Women of the Shadows: Italian American Women, Ethnicity and Racism in American Cinema

Francesca Canadé Sautman
Women of the Shadows:  
Italian American Women,  
Ethnicity and Racism in  
American Cinema  

Francesca Canadé Sautman

The women’s horizons narrow to the peephole view allowed by their black shawls. They expect no future.  
Ann Cornelisen, Torregreca (12)

Their world is the only world there is. To be exiled from it is to be without life. She cries because she is in mourning. They will not let her wear the color black. It is not a color for girls. To them she already looks too old. She would just look like a damn fool in a black dress. Black is a woman’s color.  
bell hooks, “Black Is a Woman’s Color” (343)

[a widow] must always wear black, of course, but she must wear a black scarf over her head, even in her own house for six months, and outside for two years. She must never be seen. If she must shop, she does it before dawn or after dark.  
Cornelisen, Torregreca (144)

See the woman dressed in black  
She makes a living on her back  
Standard Boot Camp Training Song
For decades, Italian American women—and indeed, Italian American men—have peered incredulously at degrading images of themselves on the silver screen, as members of an inferior “subculture,” cursed with a violent ethos, wallowing in consumption—of food, of sex and of money—shaped by the constant screams of a carceral family.

Caricatures of Italian American life have been widely popularized by the brilliant, the famous, the obscure and the mediocre, including the most celebrated Italian American directors. Flotsam in a sea of relentless cinematographic stereotyping not only of Italian Americans, but generally of all people of color and of racial and ethnic minorities, these images, considered entertaining by the Anglo mainstream, are not innocent. They convey, not very subtly at that, a subtext of racial hierarchies, social conformism of all types and of ethnic “essence” founding social stratification.

Italian Americans have played many roles in films since the early days of cinema in the United States, something which has been a mixed blessing for them, to say the least. In a descriptive overview of film to 1977, Golden (1980) delineated the history and dynamics of stereotyping of Italian Americans in media and fiction from the late 19th century, as well as in film, and the switch from “innocent buffoons, peddling arias and apples” to ruthless gangsters, stressing the interconnection between representation and self-perception. Peter Gard Steven focused on Saturday Night Fever in the construction of on-film blue-collar ethnic family life and contradictions (1982: 178-98). Carlos E. Cortés (1987) periodicized Italian American screen images from beginning as gangsters, to films in the fifties and early sixties with a fairly wide variation of roles, and back to the “ethnic commercialization” trend in the 1970s and 1980s, again replete with gangsters and hoods.

Golden (1979) examined the role of women, bringing out some important points, such as the way stereotypical food scenes (mammas waving spoons coated with pasta sauce) actually negate the full ritual meaning of food in Italian culture and the link between Italian American women in film and the 19th-century tradition of the sexual, sensual “dark woman” (1980). Cortés (1987) devoted a few paragraphs to Italian American women, whom he separated into two categories: “spoiled brats” and “Mediterranean Earth Mothers.” Since these essays, Italian American women have been absent from the current plethora of studies on women and film.
In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the movie industry displayed ambiguity towards ethnic and racial minorities and towards women. At the same time, feminist film criticism, cultural studies, black studies and other ethnic studies made it unacceptable to continue reading film with unchecked cultural assumptions and their disingenuous claims to neutrality and universalism. There is now conflict between a longstanding tradition of stereotyping which has produced a powerful—and profitable—mythology, and an audience sensibility that no longer accepts women as passive victims and no longer remains impervious to ethnic slurring.

Yet the mechanisms of stereotyping through film images are at times unclear, and their identification requires the interlacing of various reading systems. Thus, in discussing Italian American women in film, I will also be addressing stereotyping of men, coexistent to the cinematic life of Italian American women, both because Italian American men are also negative products of stereotyping and because gynophobic mythology views an Italian American world not defined by men. As King-Kok Cheung (1990) points out with respect to Asian American men and women, the reclaiming by male writers/scholars of an image taken from them and distorted by dominant groups can also generate a process of reading the cultural experience along male-centered and ideologically conservative lines which make women invisible.

Caricatures of Italian Americans in film are in keeping with the mainstream sociology of Italian Americans (Di Leonardo, 1984). For close to a century, mainstream Anglo society has either derided or ignored the complexities of Italian American life, with its crossover of rural cultural patterns, imported through immigrant culture, into the fabric of teeming, industrialized, urban life. In his often quoted study, Gambino (1975) correctly pinpointed phenomena of ethnic self-presentation such as "layering" between accepted and rejected, "fronting" fake images to comfort the prejudices of the surrounding society. Unfortunately, his portrayal of women is rife with anti-feminist cliches to construct an ideal Southern Italian woman, as unconnected to the social reality of postwar Italy as to Italian American life. His liberal use of the concept of *serietà* was critiqued by Helen Barolini for replacing the inner thoughts of women, whose voices were not heard, with what amounts largely to male wishful thinking. Barolini herself provided some finely tuned pages of reflection on the tension in
the lives of women between their wish to loosen the constraints of
the family and their deep internalizing of the family as cultural
unit (1985: 1-56). In the film *The Godfather*, Gambino saw a true
rendition of the Southern "sense of tragedy" and conservative
view of life (De Stefano, 1987). Yet, casting the Mezzogiorno in a
rigid mold, as a "tragic" space, reflects a conservative social and
gender agenda which makes short shrift of the diversities within
its culture(s) and a dry approach to sociology which ignores the
insights and qualifiers of ethnology and folklore. Furthermore, as
Micaela Di Leonardo (1984) points out, reading Italian American
culture as a monolith without regard for gender and class but also
region is an enormous distortion.

Waneema Lubiano (330-35) argues that one of the rhetorical
devices used in the media against black women is to transform
them into "social narratives." As Anita Hill (and Thomas' sister)
was publicly reviled to bolster Clarence Thomas' case—Hill's race
was made to disappear and reappear at the same time—Lubiano's
comments can be fruitfully applied to the representation of Italian
American women (348-49). Thus, as the construction of an ideal
historical societal model (e.g., a "patriarchal Africa," "blackness"
as male) only bends history to fit an anti-woman agenda which
actually respects the status quo of racism, thus, the construction
of an artificial "Mezzogiorno" of the most traditionalist ilk is
enforced as the positive cultural model of Italian life, on the one
hand, in opposition to the image of the murderous "mob" wops
armed with guns and a 100-word vocabulary, but on the other,
against women.

