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Transnationalism and nostalgia: Gianfranco Pannone's 'American Trilogy'

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Abstract

The article examines Gianfranco Pannone's 'American Trilogy' – *Piccola America. Gente del Nord a Sud di Roma*/'Little America. People from the North to the South of Rome' (1991), *Lettere dall'America*/'Letters from America' (1995) and *L'America a Roma*/'America in Rome' (1998) – showing how the trilogy employs the documentary genre not only as a way to inform the audience, but to question the way in which imagination shapes reality and vice versa. First, *Lettere dall'America* is examined in light of the *topos* of letter writing in other literary and cinematic works featuring the Italian emigration to the United States. Second, the article analyses how the migration from north-east Italy to the Pontine Marshes in central Italy is represented in *Piccola America*. Third, I discuss how *L'America a Roma* highlights the presence of southern migrants interpreting Mexicans in Italian westerns. Pannone uses documentaries to interrogate the fictional construction of America, and questions the view that narratives of migration are the reflection of 'real' experiences. Investigating the connection between nostalgia and the narration of history, this article also shows how the presence of a nostalgic vein in the trilogy is aimed at rethinking 'Italian' national history in a transnational dimension.

Keywords

transnationalism

nostalgia

migration

colonialism

America

documentary

Italian western

Gianfranco Pannone

'If the truth inhabits fiction, does this make fiction true or the truth fictional?' (Derrida 1975: 41)

This article analyses Gianfranco Pannone's 'American Trilogy' – the documentaries *Piccola America. Gente del Nord a Sud di Roma*/'Little America. People from the North to the South of Rome' (1991),¹ *Lettere dall'America*/'Letters from America' (1995) and *L'America a*

Roma/'America in Rome' (1998), and shows that Pannone employs documentaries not merely as a way to convey historical information and personal stories, but to interrogate the way in which the imaginary of 'America' is shaped. The trilogy is among the first works of award-winning director Gianfranco Pannone, who has since produced an impressive body of work including nine full-length documentaries, six medium-length films, 25 short movies and documentaries, and the fiction feature film *Io che amo solo te*/'I, Who Love Only You' (2004).²

In discussing his trilogy, Pannone clearly expresses his aim to make documentaries that do not exclusively narrate reality with an external and objective point of view, and he affirms that the documentary is a form through which 'linguistic inventions' can be experimented with, using editing strategies and styles that are usually employed in movies that narrate an entirely fictional story (2003: 34). Through an approach that the director calls 'investigative/human', the trilogy analyses what 'America symbolizes – or I should say used to symbolize – the dream of a better world', at a time in which Italians 'have stopped believing in history and the opportunities for redemption it can offer, thus Italians have given up striving and working for a better world' (Pannone and Ricciardelli 2011). The trilogy addresses the changed perspectives of Italians about America after the end of the Cold War, which Umberto Eco summarizes in these terms:

For the immigrant at the beginning of the century America was a myth – elementary but monolithic –, while for Italians today it is a multifaceted and pluralistic image, perhaps everybody constructs its own America as a kind of TV channel zapping [...] Americans perceive their own country the same way, as a place of contradictions and diversity. (1993: 15)³

In other words, the trilogy describes the American myth in a time in which it is challenged and questioned both internally and from the outside.

The second aim of this article is to analyse the presence of a strong nostalgic vein in the trilogy, in light of studies about nostalgia, memory and historical narration (Boym 2001; Cook 2004; Davis 1979). Following Áine O'Healy's suggestion to focus the study of Italian cinema 'not so much [on] the question of what might properly constitute the national cinema in the new millennium, but rather [on] the imbrication of contemporary Italian film-making in transnational influences, concerns, and practices' (2014: 269), my objective is to underline how nostalgia can be pivotal in showing 'Italian' history through a transnational dimension and rethinking the multicultural present and future of the country in view of its many migrations.

Before examining Pannone's movies it might be worth mentioning that the trilogy has seen a significant success. *Piccola America* won the People's Choice Award at the Rome Film Festival 'L'immagine dell'uomo' in 1992. *Lettere dall'America* was presented at the Florence Festival dei Popoli and the Maremma Doc Festival in 1996. Between 1998 and 1999, *L'America a Roma* was selected for the São Paulo Film Festival, the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, the Take Film Festival in North Carolina, and the Amiens Film Festival. It was awarded the first prize at the Maremma Doc Festival and the San Benedetto del Tronto Documentary Film Festival in 1999. *Piccola America*, *Lettere dall'America* and *L'America a Roma* opened the Locarno Film Festival and were presented at the Annecy Italian Film Festival in 1991, 1995 and 1998, respectively. The Italian television channel LA7 featured a week-long retrospective of Pannone's documentary work in

November of 2007, which included the 'American Trilogy', and the trilogy was also shown on the channel Rai Storia in January 2012.

