

GIULIANA MUSCIO

Spectacle of Identity: From the Lower East Side to Hollywood

Originally conceived as an oral presentation, this written text is constituted as a historical narrative accompanying the virtual screening of several clips of Hollywood films. In them, traces of the traditions of popular immigrant stage and of their influence on the formation of American cinema are found¹. As a voice-over narration, it intentionally maintains a virtual, and inevitable, connection to the images of the films, which provide both reference and structure. The focus of my analysis is the previously ignored presence of Italian performers in Hollywood cinema before the Second World War and its interaction with the Yiddish stage. These two cultures, while showing manifest similarities in their natural inclination to please popular audiences, mixing high and low, tragic and comic styles, and naturalism and expressive gestures, experienced in this period unexpected encounters. Without trying to be systematic, we trace points of contact, minor coincidences, tangential moments involving Italian and Jewish performers on the American stage and screen.

Every film clip referred to here evokes a period of film history and possible areas of study, while the related text for a virtual voice-over narration proposes information and interpretations in a synthetic form. Each scene is an episode, a fragment of a complex experience, so that we can have no intention of providing an overall interpretation: the text aims at remaining suggestive rather than textually analytic, and willingly so.

1. *GODFATHER II* (FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA, 1976)

Scene identified by the title *New York 1917*. These images document *a posteriori* a world insofar ignored: the immigrant stage and its traditions (popular and Neapolitan) in Little Italy, in the years of the great wave of emigration. The scene takes place in an immigrant theater in which Vito Corleone (Robert De Niro) enters with a friend and sits down while two

Neapolitan musical numbers are performed on the stage, “Lassanno Napule” and “Senza mamma.” Since this scene coincides with Vito’s encounter with the local head of the Black Hand, Fanucci (Gastone Moschin), it is easy to forget its background (the stage, the performers). Its narrative importance, however, makes it even more interesting to discover that these two songs were composed by Francesco Pennino, Coppola’s maternal grandfather.²

Pennino, who emigrated to New York in 1905, was a pianist (he is said to have accompanied the young Caruso in the Neapolitan cafés) and a composer. In New York he created his own musical publishing house, Edizioni Pennino, which published his compositions, mostly in Neapolitan, addressed to the American immigrant market and to the Neapolitan market in Italy, for instance on the occasion of the Piedigrotta festival. In addition to his musical business, Pennino authored the most important *sceneggiata* written in America, *Senza mamma*, a key scene of which is performed in *Godfather II*: on stage, the son, having received a letter from Naples informing him that his mother has died, sings “Senza mamma” and points a gun to his head.

The *sceneggiata* developed in Naples in the post-World War I period, and it soon became a popular format among immigrants too. Moving to America with the emigrant community, just like all the traditional theater formats, it underwent an adaptation, specifically in its setting. The *sceneggiata* written in the U.S. maintains the strong relation between dramatic song and narrative, but even though jealousy is still a key motivation for the dramatic events, the American setting encourages a different attention towards social issues, such as poverty and work, and towards generational conflicts or the condition of women, in addition to a residual *nostalgia*.

The literal translation of the first verse of the song reads:

Lonely for love, because of a bad woman / I went away from mother’s breath /
 In order to put out the flame in my heart / of my first love ... I had to leave! / I
 came here, lonely and lost / without a voice that can comfort my heart / without
 the love of a mother which never dies / and that can always make one happy! /
 Without mother / How strong still is this word! / Without love / What use do
 I have of my youth?

The song continues, explaining the story: on his return from the military service, Peppino, the protagonist, discovers that his girlfriend has married his

best friend. Going back home in tears, he laments his loss with his mother, who tells him to go far away and try to forget. After three years he receives a letter from his sister, telling him that his mother has died. Desperate, without his mother and without love, he feels that he has no reason to live. Coherent with the tradition, Pennino's song has a strong narrative, with five characters: mother, son, sister, girlfriend, and best friend. While the "far away" place is not defined geographically, quite deliberately, there is an implicit ending – suicide. And the *sceneggiata* titled *Senza mamma* does end with a suicide: not violence against the others, as in the Neapolitan tradition, but against oneself. In an arbitrary syllogism, if we reconsider the title of another composition by Pennino, 'A Patria e 'Nata Mamma (literally *The Home-country is Another Mother*), to be "senza mamma" actually becomes the equivalent of being "senza patria." Thus, the desperation of being "senza patria" becomes a cultural and emotional impossibility that could only be terminated by a suicide.