Images are not read in one way by all. Feminist theories of
the gaze have contested the power position of a presumed male,
"governing" viewer, as Jane Gaines calls him (200); they have also
stressed the importance of film language (camera movements,
framing, etc.) in analyzing women's roles in film. Lesbian film
scholars denounced the definitions of a subject and object of
desire along strictly gendered lines, which exclude women as
locus of pleasure for each other (Stacey, 1990). Just as important,
black feminist scholars have denounced the hegemony of gender
as a reading category over race and class, as one which replaces
one viewing-reading hierarchy by another, ruled by white mid­
dle-class women (Gaines, 1990). The interpretive tools forged by
black scholars and other scholars of color have been crucial to
understanding issues of racial/ethnic visibility and invisibility.
For instance, Donald Bogle's (1988) incisive analysis repeatedly
brings out the blindspots in white viewership's perception of what is a "positive" black role in film. For instance, Nell Irvin Painter remarks: "The figure of the oversexed-black-Jezebel has had amazing longevity. She is to be found in movies made in the 1980s and 1990s—She's Gotta Have It, Jungle Fever, City of Hope—in which black female characters are still likely to be shown unclothed, in bed, and in the midst of coitus" (210). In her reading, marital legitimacy of sex or the fact that white females can also be shown in that manner are extraneous to the nature of image impact: these images are seen as carriers of a specific racialized history of sexual oppression that cannot be ignored. Painter aptly reminds us that any reader brings context—knowledge/perception of history, cultural values, experience, social practice, memory—to the process. Acknowledging the flick of the mental switch which literally colors and frames images differently for different viewers is an unescapable responsibility of any reading grounded in a consciousness of the interface of race/class/ethnicity and gender.

Reading Italian American images in film calls for a gendered approach, but not one which locates itself in some undefined ahistorical control of the "patriarchy" over film images. We must recognize that as an ethnicity, Italian Americans are at once constructed as "white," with the privileges and social accountability attendant to the term, and on the margins of whiteness, perceived as a "dark," "in-between" outsider group by forces in an Anglo mainstream (LaGumina, 1973). To fully read ourselves as Italian American women means to examine the contradictions and variations of our own experience, in all its gendered forms, and at once, to willingly look into the mirror of race relations as they exclude more deeply and violently women of color.

Another crucial aspect of the popular representation of Italian American identity is its pairing with working-class life, regardless of the economic status of Italian Americans. Thus, reviewers do not see in Married to the Mob the merging of judgments about social class and Italianness it presumes, or in Mean Streets that this "real, true grit" Italian life they extol is based on a gender bias that makes the street space primary. This endotropism of the very people trained to look at film contributes to the invisibility endured by people of color, women, gay people and working-class culture.

This study is based on 45 films, mostly produced from 1977 to 1993, in which Italian Americans play central or relevant roles,
out of which 15 can be loosely termed comedies. Determining impact levels, of auteur cinema and commercial film, of box office successes and flops, is beyond the scope of this essay and would call for extensive analysis of the interplay between critical appraisal and pecuniary profits.

Italian Americans entered the 1980s paradigmatically locked into a heritage of violence. *Mean Streets* and *The Godfather* parts I and II compounded the old stereotypes about gangs and the mob with the claim to ethnic verisimilitude, attributed to directors who were said to speak from within, for, and not only about Italian Americans. *Saturday Night Fever* went the mile in creating the film persona of the violent, racist, misogynist Italian American working-class lout.

Since Italian American culture in popular film is constantly shown as violent, on the street and in the home, women are also enclosed by violence: they either must be its victims (*Raging Bull, Godfather, Saturday Night Fever, Blood Brothers, Jungle Fever*) or engage in it in “mob” terms (*The Sting, Broadway Danny Rose, The Godfather III, Men of Respect, Cookie*). Only when they practice violence in their own name (*Mortal Thoughts*) do they feel the full weight of societal condemnation and their isolation. On screen, Italian American women scream and curse but do not fight back effectively, legally or otherwise; helpless and inconsequential, they are narratively redeemed only when imbedded in the fascinating context of mob life. And maybe most strikingly, Italian American women show no evidence of the kind of intense women-bonding which is crucial to their culture as in so many others; they are always defined in their relation to men: fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, lovers.

Who are Italian women in film? In *Blood Brothers* (1978) sensitive Sonny leaves the macho construction world where work is rough and women are dirt; his mother, beaten and dissed by her husband, is also hysterical and violent towards her younger child, and Sonny threatens to kill her. In *Absence of Malice* (1981), a self-effacing, young Catholic woman kills herself because her abortion has been made public by the press. In Alan Alda’s *Four Seasons*, the one Italian American wife in a group of friends waves her hands around and peppers her speech with “I’m Italian” to explain her displays of emotion. In *Prince of the City*, the men deal with serious problems, the women get the steaks ready for the barbecue. In John Sayles’ *Baby It’s You* (1983), Sheik’s mother adulates him with benign indifference for his hustler activities, and an
Italian working-class woman provides Sheik’s middle-class girlfriend with a model of lower-class speech to use in a play.

In 1984 Alphabet City contrasted the smart, decisive WASP girlfriend to two passive Italian women: the mother who won’t budge when her building is going to be torched and the hero’s young prostitute sister, with no agenda for the future, unable to listen to her drug dealer brother’s useful advice. In the Pope of Greenwich Village, the dark-haired ex-wife of one of the small-time hood heroes is a small-minded nag who uses gutter language, again opposed to the cultured, blonde WASP woman. Woody Allen’s Broadway Danny Rose featured Italian mob women, including a screaming superstitious mother. Prizzi’s Honor, as De Stefano points out, added insult to injury, for Sicilians were criminals of an incompetent sort; “strong” Mae Rose is another dark-haired schemer who gets jilted for a blonde and is still at war with her father for independence. In De Palma’s Wise Guys (1986) the usual female roles got a slight twist: the faithful wife is clever and effective; instead of being devoted to la famiglia, De Vito’s aunt insults him and tells the mob boss at her nephew’s funeral that “he did what he had to do,” while the grandmother is the sole depository of mob secrets and tells the don to his face “va fanculo” (sic).

Gangland with a Romeo-and-Juliet theme was the subject of Ferrara’s China Girl (1987): the hood’s mother runs from the kitchen to lament her dying son, and air-head gang girls merely echo their racist boyfriends statements, if they speak at all. In Matewan, for all its social epic splendor, cautious Italian immigrant women try to pull their husbands back from the struggle (contrast to the role of women in miner’s strikes in Salt of the Earth and the documentary Harlan County).

