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SOMMARIO

<i>Journey to Italy</i> . Studiare il cinema e i media italiani fuori dall'Italia. Introduzione <i>Luca Barra, Giulia Carluccio, Giacomo Manzoli, Giulia Muggeo</i>	7
Denari americani e cinema nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra. Prime linee di ricerca <i>Federico di Chio</i>	13
Martin Scorsese presents. On a certain tendency in the canon of Italian cinema <i>Valerio Coladonato, Damiano Garofalo</i>	23
Mafia/media: immaginario, industrie culturali, culture della produzione <i>Giuseppe Fidotta</i>	37
Italiani all'estero. Prospettive comparate per lo studio della commedia all'italiana <i>Francesca Cantore, Andrea Minuz</i>	47
Decentrare lo sguardo: il caso di <i>Mediterranea</i> e l'idea di un cinema non più del "nostro" paese <i>Sergio Rigoletto</i>	61
<i>Italian Screen Studies</i> alla conferenza annuale dell'American Association for Italian Studies (AAIS) <i>Luca Peretti</i>	71
I due Gramsci. Per una archeologia del "popolare" musicale in Italia <i>Jacopo Tomatis</i>	83
Italian popular music abroad: marketing and consuming Italy's popstars in the UK 1958-1978 <i>Rachel Haworth</i>	99
Studiare gli intermediari promozionali nella produzione cinematografica italiana contemporanea: cinema, marketing e transmedialità <i>Gloria Dagnino</i>	121

<i>Foreign at home. The circulation of Angela Ricci Lucchi & Yervant Gianikian's early films beyond Italy</i> <i>Miriam De Rosa</i>	129
The Unfit: Gassman, masculinity, and the Latin lover complex in Hollywood <i>Maria Elena D'Amelio</i>	139
The Ferrania acquisition, the cinematic archive and the Anthropocene: celluloid materialities <i>Elena Past</i>	147
#restaacasaconBIAHI: How the Bronx Italian American history initiative responded to COVID-19 through video and social media <i>Kathleen LaPenta, Jacqueline Reich, Desislava Stoeva</i>	159
Confessioni di due collaboratrici seriali <i>Nicoletta Marini Maio, Ellen Nerenberg</i>	167
<i>Simultanea: media, cultura popolare e studi di intersezione in italia(nistica)</i> <i>Marco Arnaudo, Andrea Ciccarelli, Carlotta Vacchelli</i>	177
Italian Media Studies: una diagnosi un po' azzardata e un paio di proposte <i>Giorgio Bertellini</i>	181
Visioni d'oltreoceano. Note sull'insegnamento della serialità italiana nel contesto accademico statunitense <i>Giancarlo Lombardi</i>	187
<i>Mediating Italy in Global Culture: l'esperienza di una summer school internazionale all'Università di Bologna</i> <i>Elisa Farinacci, Emiliano Rossi</i>	191

MARTIN SCORSESE PRESENTS.

ON A CERTAIN TENDENCY IN THE CANON OF ITALIAN CINEMA

Valerio Coladonato, Damiano Garofalo¹

1. «*They Had a Powerful Effect on Me*»: Italian Films and the Origin Myth of Scorsese as a Spectator

Upon receiving a career award at the Festa del Cinema di Roma in 2018, Martin Scorsese delivered a masterclass on 9 “classics” of Italian cinema, released between 1952 and 1962, which had been particularly influential in his formative years². The peculiar circumstance of a U.S. director lecturing as an authority on Italian cinema was by no means perceived as an anomaly. Scorsese’s unique position, at the crossroads between these two national cinematic cultures, has been secured through a familiar mix of autobiography and film history. A spectator of Italian cinema since his early childhood, he became the quintessential Italian-American filmmaker, before evolving into the American connoisseur and ambassador of world cinema. We will attempt to unpack this trajectory, following the separate threads that converge into the current public image of Scorsese as an expert in Italian cinema. This evolution in his career has been the result of a formidable work of mediation, through which he has managed to simultaneously occupy the roles of outsider *and* insider, across multiple cultural fault lines.

