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## Italian Americans in the Hollywood Cinema: Filmmakers, Characters, Audiences

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As a film scholar and educator, I never thought of myself as a "professional ethnic," that is, as a specialist who primarily studied, wrote about, or taught ethnicity. I hardly considered myself to be an ethnic at all, having been raised as a third-generation Italian American by parents who wanted me to assimilate into the majority or dominant culture. I struggled against my Other-ness by pursuing a mainstream education, learning French and German instead of Italian, rejecting the Catholic Church at age 13, and leaving my parents' patriarchal home with my first paycheck after college. To me, at that point in time, Italian meant poverty, parochialism, and patriarchy.

Nonetheless, as I matured, I came to admire the Italian cinema and occasionally wrote about it, but I also took inspiration from the national cinemas of France, Germany, Sweden, Russia, Senegal, Cuba, China, Japan, and America. My taste in literature, painting, and music included some Italians—principally Dante, De Chirico, and Vivaldi—but my artistic pantheon was as "catholic" (small "c") and international as my cinematic idols. I had more universalist identifications.

### *The Personal Is the Political*

In 1980, however, my relative disconcern with (or active disdain of) my ethnic identity was given a rude jolt. I became the recipient of an academic award, the Society for Cinema Studies Scholarly Writing Award, for an essay I had written about the classic Italian neorealist film *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948). Publication in the prestigious *Cinema Journal* was assured, subject to one condition: elimination of a page-long "Personal Preface" that dealt with my subjective ethnic relationship to the film. This erasure of my ethnicity was probably not meant to negate my Italian-ness; rather, it was probably done to streamline the essay and to remove traces of the subjective during a period when academic film studies thought it could become "scientific." Whatever the reason, my lineal ancestry was marginalized. And even though I rarely invoked my ethnic background in my professional or personal life, I was surprised that the first time I did so, it was quickly excised. Thus, the original impetus for writing the essay—my desire to come to terms with my family heritage—was submerged.

My article on *Bicycle Thieves* was a hard-line Marxist rereading of a film that most commentators saw as a left-wing classic. That was allowed to stand unedited. I pointed to what Herbert Marcuse called "the aesthetic dimension" of the text to deconstruct its traditional interpretation as a Communist film. That also remained as originally written. Finally, I used a controversial psychoanalytic model—that of Wilhelm Reich—to analyze the family dynamics in the film, bucking the tide of the Lacanian orthodoxy that reigned (and still reigns) in the academic film community. That was left as is (Tomasulo 2-13). Only allusions to my personal and ethnic backgrounds were cut.

This is a portion of that censored "Personal Preface":

My earliest specific memory of a film is of *Bicycle Thieves*. It was not the first film I ever saw, but the memory of that *Bicycle Thieves* screening in my early childhood has remained with me and informs every subsequent viewing of the film. I was probably four or five years old at the time, and my father, like the film's *lumpen proletarian* protagonist, Antonio Ricci, had been unemployed or marginally employed for several years. The fact that my dad's name was Anthony and that we wept and held hands as we left the theater—like the film's father and son—occasioned an emotional reaction in me every time I saw the movie, because of the striking parallels to my family's desperate economic and psychological situation.

Later, while attending college, I saw the film again, and my position in the family at that time—as the sole breadwinner (just like young Bruno)—occasioned an expanded insight into the film's narrative. Antonio's *cinematic* frustrations with his joblessness, leading to his slapping his employed son, once again mirrored the passive/aggressive responses and displacements in the *real life* family melodrama I found myself acting in. The "bicycle" this time was not a metal and rubber "Fides" (faith) and the "thief" was not a lone individual wearing "a German hat," but rather my family's faith had been stolen by an American society (and a studio system) that had no real place—except at the margins—for my father, born on Mott Street in Little Italy in 1909, or his parents before him, born in "the old country."

When my father died in 1966, my growing political awareness was shaped both by the material realities of my early family life, a revisit to *Bicycle Thieves*, and by the innovative films of that period. Whereas my parents grew up with the assimilationist myth of the melting pot and Hollywood depictions of their group as either desperately

poor or fighting their way out of poverty through crime, I had a countervailing image: the newly resurrected Italian cinema of Fellini, Antonioni, Pasolini, and Pontecorvo, as well as a growing canon of work produced by Italian-American filmmakers like Coppola, Scorsese, and De Palma. While working through my Italian heritage, I found positive role models not in the desperate and often despicable Italian-American characters in Hollywood movies, but in the successes of the Italian film artists who managed to put their visions of ethnicity and more universal themes on the big screen.

