

Curiously, neither of the authors of our latest set of banking regulations, Christopher Dodd and Barney Frank, ran for reelection in 2012. It is hard not to look back nostalgically to the day when a brilliant Italian immigrant had the courage—and our Congress the ability—to call the banking system to public account.

—WILLIAM J. CONNELL
Seton Hall University

Since When Is Fran Drescher Jewish? Dubbing Stereotypes in The Nanny, The Simpsons, and The Sopranos

By Chiara Francesca Ferrari.

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176 pages.

In her book *Since When Is Fran Drescher Jewish? Dubbing Stereotypes in The Nanny, The Simpsons, and The Sopranos*, Chiara Francesca Ferrari grapples with the complexities of dubbing U.S. television series for an Italian audience, focusing on the practices of a media industry that aims to recreate the success of the English-language original in a different national and cultural context. She argues that dubbing not only represents a way to allow for the “invisible” translation and adaptation of unfamiliar aspects of the culture of origin into the receiving culture but, more significantly, dubbing functions to preserve Italian cultural and linguistic diversity and to resist the homogenizing effects of globalization.

In the book’s first two chapters, Ferrari lays out the historical background and the theoretical foundations for her case studies of *The Nanny*, *The Simpsons*, and *The Sopranos*. She discusses the development of audiovisual text translation and cultural adaptation, traces the history of dubbing from the xenophobic and nationalistic policies of Mussolini’s dictatorship to the present, and underscores the economic dimensions of the current practice of dubbing, which—far from being a remnant of fascist ideology—is an effective U.S. marketing tool that ensures the widest distribution of American cinema and television products in Italy and in most of Europe.

Ferrari focuses her attention on the use of southern Italian dialects and accents, which, after their successful use in the dubbing of *The Godfather* in 1970, have been systematically employed to further characterize a fictional stereotypical persona in dubbed cinema and TV imports. Borrowing Antje Ascheid’s felicitous metaphor of dubbing as a form of “cultural ventriloquism” that allows for the subliminal retelling of the receiving country’s national narratives, Ferrari correctly contends that, in the dubbed versions of U.S. imports, Italian audiences are presented with their nation’s narratives as an “us” versus “them” contraposition, which both nurtures a sense of Italian regional belonging and continually asserts a divide between northern and southern Italy. In this context, the use of southern Italian dialects and accents in the dubbed versions of *The Nanny*, *The Simpsons*, and *The Sopranos* serves to reiterate the dominant national narrative in which the Italian south is the Other.

In her analysis of the three television programs, Ferrari shows how their successful dubbing involves both a process of “domestication” (i.e., making familiar) and at times of “foreignization” (i.e., making unfamiliar) of cultural and linguistic elements present in the original. In the case of *The Nanny*, Jewish-American Fran becomes Italian-American Francesca, replacing the original Yiddish sayings with words and expressions in the Ciociarian dialect from Lazio. Ferrari argues that such changes were prompted by the lack of corresponding stereotypes of Jewish-Italian women and the fear that Fran’s Jewish identity would clash with that of the Italian audiences. Both here and elsewhere in the book, Ferrari overstates the influence of the Catholic Church on the Italian populace—which, by all indicators, is largely secular—while she neglects to point out the actual power and influence exercised by the Vatican on politics and the media.

At times it seems that Ferrari’s own representations of Italy are informed principally by stereotypes and not by a nuanced understanding of the context of the TV programs under discussion. In fact, one of the major shortcomings of the book is its lack of careful social, political, and historical anchoring, a deficiency that often results in a rather impressionistic and tentative analysis. For example, a closer look at the wider social, cultural, and political contexts of production and broadcasting of *The Nanny* would have revealed the fact that from the 1990s on, Italy’s national narrative about World War II was revised to incorporate and give great importance to the Shoah and the 1938 racial laws. It is likely that a TV serial with a stereotypical Jewish-American nanny would have diminished this revised narrative.