Lettere dall'America narrates the story of a Neapolitan who migrated to America at the beginning of the 1920s, Nicola Rainone, through his correspondence with the family. Using the metaphor of travel – an element that, according to Stella Bruzzi, is constitutive of every documentary (2006: 118), the movie begins in the city of departure. In fact, the opening shots show the tunnels under Naples in which civilians sought shelter from US bombings of World War II, suggesting the desire to discuss a deep, hidden and underground Italian reality. In 1947, Nicola returns to Naples for three months to visit his family, which he has not seen for twenty years. He displays his newfound riches by hiring expensive cars, organizing great feasts and describing unknowable comforts to his relatives. The letters and money that Nicola regularly sends from New York seem to be testimony to the success of his migration. However, the letters also served a political agenda: Nicola followed an initiative of the government and the Catholic church of the United States called *Lettere dall'America* which aimed to influence the results of the 1948 Italian elections. This project consisted of publishing a series of template letters and encouraging the twelve million Italians in the United States to send these messages to their co-nationals. The letters urged their family and friends back home not to vote for the Italian Communist Party. Such a request should not have seemed unusual given that expatriate associations helped illiterate members to write their letters, and the letters from the migrants often reminded family members in Italy of their duties to distant relatives (Cancian 2010: 62; Decker 1998: 5). At the end of the documentary, the family discovers that Nicola had in fact not become rich abroad, and his 1947 travel expenses had further aggravated his financial situation.

Lettere dall'America reflects upon the fact that migrants' letters are not the expression of the 'unmediated voice of the immigrant, the voice of pure experience' (Elliott et al. 2006: 7), and it clearly represents that 'imagination played a crucial role in helping family members overcome and negotiate separation' (Cancian 2010: 113). After leaving Italy, Nicola identifies with the community from which he departed and to where he wants to return. However, in a 1950 letter he talks about the soldiers who died in Korea as 'our deaths', thus identifying United States as the country to which he belongs. His letters, like those of other migrants, create 'new "imagined spaces" that translated into the construction of new subjectivities within both the social and cultural domains of Italy [...] For Italians [...] being exposed to letter writing meant becoming part of a world much larger than the one they inhabited' (Romani 2013: 28). These imagined spaces, which intermingle global and local dimensions, are illustrated in the documentary by the fact that Nicola's letters from America are written in Italian, while some of his interviewed relatives talk in Neapolitan dialect. This aspect is also portrayed by superimposing images of Naples and New York, which duplicate Nicola and his family's complex affective geographies.⁴ As one of Nicola's relatives affirms in *Lettere dall'America*, the myth of America, built on Hollywood cinema, the promises of advertisements, and Nicola's letters, 'was everything'. In other words, *Lettere dall'America* shows that – to paraphrase David Gerber's words on the letters of migrants –

immigrant personal correspondence was an early type of transnational social space [...] a social location for the staging of relationships, in which [...] through the medium of writing, immigrants and their correspondents surmounted conventional borders and organized their ongoing connections in order to solve the practical as well as existential problems associated with separation. (2006: 155)

Lettere dall'America further accentuates the multiple temporality already present in the letters of migrants, where the present is made up of a past in which one was reunited with close relatives and a future hope of reunion (Gurkin Altman 1982: 118). These letters denote a sense of time and space which differ from that which we, immersed in instant telecommunications, are used to understanding (Decker 1998: 4). The letters talk in absence of the addressee and the sender, but all the same use expressions of immediacy, of intimacy: 'epistolary time is defined by many moments: the actual time that a described event is performed, the moment when it is written down, the differing times that the letter is mailed, received and reread' (Cancian 2010: 107). *Lettere dall'America* emphasizes this multiple temporal dimension, making today's spectators become the addressees, further stretching the time between sending and receiving of the correspondence.

Perhaps because of this intrinsic ambivalence, the letters of the migrants are a carrying theme of filmography that is relative to the migration experience and the lives of the Italians in the United States. For example, the first episode of Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's *Kaos* (1984), taken from Luigi Pirandello's 1923 play and short story *L'altro figlio/The Other Son* demonstrates well the effect that the letters had on the potential immigrants who received them, meaning that 'the unknown country was prefigured in their minds and rendered familiar through their expectations' (Serra 2009: 138). This episode shows an old and illiterate woman who wants to write to her emigrant children in the United States with the help of a young woman, who, however, only pretends to write. Once this scam is discovered, the mother is at first bitter, then she lightens up in the knowledge that her sons never replied to her since they had never received her letters in the first place. Her last letter is destroyed by the father of a young man who is about to emigrate, because the father thinks that the letters of emigrants are