I concluded my "Personal Preface" with the following caveat: This preface is not included for purposes of solipsistic psychobiography, but, rather, to illuminate the history of an interpretation of a classic film text. As I read the film from an ideological, psychological, and aesthetic perspective, the accumulated resonances of earlier memories and experiences of spectatorship became nodal points in the development of my intellectual and emotional relationship to *Bicycle Thieves*.

If the phrase "the personal is the political" is true, then the film studies discipline and most of Hollywood film history have (until recently) elided, erased, or displaced an important dimension of the personal—ethnicity—and that exclusion is political.

*Italian Americans in Hollywood Cinema:  
A Historical Overview*

Mirella Affron has compiled a useful filmography that lists all of the American films that feature Italian-American settings or protagonists produced between 1918 and 1971 (Affron 233-55), the studio era and beyond. Although many *tens of thousands* of Hollywood films were made during that period, Affron's exhaustive study was able to come up with only 68 titles that fulfilled her criteria. Of those 68, only one, *A Hole in the Head* (1959), was actually directed by an Italian-American filmmaker, Frank Capra. The protagonists depicted in those 68 films fell into three basic male prototypes: the mother-fixated hero, the mother-fixated prize fighter, and the mother-fixated gangster, epitomized by movies such as *Little Caesar* (1930), *Scarface* (1932), *Golden Boy* (1939), *Kiss of Death* (1947), *Key Largo* (1948), *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956), *Al Capone* (1959), *I, Mobster* (1959), *Inside the Mafia* (1959), and *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967).

Furthermore, a significant essay by Robert Casillo has outlined the numerous overt and covert denigrations of Italian Americans

in dominant cinema's cavalcade of outlaws and gangsters, despite the fact that the Hollywood production code specified that "no picture shall be produced that tends to incite bigotry or hatred among people of different races, religions, or national origins" (qtd. in Casillo 379). Casillo cites many examples in which a film character's Italian heritage is elided except through subtle details such as gestural codes, accents, complexion, costuming, and eating habits (e.g., Little Caesar's penchant for eating spaghetti) (Casillo 376-79). Where is the authentic Italian hero (no pun intended) in all this Hollywood history? What Hollywood offers instead is either the total absence of ethnic origins or the presence of myths of ethnic culture that reflect not so much the immigrant experience as the desires and fears of WASP audiences. Even though portrayals have been somewhat gentler in recent years (*Marty* [1955], *Saturday Night Fever* [1977], *Moonstruck* [1987], or *Prizzi's Honor* [1990]), the main characters' dominant traits—inarticulateness, prejudice, vengefulness, sexual passion, and operatic excess—perpetuate certain negative essentialist stereotypes. And films like Brian DePalma's *The Untouchables* (1987) keep alive the self-loathing of the Italian gangster image—brutally epitomized in Robert DeNiro's iconic portrait of Al Capone beating in his associate's head with a baseball bat.

Only one post-studio-era film has depicted the Italian immigrant experience: *The Godfather, Part II* (1974). But during the studio era, not one Hollywood film, major or minor, traced the history of Italian immigration to America—the causes of emigration, the voyage, the arrival, or the adaptation to American customs. Indeed, Elia Kazan's autobiographical epic about Greek-Turkish immigration, *America, America* (1963), was the only feature-length narrative film about immigration, period. So, even though Frank Capra was one of the premier film directors of the studio era and even though "the Mob" had some degree of influence over studios, principally through labor unions, the lives and contributions of the more than 20 million Italians (Cordasco and Bucchioni 3) who came to this country and their progeny were essentially erased from the nation's movie screens until comparatively recently.

