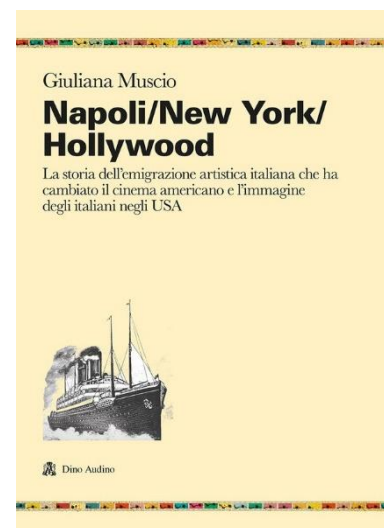


Giuliana Muscio

Napoli/New York/Hollywood

La storia dell'emigrazione artistica italiana che ha cambiato il cinema americano e l'immagine degli italiani negli USA



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The title of Giuliana Muscio's book on the development of Italian American cinema is somehow misleading. It suggests that what the reader will find is essentially a reconstruction of the westward movement of the Italian presence in America cinema, starting from Naples, passing through New York, and arriving at Hollywood, where Italian directors and actors have finally reached a position of absolute prominence (just look at the number of Italian last names in any list of Hollywood moguls, from Coppola, Scorsese and De Palma to Ferrara and Tarantino). But from the very beginning, the landscape drawn by Muscio appears much more vast and challenging to cross, because the real object of study is the complexity of the processes of transatlantic mobility and interaction between Italy and the United States at all levels, even if the main focus is of course the world of show business—in the widest sense, including not only cinema but also music, dance, theater, photography, and the radio.¹

¹ While there are various authoritative studies on Italian American cinema (for some of the most relevant, especially focusing on post-World War II cinema up to the present, see for example Muscio and Spagnoletti 2007, Muscio et al. 2010, Tamburri 2011, and the most recent, Calabretta-Sajder and Gravano 2021), very few studies (Ferraro 2005 is an exception) have approached the general issue of Italian American *cultura dello spettacolo*.

The overall historical horizon is obviously that of the migrations from Italy to the United States, still mostly limited, up to 1860, to a relatively small number of skilled workers like sculptors, woodworkers, glassblowers, stonemasons and—what is specifically relevant for the book—also stage artists, musicians, and actors: all people who prepared the field for the birth, development, and popular success of Italian American comic-dramatic companies in the early 20th century. These enterprises responded to the need for self-identification of the (almost always illiterate) Italian migrants who had started to arrive massively from Southern Italy at the turn of the century: they were rarely able to speak English and even standard Italian, but could understand dialogues in that sort of *lingua franca* which was the simplified version of the Naples dialect used in the popular theater of the *Mezzogiorno* (Sicily included). This explains the first word of the book title, because ‘Napoli’ here stands for a generic ‘Italian South’ that was largely hegemonized, as regarded not only popular culture, by Neapolitan dramatic and musical traditions. The centrality of the role of Naples to the birth of Italian American performing arts would be confirmed and even strengthened with the establishment of cinema as the main form of popular entertainment, because, as Giuliana Muscio recalls, at the beginning of the 20th century “l’industria cinematografica napoletana era allineata con altri importanti centri produttivi come Torino e Roma, e disponeva di studios tecnologicamente avanzati, pubblicazioni di qualità e sale sia popolari che prestigiose” (16).² *Cabiria* (1914), for example, produced by Neapolitan Gustavo Lombardo, who distributed it throughout the Western world, is considered the first ‘colossal’ movie in the history of cinema, preceding even D.W. Griffith’s (infamous) *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

What especially comes out from this panoramic view is the interplay of the local, the regional, the inter/national, and the global—intertwined as they are from the very beginning at the point of origin: Giuliana Muscio has to coin the expression “Mediterranean cosmopolitanism”³ (7-8) to highlight how the ‘export’ of people and forms of expression from Naples and its surroundings to America cannot be reduced to the simple ‘translation’ of some unsophisticated Southern Italian folklore onto the stages of first New York City and then Hollywood. “Mediterranean cosmopolitanism” in the early 20th century was, as a matter of fact, the end result of a long

² “The Neapolitan film industry was at the same level as other important production centers such as Turin and Rome, and could afford technologically advanced studios, quality publications, and many theaters, both popular and prestigious” (translation mine).