In a way, teaching Italian classics to Italian audiences meant coming full circle from his oft-evoked childhood memories, which Laura E. Ruberto aptly defined as a «Scorsese origin myth»³. His early recollections of Italian films are a crucial proof of «authenticity». In one of the many retellings of these events, Scorsese wrote:

1 Though the two authors contributed equally, conceiving and discussing the entire essay jointly, as is customary we specify that Valerio Coladonato wrote sections 1. «*They Had a Powerful Effect on Me*»: Italian Films and the Origin Myth of Scorsese as a Spectator and 2 *Heritage, Humanism, Cultural Diversity: Scorsese’s Canon Between Legitimacy and Affect*, and Damiano Garofalo wrote sections 3 *The «Great Ambassador»: The Role of Scorsese in Jonas Carpignano’s A Ciambra (2017)* and *The «Godfather» of Italian Cinema: The Role of Scorsese in Alice Rohrwacher’s Happy as Lazzaro (2018)*. We would also like to thank Nicole Bubalo and Pietro Masciullo for their kind suggestions on the final draft of this article.

2 See P. Medori, *Martin Scorsese: il cinema italiano ha cambiato più volte la mia vita*, “La voce di New York”, 24th October 2018, <https://www.lavocedinewyork.com/arts/spettacolo/2018/10/24/martin-scorsese-il-cinema-italiano-ha-cambiato-piu-volte-la-mia-vita/>; and C. Ugolini, *Martin Scorsese e i maestri del cinema italiano: «I loro film raccontano la vita vera»*, “Repubblica”, 22nd October 2018, https://www.repubblica.it/dossier/spettacoli/festa-del-cinema-di-roma-2018/2018/10/22/news/martin_scorsese-209691491/.

3 L. E. Ruberto, *Italian Films, New York City Television, and the Work of Martin Scorsese*, in A. Baker (ed.), *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken (NJ) 2015, p. 53.

I remember my father taking me to the movies and the two of us sharing those remarkable images and emotions together, leaving such an impression on me that today much of the desire and need to express myself on film comes from that. [...] I remember watching movies on television with my entire family, which included my grandparents, my parents, my brother, Frank [...] on Friday nights, when Italian movies happened to be on, and other relatives and neighbors would join in»⁴.

As all origin myths, these anecdotes are more relevant for the beliefs they retrospectively validate, than for their actual truthfulness and historical accuracy. Analyzing the airings of Italian titles on New York City television channels in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ruberto highlights that the story presented in Scorsese's interviews and public appearances over the years (and in the opening of *My Voyage to Italy*, M. Scorsese, 1999) presents gaps and inconsistencies. Most likely, Scorsese did not watch some of these films as early as he recalls. Moreover, he did not watch all of them in the Lower East Side apartment, where his family had to move back from a more comfortable housing situation in Corona, Queens⁵. But these (inaccurate) memories of a 7-year-old Scorsese provide a fundamental narrative link between the separate strands of his later career: the image he paints of a multi-generational immigrant family, within a close-knit ethnic community, is a powerful setting for his seminal encounter with Italian neorealism – which he describes, significantly, as both a «discovery of the world» and a voyage into his own roots⁶.

The origin myth of this transformative viewings sets the stage for the permeability between cinema and life, which will mark both Scorsese's public image and his work as a director. In his portrayals of Little Italy, Scorsese has constantly blended documentary and fiction: in the opening of *Mean Streets* (M. Scorsese, 1973), the Super 8 mm shots are «presented as if they were scenes from family movies – which is, in fact, what some of them originally were»⁷. Those real-life shots anticipated the mode of address of *Italianamerican* (M. Scorsese, 1976), a documentary that invited spectators to «find themselves in the position of a family member»⁸. Home movie excerpts were used again much later, in *The Neighborhood* (M. Scorsese, 2001)⁹, to trace the intergenerational acculturation process of the immigrant community. By aligning this way his childhood memories, his fictional and documentary work, and the larger inquiry into the Italian-

4 M. Scorsese, *My Movie Paradise*, "Esquire", 138, 6, 2002.

5 See the chapter Little Italy in R. Schickel (ed.), *Conversations With Martin Scorsese*, Alfred Knopf, New York 2011, p. 3-36.

