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Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, and
Sopranos (review)

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Mastroianni, from *Peccato che sia una canaglia* (1954) to *Ieri, oggi e domani* and *Matrimonio all'italiana*.

In the sixth and final chapter, "Remembrance of Films Past: Mastroianni and the Aging Male Body," as well as in the conclusion, Reich explores not only some of the films that the actor made in the last stages of his career, but also those in which he allowed makeup to purposely age his body. What emerges is a graceful portrait of a man who, far from shying away from the effects of time, courageously embraced them in his life as much as in his art. However, Reich's analysis goes beyond the biographical to show how the characters Mastroianni played in *Stanno tutti bene* and *Ginger e Fred* acquire a symbolic representation of "Italian Cinema as Fossil," wherein "aging masculinity comes to symbolize loss on a personal as well as a national/cultural level" (146).

Reich's book makes a significant contribution to several fields, including Italian, film, gender, and cultural studies. Mastroianni, as an Italian as well as an international icon, offers a point of entry for a study that exceeds the construction and commodification of the actor on the international scene, only partially tackled, and focuses primarily on the representation of unstable masculinity that Mastroianni embodied in some of his most memorable films. Scholars in the fields mentioned above will find ample film discussions and historical contextualization supported by substantial bibliographical references.

In sum, Reich's book raises as many questions about Italian culture and sexuality as it tries to answer. For instance, one line of inquiry would involve the interrogation of the persistence of gender imbalances in society despite the obvious exposure, in many of Mastroianni's films, of the fragile and unstable construction upon which masculinity and femininity are based. This and other questions will have to be pursued by scholars in future research, for which Reich has certainly sown the seeds.

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Peter Bondanella. *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, and Sopranos*. New York: Continuum, 2004. Pp. 352.

This book is indispensable for anyone who has an interest in the history of Italian American cinema. It is a great read and a wonderful reference book, in which one can find nearly all films whose subjects deal with the representation

of Italians in American cinema. It is also a work that illuminates the problematic relationship some scholars may experience with their own ethnicity.

In his introduction Bondanella argues that the representation of the Italian American in Hollywood movies has defined how Americans view Italian Americans. He claims that celluloid representation created an Italian American persona that dictates how Italian Americans are perceived, even if, as Bondanella notes, Americans are "far more sophisticated than what it is commonly thought in interpreting and absorbing stereotypes in their culture" (13). Nonetheless, Hollywood has managed to produce cinematic masterpieces (and flops) based on these stereotypes.

Bondanella then sets forth a genealogy of Italian stereotypes in Anglophonic culture, from Elizabethan theater to Hollywood cinema. In illuminating this phenomenon of reversed influence, he argues that British culture has conditioned American perception of Italians up to and including our own times. Thus, the manner in which Hollywood cinema places criminals and delinquents in an Italian American setting finds its source in how Italian boys are represented by Elizabethan playwrights, where perfidious Italian characters, such as Shakespeare's Iago, abound.

Bondanella then looks at how stereotyped characterizations of Italian Americans have propagated specific subgenres in American cinema. Each chapter illustrates a specific type of Italian, such as the Dago, the Palooka, and so on, and traces its development from the early days of Hollywood to the present day.

The book comprises six chapters, which correspond roughly to six typologies for depicting the Italian presence in American culture. They are titled, respectively, "Dagos: Hollywood Italian Histories of Immigration, *la famiglia*, and Little Italies from the Silent Era to the Present"; "Palookas: Hollywood Italian Prize Fighters"; "Romeos: Hollywood Italian Lovers"; "Wise Guys: Hollywood Gangsters"; "Comic Wise Guys: Hollywood Italian Gangsters Yuk It Up"; and "Sopranos: The Postmodern Hollywood Italian *Famiglia*."

In establishing categories of representation for the Romeos, the Dagos, and the Palookas, Bondanella discusses, in chronological order, the films that best epitomize each depiction of the Italian American. Since the movies discussed are for the most part genre films, Bondanella also provides a genre typology in each of his chapters. The Dago, the Latin Lover, the Fighter, and the Wise Guy are classifications that are important for seeing how filmmakers and scriptwriters represent the migratory experience and its effects over

generations. According to Bondanella—and it is difficult to disagree with him—the most relevant topic was, and still is, the life of the family, in its positive but especially in its negative manifestations. As the many “Little Italies” sprang up along the East Coast (and not only there), Italian neighborhoods became a surrogate of the *paese* the immigrants had left behind, eventually assuming a key function in any filmic representation of the Italian migration to the States. In contrast to the individualism of the American lifestyle, the Italian American neighborhoods vividly demonstrate the sense of closeness and the suffocating conventions to which everybody is bound.

Bondanella begins his first chapter, “Dagos: Hollywood Histories of Immigration, *la Famiglia*, and Little Italies, from the Silent Era to the Present,” with the discussion of a recent film, *Vendetta* (1999), based on the eponymous novel by Richard Gambino. The film is the fictional rendition produced by HBO of a true event that occurred in New Orleans on 14 March 1891, when innocent Italians, falsely accused of the murder of the local sheriff Hennessy, were lynched by an angry mob. Bondanella brings forth his commentary on this film to better illustrate the profound connection between “Italians and Mafia in the American imagination [. . .] born in the aftermath of the event dramatized in this film” (19).