³ The centrality of Naples in 18th-century European culture and beyond (one has just to remember the influence of Neapolitan Enlightenment thinkers such as Carlo Filangieri on the Founding Fathers of the United States, first of all Benjamin Franklin) was already the focus of the classic study edited by Franco Venturi (1962).

history of cross-cultural disseminations through which Naples had managed to acquire the status of an emblem of high civilization: not only music and theater but also cuisine turned the city into a myth of refinement, and a term like *macaroni*, which we today consider as the most typical item of Neapolitan and Italian popular food (even in derogatory terms), in 18th-century England trespassed the boundaries of gastronomy to enter the field of *haute couture* (see McNeill 2018). The word came to mean the most elegant of male dressing fashion styles, and two centuries later and across the Atlantic Ocean the radio talent program *Prince Macaroni Hour*, sponsored by a Boston pasta maker, also made the word acquire a cultural significance that helped Italian Americans in the 1930s to start forming a sense of self-awareness not limited to cooking, but extended to artistic creativity and performing skills.

The conjunction of all these factors placed a marginal and marginalized migrant community at the very heart of the rising show business, as exemplified by the fact that two of the most popular early 20th-century US movie (and music) stars, Enrico Caruso and Rodolfo Valentino, were Italian. But *Napoli/New York/Hollywood* also transcends any average bi-directional perspective on the process of transplanting (and hybridizing) the Italian *cultura dello spettacolo* into the context of American movie industry, by placing it within a multidimensional circum-Atlantic web involving the whole of the American continent and focusing on a “visione non solo transatlantica ma almeno in parte interamericana” (8).⁴ The reader may come to understand how Italian directors, actors, and musicians who worked in the US also contributed to the building of the movie industry in countries like Argentina or Brazil, where Italian American early acting stars, like Mimì Aguglia, were more popular than in the United States or even Italy. Inside this multidirectional network of movements of people, ideas, languages, and forms of expression, described in detail in the book, the migration of all kinds of ‘show people’ represents a sort of *exemplum* which allows to better focus the contradictory and long unsolved dialectics of alienation and integration, marginalization and centrality, assimilation and resilience, which have characterized the Italian American experience as a whole. Instead of simply setting *Italian* and *American* in an oppositional tension, as has happened until not so long ago in the field of Italian American studies, Muscio not only weaves together the local/regional and the inter/national dimensions, but also arranges them into the framework of an overall mobile dialogue. Through the latter, both the single individuals and the various migrant communities on the two coasts of the United States (but also elsewhere) are qualified as belonging simultaneously to a number of different worlds, at multiple levels—ethnic, linguistic, artistic,

⁴ “not only a transatlantic, but also an at least partially inter-American vision” (translation mine).

religious, political, and even gendered. This is witnessed by the shifting identities displayed by, say, the ur-Latin lover but also ‘softly male,’ almost subversively gay, icon Rodolfo Valentino, and by photographer/model/actor/political activist Tina Modotti.

Gradually, during the first decades of the 20th century, another relevant process involved Italian American professionals in the show business, as it was generally the case with the Italian migrant community as a whole. Nationality came to be consistently used in order to identify newcomers in racial terms, due to what David Richards (1999) and other scholars consider an extraordinarily racist moment in US cultural and constitutional history, culminating in the 1924 Nationality Quota system. Italianness was for the WASP dominant culture almost always equated with the *Meridione*, and in Italy itself the South was at that time conceptualized, to use John Dickie’s felicitous expression, as a “darkest Italy” (Dickie 1999). Consequently, many migrants did not think of themselves in national terms when they left Italy, because their allegiances were rather to the local and regional areas they came from (and also the language they spoke was usually a dialect, and not standard Italian): only when they were away from their country of origin were they more or less forcefully led to recognize themselves as ‘Italians.’ They discovered that this national identification implied their positioning inside a racial spectrum which often (but not always) placed them close to non-white *Latinos* and even blacks (see Guglielmo 2003, Guglielmo and Salerno 2003, Luconi 2016, Gennari 2017, Pardini 2017, Vellon 2018, among many others). This ambiguous ethnicity rendered Italian American identity an unstable, mobile, and changing construct, which on the other hand was firmly rooted in a cluster of long-standing cultural traditions that Italian American stage artists and musicians could exploit for self-promotion in the world of show business. For mainstream American culture, Italians, with their ‘natural’ talent for acting (corresponding to the equally ‘natural’ sense of African Americans for rhythm), became the perfect impersonators of other ethnic identities (Valentino, for instance, almost never played Italian roles, and his most famous one was that of a sheik). At the same time, Italian characters were more often than not interpreted by non-Italian characters, such as Romanian Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar* and Hungarian Paul Muni in *Scarface*.