The song *Senza mamma* was a big hit among Italian immigrants in the Americas and was recorded by the main artists of the time (Nina De Charny, Gilda Mignonette, Giuseppe Milano). Having become a successful entrepreneur, Pennino acquired his own theaters, even though there is no information about their programs in the Pennino Collection. In a progression, which is typical of immigrant show business, in the 1930s he added regular film screenings to his theatrical ventures and became a distributor of Italian films in the immigrant circuit of the East Coast, distributing *La vecchia signora* (Amleto Palermi, 1932), an early interpretation by Vittorio De Sica. Pennino's biography reveals that not only did he attempt to maintain his Neapolitan cultural roots, but he was also able to innovate their mode of production/distribution, by becoming an entrepreneur, sensitive to the changes of his audience's taste and habits. He also not only printed his own music sheets, but convinced important immigrant artists in New York to record his songs.³

To sum up, Pennino entered the American (or Italian American) cultural industry with a traditional product and a modern approach. This coexistence of the old world and the new is symbolized on the screen in *Godfather II* by a painted curtain representing Vesuvius and the Statue of Liberty: an image which was originally the logo of Edizioni Pennino, an icon that visually represents immigrant culture, in between the traditions of the motherland (of Naples) and of the new world, both facing an imaginary gulf.

It could be argued that Neapolitan *cultura dello spettacolo* is one of the true historical expressions of popular culture in Italy. After the Unification of Italy, Neapolitan songs and theater, using the dialect as a universal language, represented in a sense an alternative to the dominant culture, a spontaneous reaction to national culture.⁴ Fascism, suspicious of the possible antagonistic function of these expressions of southern Italian culture, opposed and repressed it, in favor of *Italianità*. The obstacles interposed by the nationalist/fascist regime to the use of dialect on stage might even be a remote motivation for the numbers of southern Italian performers who, within the numerous emigrations from the South, left the country and emigrated to the Americas. Neapolitan popular theater and music became diffused and successful abroad, not only because of the number of southern Italians in the audience, but also because this culture is in a sense transnational, constructed, as it is, of many layers, *porosa* (porous), as Walter Benjamin defined Neapolitan culture, and cosmopolitan in itself.⁵

Southern Italian emigrants like the protagonist of *Senza mamma* might have longed for the motherland, but Italy was not at all “another mother” towards immigrants; on the contrary, fascist Italy repressed Neapolitan culture even abroad. Pennino himself experienced in part this repression, which included Neapolitan music produced and recorded in America. In fact, the *carabinieri* in Naples were ordered to sequester the records not only of *Il brigante Musolino*, *L’assassinio di Matteotti*, *La morte di Sacco e Vanzetti*, but also Pennino’s *Senza mamma* and *Senza perdono*, not because they were “revolutionary” like the other titles, but because they ended with a suicide, which was a forbidden term and theme in Italian media during fascism.

We could argue that, just like Neapolitan culture, Yiddish culture was attacked too, and that it was also historically stratified in complex ways, sharing with the culture of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies its intrinsic cosmopolitanism. What I would like to emphasize here is the crucial role that these two cultures had in the development of American vaudeville and, later, in the industry of entertainment.

The sequence from *Godfather II*, which I illustrated, helps us to visualize the Italian immigrant stage and its lively world and indicates how the traditions of the Neapolitan popular stage were maintained and innovated by the immigrants, who were able to develop their own world of entertainment

in North America. Coppola's use of his grandfather's composition in the film also represents, and reaffirms, the continuity of these traditions, their Americanization, as well as the proud ostentation by the recent generation of filmmakers of Italian origins who now represent the top of the industry. Film directors like Coppola are no longer marginal spectators on the cultural scene as De Niro, sitting in the audience, was during the Italian American *sceneggiata* in *The Godfather II*, but its very protagonists.