D. W. Griffith first depicted the arrival en masse of Italians from the most depressed areas of the peninsula in films such as *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (1908), *In Little Italy* (1909), *The Violin Maker of Cremona* (1909), and *Pippa Passes* (1909). In 1915, with the film *The Italian*, Reginald Barker provided a more complete representation of the lives of an Italian immigrant family. The Hollywood Italian experience continues with Leonardo “Chico” Marx imitating the Italian American with his penchant for attracting beautiful women, something destined to last in the characterization of the Italian American Latin Lover: ethnic humor proved to be quite remunerative for big crowds. In the chapter section “The Great Depression and Hollywood Italian Laborers,” Bondanella comments on one of the most important works in Italian American literature, Pietro Di Donato's novel *Christ in Concrete*, which was adapted to film in 1949 by Edward Dmytryk. In a style that often follows neorealist techniques, films such as *From Here to Eternity*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Marty* represent the immigrant's plight. Issues of ethnicity, difference, values, and stereotypes (both in the negative and in the positive) are revisited by Hollywood and independent filmmakers in films ranging from *Mac*, *Big Night*, and *A Bronx Tale*, to *Household Saints* and *Love with the Proper Stranger*. As Bondanella notes, in the more recent films

there is a “continuity of values” based on the notion that “God is present in a job well done.” This is “the same belief that inspired the workmen of the medieval cathedrals, to fashion perfectly even the parts of the structure that could not be seen, since God could see all” (61). The comparison of all these films in sequence makes evident the gradual process of assimilation of Italians to the American “melting pot.” At the same time, however, it is clear that Italian Americans brought to the New World a set of values and beliefs that have greatly helped them to become one of the most economically successful ethnic groups in the country.

The second chapter, “Palookas: Hollywood Italian Prize Fighters,” deals with the representation of Italian Americans in sports. Bondanella states that this genre of cinematic production has done “little to change the stereotypes,” that it “merely continu[es] the identification of Italians with lower-class environments” (93). Pejorative nicknaming continues, as “dagos” become “palookas,” or mediocre players, an epithet that originates in a comic strip whose main character is the “inarticulate and simple boxer” (93) Joe Palooka. In this chapter, too, a long list of films on the subject of the sportsman makes evident how the representation of men in sports has been a recipe for box office success. From Rocky Graziano’s autobiography *Somebody up There Likes Me* (1956), cowritten with Roland Barber, to Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* (1980), we are presented with a type of film that, more than analyzing the actual vicissitudes of Italian Americans, seems to reiterate, within the perimeters of a boxing arena, the history of Italian American “winners” and “losers” making up much of this country’s history.

However, in spite of victories, these boxers appear defeated by the American dream. They remain who they are, Dagos with aspirations, or better yet, Palookas. I am not convinced, therefore, of Bondanella’s claim that boxing is for Rocky a means to gain self-respect. In my view, Rocky is like other real-life boxers, not destined for golf or cricket but fated to play the same very violent sport that many real-life immigrants learned on the streets of New York City or Philadelphia. In this scenario also, representation of Italian Americans does not seem to go beyond what was already expected, namely the image of vulgar, rough peasants from the Italian South, the same image that reinforced Henry James’s views that the immigrants he saw in the States were very different from his sophisticated friends in Florence and Rome.

The third chapter, “Romeos: Hollywood Italian Lovers,” spans from Rodolfo Valentino to John Travolta. The “Latin Lover” is a proverbial

representation of the Italian American man, and Bondanella discusses a large corpus of films where the narrative centers around the Italian “Romeo” exemplified by actors such as the above-mentioned Valentino, but also Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the development of the traditional “Romeo” figure into the “Disco Dago” exemplified, among others, by John Travolta’s roles in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Grease* (1978).

In the fourth chapter, “Wise Guys: Hollywood Italian Gangsters,” Bondanella discusses what is perhaps the best known and popular representation of the Italian American, the gangster. He traces the development of the gangster figure from the early silent cinema to the Classical studio era and discusses how the codes for the genre were established by Mervyn Leroy’s *Little Caesar* (1930), William Wellman’s *Public Enemy* (1931), and Howard Hawks’s *Scarface* (1932). Bondanella continues to trace the evolution of the genre in the work of New Hollywood directors and discusses at length Francis Ford Coppola’s trilogy *The Godfather* and Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995). “Comic Wise Guys: Hollywood Italian Gangsters Yuk It Up,” demonstrates the ability of more recent generations of Italian American filmmakers and directors to make fun of and satirize previous stereotypes, in the hope that spectators can be provoked to ponder the validity of such negative, pejorative, and often unfounded fears about the “Italian.”

