2015). Nonetheless, the United States are always the central focus of these works, while an investigation about music for political relations in Europe within the western block is still lacking. Moreover, great attention has been paid to the use of classical music for diplomacy, both related to music production and performances; little attention has received popular music though, (except for Fosler-Lussier, 2015). The aim of my project is to go deeper in the music diplomacy studies, concerning political relations between Germany and Italy in particular, and how these country used and modulated American methods of soft power and persuasion. The project will address particular attention to popular culture and mass media such as television and radio, offering therefore a contribute to the study of the interaction between politics and media.

State of general and own research

Although few elements of this project have already been analysed, a research which analyses relations between Italy and Germany in the light not just of political and economic history, but also of social customs and popular culture, is still missing. Popular cinema, in particular, has not yet been investigated in the diplomatic and political perspective of German-Italian connections after the Second World War.

Schlagerfilme, in general, have not been much explored in academia. While the last decade has witnessed an increasing number of studies focusing on German popular cinema, including contributions by Oliver Bekermann (2007), Daniela Schulz (2012) and Anna Sarah Vielhaber (2012), the research concerning the particular relationship between *Schlagerfilme* and Italian settings and stereotypes is limited to two master theses (VOGT 1999, AQUINO 2010).

On the other hand, post-war relationships between Germany and Italy have been discussed mostly with reference to the creation of European Union (for instance RUSCONI-WOLLER 2005, HINDRICHS 2010, DI MAIO 2014). Nonetheless, little attention has been paid to the role of popular culture in this process, as well as to the reciprocal perception, as seen through stereotypes and other representations of “otherness” (PETERSEN in RUSCONI-WOLLER 2005), also in the mass media (KUNTZ 1999). More developed are the studies concerning connections between Germany and Italy in contemporary literature, also thanks to the literary production which spread after the war (*Italien in Deutschland - Deutschland in Italien* 1999, GRISHEIMER 2009).

German fascination with Italy has a long tradition which continues to the present day, and the same can be said for studies looking at this particular fascination (for instance, see the conference *Italia imaginaria* 2010, and MAURER 2015). The interest also shifted to topics more related to tourism (MANNING 2011), and connections between tourism policies and politics in this specific context have been identified by Patrick Bernhard (2006-2008).

Methodology

To understand the role played by *Schlagerfilme*, I will examine both their production and their reception by the public. These film productions need to be analysed as the result of cooperation and negotiations between different sponsors and patrons, each pursuing their own political agenda. Therefore, an extensive archival research related to the films and the production system they were connected to (such as those involved in the production process, but also in the marketing and

reception) will provide the most significant portion of the research material. For this reason, I plan to visit archives such as Filmarchiv at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv in Potsdam and also the Deutsches Filminstitut in Frankfurt am Main. The Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik in Sankt Augustin could also be of great interest, to investigate political connections with *Schlagerfilme* production and their concerns about policies of cultural diplomacy between Germany and Italy.

Archival research in Italy is also foreseen, to the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Rome), the Archive of the political party 'Democrazia Cristiana' (Rome) and the private archive of the late Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi (Florence).

A part of my archival research will be then conducted on critiques published on newspaper and magazines of that time, to examine the impact of this phenomenon on the society. Television magazines, which began to be published in the 1960s, could also be of particular interest. In addition to that, periodicals could be useful in order to determine what image of Italy was transmitted and spread by the German media at that time, and constituted therefore the common knowledge about Italy among the public of *Schlagerfilme*. To better investigate some issues related to the reception of *Schlagerfilme* I will address particular attention to the academic field of Imagology, which considers the cultural reception of different societies and the construction of national stereotypes.

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