full of lies and they should never be sent. Another example of the persuasiveness of the letters is in Emanuele Crialesi's *Nuovomondo/Golden Door* (2006) in which the illiterate protagonists decide to cross the ocean from Italy after having seen photos faked to show the bounty of America, including enormous vegetables, a giant chicken and a tree full of money. Edward Dmytryk's *Give Us This Day* (1949), inspired by the first chapter of Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939), and Luigi Zampa's film *Bello, onesto, emigrato Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata/A Girl in Australia* (1971) show how the letters were used to attract young women from Italy for marriage by telling tales of a fabulous and completely invented country. The practice of agreeing to marriage by letter was, in fact, frequent between Italian emigrants (Serra 2009: 144).

It should be noted that, in all these cases, the emigrant's letter was not a means of telling the truth, but a means of modifying, mystifying and giving an interpretation of such.⁵ This aspect is present in *Lettere dall'America*, where the letters and their attached photographs contributed to the forming of the myth of the 'zio d'America', the 'American Uncle'. According to Peppino Ortoleva, the photographs sent to the family became a surrogate of the emigrant, making them present in their absence and underlining 'the stability of an identity which is defined by affection despite the distance and changes (if possible for the better) which are the consequence of emigration' (1991: 126). *Lettere dall'America* uncovers the role of these photographs in the Rainone family's imaginary construction of the emigrant relative. The presence of Nicola's photographs in the documentary show how they – when included in his letters – were able to materialize a reality that did not exist for those who remained at home: 'the production of images nourishes one's own memory, establishing and forming a perimeter around the spaces of one's own identity. In this sense the image recreates, records and in the end *produces* reality itself' (Ortoleva 1991: 180, original emphasis). While

the migrants' letters are 'the expression of an oral culture [that marks] the passage from the oral to the written for many labourers' (Franzina 1987: 27), *Lettere dall'America* brings back the letters to an oral (and visual) dimension, creating a portrait *in absentia* of a person whose experience, as that of many unsuccessful migrants, has been relegated to the margins of history.

In light of these considerations, it is interesting to note the way in which Pannone interprets the dissimulation of truth, both in his documentary making and in the representation of letters in *Lettere dall'America*, in relation to Jacques Derrida's 'The purveyor of truth' (1975). This article critically analyses Jacques Lacan's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter* (1844), and considers the letter to be the symbol of truth despite its being often a mediated expression and thus not sincere. Also in Poe's tale, the truth is never unveiled and it therefore becomes a significant absence, around which a fictitious world materializes. The truth, as Derrida describes it, is thus closely linked to fiction, which is necessary to construct it: 'truth inhabits fiction as the master of the house, as the law of the house and as the economy of fiction. It directs, organizes and renders fiction possible' (1975: 46). The letter seems to have truth as an aim, but at the same time it shows the truth to be a narrative construction that takes its meaning from the relationship with each of the characters of Poe's tale. Similarly, the 'truth' which Pannone's documentary discusses – the programme *Lettere dall'America* – constantly shows the artifice upon which letters are based. As in Poe's tale, where the letter is 'the lack out of which the subject is constituted' (Derrida 1975: 58), Nicola's letters create more questions than answers regarding the identity of this man. Nicola describes only the positive aspects of his experience in the United States, thus confirming a general tendency in the migrants' letters that 'systematically erase negative elements' (Serra 2009: 138), whilst his real situation was a story void of success that his relatives tell with

disappointment. It is therefore interesting to note how Pannone uses the documentary – a genre often considered ‘always grounded in real life, [which makes] a claim to tell us something worth knowing about’ (Aufderheide 2007: 18) – to talk about migration – an experience frequently analysed from a socio-historical rather than artistic viewpoint – ⁶ through an apparently honest tool, such as the letter.

Piccola America also deals with migration, this time that of Italians from the north-east regions who were relocated to the Pontine Marshes in the 1930s. In order to describe this documentary, I would like to refer to a novel which has a close thematic relationship with Pannone's work: Antonio Pennacchi's *Canale Mussolini*/'The Mussolini Canal' (2010a).⁷ Pennacchi is also one of the protagonists of *Latina/Littoria (una città)*/'Latina/Littoria (a city)' (2001), a documentary by Gianfranco Pannone which discusses the tormented approval of the new town planning scheme of Latina. Both *Piccola America* and *Canale Mussolini* tell of this internal migration via voices (real or reconstructed thanks to the literary device) of the protagonists, characterized by ‘a mix of regional dialects from Rovigo, Ferrara, Treviso, Friuli etc. – contaminated by influences from Lazio’ (Pennacchi 2010a: 457). Both works explain how this land had become the new ‘America’ after the approval of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, a system of quotas that principally penalized migration from the south and east of Europe to the United States (Pennacchi 2010a: 185).

