

*Italoamericani tra Hollywood e Cinecittà.*

By Flaminio Di Biagi.

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175 pages.

In the last few decades, Italian Americans have become a surprisingly popular subject of scholarship in Italy. After decades of virtual neglect, the mother country seems to have developed a desire to understand the culture of its cast-off progeny. This is not to say that the relationship between Italian Americans and Italians is any easier now than it used to be. In fact, in his conclusion, Flaminio Di Biagi quotes one prominent Italian critic who states that there is a "cesura culturale" (cultural gap) between the two groups. The critic goes so far as to unequivocally state that "gli italo-americani non sono italiani . . . ci imbarazzano, soprattutto quelli che provengono dal Sud" (Italian Americans are not Italians . . . they embarrass us, especially the ones who come from the South) (142). Sadly, it would appear that for many who espouse what Di Biagi calls the "Italian point of view," understanding does not mean accepting.

Cinema is one of the main avenues of communication between populations; through films we learn about one another's cultures. Of course, the images that are conveyed in films do not always correspond to what we can call reality. At the very least, "reality" is always too multifaceted and complex to be represented by any one cultural product. At worst, the stereotypes that are too frequently produced and propagated by films feed the fires of misunderstanding that lead to cultural friction. When this occurs, as has happened with Italian Americans, how can we dispel the pernicious stereotypes and correct the record? In the preface to *Italoamericani tra Hollywood e Cinecittà* (Italian Americans from Hollywood to Cinecittà), Fred Gardaphé suggests that the Italian Americans' successful integration into "American" culture has led to a "cultura di confusione" and that by embracing the mainstream culture so eagerly, they have inadvertently enabled the creation and transmission of damaging stereotypes. We therefore need to educate the public about the facts and the fictions of Italian-American culture (8).

Di Biagi's book, structured in two separate parts, aims to examine representations of Italian Americans in Hollywood films (the first part) and in the films of Italy's Cinecittà (the second part). Some of the themes treated in the first part are films directed by Italian Americans such as Frank Capra and Martin Scorsese; actors from Rudolph Valentino to the more recent Danny Aiello and James Gandolfini; images of Italian Americans in other films produced in Hollywood; "exported" Italian stars such as Sophia Loren, Marcello Mastroianni, and Gina Lollobrigida; a surprising list of Italian-American actors who, in Hollywood, are not generally identified as such (e.g., Burt Young and Kevin Jordan); and stereotypes inadvertently disseminated by Italian films that have been released in Hollywood such as *Il postino* (*The Postman*) and *La vita è bella* (*Life Is Beautiful*). Di Biagi also mentions that currently Hollywood offers images of "anetnica," that is, the absence of ethnicity, embodied by actors such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Téa Leoni, and Rene Russo.

In the second part, Di Biagi informs us that while Italian Americans have been featured regularly in Hollywood films, this has not been the case with films produced in Cinecittà. Equally, Di Biagi points out that while Hollywood has occasionally

produced positive representations—he offers the example of *Moonstruck*—Cinecittà has been less kind. For example, in Italian films we frequently see that while American relatives can represent the hope of a large inheritance, they are even more frequently represented as a source of trouble or embarrassment.

In both parts of the book, after a very brief overview, Di Biagi provides a survey across the decades starting from the 1920s to the present time. In each decade, the author offers a plethora of films that have either featured an Italian-American character or have been directed by an Italian American and that illustrate a general trend in the representation of the group as a whole. For instance, we are reminded that it is in the 1930s that the image of the Italian American as a social deviant is solidified. The classic film examples he cites are *Little Caesar* with Edward G. Robinson, directed by Mervyn Le Roy (1931), and *Scarface* with Paul Muni, directed by Howard Hawks (1932). The 1970s, with the release of *The Godfather*, also prove to be a watershed era. Similar to the effect created by Le Roy's film, Coppola's blockbuster proved to be highly influential in embedding an image of Italian-American criminality in the minds of the public in America and globally. This trend is mirrored in the films of Cinecittà as well, and Di Biagi notes that the Italian-born knockoffs trade in the heavily exploited clichés and stereotypes of the Hollywood originals. In any case, the films produced in Italy rarely offer an Italian-American image other than the buffoon of the 1960s and 1970s *commedia all'italiana* and the *mafioso* of the 1970s, and then usually in the form of a minor character, with the possible exception of Giuliano Montaldo's *Sacco e Vanzetti* (1971). Di Biagi briefly mentions one possible cause: Not wanting to wash the nation's dirty laundry in public, the Italian government viewed emigration as a subject to be avoided, along with labor conflict, poverty, and other controversial social themes (138–139).

The concept of this book, to examine the cinematic image of the Italian American as represented in the United States and in Italy, is certainly full of potential. Nevertheless, while the idea may be compelling, the strategies adopted for its execution leave us less than satisfied. There is no doubt that Di Biagi has an enviable knowledge of the subject. He offers an abundance of titles, even obscure ones. However, this turns out to be bewildering since the resulting book reads like a catalog of mini film reviews that follow each other relentlessly, providing little more than plot summary and the context of the cliché or stereotype involved. It might have been preferable to offer fewer titles and more analysis and commentary. Di Biagi fails to deliver a sustained discussion of any topic. This ultimately leads to the unfortunate impression that the book lacks a central core; indeed, the first and second parts both end with conclusions as if they were two separate books. A quibble I have is that the Hollywood film titles are given only as they were translated for their Italian releases. And while Di Biagi does offer the original English titles in the index, this is confusing and inconvenient for the reader who must then go searching in order to understand which American original is being referenced, especially since the translated title often offers no hint as to the original. If, on the other hand, this has been done because the book was destined exclusively for the Italian market, then that implies that the American reader has been ignored. Either way, the American reader is at a disadvantage.

The book leaves one perplexed as to the target audience. With insufficient development and even less synthesis of the subject, it can be of little use to the academic

conducting research. Perhaps it might be useful to the student fluent in the Italian language who is embarking on a film studies project and who is looking for a point of entry into the subject or for the general reader interested in an overview of Italian Americans as represented in films.

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