The new national interest in ethnicity no doubt derived from the civil rights movement. It is no secret that the emergence of a white ethnic consciousness was a reaction to the special minority status accorded in the 1960s and 70s to "visible minorities": Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics—whose epidermal pigmentation automatically tagged them as "Other." In the media, the appearance of Alex Haley's *Roots* (both book and TV series) provoked increased focus on the national origins of all "hyphenated Americans." It may have reached a point as Werner Sollors put it

in his book *Beyond Ethnicity*, "In America, casting oneself as an outsider may in fact be a dominant cultural trait. . . . Every American is now considered a potential ethnic" (31, 33). And in the academy, various groups rediscovered a cultural ethos that had been denied or rejected for decades in favor of acculturation or accommodation to the dominant and homogenizing influences of Anglo-Saxon values and standards.

*Three Italian-American Filmmakers:*

*Capra, Coppola, and Scorsese*

The amelioration and assimilation of ethnicity noted above has also been prevalent in the work of Italian-American filmmakers. This article will deal primarily with three directors: Frank Capra, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese. In analyzing their work in terms of ethnicity, it must be noted that a pervasive ambivalence permeates their films. Most of their films deal with non-Italian subjects and themes. Indeed, their collective commitment to genre formats and conventions is a clear textual indication of their rootedness in an American rather than a European tradition of filmmaking. Their cinematic forbearers are likewise American: Griffith for Capra, Welles for Coppola, and Fuller for Scorsese (Braudy 18). When they do portray Italian-American families and themes, the members of their own group are usually associated with criminal and other antisocial behavior. It is one thing to share an ethnic joke or discuss a problem in the community among members of a minority group; it is quite another to present it to the entire world. Unflattering self-portraits pose the greatest threat to a group's public image because they carry the cachet of insider knowledge and legitimacy.

Just as Amiri Baraka has critiqued the films of Spike Lee for being "part of a retrograde movement," so white ethnic film directors can be criticized for their unflattering portraits of their own communities. This is especially true of Coppola and Scorsese, both third-generation Americans. And, as Lee Lourdeaux says in his recent book, *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America*,

Ethnicity, to a third-generation American, means not so much consciously choosing between one's heritage and mainstream culture as living with the contradictions entailed in double identity. (172)

Lourdeaux's phrase, "double identity," may be an offshoot of Solors's term "double consciousness," used to point out that ethnic texts (like many ethnic lives) invariably speak both to outsiders and insiders; in short, they mediate between the ethnic group and the rest of America by (l) pointing out differences between the

minority group and majority culture and (2) accentuating common America values, in the spirit of assimilation.

Frank Capra was the epitome of an assimilationist ethnic. Born in Sicily, he pursued a mainstream education and a career in the film industry in Los Angeles against his parents' wishes. His movies combined disguised Italian Catholic traditions (such as communal compassion, warm family values, and an emphasis on the arts) with American populism to create a synthetic blend that often critiqued the greed implicit in the individualistic WASP success ethic. All Capra's many Christ figures (Mr. Deeds, John Doe, Mr. Smith, George Bailey), however, were quintessential all-American types played by Gary Cooper or Jimmy Stewart. In militantly maintaining such cultural uniformity, Capra's "hyphenated vision" (Lourdeaux 5) magnified superficial gaps and fissures in the American national character and vice versa. Thus, Capra disguised his visible differences from dominant society in order to take part in the Anglo-American dream. His narrative schemas organized cultural values to conform with the social prejudices and expectations of WASP audiences. Umberto Eco, who also wanted to be taken seriously by the Anglo-American literary establishment, said,

For the Protestant civilization, economic success is a sign of the benevolence of God, while for [Catholic] civilization, poverty and suffering are proofs of His benevolence. Success is the proof that God is ready to send you to hell. (Eco 79)

Although most of Capra's ethnic characters were played by non-Italians, at least he was decent enough not to mythologize them as criminals.

The same cannot be said of Coppola and Scorsese. They came of age professionally during the ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s, when Hollywood saw the commercial opportunity to exploit ethnicity. This period coincided with the dismantling of the Production Code of censorship that restricted sexual explicitness, gratuitous violence, and the wages of crime. The logical sublation was to synthesize ethnic revivalism and post-Hays Code exhibitionism by filming "screaming, cursing, battering, gun-toting, sexually-indulgent Italian Americans" (Cortes 117).

Francis Coppola's dual identity, his love-hate of his own ethnic background, is manifested in the fact that of his eighteen films, only three (the *Godfather* installments) deal with his own group. He did not work with Italian themes and characters until his fifth feature film. *The Godfather* (1972) contrasts two very different generations of Italian patriarchy, one that held on to the positive values of its heritage (like family) and one that attempted to look, act, talk, and be like members of the majoritarian culture. The

tension between these two generations is a metaphor for the "chains of ambivalence" that locked Coppola into an ethnic self-hatred.