2. ENRICO CARUSO IN *MY COUSIN*

Clips of *My Cousin* (Edward Josè, 1918). The images I have chosen highlight the work of Enrico Caruso as a star and an immigrant, his role in the history of media, and his naturalistic and modern approach to performance.⁶ In fact, in the film *My Cousin*, Caruso interprets two roles: the immigrant artisan in Little Italy and himself, the great star of the opera, *the* tenor of the Metropolitan.

In search of cultural legitimacy, American cinema enlisted Caruso to act in two films, *My Cousin* (1918) and *The Splendid Romance* (1919). Something went wrong, however, and the singer's film experience fell swiftly into oblivion. Given the incredible popularity of Caruso and his excellent performance in the surviving film, *My Cousin*, the historiographic mystery of this supposed flop calls for an explanation. While curating the exhibit *Starring Enrico Caruso* for the Cineteca di Bologna in June 2010, I serendipitously found photographic evidence of a possible explanation in a revealing pair of mustaches, which, as we shall see later, play an important role.

The legend of Enrico Caruso began to spread worldwide in 1903 when he signed a spectacular (and unequalled even today) contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, becoming the first international media star.⁷ In July 1918, after a long courtship and with the signing of a contract, again considered exceptional at the time (\$200,000 for two films), Jesse Lasky, as part of the plan to use "famous players" in cinema, enlisted the Italian tenor for two movies, originally film-operas, *I Pagliacci* and *La Bohème*, which were Caruso's greatest successes on stage. The project changed, however, perhaps due to Caruso's interest in experimenting with his acting abilities and his wanting to become more deeply involved with the medium.



Enrico Caruso in *My Cousin*. Peabody Archives. The Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

In *My Cousin*, Caruso plays the part of both the tenor Caroli and his poor immigrant cousin who lives in Little Italy and is in love with the beautiful Rosa. His acting in the role of the cousin is quite different from his role as the tenor – and not just because of the mustache he wears in the film to characterize them differently. Watching Caruso act allows the spectator to sense his ease in playing the two parts, along with his involvement and amusement on the set. The film even gave him the opportunity to make fun of himself as a star, so much so that, pretending to be someone else, he says of Caroli: “He has his faults...” Furthermore, he drew on his condition as an Italian immigrant. The film is full of references to his nationality – the sailors, the flags in the *fiesta* in Little Italy – underscored by the cast chosen, which includes actors from the immigrant theater such as William Ricciardi (in the role of Rosa’s father), and the expert “consultation” (documented in a reportage from the set) with Cesare Gravina, a musician from Sorrento who had already worked in American cinema and would soon become Stroheim’s favorite actor.

In *My Cousin* Caruso surprises us as a modern actor – one that could not have disappointed popular audiences. But in the film he plays – with evident pleasure and ease – more the character of the poor immigrant cousin in Little Italy than the famous tenor; the disappointment of international audiences might have come from this very role, not from his performance. The narrative schism which opposes the star of the Metropolitan and the Italian immigrant is a sign – an incredibly clear symptom today – of the unresolved American contradiction, showing how much the hegemonic Anglo-American classes could at the same time venerate Italian artists and performers and discriminate against Italian immigrants, treating them with racial prejudice.⁸

The visual evidence of this symptom can be found in the publicity stills, exhibited in Bologna, which reveal that the mustache was penciled on the pictures, therefore it was a device introduced after some takes had already been made (and photographed for publicity purposes) – a strange initiative for such an important production. These photographs reveal that there was a pre-existing film, full of traces of this racially negative attitude, surfacing in scenes of jealousy and revenge, with the ritual knives and bandanas. Reading carefully some of the novelizations of *My Cousin* that appeared in the American newspapers and film magazines in 1918, we discover that the first

version of the film was an ethnic – we could even say racist – melodrama, a sort of Hollywood version of a *Cavalleria rusticana* set in Little Italy.