In Moonstruck (1988), Loretta, a working widow, refuses a convenience marriage to a stereotypical Italian American “mamma’s boy” to be swept off her feet by the fiancé’s oddball brother, but her mother is the only somewhat assertive female character. In Dominick and Eugene (1988), centered on two working-class Italian American brothers in Pittsburgh, the only Italian woman is a kind, maternal, elderly neighbor who cooks for the brothers and keeps an eye on them. In a low-budget comedy of little consequence, I Love New York (1988), vulgar, sexually aggressive Italian girls, reduced mostly to a voice on the phone, are contrasted to the clever Anglo daughter of a rich man. In Married to the Mob (1988) Angela hates her mob world and tries hard to get away but can’t until the FBI—and the clean-cut Anglo
boyfriend—move in to help. The lowlife hero of *Spike of Bensonhurst* makes it in the local crime family, impregnates the boss' dizzy spoiled daughter, moves to a Puerto Rican neighborhood where he fathers another child and paternalistically lectures the residents on how to be clean and fight crime(!). Meanwhile, his mom "becomes" a lesbian while her thug husband is in jail and shacks up with a fat, gluttonous, bad-tempered woman. Being a lesbian is "unnatural" and "un-Italian," comments Mr. All-Italian Boy.

In Susan Seidelman's *Cookie* (1989) the heroine fits right in to the Mafia life she once derided and—an apparent "feminist" twist—into her father’s shoes. Her rebellion is limited to attitude and funky clothing; she finally accepts the family business and the hitman boyfriend. Nancy Savoca's *True Love* (discussed below) gave women center stage and treated Italian working-class life with tenderness and quasi-ethnological veracity.

In Alan Alda’s *Betsy’s Wedding* (1990) only Eddie reflects on identity questions; the Italian women in his family, his sister and his mother, are amusing, quaint figures, contrasted to the sophisticated society at large. In *The Freshman* a spoiled brat Mafia don’s daughter aggressively chases after the hero. Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* shows no Italian women at all except for the anti-Semitic hags in the beauty parlor. In *Miller’s Crossing*, Johnny Casper’s obese wife appears to babble in accelerated (dubious) ridiculous-sounding Italian about her fat son’s eating problems. In contrast, the Canadian film *Goodnight Michelangelo* shows a struggling Italian immigrant family in which ineffective, virulently misogynist straight men, and sleazy or victimized blonde women, are contrasted with the fighting spirit of the dark, intelligent and aggressive mother, the affectionate and politically conscious gay man and a little boy coming to terms with the chaos wrought by the oppressive world of adults.

In 1991 Italian Americans were all over the map. In John Sayles’ *City of Hope* Italian women range from racist community organizers to women who poignantly watch disaster unfurl, including soft-spoken, devoted mother Angela, naive enough to fall for junkie Nick’s fast-talking, but who never inflects events. In Coppola’s *Godfather III* a new Connie is a strong gangster support figure, who inspires fear herself, half-jokes Michael, and Michael’s young daughter Mary falls victim to gang violence; the women are cast as reflections of each other and metaphors of the Sicilian “tragic mode” of life, through the use of a common,
somber clothing color-scheme, and such dramatic devices as Connie's veiling gesture after Mary is shot, echoing the mourning gesture of the young woman in the last scene of *Cavalleria Rusticana*. In Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, Angie goes from desire/curiosity to trying to cross the color barrier only to fail and be beaten and spat on "in the 'hood" and called whore and white thrash by her black lover's relatives. *Men of Respect* was an adaptation of *Macbeth* giving a "strong" role to the "Italian Lady Macbeth" but opting to cast her also as vulgar and crude. In a silly comedy, *Once Around*, a "typical" Italian Daddy's girl brings home a non-Italian older fiancé for approval, listlessly hanging on father or lover; her best scene: having noisy sex on the living room couch in her parents' house as they listen. In *True Colors*, an Italian American entrepreneur is—naturally—"connected" and his wife a passively collaborating parasite. With *Oscar*, Sylvester Stallone put down his gloves and machine gun and tried to be funny: a comic ingredient was provided by the screaming temper-tantrum-throwing spoiled and scheming daughter. In *Twenty-Ninth Street*, women are secondary at best, the mother on the rough-hewn "sensible matron" side and the daughter in the venerable tradition of the crude air-head, who has to be reminded to remove her chewing gum—the Italian woman's trademark in film—for the nuptial kiss. *Mortal Thoughts* provided a very different and complex view, focused on the friendship of two women, one of them clearly identified as Italian, accomplices in murder triggered by the domestic hell enforced by men.

In 1992, John Turturro's *Mac* gave hopes of portraying Italians more accurately and of providing a valid testimony about blue-collar Italians: not so for women, however, for the only Italian is the screaming voice of Mac's mother, who remains literally invisible during the entire movie, as opposed to the overbearing but towering figure of the father. The farce *My Cousin Vinny* labored on the heavy stereotyping of Brooklyn Italian Americans as cute but vulgar street-minded working-class people, outwitting the Good Ol' South—also outrageously stereotyped, as is Billy's Jewish friend—while Lisa, the out-of-work hairdresser/auto mechanic, who knows everything there is to know about cars, is at once a caricature and an—attempted—role reversal.

In 1993 several films centered on Italian Americans: Nancy Savoca's *Household Saints* (infra) explored the world of a young girl's mysticism and struggle for dominance. Robert de Niro
directed *A Bronx Tale*, based on a Chazz Palmintieri play, in which Italian women consist of the tender but self-effacing young mother and a few “chicks” who stroll down the street in mall hairdos and tight clothes to be whistled at.\(^5\)

This rapid survey underscores the paucity of Italian American female roles in film. Only a handful were central roles; mostly, Italian American women remained secondary, docile mothers and beaten wives/girlfriends, objects of ridicule and contempt, or vicious sidekicks to their more brutal but definitely awesome male counterparts, shadows in a world already characterized by the shadowy aura of criminality and “lower-class” culture. Significantly, male Italian American directors have in no way broken this pattern; on the contrary.

**ETHNICITY, GENDER AND CLASS: WOMEN AND WORK**

Although many Italian immigrant women worked for wages before coming to America, as well as becoming factory and office workers in their new country (Cohen: 15-36), the view still prevails that Italian women from the South were always chained to the stove and bedroom and hardly put their nose outside. This inaccurate picture, which Di Leonardo calls “the rhetoric of nostalgia” (233), has been so pervasive among Italians because it idealizes the memories of a painful experience and implies a higher social status of informants who claim that the women in their families never had to work. Writings on the family in the Mezzogiorno, by Gambino, for instance, and recent research by female scholars (Di Leonardo, Cohen, Ewen, Cappozzoli) show that sociology has been the locus of a completely gendered reading of the realities of Italian and Italian American women.