Coppola often blurs distinctions between ethnic and mainstream cultures, using one as the metaphor for the other. Unlike Capra, Coppola did not grow up in a poor immigrant family, and unlike Scorsese, he did not spend his youth on the "mean streets" of Little Italy. From his successful family, Coppola no doubt inherited an immigrant desire to succeed. As he put it,

I was raised to be successful and rich. Everything you do is to make your family proud of you. It relates to the immigrant thing. Get an education, have a reputation, have your picture in the paper . . . and have lots of money and security. (Coppola 223)

Of course, Coppola employed three mainstays of the Italian tradition—the family, patriarchy, and Catholicism—to create his gangster epic. But his use of these tropes of ethnicity reflect a symbolic anger (or at least ambivalence) about his own immigrant identity, his childhood religion, and his successful ethnic father, Carmine. The famous cross-cutting scene in *The Godfather* that intercuts the baptism of Michael's godson with a series of brutal Mafia "hits" manifests the irony and hypocrisy of Michael Corleone's Catholicism, but it can also be seen as equating vengeful murder and religion.

In the first *Godfather* film, the gangster is seen as respectable citizen; in *The Godfather Part II*, the good citizen is seen as a gangster—as he adapts to Anglo ways of success at all costs. In the third installment, Coppola literalizes the operatic grandeur of the Mob's pretensions by ending the film at an opera performance. Coppola seems to want to metaphorize his Mafiosi in order to take the ethnic sting out of his representational attack on his own group: "The Mafia is an incredible metaphor for America. . . . Both are totally capitalistic phenomena" (Coppola 223). But metaphor is a literary device not always accessible to film audiences, who perceive movies realistically rather than figuratively, even if metaphor is often part of an Italian aesthetic.

Audiences—Italian and non-Italians—probably saw the gangsters and their dirty deeds as "real" Italians, not as "discursive constructions in a free play of signifiers." Otherwise, the producers of *The Godfather Saga*, the 1977 television version of Coppola's ethnic epic, would not have included the following disclaimer before the show was aired:

*The Godfather* is a fictional account of the activities of a small group of ruthless criminals. It would be erroneous and

unfair to suggest that they are representative of any ethnic group.

Naturally, after watching and hearing that caveat, a nationwide audience was then treated to the violent saga of the Corleone family, with scenes in Sicily, people speaking Italian, and major characters named Barzini, Clemenza, and Tattaglia. It's a good thing we had that disclaimer! Otherwise, we might have thought the film was about Italians.

Martin Scorsese's body of work is far less ambivalent than Coppola's in depicting the tension between the Italian and the American components of his cultural identity. Ten of Scorsese's twenty films have dealt with Italian themes or characters, usually among the criminal class. Like Coppola, Scorsese tries to transcend the clichéd stereotypes through irony and visual sensibility, but most audiences probably take his films straight, so to speak, as raw, unvarnished, realistic portraits of real Italian-American hoodlums. The director's documentary-like imagery—handheld camera, location shooting, black and white film stock—often contributes to the Barthesian “reality effect” of his portrayals. He may be satirizing the mobsters, but is the mass audience in on the joke? In addition, Scorsese's hoodlums rarely achieve the glamour status of a wealthy, powerful Don; they remain petty thieves and punks—even if they sometimes achieve ill-gotten wealth or fame.

The Catholic Church and its visual rites and rituals serve to anchor Scorsese's characters within an otherwise chaotic social nexus. In his early films, introspective characters sought salvation on the streets, as in the opening scene of *Mean Streets* (1973), in which Charlie's *monologue intérieur* is heard over a blank screen: “You don't make up for your sins in church. You do it in the streets. You do it at home. The rest is bullshit and you know it.” This focus on the inner life of his Italian characters sets Scorsese apart from Capra and Coppola, who merely represented the external trappings and themes of Italian Catholicism.

