

Film Reviews

Mi Pogolotti Querido/Il Mio Amato Pogolotti.

By Enrica Viola.

UNA Film srl Torino, 2010.

57 minutes. DVD format, color.

This multinational, multicultural, and multilingual documentary with a wonderful musical soundtrack is superbly edited so as to fit a complex story tightly into a one-hour format. The film is part of an international encounter between the Italian state and contemporary Cuba that also involves the region of Piedmont and the University of Turin. In 2000, one of the two principal narrators in the film, the artist Giuseppe “Pino” Chiezzi, then a member of the Regional Council of Piedmont, was in Havana to attend an exhibit of the paintings by Cuban visual artist Marcelo Pogolotti—an exhibit that was partially supported by the Italian Embassy. During that visit, he learned about two Pogolotti stories: that of the three generations of a family originally rooted in Italy and of the workers’ neighborhood that Marcelo’s migrant father Dino Pogolotti constructed in Cuba. The Regional Council subsequently sponsored the book *Dino Pogolotti: un piemontese all’Avana/Dino Pogolotti: un piemontés en la Habana* (Edizioni Blu, 2004), written by a team from the University of Turin based on field and historical studies in Cuba.

Part of the fascination of the film lies in director Enrica Viola’s skillful blending of two narratives into a single story. The film makes use of the research material of numerous visual and textual sources (newspapers, postcards, pictures, photographs, documents and receipts, letters, maps, archival footage, etc.) about two interrelated histories that began in the 1890s. The first is the story of the three-generational lineage of Dino Pogolotti (1879–1923, migrant, entrepreneur), his son Marcelo Pogolotti (1902–1988, painter and writer), and his granddaughter Graziella Pogolotti Jacobson (b. 1932, writer, cultural critic, and important intellectual of the Cuban Revolution); the second is that of the people of a neighborhood that Dino’s construction company built in 1911, an area that occupies a unique place in the social and cultural history of Havana and of Cuba. This barrio—once officially named Barrio Redención but always colloquially called Barrio Pogolotti—was the first “workers settlement” of relatively inexpensive working-class housing built under government auspices in the Hispanic Antilles of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

This film—and the preceding book—strongly reflect the revitalization of Havana that began in the 1990s, with its emphasis on active participation by local communities and organizations in planning, managing, and executing the reconstruction and improvement of the urban infrastructure and numerous aspects of the quality of life in the city’s neighborhoods. These enlightened actions by the state and the Cuban authorities also involved new investment patterns and recycling of funds to enhance and develop the people-centered voluntary collective efforts. Another important process the film reflects is the restructuring of many aspects of Cuban culture so as to express the many vernacular creations that are based in multigenerational re-workings of African-derived forms and practices. In the film, these are shown as centered around

beliefs and practices of religion, spirituality, healing, and herbology, each with rich accompaniments and derivatives in music, dance, and the visual arts.

The film was shot in Barrio Pogolotti, in those parts of central Havana where Marcelo lived after 1939 and Graziella grew up, in Pino Chiezzi's studio in Italy, and in the little town of Giaveno in western Piedmont where Dino was born and raised and others of the family lived. Through long shots and montages, other Havana settings are also shown: the waterfront, the Malecón seafront avenue, the Miramar and Vedado neighborhoods, and the skyline of the city at various moments of the day.

Viola's film has a very tight structure. There are upward of seventy distinct scenes and two major narrators who appear throughout the film: Pino Chiezzi, speaking in Italian, and Graziella Pogolotti, speaking in Spanish. Together, they recount the story and experiences of the Pogolotti family and also comment on the barrio and on Cuban history, society, and culture. The barrio itself is vividly represented by its own people. There is a sort of chorus, a quartet of domino players who appear in many scenes throughout the entire film, whose conversation while playing touches on each major theme of the movie. The film also focuses on a number of residents of the neighborhood; these people are represented and named as fleshed-out individuals whose personal and familial stories are briefly and succinctly told. Further elucidation comes from three academic expert "talking heads." Two of them concentrate on the barrio's history and significance for Cuban culture and society, while the third focuses on Marcelo and Graziella Pogolotti.

The film interweaves the two stories. The one concerning the Pogolotti family is told by the two principal narrators, Chiezzi and Pogolotti, who always appear individually. In this narrative thread, they are supported by one of the three academic experts, Helmo Hernández who appears several times in Havana's Museum of Cuban Art. He gives examples and explanations of Marcelo Pogolotti's paintings and writings and fascinating comments on the Marcelo–Graziella relationship. The second story is much more complex and is essentially told by the various people who live in Barrio Pogolotti, with key support by two of the academics María L. Zardoya (architect and planner, Center for Urban Studies of Havana) and Miguel Barnet (poet, novelist, ethnologist, Casa Fernando Ortíz, University of Havana).

In this story of the barrio, we encounter the film's chorus. A recurrent setting is one of the barrio homes where year after year an unspecified number of diverse players are always seen playing dominos. The domino players shown are usually the same four men, although other players appear briefly, one of them a woman. They appear over the course of nine distinct scenes in each of which their conversation centers on a theme of importance in the film. In sum, they emphasize the intense, kinship-like nature of the solidarity, mutual caring and noncompetitiveness of social relations in the neighborhood, its special local styles of belief and practice, and the residents' sense of place and of occupying a very distinct identity within Cuba. The barrio itself exists because of governmental action early in the twentieth century. The original inhabitants—many of whom were *tabaqueros* (cigarmakers)—from Old Havana won a housing lottery and had the pecuniary discipline needed to pay off the houses. They could use the school that was built as part of the barrio. They played a special role in the literary diffusion and the legitimation of vernacular Afro-Cuban beliefs and practices—and contributed very greatly to creative movements in the country's musical, artistic, and

cultural development. These conversations by the domino players punctuate other scenes that depict significant aspects of life in Barrio Pogolotti through two kinds of shots: collective takes of people in houses, alleys, streets, and sidewalks and shots of specific named individuals, most of whom are lifelong residents.