The Pontine Marshes do not merely represent ‘America’ for the workers, the land where one goes to find one's fortune, but also Africa, a land that can be colonized and conquered. Pennacchi writes that ‘thirty thousand people, in the space of three years – ten thousand per year – [were brought] down here [...] from Veneto, Friuli, Ferrara [...] in the middle of foreigners who talked a different language’ (2010a: 137) are at the same time ‘invaders’ that look at the locals with a sense of superiority, calling them ‘Moroccans’

(Pennacchi 2010a: 263), and objects of abuse by the local 'ruling classes' (Pennacchi 2010a: 304), who called them 'polenta eaters' or '*cispadani*' (Pennacchi 2010a: 137, original emphasis). Despite a lively admiration for the regime that continues to exist even until recent times, *Piccola America* describes how many of the promises made by fascism were not kept. While *Canale Mussolini* contains references to the settlers that, after having met in the Pontine Marshes, went to fight in Africa (Pennacchi 2010a: 246), *Piccola America* shows that these lands were the set for Carmine Gallone's film *Scipione l'Africano/Scipio Africanus* (1937), which celebrated Italy's conquests in Africa. The Pontine Marshes were for fascism not only a 'little Hollywood' where propaganda films were set, but also a theatre to show the world the achievements of its regime, such as the foundation of brand-new cities and the extensive land reclamation work.⁸ 'It seemed it was the Wild West' says one of the interviewees who describes this land as frontier territory, while another notes its similarities to African landscape. These resemblances are visually represented, and the camera indulges on the palm trees that are located in the Pontine Marshes area. Recalling that the money destined for the settlers in the Pontine Marshes was used for the African campaigns once the conquering of the empire had begun, *Piccola America* makes the explicit link between two different conquered and colonized lands for the regime and two experiences of Italian migration.⁹

In *Canale Mussolini* the internal migrants are compared – in an often controversial way – with the immigrants in Italy, or, as Pennacchi calls them *extracomunitari* – literally, 'outside the community', a term that defines people of non-EU origins, but is often used to mark the exclusion of economic migrants from the nation (2010a: 242). This comparison is not made explicit in the American Trilogy, but it is difficult not to see that Pannone puts Italy in a prospective of mobility following the country's net immigration surpassing net

emigration from 1972 onwards (King and Andall 1999: 136). Pannone deliberately filmed two short films about the stories of two immigrants to Italy – *La giostra*/'The carousel' (1989) and *Kelibia/Mazara* (1998), co-directed by Tarek Ben Abdallah, respectively, before and after the filming of the trilogy. In this sense, one could look at Pannone's documentaries as an example of a reflection shared by some Italian intellectuals and directors – from which the most striking example is perhaps Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994) – that suggested a comparison between contemporary and earlier experiences of migration.

Canale Mussolini further quotes another three events that highlight the comparison of the Pontine Marshes to 'America'. First, Pennacchi talks about the colonization of the Italian imagery by Hollywood movies, and describes 'the American Westerns [...] in black and white' where 'the whites were always the good guys, bringing civilisation and progress, while the Indian Redskins were the bad guys that blocked the paths of both progress and civilisation with the utmost monstrosity' (2010a: 263). *Canale Mussolini* points out that these movies inspired the Italian colonizers during the wars in Africa (Pennacchi 2010a: 263). Second, *Canale Mussolini* further uses the metaphor of America to describe how the relocation of a group of people to the Pontine Marshes spurred racism, an aspect that is also underlined by the interviewees in *Piccola America*:

in Littoria [...] those who live in the rural farms are considered 'Venetians', irrespective of their origins. When they come to the city, they are called 'Bepi', 'Bèppi' or 'coloni'. 'Colono' is almost worse than 'nigger' [...] for us the people from the Lepini mountains are all Apaches and those from the Marche: Sioux. We, in the eyes of the people of Latina, are 'country' wasps. We're Missouri, they're New York. (Pennacchi 2010a: 305)

Third, Pennacchi represents the post-World War II US economic and political 'colonisation' of Italy, underlining that the United States tested DDT in the Pontine Marshes, a substance which is now 'prohibited worldwide because it does not biodegrade. It stays in the food chain forever' (2010a: 211). Through the tales of this period, *Canale Mussolini* describes Italy as a land to be conquered and colonized by the United States, one aspect of the relationship between the two countries that is not described in *Piccola America*, but in the third film of the trilogy, *L'America a Roma*.