Popular film, which is not subtle in presenting social life to start out with, has hastily endorsed the stereotypical images of ethnic nostalgia and practically shut women out of the work space, while at the same time, showing them, by definition, as vulgar and “lower class.” John Sayles’ *Baby It’s You*, a contrast between Sheik’s Italian American working class and no-way-up future and his Jewish girlfriend’s middle-class aspirations, is condescending along class lines and empty along ethnic ones. A brief apparition by a female working-class character is significant: “My name is Joanne Tessitori,” she tells Jill; Jill then repeats the sentence to herself to copy the “lower-class” accent and intonation for the part she is playing in *The Time of Your Life*. Indeed, most
Italian Americans in film are assumed to be lower class/working class, wealth and comfort stemming solely from a life of crime. Exceptions (Once Around) produce a shallow caricature of middle-class Italian life and its handling of tradition, although they are a significant component of Italian American life.

Most women in films have thus been presented as mammas tottering out of the kitchen or housewives who are also, in mob films, consumerist parasites, accessories to murder which fills their bank accounts. To fully understand the impact of that presentation, one has to consider the particular negativity of the nonproductive member of society in North American Protestant-ethnic-based culture, as Waneema Lubiano (1992) and other writers have pointed out with respect to the stereotype of the "Black Welfare Queen."

Since Italian Americans have broken into middle-class professions but are still partially marginal in positions entailing intellectual prestige, as shown by their ambiguous place in academia (Viscusi, 1991), one is not surprised to find few or no professional Italian American women in film; however, very few of these women work in any capacity. The second role of Swing Shift is an Italian woman but her identity is simply alluded to, in a scene that contrasts her "nobody" status with stars who all have Anglo-compatible names. The owner of a dance hall won't let Hazel sing because he needs "a big name, like Jeanie Simms, Helen Forbes, not Hazel Zanussi." Although many studies have commended Swing Shift and its representation of women in the factory, Hazel’s ethnic character is never noticed.

Italian American women are more likely to work in comedies than in other genres. It is rare that a job is connected to construction of the character, as is the case for instance in True Love, where Donna and her friends work as retail clerks and one drives a cab, or in Household Saints, where Catherine insists on working in the butcher shop against the prohibition of her malevolent mother-in-law. The job appears often as a narrative device to position her with respect to other characters: in Moonstruck, Loretta works in an office while her aunt runs a grocery with her husband, and Angie is Flipper’s secretary (Jungle Fever). In other films, these women are shown as unable or untrained to work: Bunny has a pet business, but she steals the dogs and Cookie is useless in a garment factory (Cookie). In Married to the Mob, Angela can only find a job as a beginner in a hair salon. In My Cousin Vinny, Lisa’s coup de theatre in court is prepared by the announcement that
she is an unemployed hairdresser. Joyce (Mortal Thoughts) runs a beauty salon in partnership with Cynthia.

The beauty salon in films about Italians is important. In Married to the Mob, it is a space devolved to the loud and foul-mouthed gangster wives who use its rituals of grooming to try to control Angela, while their hairdos and clothes are showy and coded as "in terrible taste." In Goodfellas, the women are pudgy, balding, wrinkled-skin anti-Semites (and critic Georgia Browne exclaims: "we learn . . . what Italian women do for their bad skin," 1990: 64). These are the comments that discourage subtle academic discourse; on the outside, at least, the message of these films is not encumbered with fine distinctions: gangster culture and Italian "subculture" are completely merged.

Yet the hair salon can be at once a woman’s space and a community space, for instance, with DiAna’s Hair Ego, the basis of operations for the SCAEN (South Carolina Aids Education Network), founded by black businesswoman-activist DiAna. The salon is used by women writers to configure symbolically the complex interactions between women, such as Rosemarie Caruso’s play The Suffering Heart Salon (1983) or a short story by Dani Shapiro “The Way Women Laugh” (1993). In a more general sense, collective grooming has a particular woman-bonding quality, underscored by bell hooks (1991: 348-49), and as we see it in a scene of True Love. This dimension is lacking in most films, except maybe in Mortal Thoughts where the salon becomes a semblance of economic independence and a refuge for the women, who dread the invasion by violent, overbearing Jimmy and his order of male prerogative.

EROTICISM AND ETHNICITY: THE ABSENT BODY

Being a sexual image has meant different things to non-Italians with respect to Italian men and women. De Stefano gives quotes from the popular press where the “Italian male” is “idolized” for his “swarthy primal qualities,” manifest, apparently, in the violent hood; these remarks are indeed blatant racism, similar to the rhetoric used against blacks. Yet, in many films, Italian American women are sharply divided as “good” (or tolerable) and “bad” along hair color and complexion lines. Alphabet City, Pope of Greenwich Village, Blood Brothers, Married to the Mob, and Mean Streets agree that the dark-haired, dark-eyed Italian American is a nuisance and a loudmouth, either that or a victim
In City of Hope, Italian women are divided between ignorant, angry “bitches,” their dark hair and looks a visual metaphor for their atavistic cultural and political shadows, and “nice” Angela’s warm reddish glow. Blondes, on the other hand, always non-Italians—as if Italians couldn’t be blonde—are intelligent, determined, independent and loving. Yet filmmakers do not apply these codes to men, reflecting an ancient stereotype formulated in 19th-century Western European cultures—as in Mérimée’s Carmen and Colomba, both destructive on different planes—about the “dark primitive Mediterranean woman,” as a sexual menace, which is also expressed in North American images of Hispanic women. At the same time, this sexual menace is often non-erotic. The ability to show dark-haired Italian women as both attractive and vibrant characters is a very recent development, found in films as dissimilar as True Love or My Cousin Vinny.

Outside of lead roles, Italian women are made into clownish figures, with overweight as a standard trait. For instance, while Cookie has a long list of Italian names (Maria Carmela, etc.), she is only partially identified as Italian, because of her attractive Polish mother, but the women in the film who are completely Italian American are all incredibly dumb and/or fat (her friend Pia Mancuso), vulgar and vociferous (Bunny) and, generally, overweight, dressed in bad taste and obsessed with cooking (the women at the funeral or the woman at the party). In Betsy’s Wedding, while the grandmother only voices platitudes about money and food, the overweight sister is the only one to speak with a heavy Italian-American accent, to dress loudly and show a complete lack of social exposure; her comment on the sumptuous home of Betsy’s Anglo-Saxon future in-laws is simply “it must be a bitch to clean.” Clothes play a remarkably important rule in showing Italians of any gender as incapable of true “style” or class, unable to dress appropriately even if they did make it to the higher rungs, like Vinny who tried the bar six times and wears a leather jacket and cowboy boots to court (My Cousin Vinny).

When sexualized, Italian women were for many years pure objects of possession and contempt: Connie pregnant and beaten (Godfather I), Teresa publicly derided by her own cousin (Mean Streets), Anette viciously humiliated by being “done” in the back-seat of a car, while boyfriend Tony ignores the scene, and then tells her she asked for it because she is not “a nice girl,” Saturday Night Fever giving the message that if your name is McDonald
and you live across the bridge, you can resist physical assault and
tame the beast, but that the fate of Italian girls is to be degraded,
that they, in fact, know nothing else. This tradition was held up
with variations by Jungle Fever’s Angie or Prizzi’s Honor’s Mae
Rose.