6 L. Ruberto, *Italian Films, New York City Television, and the Work of Martin Scorsese*, cit.

7 C. Gendault, *Playing With Stereotypes: Martin Scorsese's Italianamerican (1974)*, in S. Schrader and D. Winkler, *The Cinemas of Italian Migration: European and Transatlantic Narratives*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2013, p. 143.

8 Ivi, p. 144.

9 J. Cavallero, *Hollywood's Italian American Filmmakers: Capra, Scorsese, Savoca, Coppola and Tarantino*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2011.

American experience, Scorsese acquired an unprecedented «epistemic authority»¹⁰. Early on, the “authenticity” of his vision was validated by the most prominent critics, such as Manny Farber and Roger Ebert¹¹. Then it echoed in his public appearances (including the first retrospective of his work, titled *Going to Look for America: The Urban and Ethnic Experience Through the Films of Martin Scorsese*¹²), and in the rest of his activities.

As Marc Raymond notes, the difference of tone and address between his first documentary on film history, *A Personal Journey With Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (M. Scorsese, M. H. Wilson, 1995), and his second one, *My Voyage to Italy*, is striking: whereas the former is detached, institutional, and “objective”, the latter is emotional, personal, and subjective¹³. *My Voyage to Italy* ties the affective impact of Italian cinema with the discovery and recuperation of Scorsese’s individual roots. It combines two different modes of address and subjective positions: that of a family member passing on his (ethnic) heritage, and that of an instructor (re)affirming the film history canon. Here lies the ideological work of this documentary, which projects the affective bond of the family onto the community of cinephiles.

In the following years, Scorsese’s discourse shifted, as reflected in both his interviews and fictional works (in particular, *Gangs of New York*, M. Scorsese, 2002): as «the theme of a multi-ethnic Lower East Side was replacing the theme of Italian American Little Italy [...], Scorsese now linked his Italian American experience with the history of the Irish and other white ethnics in America»¹⁴. The backdrop of this shift was the so-called White Ethnic Revival: a cultural attitude of “re-discovery” of roots by immigrants of European descent, highlighting their role in the making of the nation, while also emphasizing heritage as a way to renegotiate (and distance themselves from) their “uncomfortable” whiteness. Towards the end of the century, through the «connection between autobiography, social history, and his filmmaking», we can observe «Scorsese’s evolution from a strongly identified Italian American to a more broadly identified White-Ethnic American»¹⁵. Parallel to this shift, Scorsese’s promotion of Italian cinema also evolved – from a gateway into his roots, to a defense of the «cultural diversity» preserved through world cinema.

10 P. Lopes, *The Power of Hyphen-Nationalism: Martin Scorsese’s sojourn from Italian American to White-Ethnic American*, “Social Identities”, 23, 5, 2017, p. 569 (the author borrows the expression from Meryl J. Irwin).

11 M. Raymond, *Hollywood’s New Yorker. The Making of Martin Scorsese*, SUNY Press, New York 2013; see in particular chapter 2, *The Formation of Scorsese’s Critical Reputation*, *ivi*, pp. 47-86. Raymond’s book, to which my whole analysis is indebted, provides a comprehensive overview of Scorsese’s public image through the decades, highlighting the importance of his “collateral” activities and the evolving context in which he has operated – in a welcome shift from an exclusively auteurial perspective.

12 The program and the selection of speakers, including the director’s parents and a childhood friend, were «organized around the idea of Scorsese as an authentic voice emerging from his community»; *ivi*, pp. 84-85.

13 See *ivi*, p. 146.

14 P. Lopes, *The power of Hyphen-Nationalism*, *cit.*, p. 571.

15 *Ivi*, pp. 565 and 563 respectively. Lopes uses the categories developed by historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, who alerts against the political dangers of this collective re-writing of the history of U.S. ethnic and racial oppression. See his *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2006.