In this documentary, Pannone narrates the films that were the passion of his childhood and adolescence: Italian westerns. *L'America a Roma* traces Guglielmo Spoletini's¹⁰ cinematic experience of the 1960s along with six other 'magnificent' actors of Italian western movies in their own words. Spoletini describes his desire to shoot a western movie set in Rome today, and the documentary ends with the shooting scenes of this potential film. These potential scenes are presented together with original clips taken from Italian western movies and interviews with the protagonists. This interaction further shows that Pannone interprets the documentary as a genre that combines fictional and non-fictional elements, and that *L'America a Roma* provides a meta-reflection on cinema. Like in *Piccola America* – where the Pontine Marshes are Africanized, *L'America a Roma* 'westernizes' Rome, by showing the abandoned sets and using the original score of Italian westerns.

In the third documentary of the trilogy, Pannone highlights how some Italian directors of western movies have been able – to use Christopher Frayling's analysis of Italian westerns – '[to redefine] the dominant "codes" of Hollywood within an authentic Italian cultural context' ([1981] 1998: 67). The Italian western in *L'America a Roma* can be seen as an anti-colonial narrative in at least three ways. First, this genre is described as a form of resistance

coming from a country such as Italy which, according to Austin Fisher, 'from a military and political perspective (as well as an economic one in the houses of the South), [...] had been colonized by the American sphere of influence' (2011: 19). *L'America a Roma* well represents the idea that 'even if Italy was an American colony, the natives appropriated, subverted and adapted "America" as much as "America" foisted itself upon them' (Fisher 2011: 19). Americanization, in other words, can be interpreted as a hybridization of the myths of the dominating culture that in their turn are exported: 'this was by no means a one-way process of displacement, in which Italians uncritically imitated Hollywood's motifs [...] I repudiate the era's widespread perceptions of a politically engaged native cinema set against an anodyne, imitative genre cinema' (Fisher 2011: 3).

Second, the documentary concentrates on Carlo Lizzani's western movie *Requiescant/Kill and Pray* (1967), which tells the story of the conquering of the Wild West showing how the Mexicans were expropriated from their lands. As in the case of *Lettere dall'America* and *Piccola America*, space in *L'America a Roma* is intrinsically transnational, mirroring one of the fundamental characteristics of the Italian western, the 'reflection in reference to the idea of the "West", namely how the West contaminates, but is in turn also contaminated, by other cultures' (Pineda Franco 2013: 76). *L'America a Roma* shows in visual form a feature of Italian westerns which Adela Pineda Franco underlined in her critical analysis – namely, that these films (and in particular *Requiescant*) challenged well-established dichotomies of Hollywood cinema 'like that of literate/illiterate, civilized/barbarian, foreigner/native that show the dialectic of colonialism' (2013: 77). The reference to *Requiescant* is significant in this regard since this film is the result of a complex operation of cultural hybridization. According to Raffaele Moro,

[t]his is a pretty strange movie, which oscillates between very strong violence (the scene depicting the massacre at the beginning), naive and almost picaresque elements (*Requiescant* uses a cooking pot to spur his horse and discovers his talent as a gunslinger by chance), [...] and both revolutionary and pacifistic messages. (2013: 151)

Cultural hybridization is pivotal in *Requiescant* to the 'political' purpose of questioning the opposition between westerners and Mexicans. Significantly, Lizzani believed that westerns were inspired by the Third World struggles and could upend the colonizer's narration of history (1967: 198–99). It should also be noted that the interest in westerns of 'political' authors such as Lizzani or Pier Paolo Pasolini¹¹ demonstrates a reciprocal influence between 'quality' and 'B' movies that have for a long time been considered separate artistic products.

The identity of the actors playing in the Italian westerns suggests a third anti-colonial reflection. *L'America a Roma* creates a parallel between the class subordination of the Mexicans in the movies and the actors who interpreted them, some of whom were migrants to Rome from the south of Italy. In other words, Pannone reviews the colonial dichotomy between the American civilizers and the uncivilized Mexican within the dynamics of the pre-existing colonial aspects in Italy, a country whose national unity can be seen as a colonization of the south by the north (Verdicchio 1997: 191–212). In this regard, Fisher notes that

the Western's archetypes, from their origins in the late nineteenth century, display notable concordances with dominant modes of representing the Italian South. The Wild West's status as a contested terrain for American national identity was therefore equally a mythic space with resonance within the Italian popular imagination. The

genre's appropriation by radical audiences, for whom issues of banditry and redemptive violence held by an additional fascination and urgency, is interpreted from within this pre-existing framework. (2011: 3)¹²

Fisher also contends that the translation of the Italian unification into the border issue between the United States and Mexico 'offers a hypothesis emphasising that Italy's intimate ties to American culture begin with nineteenth-century emigration, which arose largely in the South as a result of stark inequalities after the Risorgimento' (2011: 45). Indeed, as Flavia Brizio-Skrov argues, Italian western movies 'responded in some measure, to the enormous social, political and ideological changes occurring in Italy' after the economic boom (2014: 184).