Save for a fleeting reference to Italy’s contemporary immigration from other countries, Ferrari’s analysis of *The Simpsons* is also detached from an actual cultural and social context. Ferrari contends that the fact that the various U.S. ethnic identities are not transposed into the dubbed version of *The Simpsons* reflects a form of erasure of difference that promotes a narrative of national homogeneity (18–20). In fact, except for Willie, the Scottish gardener who speaks with a Sardinian accent, and Carl Carlson, Homer’s African-American co-worker, who has a Venetian accent, the vast majority of American ethnics in *The Simpsons* are dubbed with southern Italian accents: Roman, Neapolitan, Apulian, and Sicilian; that is, they are identified as Italy’s internal Others. However, judging from the dubbing of Apu, the Indian store clerk, it does not appear that the transposition of U.S. ethnic stereotypes onto Italy’s immigrant communities promotes multiculturalism and reflects a positive sign of inclusion. In fact, in the Italian version of *The Simpsons*, Apu’s speech is not only marked by nonstandard intonation but also by grammatical errors, as if to underscore a flaw in his identity. While it is arguable that a negative representation is better than no representation at all, closer attention to the Italian history of migrations, both within and outside of the country, could have helped shed light on what Ferrari calls ethnic “erasure.” In fact, the transposition of the different ethnicities present in the original show to southern Italian identities appears to be, first and foremost, an implicit reference to the national narratives of past Italian migrations. Italian national discourse conceptualizes current migrations to Italy in terms of preexisting frames of “migrations” out of Italy and within Italy, established categories of difference, and stereotypical labeling. Thus, within this conceptual framework one could argue that southern Italian accents in *The Simpsons* seem to mark both the stereotype of the Italian emigrant and that of the internal migrant who performs “ethnified” occupations such as groundskeeper, policeman, etc.

In her analysis of *The Sopranos* (dismissing the “enraged” reaction of Italian-American groups to the all-too-familiar depiction of Italians as mobsters), Ferrari aptly compares Italian Mafia programs and the HBO serial, illustrating how the complexities of the latter’s translation and adaptation ultimately determined its late-night scheduling for a niche public and its limited success in Italy. While the accent of Tony Soprano, the Italian-American mobster, is domesticated into that of a native of Avellino, the word *mafia* is “defamiliarized” (120) and replaced with *mala*, short for *malavita*, i.e., criminality, “to stop perpetrating the stereotype that all Italian Americans are mobsters” (123). While Ferrari considers this substitution a form of censorship, she fails to explain to the reader that *mala* was the celebrated and glorified criminal milieu of Milan during the economic boom years (mid-1950s to early 1970s) and that such a choice may indeed add more of a positive connotation to Tony’s shady activities. Her discussion of *The Sopranos* is largely unfocused, as she flounders from one hypothesis to another to finally find the most likely answer to the difficulties surrounding the dubbing of the show in a short article in *Variety* that correctly points out the dangerous liaisons that former prime minister and owner of Mediaset Silvio Berlusconi had with *mafiosi*.

In her examinations of *The Nanny*, *The Simpsons*, and *The Sopranos*, which she enriches with quotes from various authors and experts, Ferrari does an excellent job of framing the three TV series within their genres and tracing their intertextual relations to other TV programs on American and Italian television. However, she does not clearly illustrate how cultural ventriloquism works in each case, nor does she identify for the reader the contextually relevant narratives in which Italian southerners figure as Other. In fact, Ferrari’s discussion of Italian national narratives and Otherness appears to be an afterthought rather than a foundational aspect of her project. Failing to provide any informed criticism of the Manichean opposition between north and south, the author herself seems to participate in the perpetuation of the dichotomy by repeatedly presenting the divide as insurmountable or “rooted in history.” She is also heavy-handed in her descriptions of the “defining” traits of some stereotypes, for instance, those that turn a Jewish-American nanny (or a working-class woman as in *Roseanne*) into the quintessential Italian American or southern Italian. One would have expected greater tact or more careful editorial advice.

In fact, in Ferrari’s exposition, her stated concern for the plight of the Other appears to be in blatant contradiction to what, in case after case, is an uncritical acceptance of the transposition of stereotypes from one national context into another in the name of preserving humor and producing an effective (i.e., successful and marketable) translation: “Thus, ironically, what should be a division to be overcome becomes in reality one of the most successful sources of ‘humor’ on Italian television, whether nationally produced or imported from abroad and dubbed” (97).

Contrary to her stated intentions (3, 18), and thus confounding this reader’s expectations, Ferrari does not scrutinize the practice of stereotypical characterizations of particular ethnic and social groups. In fact, her overarching interest in showing that successful dubbing involves the exploitation of regional and linguistic stereotypes prevents her from offering a critical look at the effects that stereotypes actually have on audiences. Ferrari does not propose a viewer-oriented analysis of the practice of dubbing stereotypes, nor does she problematize the effects that stereotypes have on a

socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse target audience, which in the case of *The Simpsons* in Italy consists primarily of children.