This focus on named individuals from the neighborhood is particularly revealing, the camera showing each in his or her milieu, surrounded by the instruments and tools of their particular trade. Through these scenes we learn the long history of organized social action in the barrio, the barrio's special place in the history of literature on Afro-Cuban beliefs and practices, the importance of the Jesús Menéndez Sports and Recreation Center as a focus of so many activities in the community, and the contributions of the Cuban ecumenical movement's Martin Luther King Center to many development and service efforts. The presence of vigorous elderly people in all the barrio-related scenes is particularly striking.

Visually, the movie is outstanding, capturing the many aspects of life visible in the streets, walkways, and houses of the barrio. Using long shots and close-ups, it shows the layout and uses of interior space, the furnishings and decorations of each person's home, the paraphernalia of their occupation or working space, their dress and self-presentation, giving an accumulation of visual clues that captures much about the character of each individual—the two narrators, the three academic experts, the group of domino players, and the individual residents of Barrio Pogolotti upon whom the film dwells. Furthermore, it captures the light of Havana at various times of the day and, above all, effectively meets the challenge of depicting the very special quality of the dusk of the Antillean evening. Viola's documentary technique is refreshing, especially in how it approaches language, preserving people's spoken vernacular without voice-overs (optional subtitles in Italian, Spanish, or English are provided). Those people who appear in the film are never identified by subtitle, although all are clearly identified in the closing credits.

All in all, the film's approach to its settings and characters is a naturalistic one, often enlivened and enriched by the musical soundtrack. One significant and effective departure from this naturalism is built upon Marcelo Pogolotti's return to Havana on the eve of World War II. The soundtrack in this scene is a Yoruba chant, and the silhouette of a dancer in West African garb appears, as Graziella remembers the chaos that characterized this arrival. Oscar Valdez, the percussionist resident of Barrio Pogolotti drums and sings his chant to the female *orisha* (spirit) Yemayá. The image of the dancer resolves into a young woman dressed in blue and white (Yemaya's colors). Valdéz and his current group perform his famous jazz version of the chant to Yemayá. The dancers/chanters (members of the Conjunto Folklórico Alafia, a youth dance group in Barrio Pogolotti) thus invoke the arrival of uprooted African slaves in Cuba and underscore the importance of Afro-Cuban culture in the barrio.

In the closing minutes of the film, just before the credits, there are separate scenes in which each of the two principal narrators gives their concluding summations of the film. First, Pino Chiezzi points out that Barrio Pogolotti, now one hundred years old, had been the site of many family stories and many struggles but also of many rewarding experiences. He speaks of a *vita vissuta*—a life lived fully—in both the barrio and in Cuba in general. Here, he is commenting on life as it has been lived under the Cuban Revolution, which has sometimes been difficult, penurious, and materially limited, but

also vivid, intense, and fulfilling. This scene is followed by one with Graziella Pogolotti who typewrites a comment that we read on screen:

Dino founded a working-class neighborhood.
 Marcelo devoted himself to the building of a new culture.
 All of us claimed the right to establish and dream.

She is writing about her family. But also, like Chiezzi, she is invoking the transformation of Cuban society since 1958.

—ANTONIO LAURIA-PERRICELLI
New York University

The Italian Character—The Story of a Great Italian Orchestra.

By Angelo Bozzolini.

An Alpenway Media Production Film, with Accademia di Santa Cecilia and RAI Tre, 2013.
 100 minutes. Streaming format, color.

Little Opera.

By Louis Wallecan.

A Bel Air Media Production Film with France Télévision, 2012.
 53 minutes. Streaming format, color.

National character, according to Silvana Patriarca, is an objective disposition of a people, that is, its consolidated moral and mental traits (Patriarca 2010). No doubt music, and opera especially, has contributed to shaping the Italian character long before Italy existed as a nation. Before cuisine, wine, luxury cars, and fashion—widely recognized as arts and industries in which Italians are prominent—exists opera, a kind of prototype of those “made in Italy” products that have been accompanying the fame and fortunes of Italians everywhere, almost like trademarks so much needed in the age of globalized competition.

These two films share the idea that music not only is a form of art or entertainment but that it also maintains a deep relationship with the people and place where it originated or developed. Even if its language has become somewhat universal—as has been the case with classical and operatic music for centuries now—there remain particular features that associate a single style or genre to a historical experience rooted in a specific area or culture.

When I was a graduate student in New York City, in the early 1980s, I once attended a conference at which a group of eminent Italian philosophers challenged U.S. colleagues to a debate over what is really meant by the term “the Italian difference” (from Mario Perniola’s seminal essay of 1976). A few years later Peter Carravetta launched the academic journal *Differentia*, subtitled *A Review of Italian Thought*. Now that the times seem to have relegated Jacques Derrida’s popular notion of “différence/differance” to merely academic matters, the phrase *la differenza italiana* resuscitates old