But by now, much of Italian American culture has been accepted and assimilated into mainstream America. People no longer react with fear to Italian names; mainstream America now seems more concerned with the recent arrival of other ethnic minorities, with the usual fear that these groups may attack the very foundations of the society, including language, individualism, and respect for privacy. In short, Italian Americans have been tamed, to the point that the accessibility of images from *The Godfather* and *Saturday Night Fever* are emblematic not so much of the Italian American, but of a certain pervasive taste in pop culture.

Later in the book, Bondanella discusses the representations of the Italian American in television series such as *The Sopranos* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Tony Soprano is a mobster who is beset by psychological anguish, while Raymond is the perfect idiot from the suburbs, complete with intrusive, ill-mannered parents, the television equivalent of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

Despite the volume’s many positive qualities, it must be noted that it might have been of even greater utility had Bondanella given an in-depth analysis of some of the central issues in Italian American studies and

provided a more theoretical dimension to his study. Interestingly, Bondanella's initial discussion of stereotypes of Italians in Elizabethan theater gives a distinguished pedigree to the rather unpleasant rendition of Italian Americans in Hollywood cinema. Yet, far from providing readers with illuminating analysis of this phenomenon, the volume revisits the many expressions of stereotyping and debasing of the Italian American in a still culturally predominantly WASP country. In short, it seems to legitimize what happened on this side of the Atlantic. Furthermore, Bondanella ventures, unsuccessfully, into difficult and tricky territory in choosing to discuss Spike Lee's movies. Bondanella affirms that in Lee's *Jungle Fever* "relationships can only be generated by sick curiosity about 'doing it' with someone of another ethnic or racial group, not by friendship, affection, and love" (89). In general, Bondanella believes that Lee's attitude "reflects a particular form of racism of his own, especially his consistent depiction of Italian Americans as bigots" (84). I am not sure statements such as these are constructive, as sentiments of racial intolerance with respect to African Americans can be extrapolated from the work of many Italian American directors (see Chazz Palminteri's *A Bronx Tale*, as well as many of Scorsese's movies, for instance). Racism works both ways. While for some this may be a cultural agenda, I prefer to call it a form of cultural poetics. It is also noteworthy perhaps that Lee, in *The 25th Hour*, repeats the same monologue that Bondanella quotes in his book. The character played by Ed Norton locks himself in a restroom and starts firing against all ethnic groups of the city of New York, now completely wounded by Ground Zero. And it is not incidental that Lee has his character repeat the monologue of John Turturro from *Do the Right Thing*, for things are not getting any better. So, I am not sure that Lee is indeed not using the "doing it" with members of other races as a metaphor for something else, as frequently happens with sex in the arts.

Since cinema is a most powerful medium to guide our interpretations, before making any blunt statement about authors' intentions we should explore and apply critical and theoretical reasoning. Anyone working in the fields of women studies and gender studies cannot help but recognize a huge gap in Bondanella's history of representation. Even if Nancy Savoca's films are mentioned within the *famiglia* typology (57–60), the typologies Bondanella maps are concerned predominantly with Italian American men. The absence of female names is quite problematic, particularly today.

Finally, Bondanella declares his interest for this topic to be based not on his by now remote Italian roots, as his name would suggest, but rather on his

own work, largely in the field of cinema studies. It seems odd that one would choose to distance oneself from one's own roots in authoring a book that depicts and comments on cultural production as it relates to one's ancestral ties. Perhaps Bondanella creates distance between his own name and the subject of his book precisely because of the stereotypes about Italian Americans. According to Fred L. Gardaphe, studying ethnic literature means starting a process that "necessarily involves a self-politicization. It is a study that requires placing a personal item onto a public agenda" (*Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996], 1). If we accept this tenet, we may wonder where the "self-politicization" is in this expansive discussion on the representations of Italian Americans in cinema, one of the most popular forms of visual communication of our time.

In conclusion, I remain unsure as to whether Bondanella has created a culturally specific criticism in film studies that is sensitive to Italian and American cultures alike. All the films he writes about are by Italian American directors, with Italian American actors usually playing major roles. However, what does Bondanella make of all this effusive display of ethnicity? Should we practice a "culturally specific" criticism, or do we have to pretend that an acritical, merely chronological, type-based analysis of the movie plots will suffice? The signs of ethnicity that directors like Martin Scorsese or Abel Ferrara give us are far more telling than what we are led to suppose after reading this very comprehensive book. And while critics like Gardaphe and Anthony Julian Tamburri offer us many ways to read all these "signs" in literature and cinema, I believe there is ample space to do more innovative critical work when "screening ethnicity."

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Salomé Vuelta García, cur. *Relazioni letterarie tra Italia e penisola iberica nell'epoca rinascimentale e barocca. Atti del primo colloquio internazionale, Pisa, 4–5 ottobre 2002*. Firenze: Olschki, 2004. Pp. x + 177.

In un suo saggio del 1990, Remo Ceserani, noto specialista di comparatistica, si lamentava dello stato di disinteresse dell'insieme della cultura italiana nei riguardi della cultura spagnola, e denunciava la tendenza a considerare le culture iberiche o ibero-americane come belle e interessanti perché "esoteriche", e la scarsa conoscenza, nonostante i contributi autorevoli di