Ferrari makes no reference to the ongoing debate in the field on the effects that the stereotypical rendition of accents and dialects can have on audiences, nor does she discuss the ways in which the systematic use of Italian accents and dialects to elicit humor or add a negative connotation to characters or plot effectively teaches audiences to discriminate against the speakers of those dialects, who in turn are either marginalized or forced to succumb to standard language ideology in order to be accepted in mainstream society. Rather, without offering proof for her assertion, Ferrari states that, in the context of a global media market, dubbing becomes a way to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity and to resist the homogenizing forces of globalization. One would be tempted, however, to ask how language diversity can be preserved by the inferiorizing representation of accents and dialects. How can the use of largely artificial codes that draw their distinctive traits from different southern Italian dialects, but are often descriptive of none, represent a form of resistance to globalization? And why should it be acceptable and unchallenged to devalue Italian accents, dialects, and their speakers in the name of humor? Not too long ago, ignoring the effect that such conventions had on African-American audiences, white actors in blackface were thought to be funny and their performances a great source of humor. We should hope that, not too far in the future, greater attention will be paid to stereotypical and hurtful representations of accents and dialects in Italy and that such a convention will be abandoned just as blackface has been in the United States.

Throughout her book, Ferrari intersperses her discussion with excerpts from interviews she conducted with professionals in the Italian dubbing industry. While these quotes provide an insider's view of the politics of dubbing, nevertheless these media experts' ideas and opinions on Italian culture, society, and language are at times rather impressionistic and uninformed. Unfortunately, the author does not take into account scholarly literature that would have led her to a more nuanced analysis of the TV programs. Readers would have benefited from greater attention to the political, social, and cultural climate surrounding the production and broadcast on Italian television of these shows. Particularly glaring in this respect is Ferrari's failure to make any reference to the role played from the mid-1980s to the present by the overtly racist Northern League party in rekindling and fueling regional antagonism and in fomenting antisouthern prejudices, thus creating a hostile environment that informs the choice of accents in dubbed TV serials. Moreover, one would have expected a few words of comment on the fact that all three TV programs were acquired and broadcast by Berlusconi's Mediaset network, whose headquarters are in Milan. The question then arises as to how the geographic location of the media relates to the largely positive representation of the north and the overwhelming negative representation of the south.

While presented as an interdisciplinary study, *Since When Is Fran Drescher Jewish?* is firmly anchored in the field of media studies and the media industry; any foray outside those specific fields of expertise appears somewhat tentative and confused. Particularly fuzzy and imprecise are Ferrari's explorations of linguistic issues, such as the distinction between Italian national language and dialects, the discussion of the contextually determined use of second-person address pronouns (63), the explanation of the status of Sardinian as a language rather than as a dialect (91), or the description

of dubbed Italian-American accents (110). Furthermore, save for a very few cases in which she focuses on the transposition or substitution of particular words, Ferrari does not provide examples of the “accented” speech and dialect of the various characters, thus leaving the reader perplexed.

Because of its lack of solid, in-depth, historical and social research, this book would be difficult to assign as a text for interdisciplinary courses. Nevertheless, *Since When Is Fran Drescher Jewish?* is a timely contribution to the field of contemporary Italian media studies and provides a media-industry perspective on the translation, adaptation, and dubbing of foreign audiovisuals into the Italian national context. Ferrari’s book represents a good point of departure for anyone who desires to begin an investigation of the complexities of audiovisual translations.

—GIULIA CENTINEO
University of California, Santa Cruz

Corbino: From Rubens to Ringling.

By Janis and Richard Londraville.

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221 pages.

An artist’s life is rarely easy. Even for the best, a tenuous livelihood and elusive recognition are a common fate. The Italian-American artist Jon Corbino was more fortunate than most. Nevertheless, amid some notable achievements and successes that enabled him to sustain a lifetime career as a leading painter of his generation, he faced his share of disappointments, frustrations, and struggles. Moreover, almost sixty years after his death, he is largely forgotten. All this is captured in *Corbino: From Rubens to Ringling*, the first-ever biography of the artist, penned by Janis and Richard Londraville. On the one hand, the couple has done us all a favor by recalling and chronicling Corbino’s worthy career. On the other hand, their earnest account of Corbino’s life and work becomes at times so intensely personal and colloquial as to lack nuance and an appropriately deft balance.

Giovanni, or Jon, Corbino was born in Vittoria, Sicily (Ragusa province), on April 3, 1905. His father was an intellectually disposed, politically active anarchist who fled to Argentina and then to the United States in order to evade arrest, abandoning his nineteen-year-old pregnant wife. Adding insult to injury, Corbino’s father financed his escape by selling his wife’s dowry, a family home. Thus, Corbino and his mother were left behind in Sicily to depend for support on her parents’ largesse. Hopes for a family reunion in New York City were thwarted either by miscommunication or the continued improvidence of Corbino’s father. Traveling to the United States, mother and son were detained for two weeks at Ellis Island in December 1910 and then deported back to Sicily when Corbino’s father failed to meet them at the New York docks. It was almost another three years before mother and son successfully immigrated to the United States and reunited with Corbino’s father.