Spike Lee had provoked sharp criticism for his presentation
of women in some of his earlier films (bell hooks, 1989). His
Jungle Fever left all camps perplexed. In showing Angie gradually
losing her “color blindness” and coming to terms with the impact
of racism on her personal life, Lee stated that oppression along
race, gender and class mix in peculiar ways. Revealing scenes are
the cops putting a gun to Flipper’s head, with the opposite reac­
tion of both protagonists or Flipper’s father lecturing the com­
pletely befuddled dark-skinned grand-daughter of immigrants on
the mythology of the Southern white lady. Yet, although the film
is about sex, there is something almost asexual about Angie: in
the first scene where she and Flipper fall down on each other the
camera rapidly increases distance until they seem very far away
on the office draughting table, in contrast to the first scene which
shows a black woman as fully and sexually active, and one has to
concur with Painter that it is black women who are selected for a
fully sexual portrayal. And Lee does indeed an awful job at pre­
senting black women, shown as completely male-focused and
homophobic.

Many of these scenes can be contrasted with the portrayal of
Donna in True Love, who knows how to be aggressive when she
wishes. One might think of her radiance in the scene where she
invites Mikey in, the night before the wedding: as she slowly
removes her lace nighty, the camera moves back to frame them in
a moment that is both graceful and erotically charged, creating a
voyeuristic distance, almost of a “peephole” nature. Oddly
enough, other rare expressions of a woman’s autonomous sexual
desire are found in two gross stereotypical farces, Married to the
Mob and My Cousin Vinny. Angela leads the seduction game on
her first date and voices—albeit unconsciously—sexual desire;
Lisa, framed at first sight as a prominent, well-shaped fanny in a
tight skirt, apparently casting her as a “bimbo” type, distends that
image in sexual word play with Vinny where the language of
plumbing is appropriated by a woman as a tool of power and
competence. However, Lisa’s role reversal potential is defrauded
by a safe return to concerns over marriage, children and the “bio­
logical clock.”
The one world-famous sexual Italian American woman is Madonna. She is briefly discussed only because she is a persona more than a director, and her own films, albeit somewhat narrative, are videos, in which her presentation of self is not linked specifically to ethnicity but to questions of gender borders: “I’m a fag trapped in a woman’s body,” she said in a recent interview. But ignoring her presence would indeed posit a stereotype, that “nice” or “real” Italian girls do not parade in underwear or hang out with gay men of color. In her video Like a Prayer, however, her coding as an “Italian girl” seemed obvious by a return to her natural hair color and a style of dress reminiscent of Italian Neo-Realist films. This coding became erotically and politically explosive in transgressing not just black-white, but also contemporary black-Italian sexual borders, most recently marred by the murder of Yusuf Hawkins, through the use of baroque mystical and popular Catholic imagery.

Yet, the predominant image transmitted by popular film voids Italian women as erotic beings. Dark haired women are sinister. Their bodies are clad in funeral black or in loud color combinations; in fact, they have no bodies: these women seldom, if ever, appear unclad. Their bodies exist exclusively as the province of abuse and dominance, as the visible enclosure of ethnicity, signaled in the bruises and scars inflicted by belonging to “lower” culture, in the distortions wrought by their diet, burdened and erased by the compensatory outlet of childbirth.

ITALIAN-AMERICAN-NESS AND ITALIANITÀ:
WOMEN AND HOLLYWOOD’S CONSTRUCTION OF ITALIAN LIFE

Critical readings of ethnicity and culture in film may be difficult but critics help us in this domain by constantly expressing their own prejudices. Can it be, for instance, that gangsters really “just happen” to be Italian? Gavin Smith (1991: 34) writes of Angela: “from the closed world of Long Island Italians, she goes into the Lower East Side” . . . so it was Italians after all, not just gangsters? Director Demme is anointed “multi-ethnic” and subversive and the proof lies in Married’s soundtrack, which “bursts at the seams with rock pop reggae and Latin music.” Yet, what I heard in that soundtrack—baptized “Mambo italiano” not “Mambo gangstero”—was a caricature of both Italian and Latin culture, through an accumulation of disjointed food images, removed from their cultural and social fabric, flagstaffs for an infantile, regressive consumerism.
Also, the manner in which selective bits of “ethnic” material are used to identify gangsters amounts to unmistakable cultural notes, for instance, when the gangsters in *Married to the Mob* bring Angela “nice olive oil” and “beautiful tomatoes.” Can anyone seriously imagine a filmmaker showing Meyer Lansky preparing chicken soup before going on a hit? The assumption that just because a director is Italian American he truly reflects the whole culture he depicts, as is most often claimed about Scorsese’s *Mean Streets*, is also astounding. In fact, critics and reviewers do not hesitate to use terms such as “tribe” and “tribal” when referring to Italian American daily life in film (Jami Bernard, *New York Post*, Mike McGrady, *Newsday*), all of which underlines the extreme degree of “otherness” Italian Americans have acquired in popular U.S. culture.

*Italianità* itself, not gangster mores and customs, is what is constantly derided. For instance, in *Married*, a funeral scene turns traditional aspects of Italian mourning customs (such as keening and wailing, which are mostly no longer practiced in North America) into a grotesque cacophony, predicated at once on the idea that grieving over a gangster is laughable, and on the impossibility for most North American viewers to culturally situate the behavior anywhere but outside the pale of “normal” culture which values decorum and self-control and implicitly declares hysteria “womanish.” (In *Wise Guys*, however, De Vito’s wife and son use the stereotype to their advantage to fool the gangsters.)

In Woody Allen’s *Broadway Danny Rose*, the gangster’s vociferous mamma is frantic about the *malocchio* affecting her son. Scenes which make fun of “superstition” are a source of great amusement for urban moviegoers. Yet, in traditional cultures, by no means specifically Italian, beliefs in the functioning of the Evil Eye are at once pervasive and complex (Dundes, 1980). In Woody Allen’s farcical exploitation of Italian Americans, elitist urban culture has again displaced the function of traditional belief to the three-ring circus of “backward ethnic traits.”

Food is unquestionably wrapped tightly around perceptions of ethnicity, in a positive, binding way from within, often in a derogatory way from without. As Richard Raspa (185-94) demonstrated for an Italian American community in Utah, the more isolated a community, the more ritually important become the minutest details of food preparation and the retention of the most regional particularist traits. Food has unquestionably been symbolic of ethnic difference in several films, for instance, bread: in
The Pope of Greenwich Village, white bread belongs to WASPs and is deemed inedible ("White bread? no wonder WASPs have no color"), in Cookie, Bunny calls the Italian American DA a "wonderbread wop," while in Goodnight Michelangelo, eating brown bread is tantamount to assimilation and the boy tries repeatedly to eat it and vomits every time until he gives up because he finally understands that he is forcing himself to absorb the food he detests only to be absorbed into the mainstream out of self-hate and to deny his otherness status.