This means that one peculiar feature of the Italian American experience has been a deep awareness of the ‘performativity’ of identity, as something which has nothing to do with in-bred ‘biological’ tendencies according to the ‘race’ one belongs to, and is instead the product of long-term cultural trends. Muscio’s book stresses the fundamental role of musical and dramatic education in Italian, and especially Neapolitan, society since the Renaissance, and traces the stories of a number of figures (Antonio Maiori, Eugenio De Liguoro, Lido Manetti, Tullio

Carminati, Giulio Trento, just to name a few) who consciously took advantage of all the opportunities the most modern of civilizations could offer to someone who had such an enormous and well sedimented, but eminently dynamic and adjustable, array of technical know-hows. It is not a coincidence that the first authentic media star in the history of show business was Enrico Caruso, due to his ability to ‘performatively’ conflate (and respectively activate according to the given situation) not only his talent as a singer of both opera and *canzone napoletana*, and as a theater as well as a movie actor, but also all the levels of his multifarious identity—local (Neapolitan/Southern Italian), national (Italian), migrant (Italian American) and international/cosmopolitan, as the ‘global’ artist he was.⁵

The Second World War operated like a watershed for the Italian American community at large and more specifically for their representatives in the world of cinema. While Italian ethnicity was gradually accepted as fully white, even if at the cost of severing most of the connections to Italian cultural roots, Italian Americans gained a surprising prominence in the show business, also thanks to the rebirth of post-Fascist Italian cinema with *neorealismo*, which rapidly became an extremely influential new vogue in Europe and the US (see Ruberto and Wilson 2007). The last chapter of Muscio’s book is aptly titled “Transnational neorealism,” and examines the first phase of a process that would eventually lead to the almost ‘hegemonic’ standing of Italian Americans in the movie industry, also due to the ‘reverse effect’ of that sort of Marshall plan on the cultural level devised by Hollywood when it outsourced some of its major productions to Cinecittà. A central figure in this phase was Frank Sinatra. On the one hand he embodied a totally non-ethnic Americanness (his English pronunciation was adamant, up to the point that his songs were often taken as *exempla* for correct inflection—together with, not so much paradoxically, African American Nat “King” Cole’s...); on the other, Sinatra was personally engaged in the fight for the civil rights of Jews and blacks on the basis of an experience of marginalization, exploitation, and persecution Italian Americans shared with them (when asked why he subsidized the NACCP, he replied that blacks were not the only ones who had been seen hanging from trees—Italians had been, too).

If one flaw can be detected in *Napoli/New York/Hollywood*, this is the too fast pace it takes in describing the coming of age not so much of Italian American cinema as of its dominant position since the last quarter of the 20th century—a relevance that far outweighs that of neorealism, and which in turn has opened the way to the possibly total assimilation of ‘Italian Americanness’ within mainstream American culture. Just to make one example, the role played

⁵ Witness a fame which managed to reach even the still ‘wild’ Amazons (a ‘true’ legend reconstructed by Werner Herzog in *Fitzcarraldo*).

by Sylvester Stallone in transforming a working-class Italian American boxer into the avatar of ‘true’ Americanness could have been investigated in depth, and could have led to a more thorough view of the complexity of the cinematic imagery of and about Italian Americans. But it is only a really minor shortcoming, because we already have all kinds of analyses, interpretations, and theorizations of contemporary Italian American cinema. What was missing, and what the book successfully provides, is a meticulous historical reconstruction of the early decades of the Italian presence in American cinema, theater, music, and more generally performance culture, and a precise theoretical framework to ground it upon.

One last remark. *Napoli/New York/Hollywood* is actually the Italian translation (and revision) of Giuliana Muscio’s book published in English by Fordham University Press in 2018. While an extremely interesting chapter on the American silent films ‘made in Italy’ has been unfortunately eliminated, this new version has added a more incisive inquiry into the dynamics that allowed Italian actors who had worked in popular immigrant theater to gain admittance to the new cinema industry. It seems to me the perfect closure for a book that follows a path from Naples through New York to Hollywood but then ends up with the ‘coming back home’ of Tony Soprano, who discovers a Naples totally different from the one he imagined. The book has followed the same route, and has come back, to make the Italian readers find out that the ‘Italianness’ of Italian American cinema is so different from what could be expected.

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