There is no documentation of the reasons for the variants introduced in *My Cousin* as we can see it today, nor it is known who authorized them. And yet, something stopped the initial distribution of *My Cousin*, to the point that the premiere of such an important film was delayed; the official reason given unanimously by the press was the post-World War I flu epidemic, but the panned-in mustache reveals another story.

In my opinion, Caruso disliked the first version of the film, and given his Italian pride, his love for the stage (which encouraged him to experiment with acting) and most of all, his power as a media star, he intervened and asked for a re-shooting of the (anti-immigrationist) episodes involving the poor cousin, whom he transformed not only with a mustache (which makes him almost unrecognizable) but by actually adding a humorous characterization: Caruso transformed a cheap anti-Italian drama into a warm comedy of errors.

Still, despite a successful opening night and the positive reviews, *My Cousin* is, and was, considered a flop because the production company, Famous Players, did not resolve the above-mentioned contradiction between the adoration of the great Italian tenor and the prejudice towards Italian immigrants. Had the producer Jesse Lasky wanted to exploit the popularity of the great tenor, he could simply have dedicated more of the film's time to the character of the singer, and, as announced in the papers, accompany the film screenings with the recordings of his beautiful voice. From the point of view of the performance however, Caruso is better at acting the part of the cousin, where he uses his whole range as a versatile performer – from being pathetic to humorous – and his warmth, which usually reached the audience through the expressive quality of his voice. But in 1918 the role of an immigrant became a handicap even for this international star. As a matter of fact, it associated him with the great wave of Italian immigration – a social issue that was so problematic that one year later, in 1920, American authorities imposed quotas on the number of Italian immigrants.⁹

As the film shows, Italian artists in North America were able to divide between high tradition (in this case opera) and popular culture, Neapolitan as well as American. As testified by his recordings, Caruso sang opera as well as Neapolitan and American songs. He was the first modern opera star

appreciated both for his technical ability and his great expressivity. His singing was distant from the rhetorical emphasis of his colleagues of the 1800s, as well as from the exhibitionism of the virtuosi of earlier times, and was rooted in the typically southern Italian tradition of *verismo*. In the film, Caruso's acting is surprisingly spontaneous and humorous; in a pre-Method acting intuition, he used props and costumes to stress identification, and even utilized his own desk and his costume for *I Pagliacci* displaying, in addition, his other passions such as caricatures, jokes, and improvisations.¹⁰

A tangential association between Caruso and Jewish culture comes with his performance of *La Juive*. Given his attitude towards *verismo*, in order to give his public a true representation of Jewish people, he frequented the synagogue to study their movements and expressions.

3. THE LOWER EAST SIDE

Exterior shots of Delancey Avenue from such silent films as *My Cousin*, *Poor Little Peppina*, *Man in Blue*, and *Younger Generation*.

Caruso did not need to travel far to encounter Jewish culture. Delancey Avenue, in the Lower East Side of New York, was populated by both Italian and Jewish immigrants. By showing the physical contact in the busy street, with fruit stands and vendors of different ethnic and immigrant national groups, the shots in these silent films help to visualize and explain the cultural interactions stimulated by this proximity.

Cesare Gravina, who assisted Caruso in the preparation of *My Cousin*, walked the streets of Little Italy in *Poor Little Peppina* (Sidney Olcott, 1916), starring Mary Pickford, where he appeared as a *camorrista* escaping to America. There are two elements in the film worth noticing: the association of Italians with organized crime, which, in accordance with the line established by American popular media, happened very early in American cinema; and the only screen appearance of the great Antonio Maiori. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Maiori was a great interpreter of Shakespeare in Italian and very much appreciated by the American upper classes (See Carlson, Uricchio, and Pearson). As Emelise Aleandri documents in her book on Italian theater in New York, he also interacted with Jacob Adler, the famous actor

of the Yiddish theater, in the *mise-en-scène* of Shakespeare in their respective languages, for example, alternating in the performance and exchanging sets and costumes for *Macbeth* at the Bowery Theatre.