What of Italian food in film? It becomes a "colorful" and unmistakable signature of things Italian apposed to mob life, as in the famous "Don't forget the cannoli" line of The Godfather. But it's pasta we find all over the screen, in an imagery made famous by The Godfather and continued in Goodfellas: gangsters amorously stirring deep red meat sauces between hits, and as blood is splattered everywhere, red pasta sauce explodes on the screen too. Contrarily to the delightful impression created on Anglo critics that the filmmakers are sharing "authentic" recipes with the audience (Browne, 1990), the "pasta paradigm" (to paraphrase one of Golden's titles) contrives a multiple assault on the senses, with redolent, spicy food, red color, blood, gunshots, violent death, combined for full effect by using the "exotic" and sensual coding of a strong-flavored, "olive-skinned" (swarthy) culture. Maybe such images prompted a pained and searching poem by Sandra Gilbert, entitled "Mafioso," which begins with the following lines, then contrasted to the disembarkation from Ellis Island, under "the evil eyes of a thousand buildings" (Barolini: 248-49):

Frank Costello eating spaghetti in a cell at San Quentin
Lucky Luciano mixing up a mess of bullets and calling for Parmesan cheese
Al Capone baking a sawed-off shotgun into a huge lasagna
are you my uncles, my only uncles?

The claim that only "gangsters" and not Italians are shown does not hold up because screenplay writers and directors insure that the ethnic markers provided, in particular by food, are amply and distinctly visible. For instance, in the old The Time of Your Life, an adaptation of a William Saroyan play, the bartender's mamma suddenly erupts on the scene and in about one minute makes a speech in Neapolitan dialect about his eating habits and exits. Years later, in Miller's Crossing an obese mother appears to babble about her chubby son's attitudes to food, in Italian of course.
While the function of the first scene was ambiguous—Saroyan the ethnic using light touches to identify his characters as social and ethnic marginals—its function in *Miller’s Crossing* reinforces, by association with body imagery grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense, and by contrast with the “life-giving” dynamics it supposes, the murderous viciousness of Johnny Casper. The fact that the Italian language is used, in an English-speaking movie, as a vehicle for that contrast is, of course, a coincidence.

Italian American women have also spoken of food in their own way. It is amazing how little pasta there is in *True Love*, for instance, where buying expensive fresh mozzarella or eating cheesecake at a gathering of women (“your aunt Carmela baked it”) connotes different gendered situations: sexual bantering in the store, women bonding and food stuffed down as solace in the kitchen. In Savoca’s *Household Saints*, food is an infinitely complex medium of expression. At once the locus of Catherine’s family oppression (producing an enormous meal in impossible quarters) and of her independence (taking over the sausage production from her mother-in-law), it becomes the locus of intense resistance as Teresa, determined to become a saint, resorts to the ancient technique of anorexia to remove herself from the profane territory of mundane bodily functions. Here food is less linked to ethnicity than to gendered visions of temptation, sin and pleasure at once but also to magic and power, as shown by the formula-recipe repeated as a chant by Catherine preparing the sausage and the re-incorporation of the very carnal—and phallic—sausage into religious belief as the saint’s father’s butcher shop becomes also a holy place.

*Italian Americans, Race, and Racism*

A most puzzling aspect of the screen image of Italian Americans is their relationship to race. So many films about Italian Americans have dealt openly with issues of race and violence, starting with *Mean Streets, The Godfather* and *Saturday Night Fever*, that racist language has become part of the cinematic stereotype of Italian Americans. “Don Vito,” says Golden (1980: 89), “sought justice, loved children, hated drugs and Negroes—indeed almost all laudable Americanisms.” If Italians are racists, this fact can, depending on one’s views, either be considered another proof of their low-life qualities or be treated with benign indifference. Using racist words and statements in scripts paints Italians
in even a worse moral and cultural light. On the other hand, the scripts also reflect the racist sentiments of at least part of the audience. Thus, the "racist Italian" is also a grotesque mouthpiece for "unpleasantness" that might otherwise be judged too offensive but becomes perfectly normal since it comes from a "gutter subculture."\(^{13}\)

How do women fare in this mess? The misogyny of some directors and scriptwriters interfaces in strange ways with their attitudes about race. Take John Sayles, who is known as a socially conscious director. His *City of Hope* exposes the racism of commercial real estate deals which took place in Jersey City over the last ten years. Yet his facts are peculiar: he depicts racial gang strife in a city which is for the most part integrated. The Mayor who engineers the torching of the building and the forcible removal of its luckless inhabitants is Italian. Yet, in the history of the city's mayors, it was actually an Irish mayor who drew the ire of African-American voters, who voted for the one Italian in between his terms. In one scene, an Irish cop claims that the buildings were in better shape "before," i.e., when the Irish ran the town, and before this Italian slumlord took over, while the city has been Irish-run for decades. In this film, Italians have been selected to play the part of the "reactionary ethnics"\(^{14}\) and vicious racist organizers, sandwiched between the Anglo-Irish norm and the people of color trying to beat down the door. Italian women are community agitators who complain that their neighborhoods are unsafe and ruined by "those people" and oppose bilingual education. The film's women are curiously all set up as passive: only one black mother stands out as having independence of thought. The others include Hispanic women, victims of the building torching, the wife of the African-American politician-organizer whose presentation in bed was viewed dimly by at least one critic (supra) and three Italian American women, helpless spectators to their son, brother and boyfriend's demise. In fact, Angela is not just passive: a spectator to the anger of black and Hispanic residents, her face registers incomprehension and even disapproval.

In *Mean Streets* again, Scorsese opened his male character out of the hood by showing his attraction towards the black woman who sings in the club and whom he briefly dates. Yet Teresa, dark haired herself, compensated her low value in the world of men with bitter racism towards black people, turning in anger against a black hotel maid in a way that obviously embarrassed even her lover.
Anti-Semitism is another favorite of the Italian cinematic persona. In *Goodfellas*, Henry Hill falls in love with a vibrant Jewish girl (played by an Italian actress) while the Italian women in the beauty parlor, with their bad skin and thinning hair, are objects of disgust, who talk about Miami being "Jew Heaven."