In the third documentary of Pannone's trilogy, the American Dream is also represented by the unexpected role that mostly working class and migrants from the south had in the Italian film industry as actors interpreting Mexicans and outlaws. In this case – using an expression borrowed from the analysis of Leonardo De Franceschi on the role of the actors of African descent in Italian cinema – one could speak of Italian westerns as a place of representation for southern migrants, who were often denied this right due to their class or race. Working according to 'precise character types' (De Franceschi 2013: 45) and being 'systematically confined to service roles on the margins of society' (De Franceschi 2013: 48), the bodies of these actors represent another internal frontier inside the history of Italy, that of anti-southern racism.

The decision to discuss a supposedly inferior, B movie type, such as the Italian western, demonstrates the trilogy's intention of dealing with a socio/historic reality that is all too often considered to be marginal. At the same time, Pannone uses documentary movie – a genre that 'in Italy [is] considered to be strictly only for television and limited to the role of

education or to be scientific or nature-based' (Barone 2003: 25) – to show that the representation of the real cannot be disassociated from the fictitious or personal. Indeed, as Gary Don Rhodes and John Parris Springer have argued, a 'frequent intermingling of documentary and fictional devices in narrative films [...] constitutes a persistent tendency in the cinema from its very beginning' (2006: 3). By evoking America as dream-like and imaginary, Pannone's trilogy challenges the idea that the documentary genre is objective and thus separate from the intimate. Pannone in fact affirms that the documentary maker is expressing his thoughts and thus brings a personal view of reality to the fore (2003: 39). This aspect is underlined in *Lettere dall'America* by the familial and private dimension which is favoured over the objective dimension, and delineates the fleeting profile of Nicola Rainone.¹³ Similarly, *Piccola America* narrates the stories and hopes of those who had contributed to the construction of the Pontine Marshes with their own voices. These movies do not make explicit that Rainone was Pannone's maternal grandmother's brother and the director grew up in Latina perhaps in order to construct a more universal experience. However, the spontaneity of the interviewees and the domestic environment of the interviews in *Lettere dall'America* – Pannone's grandmother is interviewed at home – seem to suggest the acquaintance of the director with those featured in the movies. An autobiographic vein is, instead, present in *L'America a Roma*, during which the director tells of his own passion for westerns by showing home movies of his own childhood.

The trilogy has a strong emotive component that is transmitted through interviews, archive material and home movies that make the spectator testimony to the facts that are being told. One can comment on Pannone's films taking into consideration Keith Beattie's opinion that, 'the assertion of subjective and personal points of view and the representation of one's self, family and culture, forces a significant revision of an objective, externalizing,

documentary practice' (2004: 107). The 'American Trilogy' questions the very possibility of an objective narration, showing that a documentary is the result of mediation and a negotiation between the event narrated and a subjective dimension. By introducing an element of subjectivity in its narration of events, and reflecting on the mechanisms of narration at the centre of the documentary, the trilogy leaves hermeneutical possibilities open to the spectator. To paraphrase Bruzzi's analysis of documentary making, the 'American Trilogy' shows that the documentary 'can never simply represent the real', but is the result of 'a dialectical conjunction of a real space and the film-makers that invade it' (2006: 153). This tension between facts and representation is also recognizable in the use of an external narrator in *Piccola America* and *Lettere dall'America*. This practice is usually considered to be negative, as 'inevitably and inherently didactic' (Bruzzi 2006: 47). Paraphrasing Bruzzi again, although it is true that the narrating voice in the trilogy is a male, omnisciently full of position and authority, it can be seen that it here 'functions almost like a searchlight suddenly turned upon the character's thoughts; it makes audible what is ostensibly inaudible, transforming the private into the public' (2006: 47). For instance, the voice-over of the narrator in *L'America a Roma* frequently offers an alternative view to Spoletini's, offering an indirect dialogue between the two on the possibility of setting a western movie in the urban environment of Rome.

