

Exhibition Review

Italian American Cinema: From Capra to the Coppolas.

Curated by Joseph McBride and Mary Serventi Steiner.

Museo Italo Americano, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, California.

September 18, 2015–March 6, 2016.

Italian immigration to the United States and American cinema share a chronology: The birth and development of the U.S. film industry in the early decades of the twentieth century coincided with the great wave of Italian immigration. Initially regarded as a working-class form of entertainment, the movies were especially popular among immigrants who in fact made up most of the patrons of the early nickelodeon theaters. The new art of cinema also provided an effective medium to experiment with and shape cultural images of ethnic groups. From the pioneering films of the early twentieth century, and for more than a century since, images of Italians and themes embedded in the Italian American experience have played significant roles in U.S. cinema. The multimedia exhibition *Italian American Cinema: From Capra to the Coppolas* at the Museo Italo Americano at Fort Mason Center in San Francisco was funded by a grant from the E. L. Wiegand Foundation. Written by San Francisco State University film professor Joseph McBride (author of critically acclaimed biographies of Frank Capra, Steven Spielberg, and John Ford and a former columnist for *Daily Variety*) and co-curated by McBride and Mary Serventi Steiner (a member of the Museo board of directors), the exhibition marked the contributions of major Italian American filmmakers as well as many other Italian American professionals, including actors, singers, composers, producers, screenwriters, and animators, who have helped build Hollywood from the silent film era to today.

With the entire space of the Museo Italo Americano dedicated to the exhibition, a series of timeline wall panels provided useful historical context for salient cinematic facts and developments from the 1890s to the present century. Divided by decade, the timeline referenced, among others, the influence of the Italian epic genre, including that of Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), on director D. W. Griffith and early American cinema; the first major feature film, *The Italian* (1915), starring George Beban, which depicts the Italian immigrant journey to New York with a mixture of sympathy and stereotyping; and the emergence in the 1920s of another Italian prototype, the charming "Latin Lover" Rudolph Valentino, along with the popularization of the gangster genre. From the 1930s films *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932) to its more modern iterations in *The Godfather* saga (1972, 1974, 1990) and the TV series

The Untouchables (1959–1963) and David Chase’s *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), this genre has appealed to generations of American audiences by capitalizing on the long-standing association between Italian Americans and criminality. That the exhibition seemed to make references to television and other forms of popular culture without much context or reflection is perhaps understandable in a popular exhibition. Nevertheless, it mainly focused on mainstream Hollywood films and included only a few, seemingly random, examples from independent cinema, for example, Nancy Savoca’s *True Love* (1989) and Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989), the latter highlighted for Danny Aiello’s Academy Award–nominated performance rather than for its non-Italian American director’s polemical handling of the race politics between Italian Americans and African Americans.



Frank Capra, 1930s. Image courtesy of Eveljn Ferraro.

While old stereotypes persist, the exhibition revealed the diversity of Italian American cinema, especially from the 1970s onward, when Italian American directors and actors became driving forces in modern American filmmaking. This influence was paralleled in other areas of American life, from food and fashion to the arts and politics, and was the result of a long process of assimilation into mainstream America. In more recent phases, a new generation of Italian American filmmakers found themselves in a better position to explore their ethnic roots on-screen, even in autobiographical form, compared to previous generations. For instance, Martin Scorsese's 1974 documentary about his parents, *Italianamerican*, would have been unthinkable in the early 1940s for someone like Frank Capra, who during World War II produced the *Why We Fight* propagandist series commissioned by the U.S. government to support the Allied war effort. This happened at a time when Capra's native land, Italy, became the enemy of his adopted country (he emigrated from Sicily to Los Angeles in 1903) and the loyalty of Italians in the United States was being questioned. Such a comparison points to one of the many intricacies underlying the relationship between the works of Italian American filmmakers and the transnational ties between Italy and the United States, an aspect that unfortunately was not adequately captured by the exhibition. In other words, the exhibition was successful in showing to the public a large variety of themes and names that have contributed to the vitality of Hollywood, but it missed the opportunity to further contextualize and question the cinematic construction of Italian America. The visitor could thus appreciate, for example, the role that Sergio Leone's "Spaghetti Westerns" or *western all'italiana* movies had in reviving a dying Hollywood genre in the 1960s. However, without an organic transnational reference frame, visitors were constrained to wonder about the intended meaning of the Italian director's inclusion in an exhibition dedicated to Italian American cinema.

This limitation addresses the depth of exploration of an exhibition otherwise professionally organized, researched, written, and presented to the public. Throughout the rooms of the Museo Italo Americano, visitors were engaged in a cinematic tour that featured individual talents who have gained national recognition in American dramas, comedies, and musicals; men and women behind the camera, with a large section devoted to the Coppolas; and a variety of genres, including also animated film, documentaries, and TV series. In addition to the timeline and the descriptive wall-panel text, several other elements were integrated into the exhibition: original one-sheet movie posters, many photographs and film stills, some movie props kept in vitrines covered by Plexiglas, film cameras, original storyboards, a video station playing film clips with Italian American characters or themes (from, for instance, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1939, and *Saturday Night Fever*, 1977), animation



Sofia Coppola's chair from the filming of *The Godfather Part III* (1990), in which Sofia Coppola played Mary Corleone. Image courtesy of Eveljn Ferraro.

drawings, magazine covers, and other memorabilia. The Coppola family seemed particularly well-documented in the exhibit (e.g., storyboards from Francis Ford Coppola's films, a director's chair used by Sofia Coppola, and ample references to other family members, such as Nicolas Cage and Jason Schwartzman). Francis Ford was specifically (and perhaps hyperbolically) lauded as the "Godfather of Modern American Film" and as a "paterfamilias of a major filmmaking clan." That both his American Zoetrope company and his son, Roman Coppola, were given "special thanks" in the exhibit program should not be overlooked as well. Concurrently with the exhibition display, the museum organized several supporting initiatives. It hosted a few Italian American film screenings as well as lectures and roundtables with California-based scholars (this reviewer participated in one such event) that allowed for further discussions of Italian Americans and media representations and other themes central to the exhibition. An accompanying publication collects in a full-color, fifty-page catalog most of the descriptive text panels and images on display during the exhibition.

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