In scripts, "positive" race relations are purely dealt with through the attraction of a male (Italian) to a female of another group (Chinese, black, Hispanic). I, for one, refuse to be taken in by this superficial attempt at seeming "progressive" and its condescending pose towards people of color (the women are okay because they can be somehow annexed). Yet this crumb is often tossed disturbingly at the expense of Italian women. Italian women become, in their very bodies alone, explicitly or implicitly compared to women of other groups which suggest their inferiority. If their actual looks are not at stake (*Goodfellas, Married*) it is their vulgarity. Thus, the young black woman, Jane, in *A Bronx Tale* is not only fresh and charming, she has "class," while the girls from the hood are cheap and vulgar. Conversely, it can be argued that Spike Lee did a creditable portrait of Angie but at the expense of black women in his script.

In short, films about Italian Americans are so tightly locked up in conundrums about race that they can't do "the right thing" and women pay the price. The hierarchy of the world at large is repeated in good/evil, upper/lower-class terms: at the top loom WASPs and Anglo-Irish people; then marriageable Jewish and WASP women who are objects of desire to Italian men and prove to be smart and effective; then come Italian males, crude, this is true, but fascinating; then Italian women and people of color have to scramble and step on each other for a seat in the last row.

**IN OUR OWN VOICES**

It has been argued that a commercial film made by men—true, in this case of a novel by Alice Walker—could be "reappropriated" in the political culture of women viewers (Bobo, 1988). A similar process might be possible in the case of *Mortal Thoughts*. A woman kills an attempted rapist but cannot be forgiven by a society acting as curator for the privilege of men. As they are hounded, the woman and her friend become more deeply enmeshed in crime, killing a second husband who "knew too much." But it seems that the real subject of the film lies in a battle of wits and will with the state, which must break down the
bond between the women, and make them give each other up. The film moves with the hieratic rhythm of tragedy, enhanced by the film language itself. The relentless questioning and pushing at Cynthia’s emotions is expressed through tight camera work, focused on her own face as well as on her boxed, detached image in the video monitor, as if her autonomy had already been successfully denied. In this deadly game of *omertà* and veiling the truth, Joyce, the Italian woman, acts as an unbendable figure of female determination, refusing to open her mouth and betray her friend regardless of the pressure on her. The long silent look they exchange in the final scene is paradigmatic of the women’s sense of being isolated and under siege. In many ways the film is about female voice: the absence of voice imposed by a violent husband echoed by the contrast of Joyce’s obstinate silence after arrest and Cynthia’s gradual loss of control in a maze of words extracted from her.

Of all the films viewed for this discussion, one stands out as representing at once faithfully, ironically and tenderly the realities of Italian American working-class life: Nancy Savoca’s *True Love*. This is sometimes mistaken for a light, conventional comedy, although critics have stressed the “somber” message of a doomed marriage. Yet, the film looms subtly in-between these value-based categories. It is an amused but merciless look at inter-gender power struggles in an Italian American working-class community.

*True Love* makes reference to a quasi-ethnological narrative by framing itself between two trailers of roughly cut, jumpy home videos in runny colors, of the engagement party and the wedding. Gloria Nardini (1991) analyzed the film in this vein, but I would take a somewhat different approach to the cultural categories imbedded in the film, in particular, it seems to me that the concept of “bella figura” is less important than gender wars.

*Love* is theoretically about love and marriage, but most of the narrative is spent detailing the open warfare between the women and men of a community where one marries young. As a result boys are still childish and the young women feel burdened by the early onset of responsibilities. Although the fighting and jibbing are in good fun, borderline anger smolders under it, because the battle is for power and control within the family and community, but also to determine a life of one’s own. The men feel overwhelmed and left behind. The women feel superior and forced to play up to the whims of half grown little boys. Thus, when Michael and Donna argue over time spent apart, Michael begs
and bargains (for an hour, an hour and a half) like a child to a par-
ent.

The wedding preparations become a paradigm for these con-
trasting gendered programs. The men are only too happy to shirk
the boredom of the tedious details of what is only a social and
family ritual. The women are caught up in details that will make
the fantasy last, like the blue-tinted mashed potatoes. “There is no
such thing as blue food in real life,” objects Michael, to which
comes the retort: “This is not real life, this is a fantasy day.”

The young straight women in this film certainly entertain
ambiguous relationships with men. For Donna, giving up the
wedding still means public shame and moving to upstate New
York, while her friend JC the cab driver resists the pressures and
loss of liberty associated with commitment to a man: “I need to do
this alone,” she says. JC also gives her suitor the finger across the
window and on dates, keeps an extreme reserve, with the tone of
an indulgent older sister. Donna’s sister Yvonne is eager to date
her “cute” cousin but states that “all fucking guys,” are “idiots”
and is more than ready to physically rip in to any that get in her
way. Michael’s older sister constantly berates him for being
immature and disgusting. It is significant that the last line of the
movie is spoken by a little girl whose young companion drools
blue mashed potatoes as she objects strongly “that’s disgusting”; it
is also rather ambiguous: the words refer ostensibly to bad table
manners but could, analogically, qualify the entire endeavor.

The “sex wars” are muted but present in the older genera-
tion. Angelo, Donna’s father, is the one male shown with common
sense and understanding, as he tells his daughter on the way to
the wedding in the limousine that she doesn’t have to go along
with it. His home is also an area of struggle for space and coexis-
tence as he is chided for the junk he brings back to fix. One of
Donna’s aunts complains that her husband brings back “filthy
videos,” but she told him “not to get him any ideas” and at the
wedding, announces that he worships her. Another aunt reassures
Donna with a macabre joke, advising her to tell a difficult hus-
band to take gas, as she actually opens the oven door and mimics
the scene as a playful “death wish,” and the older women all
laugh raucously. In the plumber episode, Michael’s mother’s com-
ings and goings, following instructions off-screen from her stub-
born brother, bent on fixing plumbing beyond his competence, as
she complains and protests, reflects the struggle between the way
of the women and the way of the men.
In this conflict, men panic and turn to bonding with each other out of the reach of women. Boys embrace, mimicking love, during the engagement and Mikey wants to go out with his friends on his wedding night. At first, sexual aggressivity belongs to the men: Mikey jokingly hits on a customer because he is getting married. He pulls at Donna’s clothes in the store and the old neighbor tells him to enjoy it while he can because after the first kid she will blow up like a balloon. Ernie and his girlfriend argue passionately about whether she was dumped or left her previous boyfriend. In the babysitting scene, Mikey teases Donna sexually and playfully pretends to box her, but on the couch, Donna ends up on top and much more active. When they buy rings, Michael attempts to resist wearing the symbolic knot but Donna settles the matter in seconds. In later scenes, however, the hostility between people who actually love each other but can’t fully negotiate gendered power lines erupts. Before the wedding, Donna seriously curses Michael and tries to beat him up and of course, there is the famous bathroom scene at the wedding itself. As Donna sobs convulsively at Michael’s latest attempt at freedom—excessive even by one of his male friends’ standards—the women still fall short of a unified way of dealing with men: Yvonne curses and threatens, JC gently advocates “give him time,” always the big sister overseeing troublesome little boys.