Scorsese is also not above criticizing the Church as an institution and his own ethnic heritage. But the part of that heritage he critiques most harshly is the patriarchal violence and gangsterism, which inevitably leads to perpetuating the negative stereotype. Scorsese has even explicitly stated this in reference to *Raging Bull* (1980): “The thing that fascinates me is that Jake LaMotta is on a higher spiritual level, in a way, as a fighter. He works on almost a primitive level, almost an animal level” (Kelly 32). This exultation of animal violence in *Raging Bull* and in most of Robert DeNiro's excellent performances for Scorsese nonetheless contributes to the pervasive idea that it is part and parcel of male



Italian identity. The treatment of women in the all-male rituals of *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull*, and *Goodfellas* (1990) likewise perpetuates the derogatory and cliched notion that Italian men see women as virgins or whores, Madonnas or Mary Magdalenes, traditional earth mothers or neurotic temperamental nags.

By comparing Jake LaMotta's boxing style to a priestly vocation, as the director does in one interview (Wiener 75), he provides a level of irony and association that is probably beyond most spectators. Most viewers, one would suspect, preconditioned and predisposed by prior movie stereotypes, see LaMotta as just a slightly more vicious, slightly more mindless Rocky Balboa, another Italian-American stereotype conceived and perpetuated by an Italian American, Sylvester Stallone.

Another ethnic director, the unlikely Spike Lee, at least adds variety to the cliché by capturing the diversity of contemporary New York Italian-American characters and attitudes better than the three Italian-American filmmakers discussed above. In *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Lee shows a sensitive brother (Vito), a racist brother (Pino), and an ambivalent father (Sal) struggling to maintain their ethnicity and their familial cohesion in the midst of a racially charged urban powder keg.

#### *Conclusion: Audiences*

This essay does not merely call for more positive portrayals of Italian-American role models in the media, in the way an idealized Sidney Poitier or, more recently, Bill Cosby, have been used to rebut previous negative screen images of black people. And it must be made clear that whatever mistreatment Italian Americans have received in dominant cinema or society, it does not compare to the level of brutality and exploitation visited on African-, Hispanic-, and Native-Americans on our screens and in real life. Yet whatever the differences, in the end, dominant cinema either ignores or typecasts all ethnics as "the Other" in its distorted symbolic universe.

As audiences, we need to understand the complexity of the issues involved in the simplistic social roles usually assigned by filmmakers and performers. We can also demand more complex issues and personas from the creative community. I wish I could say, as Ana Lopez does, that Hollywood is a true "ethnographer of American culture": a producer of multiple discourses that intervene in the socio-ideological struggles of a given historical moment (Lopez, in Friedman 404). In the kind of ideal, polyphonic discourse Lopez describes, there would be dialectic contestation and "perspectival relativity" over the audience's experience of ethnicity in film . . . and in real life.

Ultimately, the problem is economic. Just as freedom of the press applies only if you own a press, so too only the owners of the

means of production of meaning production in the cinema get to share their creations with the rest of us. As more ethnic minorities get to tell their own stories and experiences in Hollywood or independent films, we can hope that diversity will lead to discovery.

But we can do more than just sit and wait for the status quo to evolve. As thoughtful spectators, we can employ a "hermeneutics of suspicion" to analyze not whether Hollywood's *imaginary* America is homologous to the "real" America, but how Hollywood's imaginary America is the product of a representational process that signifies not so much "American culture" as certain of America's ways of signifying itself to itself. In short, authenticity is not the answer, although as Lester Friedman put it, "Cinema and its creators should be held accountable for racist and sexist images" (9) because—as *The Godfather* disclaimer proves—entertainment films do have the potential to create, reinforce, and modify public perceptions of ethnic groups.

For the most part, this article has critiqued the filmmakers and characters who perpetuate negative images of Italian Americans. But audiences can also be empowered to take partial responsibility for the process of representation if they perceive film viewing as a dialogic, interactive process. In short, spectators can deconstruct, challenge, and *re-construct* those stereotypical dominant media images. Certainly, if Italian Americans and other ethnics misrecognize and take for real their false reflections in the mirror-screen or dream-screen of the cinema, they are as much to blame as the creators of those images. If Hollywood is given "the power to define difference, to reinforce boundaries, and to reproduce an ideology which maintains a certain status quo" (Marchetti, in Friedman 278) by default, then we victimize ourselves. But, in real life, human beings create their own reflections and cast their own shadows. We can do the same in our national cinema—as filmmakers, performers, or viewers.

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