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Vaudeville, Hollywood and the radio during World War II : the intermedial politics of variety acts

The growing importance of the radio as a major mass medium in the United States during the 1930s is partially linked to its connections to Hollywood : many variety shows involved the participation of movie stars whose status and personae were built accross media (like Bing Crosby) and the mutual dependency between radio and film was also reinforced by the radio versions of famous movies (at the *Lux Radio Theatre*, or the *Screen Guild Theatre*).

World War II gave the radio a particular political significance. On the one hand it was an essential communication tool ; on the other hand, entertainment in mass media was one of the forms of the American war propaganda. This era called for an intensification of the involvement of Hollywood personalities on the radio, for example when stars engaged in the war effort took part in variety shows like *Command Performance*. In parallel, more Hollywood movies included the kind of variety acts then featured on the radio or on stages, notably on tours for soldiers. Films such as *Hollywood Canteen* are not only the contributions of the Hollywood film community to the national effort, but also part of an intricate intermedial network where variety acts are remediated across stage, radio and film.

This paper will study this historical phenomenon. I will tackle the cultural and political implications of the strengthened connection between Hollywood and the radio during World War II. I will try to demonstrate how the declining forms of vaudeville and variety theatre, challenged mostly by the radio in the 1930s, briefly found a new life in the wartime dialogue between the film industry and the radio. I will analyse in particular how, in this context, an “old” medium was given a new meaning by contemporary mass media and how Hollywood’s self-reflexivity and politics were redefined by the impact of radio shows and the dissemination of variety acts in films.

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Key-words

Hollywood, radio, World-War II, vaudeville, variety

Biography

Marguerite Chabrol is Professor of Film Studies at the University Paris 8. Her research focuses on classical Hollywood cinema and the relations between cinema and other forms of art, mainly drama and music in their mediatic and cultural context. She is the author of *De Broadway à Hollywood* (CNRS Editions, 2016). She co-edited a critical edition of Jane Feuer: *Mythologies du film musical* (Les presses du réel, 2016 with Laurent Guido). She recently edited with Pierre-Olivier Toulza *Star Turns in Hollywood Musicals* (Presses du réel, 2017). One of her current research interests is the study of classical movie stars on the radio, such as Marlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth and Katharine Hepburn.