It is in the streets of the Little Italy in *The Man in Blue* (Edward Laemmle, 1925) that we meet Gravina once more, in the role of the flower vendor (a stereotypical representation of Italians in silent cinema)¹¹. He is caught in a dilemma, divided as he is between the association with the mafia (defined as such in the intertitles) and the assimilation into American society. In the film he tries to protect his step-daughter, “the flower of Napoli,” – who is in love with an Irish policeman – from the lust of the mafia boss, antagonized by a radical Italian newspaperman. Several narrative elements are associated with Italian immigrants in American silent cinema: flower vendors, organ grinders, mafia bosses, marriage of convenience. The immigrant characters are represented as negative or pathetic victims: unless an American authority protects them (or saves them, as in this case), they are impotent or menacing, thus projecting the American imaginary of the immigrant community onto the narrative.

Sicilian born Frank Capra made one film where he addressed directly the issue of immigrant culture, and specifically, the adaptation of the second generation to American values, in *The Younger Generation* (1928).¹² The film describes the experience of a Jewish family who lives on Delancey Avenue. Thanks to the initiative of the unsentimental young son, the family achieves wealth and social status, thus managing to move to Fifth Avenue. However, the loss of contact with his own cultural roots literally kills the father, who is unable to adapt to the cold marble halls and rigid social rules of higher society. The mother is a key character in the film. Favoring her son, she contributes to her husband’s death. Though it may appear an easy joke, the stereotype of the Italian mother is not very different from that of the Jewish mother; the director seems to be particularly aware of the contacts between the two cultures in relation to family roles. Hidden behind, and considering the negative representation of the son, one could see a self-critical portrait of Capra’s own experience as an Italian emigrant. For he did become one of the most famous (and wealthy) directors of Hollywood’s classical age, but negated and resented his Sicilian origins. This elicits a sincere debate about second-generation immigrants, facilitated here by the distance allowed by ethnic difference.

In the 1910s and 1920s the anti-Italian prejudice persisted, while at the same time Italian performers were requested to the point that emigration quotas did not apply in their case. They performed in Italian also for American audiences, and they were appreciated on stage and in film, because of their versatility, typical of the Italian performer.

Since ethnicity was a problematic issue for the newly born cinema industry, in silent cinema it was diluted, with a complex articulation of character and performer, to the point that Italian actors did not interpret as a norm Italian characters. Rodolfo Valentino, for instance, in the main part of his career performed one Italian character only, and in a minor film, *Cobra* (Joseph Henabery, 1925). This conflicted attitude had strong implications in the creation of the imaginary with respect to ethnic identity, for what it *proposed*, what it *hid*, and what it *condensed and turned around*. While we cannot discuss here the complex narrative work of American cinema in relation to race and ethnicity, it must be emphasized that the articulation of the racial/ethnic prejudice had at least one indirect effect which is relevant for my discourse, i.e., that of hiding the contribution of Italian performers to Hollywood cinema. To this must be added that even Italian film history bears almost no trace of the work of these Italian performers in Hollywood, though they may have been ignored in their country for a number of different reasons, and most particularly for the anti-emigration and anti-southern prejudice of the dominant culture. This double negation/prejudice, in the U.S. and in Italy, has, as a consequence, excluded from historiographic appreciation the work of these performers and the important role played by Italian stage traditions in the development of American cinema.

4. GANGSTERS

Clips from *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932). The issue of ethnic representation emerges with precision when one analyzes the differences in the performance style within two genres, the musical and the gangster, which are populated by Italian and Jewish characters and performers, though we must always keep the race or ethnicity of the character separate and distinct from that of the performer. The Italian performer was easy to spot in classical Hollywood

film because of generic conventions. On the one hand he/she was confined within a stereotype – often negative – or in secondary roles, and on the other, after the introduction of sound, because he/she was betrayed by an Italian American accent. Besides the distinction between performer and character, it is important to highlight a second fundamental dichotomy: that between the stereotypes that Hollywood created for the Italians in North America, such as the violent and primitive gangster (rooted in the imaginary Black Hand, created in the late 19th century by the American popular media in order to discourage Italian immigration) and the artist and the musician, associated with the traditions of the Bel Paese, cradle of the arts.