The subjective dimension in the trilogy is also represented by the presence of a subtle nostalgic vein, since most interviewees are talking about events that happened to them when they were young. In *Lettere dall'America*, nostalgia is directed at the pre-telecommunications era in which one would still wait to hear from the migrants and could imagine America as a mythic place of hope. In an essay on the letters of Italian migrants, Fabio Caffarena and Antonio Gibelli also note that migrants 'sometimes represent themselves as continuously

attempting to return to the social tissue and parental presence they had left behind: the movement of these men in a sense joins and overlaps the backward the journey of words that carry memories, questions, nostalgia' (2011: 570–71). In *Piccola America*, one of the interviewees seems to reveal a common sentiment when she affirms that her memory of the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes and the fascist period was 'a good time, perhaps because I was a child'. Those interviewed in *Piccola America* seem to still live in those 'dreams of future prosperity' upon which the entire fascist rhetoric was based (Mack Smith 1976: 107). *L'America a Roma* opens with the memory of the economic boom and deals with Italian westerns, a genre that sees the Wild West as 'a place lost from cinema – [...] one of the most potent and precocious examples of nostalgia of a place and time that was purely manufactured by media' (Morreale 2009: 31–32). Significantly, the movie often alternates close-up shots of Spoletini's eyes and reverse shots of abandoned sets of western movies, suggesting that the audience should also look at these images through his nostalgic eyes.

A vaguely nostalgic vision can be recognized also in the reference to Pasolini in *L'America a Roma*, even if this presence is enrolled in the efforts that Pierpaolo Antonello defines as 'forgetting Pasolini', namely

the necessity to overcome the representation of the intellectual as a bard, who filters the complexity of the world through literary culture of one's own corporal experience [...] as if these were the only ways in which intellectual, ethic and political commitment could be conceived and implemented in contemporary society. (2013: 21)

Unlike those who regard Pasolini as the committed intellectual, entirely extrinsic to commercial cinema, Pannone portrays him as an author who did not see a contradiction

between 'high' and 'popular' culture, and was able to understand as an artist that 'political or serious cinema was not unilaterally conveyed through realist representations, as most criticism often intends [...] Political cinema [...] turned genre movies into instruments of commitment, more or less didactically represented' (Antonello 2013: 159). To paraphrase Antonello, one can say that 'the discipline for research' and the 'need to document' that animate the trilogy bring these works close to 'a new form of intellectual commitment that comes from a Pasolinian vein, but goes further' (2013: 121). I believe that Pannone's intention to strike out on a path different than that of Pasolini is clearly signalled in a scene that portrays the duel between two former western actors in *L'America a Roma*. The scene presents common features of western movies, such as a close-up on the eyes of the first gunman, a reverse cow-boy shot of the second gunman, and then a close-up on the gun of the first gunman. In the background, narrative music is played: an excerpt from Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthews Passion*, 'Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder' (1727), which Pasolini used in his movie *Accattone/The Scrouger* (1961).

Pannone's trilogy proposes a new commitment that glances towards the past, identifying possible ways of envisioning the present and the future of Italy. In particular, I believe that the difference between Pannone's and Pasolini's works is identifiable in the role they attribute to nostalgia. Antonello suggests that Pasolini's nostalgia for a non-industrial society and non-bourgeois models of sexuality was often based on romanticized and artistic descriptions of a mythical past rather than historical accounts. Pannone's trilogy instead creates a short circuit between history, memory and nostalgia, which questions the division that often seems to separate these three dimensions, respectively associated with objectivity, subjectivity and fantasy. In this way (and not dissimilar to certain films analysed by Pam Cook in her essay in *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*) the trilogy seems

to illustrate well the assertion that memory makes a 'bridge or transition' between nostalgia and history (2004: 2). Indeed, according to Cook

in the very act of addressing audiences as nostalgic spectators [...] the media invites exploration and interrogation of the limits of its engagement with history [...] What has been lost [...] is the authority of history itself, and its ability to produce convincing and objectifiable accounts of the past which will achieve a consensus. (2004: 2)

Pannone's attention to a prospective often considered inauthentic, such as nostalgia, via the genre of documentary underlines the role of fantasy and memories in the representation of facts.

Such a rehabilitation of nostalgia appears functional to rethink the present and future of Italy, in line with that which Svetlana Boym calls 'off-modern' critical reflection (2001: xvi). With the adverb 'off', Boym indicates one of the official characteristics of nostalgia; its capacity to explore aspects often left at the margins of the deterministic narration of history: 'the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, non-teleological possibilities of historic development' (2001: 50). Boym underlines how nostalgia, unlike melancholy, is not located at an individual conscious level, but instead involves a relationship between the personal and collective memory, between the individual biography and that of a nation. Furthermore, Boym affirms that nostalgia is not always a reactionary and sentimental force, but can also be a way of refusing modernity and rethinking the present: 'fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future. Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales' (2001: xvi). If it is true that

'restorative nostalgia' exists and that it looks to recreate lost origins or homeland, it is also true that 'reflective nostalgia', a fragmented and ironic nostalgia that disputes traditions and their invention, is opposed to this:

Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (Boym 2001: xviii)

As an example of the second type of nostalgia, Boym analyses the works of migrant artists such as Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky and Ilya Kabakov, demonstrating how often the nostalgic suffering of the migrant disputes the restorative nostalgia that is the basis of identity narration.

