

since she seems to be the end of the family tree. It is up to the viewer to understand that the world that failed was the world of complete acceptance of the Jews as Italians – as much as Jews contributed to Italian life on every level, the Racial Laws of 1938 and the Holocaust established that they were not “true” Italians. The film suggests that it was this lack of acceptance of Jewish Italians that led Volterra’s father and his siblings to emigrate to Israel.

Although the film’s historical focus is not as wide-ranging as I might have liked, its insight into the interrelations between Italy and Italian Jews over many centuries would make it a positive addition to college courses on Italian Jewry. More broadly, it raises questions connected to self-identification of a minority group and the challenges of the continuity of the identity of that group in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

1. The RaMHaL (1707–1747) was born in Padua and received an excellent Jewish and general education. His Hebrew was magnificent, and he wrote both poetry and dramas. He also wrote a book of ethics, *Mesillat Yesharim (The Path of the Upright)*, which became one of the most popular books in the yeshivot of Eastern Europe. A third facet of his creativity got him into trouble: Claiming that he communicated with a holy being, or “magid,” he recorded his mystical revelations. The community to which he belonged banned his further writing on Kabbala. As a result, he left Italy, spent some time in Amsterdam, and finally moved to Acre, where he died before his fortieth birthday.

Mal’occhio.

By Agata de Santis.

A Redhead Productions Film.

52 minutes. DVD format, color.

Mal’occhio (The evil eye) tells the story of first-generation Italian Canadian Agata de Santis’s search for information about her family tradition of belief in the evil eye. With her own voice-over narration, the director traces her journey from her first inquiries using the Internet and library research to her journey to Calabria, Italy, in search of answers to her questions. Along the way, she interviews her family; her (Italian-Canadian) neighbors in Montreal; Italian Americans in New York; several scholarly experts, including Italian cultural anthropologist and *mal’occhio* researcher Raffaele Ferrara; and a folk healer in Eboli who has a lively practice of evil-eye removal. Each interviewee offers an interpretation, opinion, and new details until a complex but consistent mosaic of this belief system emerges. Viewers get a sense of the variety of beliefs that exist among Italians in Italy and in North America; the film’s protagonists emerge as vibrant individuals with different backgrounds and motives, and there

are several wonderful scenes of the rituals involved in the diagnosis and removal of the evil eye and the verbal formulas and prayers associated with them. Many of the conversations take place in Italian or an Italian dialect, making the film interesting from a linguistic point of view as well as an ethnographic one.

However, the film is not without its shortcomings. The most salient is that the director's inquiry is entirely framed by her focus on whether what she calls a "superstition"—a term that is entirely outdated and rejected by most contemporary ethnologists on either side of the Atlantic—is "real." De Santis repeatedly asks herself whether she "should" or "should not" believe in the evil eye—as if belief were somehow equivalent to faith and subject to an act of will. Ethnological studies of belief recognize its contextual, emergent, and fluid nature, distinguishing it sharply from Christian notions of faith, which are characterized by a deliberate, chosen commitment to a religious creed. Furthermore, ethnologists who have studied the evil eye attest to its *social* reality: Even though a gaze cannot by itself cause harm, envy can be a powerful force of social control, especially in small-scale societies characterized by dense networks and face-to-face interaction. Unfortunately, the director's interview questions were framed by this misconceived focus on belief, such that she asks even the experts she interviews whether or not they believe in the *mal'occhio*. At times one senses their discomfort: Professor Ferrara, for instance, cites Ernesto de Martino's "non è vero, ma ci credo" (it's not true, but I believe it), an aphorism that captures the ambivalence of belief, in attempting to address her question, but the director glosses right over the allusion. Perhaps de Santis was not familiar with the reference, but that in itself signals the presence of a serious lacuna in her knowledge. Sam Migliore, professor of anthropology at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Surrey, British Columbia, and author of *Mal'uocchiu: Ambiguity, Evil Eye, and the Language of Distress* (University of Toronto Press, 1997), clarifies the problem of belief when he identifies ambiguity as the key to understanding it; but unfortunately the film cuts to another scene before he is allowed to fully develop his thought. The film would have been much more interesting and ethnographically sound had de Santis focused on this ambiguity of belief. In the end, we witness the director herself experiencing a headache cured successfully by an evil-eye removal spell, and thus she "chooses" to become a believer.

Another flaw in the documentary is a lack of depth in the contextualization of evil-eye belief as part of a larger worldview characterized by the concept of "limited good," the idea that one person's good fortune necessarily takes away from everyone else's because the amount of good in the world is finite. The absence of any symbolic analysis of rituals and amulets, either from the point of view of practitioners or from a scholarly viewpoint, is also disappointing, as practitioners themselves are often quite articulate about how certain amulets or cures work. Ultimately, these shortcomings make *Mal'occhio* unsatisfactory for educational use. However, the film could be useful in sparking conversations and personal narratives about this belief and its associated practices, especially when supplemented with more scholarly materials, and segments of it could also be used very effectively to illustrate typical curing rituals and formulas in an Italian or Italian-North American context.

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