In the 1930s, gangster characters are often Italian, but they are rarely performed by Italian actors. As already mentioned, Hollywood was both cautious and stereotypical in the representation of ethnicity: the unwritten norm, which applied when an ethnicity-race-nationality was problematic, was to avoid “doubling” it by using an interpreter of the same. We see white actors in blackface interpreting Afro-American characters or in redface to interpret Native Americans, but in classical cinema there is also a special interchangeability (as yet not investigated) between Italian and Jewish characters/performers. The most famous 1930s Italian gangsters, Tony Camonte of *Scarface* and Rico in *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931) are in fact performed by Jewish actors (Austrian-Polish) Paul Muni and Edward G. Robinson, who created the portrait of the hot-blooded and primitive criminal, now associated with Italian Mafiosi on the screen. On the contrary, the few Italian or Italian American performers who interpreted gangster roles in these years, like George Raft, Eduardo Ciannelli and Jack LaRue (Gaspare Biondolillo), presented them in a detached, at times ironic mode, as Raft did in *Scarface*, flipping the coin in the moments of tension, or Ciannelli as a sadistic, elegant, cold-blooded alias of Lucky Luciano in *Marked Woman* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937), or Jack LaRue as the impassible Popeye/Trigger in the adaptation of *Sanctuary* by Faulkner, in the cult film *The Story of Temple Drake* (Stephen Roberts, 1933). The unexpected result of this ethnic interchange is that the dominant stereotype of the Italian gangster today – violent and primitive, with a vein of childish cruelty – owes more to Rico and Tony Camonte than to an ironic George Raft.

5. THE PRODUCTION OF YIDDISH AND ITALIAN FILM IN NEW YORK IN THE 1930S

Images of *Santa Lucia Luntana* (Harold Godsoe, 1931). As I have tried thus far to demonstrate, in the 1930s an Italian performer in North America had two options: move to Hollywood, with the risk of being confined to the background or within an often negative stereotype, or contrast the negative American attitude towards Italians by remaining in Little Italy and creating a non-assimilated world of entertainment, in the traditions of the home country. For many artists, the second alternative became a necessity with the introduction of sound, when casting was limited by the ethnic mark of the accent or the ability of speaking English. As a result, the immigrant stage developed new modes of production and broadcasted radio programs in Italian, and even made its own films. From the cultural point of view, in so doing, it maintained the traditional formats of *sceneggiata* (popular drama with songs) and *macchietta* (comic musical characterization), while in terms of technology and economics of production, it used an American, modern approach.

The story of the relationship between Neapolitan music and the history of music in the world, or between Sicilian musicians and jazz, and in general the cosmopolitanism of the orchestras is too huge a topic to be developed here.¹³ With the advent of sound in cinema, ethnic and non-assimilated communities started making films in their own languages, often containing songs, shooting them in the old studios managed by the majors before the First World War (before they moved to the West Coast), such as the Metropolitan studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey. *Santa Lucia Luntana* and *Così è la vita* were among the titles shot in these studios, where Yiddish films such as *Ad Mosay* and *Uncle Moses* were also shot, together with African-American movies directed and produced by Oscar Micheaux, and the Yugoslav film *Ljubav i Strast*. Edgar Ulmer also shot the Yiddish film *Green Fields* (1937) in Fort Lee.¹⁴ At times the same directors made movies for different ethnicities, as in the case of Bud Pollard, who directed *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Black King*, *O festino la legge*, and the Yiddish film *Victims of Persecutions*.

The film *Santa Lucia Luntana* is an Italian-American *sceneggiata* shot by the Italian immigrant theater community in New Jersey in 1931.¹⁵ The dialogue

of the film is spoken in three languages – English, Neapolitan, and Italian – and the narrative expressed the nostalgia of the southern Italian emigrant living in New York. The immigrant's dream, however, was not the American Dream but one of returning to Naples, even though the film gave space to the contradictory effort of at least a partial integration in a society that was hostile.