If Fred Davis is right to affirm that nostalgia serves to construct identity in moments of major social insecurity, evoking the past and its stability (Davis 1979: 45), I believe that nostalgia for the stories of mobility and migration that made up the history of Italy is employed in Pannone's trilogy to respond to the social insecurity caused by immigration. In other words, the trilogy provides useful elements for the reconsideration of national identity from a transnational perspective, and it portrays a past characterized by complex relationships of belonging and cultural diversity, and by hybrid national imaginaries that are mutually permeable with otherness, with 'America'. For this reason, the trilogy can be seen as an example of what John Hess and Patricia Rodden Zimmermann call 'transnational documentary', given its ability to trace 'interactions between and around cultures; performing

histories; imagining new subjectivities and alliances; mapping conflicts as multidimensional; traversing fantasies and material limits, cultures and political economies; formulating new analytics and locating new emancipatory places' (2006: 102). Creating imaginary communities that extend themselves way beyond national boundaries, the trilogy 'explore(s) how cultures, nations and identities are constructed, how they evidence all sorts of contradictions, hybridities and combustions and how new social spaces are always in volatile, contentious development' (Hess and Zimmerman 2006: 104). If the authoritarian narration of the documentaries played a fundamental role in the consolidation of the nation (Ben Ghiat 2015: 62–77), the reinterpretation of the documentary genre in Pannone's trilogy disputes the link between identity and territory upon which nationalism is based in order to open up space for those who arrive in Italy, looking for 'America'.

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Italian are mine.

² Pannone's latest documentary, *L'esercito più piccolo del mondo/The Smallest Army in the World* (2015) follows the story of two Swiss Guards during the time of Pope Francis, and was presented at Venice Film Festival in 2015.

³ This sentence is not present in the abbreviated version of the article that was included in Umberto Eco's collection of essays *Sulla letteratura/On Literature* (2002) and was translated into English by Martin McLaughlin in 2004.

⁴ The superimposition of images of Naples and New York is a narrative *topos* in the cinema about the Italian American experience (see, e.g., Bruno 2010).

⁵ Although less evident, another example of this tendency can be seen in Sacco's last letter to his son in Giuliano Montaldo's *Sacco e Vanzetti/Sacco and Vanzetti* (1971), which is in fact addressed to the spectator.

⁶ An example of this critical tendency is Morandini et al.'s analysis of Ettore Scola's film *Permette? Rocco Papaleo/My Name is Rocco Papaleo* (1971), which they argue to lack sociological consistency in the depiction of an Italian emigrant to the United States: 'whilst being confronted with the "barbarian" naivety of a Mediterranean in North America, E. Scola ties the grotesque with a more than jarring sociological reliability' (2014).

⁷ Concerning this migration, see Franzina and Parisella (1986); Snowden (2006). Judith Landry has translated *Canale Mussolini* into English (Pennacchi 2013). As I analyse specific expressions in Italian related to migration and colonialism in Pennacchi's novel, I will provide my own translation from the original Italian text.

⁸ It should be noted that Antonio Blasetti's debut film *Sole/Sun* (1929) also celebrates the remodelling of the Marshes by the Regime.

⁹ Pennacchi makes this link explicit, not only in *Canale Mussolini*, but also in the essay in *Fascio e martello. Viaggio per le città del duce/Beam and hammer. A trip through the*

Duce's cities', discussing how eucalyptus was imported from the colonies and transplanted in the Pontine Marshes on a large scale 'because it absorbs a lot of water and keeps the mosquitoes away' (2010b: 266)

¹⁰ Spoletini was a former stuntman and actor, and his stage name was William Bogart.

¹¹ Pasolini played a revolutionary Mexican priest in *Requiescant*.

¹² According to Christopher Frayling, Alberto Moravia suggested that massacres in Italian westerns reflected the fear of over-population due to emigration from southern to northern Italy (2013: 88).

¹³ In this sense, the documentary can be seen side by side with other documentaries telling of private experiences of Italian Americans such as Frank Cappiello's *Immigrant Son: The Story of John D. Mezzogiorno* (2011), Susan Caperna Lloyd's *The Baggage* (2001), Martin Scorsese's *Italianamerican* (1974), and Kym Ragusa's *Fuori/Outside* (1997). For an overview of these documentaries, see Muscio (2010).