**Conclusion**

If, as Werner Sollors (x-xv) remarks, ethnicity is “invented,” and even more so, an “invention” of the postmodern age, corresponding to complex political agendas, popular film is at once informed by the processes of invention engaged in by writers, sociologists and politicians, and itself a powerful inventing medium. Striking however in this creation of ethnicity, in particular of ethnic nostalgia, is the quasi-absence of female voices: silence in writing the scripts, silence of women within the scripts, silence in film criticism, and silence in social commentary. When Italian American women have spoken in their own voice, in essays, fiction, poetry or more rarely, film, they have conveyed memories of intense personal odysseys of separation and reintegration into family and community and of powerful, strong, influential women. These are the women made into women of the shadows by filmmakers of popular cinema.

Italian American women, like other women belonging to eth
nic and racial groups that are the object of mainstream contempt/hate, are beginning, through works like Nancy Savoca’s films and a few isolated sunbursts, to break out of the shadows for a place of their own. This journey rings loudly with the words spoken years ago by Mary Mazzotti Gillian in her fierce admonition to the forced acculturators of the schools:

Remember me, ladies,
the silent one?
I have found my voice
and my rage will blow
your house down.

(from “Public School no. 18: Paterson, New Jersey”)

Notes

1. With respect to the question of terminology discussed by Anthony Tamburri, I have opted to use the term “Italian American,” without hyphen, throughout, except, to facilitate reading, analyzing a specific film script where I will also use the shortened form “Italian.”

2. A number of writers have addressed these questions and are listed in the bibliography. Compare for instance the depiction of Italian Americans and José E. Limón’s comment: “[stereotypes] of the Chicano depict him as dirty, violent, hypersexual, treacherous, and thieving, although he also often appears as cowardly, apathetic, and dormant . . . Only rarely does the Chicano appear in positive imagery in Anglo-American social expression. In these few instances he is transmuted into a colorful, romantic figure full of rich, mysterious life forces. In all cases reality is carefully avoided.” (Limón: 3)

3. “Stereotypes are seen as a mechanism employed by the dominant society to rationalize its behavior toward subordinate groups” (Limón p. 4) and film “teaches” a certain type of “reality,” (Cortés, 1992).

4. The complex reactions of many Italian Americans towards these films is addressed by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison in her essay, “Godfather II: of Families and Families” (1974) (Barolini: 120-25): “why do Italians like this film in spite of it all?” she asks. This writer must confess, in the interest of recognizing some of the paradoxes and difficulties inherent to this discussion, to having also experienced the “guilty pleasures” of the Godfather, “in spite of it all.”

5. In their encounter scene in the bar, shots of Angela are taken from a distance, slightly from above so she seems smaller, more expectant, more timid, and so that even the close-ups are framed as Nick sees her, not with a focus on her. This camera language could be contrasted with the lingering close-ups of Joyce and Cynthia’s faces in Mortal Thoughts, in which conflictual and complex emotions are outlined.

6. For the symbolism of veils and veiling in Italian culture see Sautman (1992).

7. As this essay concludes, two new films came out about Italian American women: Mr. Wonderful and Angie but were not viewed.

8. My use of the erotic category to evaluate women’s roles in film is definitely a “post-sex wars” feminist stance. I am not assuming that eroticization is necessarily exploitative and I am suggesting that desexualization can be a reduc-
tion of character and, when ethnically coded, a statement on race. On the "sex wars" and "post" issues, see Carla Freccero’s precise and sharp review (Freccero, 1990).

9. A similar scene takes place in Baby It’s You, at the back of the bar.
10. Yet there is more to the history and community of Italians on Long Island, see Capozzoli, 1990.
11. The entire review is an exercise in viewing privilege, for instance: "Scorsese has always taken responsibility for recording and preserving on film New York’s Italian-American Culture . . . Mean Streets is his Tristes Tropiques. The anthropologist’s role comes naturally to Scorsese. Even the Last Temptation of Christ was grounded in homely details of the life and times of a messiah." (!!) and we watch Paulie "meticulously slicing garlic with a razor blade: Slice it so thin, you see, that 'it melts in the pan'. Go home and try it," etc.
12. This process has been amply analyzed with respect to the Middle Ages; see Bell and Bynum.
13. Donald Bogle’s commentary on the gradual acceptability of the use of racial epithets (Bogle, 65) is most illuminating in this respect.
15. The film has been compared to Thelma and Louise and the two women to lethal angels by Kathleen Murphy in Film Comment (1991).

Bibliography

——. “Who is Maria? What is Juan? Dilemmas of Analyzing the Chicano


Freccero, Carla. “Notes of a Post-Sex Wars Theorizer,” pp. 305-25, in Conflicts in Feminism.


Sinister Wisdom. Il Viaggio delle Donne.


Film Reviews


Goodfellas: Georgia Browne, Village Voice, 9-25-90, p. 64.


Filmography

Alphabet City. 1984, sc. Gregory Heller, Amos Poe, dir Amos Poe
Baby It’s You, 1983 sc. dir. John Sayles
Betsy’s Wedding. 1990, dir. sc. Alan Alda
Broadway Danny Rose, 1984 sc dir Woody Allen
Dominick and Eugene. 1988, Sc.: Alvin Sargent and Corey Blechman on story by Danny Porfirio, Directed by Robert M. Young.
The Freshman. 1990, sc and dir. Andrew Bergman
Goodnight, Michelangelo (Canada). 1990, Carlo Liconti, dir and sc.
Married to the Mob. 1988, sc Strugatz and Burns, dir. Jonathan Demme
Mean Streets. 1973, Martin Scorsese (1973)
New Jack City. 1991, dir Mario Van Peebles, sc. Thomas Lee Wright, Barry Michael Cooper.
Once Around. 1991, sc Malia Scotch Marmo, dir Lasse Hallstrom.
The Pope of Greenwich Village. 1984, sc. Vincent Patrick, based on his novel; dir: Stuart Rosenberg. 1984
Rocky. 1976, sc. dir G. Avildsen.
Sting, 1973, sc David S. Ward, dir George Roy Hill
Swing Shift, 1983 dir. Jonathan Demme, [sc.: various]
The Time of Your Life. 1948, dir H.C. Potter, sc. Nathaniel Curtis on W. Saroyan’s play
True Colors. 1991, sc Kevin Wade dir Herbert Ross
Twenty-Ninth Street. 1991, dir. sc. George Gallo.