Farfariello, born Eduardo Migliaccio, represents instead the tradition of *macchietta*. Another key personality of the Italian immigrant stage in America, he performed in the short *The Movie Actor* (1932) in which he presented four of his most famous *macchiette*, documenting the creation of the peculiar Neapolitan-Italian-American language, for example in the famous *La lingua italiana* (performed on the notes of *O sole mio*).¹⁶ The tradition of the musical *macchietta* arrived in Hollywood with Louis Prima and Jimmy Durante (in a contamination of jazz and Neapolitan rhythm, which would deserve further investigation) and continues in the notes of *That's Amore*.

6. THAT'S AMORE

Clips of *The Caddy* (Norman Taurog, 1953). Composed by Harry Warren-Salvatore Guaragna, who won an Oscar for *Lullaby of Broadway* in the 1930s and wrote the music for several of Busby Berkeley's musicals, the song *That's Amore* is performed by Dean Martin and (Jewish comedian) Jerry Lewis in *The Caddy* (Norman Taurog, 1953). The musical sequence is the quintessential Italian stereotype: it is performed at a crowded family dinner, dedicated to Argentina Brunetti (in the film, the mother of Dean Martin's character) with Frank Puglia playing the mandolin in the background, and with pizza-pie, "pasta e fasui," and wine being exhibited for the camera whenever the words evoke these Italian culinary items. This overdone representation of *Italianità*, in its excessive ethnicity (the sequence starts with Martin's mother putting some money in his pockets and ends with everybody eating and singing), becomes ironic, not only for the comedy which contains it, but in its very textual presentation. In addition, the presence of Jerry Lewis, singing along in his squeaky voice, erodes its ethnicity, disturbing this all-Italian scene, with his obvious alterity. At the same time, the scene seems to emphasize, while mocking it, the multicultural character of American cinema.

Dean Martin, with his ironic and yet extremely accomplished singing (and acting), together with Frank Sinatra, represent the closing of the dichotomy that had separated the Italian character and the actor in the postwar period. This new trend was inaugurated when the Oscar was awarded to Frank Sinatra for *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953), the first assigned to an actor of Italian origins performing an Italian character. Soon the Rat Pack, which included also African-American Sammy Davis Jr., developed a musical-gangster-multicultural and ironic format, now at the basis of *gangsta rap*.¹⁷

After this winding and fragmented itinerary in American cinema (and music) we can even claim that the rap recorded by “goodfella” Joe Pesci is in continuity with the tradition of the *macchietta*. And these are the colorful games that the spectacle of identity can play.

Notes

¹ On Italian actors in Hollywood before the Second World War, see Muscio, *Piccole Italie*. On the cultural history of Italian emigration in America, see Piero Bevilacqua, De Clementi, and Franzina; Mangione and Morreale; Cannistraro; and Bertellini, *Southern Crossings*. For more recent work on Italian American culture, see Lavery, and Barreca.

² I researched the biography and work of Francesco Pennino at Coppola’s American Zoetrope in San Francisco in 2008 and presented the paper “Francesco Pennino and ItalianAmerican sceneggiata” at the International Conference, *Neapolitan Postcards*, Calandra Institute, New York, March 2009.

³ Some of these records are preserved at the Library of Congress.

⁴ Southern Italian culture in America is discussed by Bertellini in *Italy in Early American Cinema*, and Casillo.

⁵ For the concept of cosmopolitanism, see Beck.

⁶ For a biography of Caruso, see Gargani and Cesarini.

⁷ On this aspect see Shifert.

⁸ On the question of race and ethnicity see Guglielmo.

⁹ See Bevilacqua, De Clementi, and Franzina, Vol. 2 *Arrivi*.

¹⁰ The Method is Stanislavki’s concept of naturalistic acting, applied at the Actor’s Studio and, interestingly enough, inspired by the acting style of Eleonora Duse and Tommaso Salvini.

¹¹ On the representation of Italians in Hollywood films, in addition to the chapter “From The Italian to Tony Soprano” in my *Piccole Italie*, see Richards and Bondanella.

¹² See Muscio, “From the Lower East Side to Fifth Avenue, and Back.” On the Italian/Jewish connection see Russo.

¹³ See Frasca. We could also mention Gardel's tangos with Neapolitan words, Louis Prima and his *gigolo*, the first Dixieland band directed by Nick La Rocca.

¹⁴ See Koszarski.

¹⁵ See Muscio, "Santa Lucia Luntana."

¹⁶ See Haller.

¹⁷ See Tosches, and Gennari.

Works cited

- Aleandri, Emelise. *The Italian-American Immigrant Theatre of New York City*. Charleston: Arcadia, 1999.
- Barreca, Regina, ed. *A Sitdown with The Sopranos*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Beck, Ulrich. *La società cosmopolita*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003.
- Bertellini, Giorgio. *Southern Crossings: Italians, Cinema and Modernity (Italy, 1861-New York, 1920)*. Diss. New York U, 2001.
- . *Italy in Early American Cinema. Race Landscape, and the Picturesque*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009.
- Bevilacqua Piero, Andreina De Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, eds. *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*. Vol.1 *Partenze*; Vol. 2 *Arrivi*. Roma: Donzelli, 2001-2002.
- Bondanella, Peter. *Hollywood Italians. Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, and Sopranos*. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Cannistraro, Philip, ed. *The Italians of New York. Five Centuries of Struggle and Achievement*. New York: The New York Historical Society, 1999.
- Carlson, Marvin. *The Italian Shakespearians: Performances by Ristori, Salvini and Rossi in England and America*. Washington, D.C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1985.
- Casillo, Robert. *Gangster Priest: The Italian American Cinema of Martin Scorsese*. Toronto: Toronto Italian Studies, 2007.
- Frasca, Simona. *Birds of passage. I musicisti napoletani a New York, 1895-1940*. Lucca: Lim, 2010.
- Gargani, Pietro, and Gianni Cesarini. *Caruso*. Milano: Longanesi, 1990.
- Gennari, John. "Passing For Italian. Crooners and Gangsters in Crossover Culture." *Transition* 72 (1997): 37-48.
- Guglielmo, Thomas. *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Haller, Hermann W. "Between Naples and New York: Italian Immigrant Speech in Eduardo 'Farfariello' Migliaccio's *Macchiette*." Lecture at the Calandra Institute. New York, March 6, 2007.
- Hostert, Anna C., and Anthony J. Tamburri, eds. *Scene italoamericane. Rappresentazioni cinematografiche degli italiani d'America*. Roma: Sossella, 2002.
- Koszarski, Richard. *Fort Lee: The Film Town*. Rome: John Libbey Publishing, 2004.
- Lavery, David, ed. *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*. London: Wallflower, 2002.

- Mangione, Jerre, and Ben Morreale. *La Storia. Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1992.
- Muscio, Giuliana. *Piccole Italie, grandi schermi*. Roma: Bulzoni, 2004.
- . "From the Lower East Side to Fifth Avenue, and Back." *Public Space, Private Lives. Race, Gender, Class and Citizenship in New York, 1890-1929*. Eds. William Boelhower, and Anna Scacchi. Amsterdam: VU UP, 2004. 313-22.
- . "Santa Lucia Luntana and Italian American Film Production in New York in the Early 1930s." *Ambassadors: American Studies in a Changing World*. Proceedings of the 2003 AISNA Conference. Eds. Massimo Bacigalupo and Gregory Bowling. Rapallo: Busco, 2006. 274-80.
- Richards, David. *Italian-American. The Racializing of an Ethnic Identity*. New York: New York UP, 1999.
- Russo, John Paul. "Un capolavoro incompreso: il cinema italo-americano di Capra," in *Scene italoamericane*. Ed. Hostert and Tamburri. 305-38.
- Shifert, Marsha. "Aesthetics, Technology, and the Capitalization of Culture: How the Talking Machine Became a Musical Instrument." *Science in Context* 8 (1995): 417-49.
- Tosches, Nick. *Dino*. Milano: Baldini e Castoldi, 2004.
- Uricchio, William, and Roberta Pearson. "Dante's Inferno and Caesar's Gost: Intertextuality and Conditions of Reception in Early American Cinema." *Silent Film*. Ed. Richard Abel. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1996. 217-33.