2. Heritage, Humanism, Cultural Diversity: Scorsese's Canon Between Legitimacy and Affect

In recent decades, Scorsese's activism played out on multiple fronts, through a range of initiatives contributing to his current place in the cultural field. In continuity with his time as an instructor for the NYU film program in the late 1960s¹⁶, he has become an educator and a “public historian” of cinema, using his storytelling abilities to disseminate film knowledge in a variety of formats. He has «made many documentaries on cinema history; appeared as an authority in numerous documentaries and shorts dedicated to the cinematic past; edited a book series for the Modern Library reprinting four texts of film literature»¹⁷. To all that, he has added a sustained effort in restoration projects¹⁸, through the creation of a dedicated organization (the Film Foundation, responsible for the World Cinema Project), and collaborations with leading archives and institutions – including the Cineteca di Bologna.

To grasp Scorsese's impact on the legitimacy and reputational capital of Italian films, it is crucial to note how he mediated a wide array of cultural oppositions. A celebrity in his own right, Scorsese's public image rests on the successful reconciliation and “magical” resolution of dichotomies: his «structured polysemy»¹⁹ bridges values, meanings, and contexts that are otherwise irreconcilable. Scorsese is an industry insider and outsider; a U.S. national treasure and a promoter of world cinema; a director trained in the intellectual milieu of the East Coast, but whose success was achieved on the West Coast; an instructor who celebrates and re-discovers Hollywood B-movies, while claiming allegiance to European art cinema; the son of (and cultural representative of) working-class immigrants, and one of the most recognizable and respected voices in specialist film circles and the festival circuit. As such, he is almost unique in his capacity to occupy the space «between two worlds»²⁰.

The oft-repeated formula «one for them, one for me»²¹ encapsulates his strategy of alternating commercially successful projects with more daring, personal, and “artistic” ones: this allows him to convert the symbolic capital of his «highbrow reputation as artistic genius» into the economic capital of his directing career²². Through the same symbolic capital, he has also targeted audiences in the cinephile niche, for instance with the «promotion of movie cable channels, including classical movie channels like TCM and AMC»²³. As a public historian/film critic, he plays a paradoxical game: creating spaces of marketability

16 See chapter 1 *Scorsese and the University*, in M. Raymond, *Hollywood's New Yorker*, cit., pp. 11-46.

17 Ivi, p. 128.

18 Ivi, in particular pp. 94-101 and pp. 161-64. The numerous restoration projects would deserve more space than it is available here: see also the paragraph *Scorsese and Film Advocacy*, in L. Ruberto, *Italian Films, New York City Television, and the Work of Martin Scorsese*, cit., pp. 66-68.

19 The reference is to Richard Dyer's seminal work in Stars, *British Film Institute*, London, 1979.

20 M. Raymond, *Hollywood's New Yorker*, cit., p. 18.

21 J. Péquignot, *Martin Scorsese et la Nouvelle Vague: de l'auteurisation à l'auteurisation*, International SERCIA conference, *Cinema and the Crossing of Frontiers*, University of Bath, September 8th-10th, 2011.

22 M. Raymond, *Hollywood's New Yorker*, cit., p. 195.

23 Ivi, p. 178.

for films, while reinforcing auteurism – a logic that defends cinema’s intrinsic value and autonomy from the rules the market. In fact, the work of Scorsese as a film ambassador both pre-supposes and fuels the politics of auteurism. His fervor is attested, again, in his biography: he swapped his early religious sentiment with cinephilia, «replacing» the vocation as a Catholic priest with a Hollywood career. As Janet Staiger claimed, «the religious motif» is integral to the auteurist discourse, and «the elevation of some individuals into an elite group [...] often takes on religious tones, as if they were members of a spiritual priesthood»²⁴.

When Scorsese harks back to his childhood memories to justify his didactic authority on Italian films, he does so through the filter of auteurism. This requires a triangulation with French film culture, which has permeated Scorsese’s career more than he has sometimes been willing to admit – or has been generally recognized by others²⁵. In Geneviève Sellier’s poignant analysis, the French *politique des auteurs* hinged upon a certain relationship with the past: it was «a kind of parthenogenesis, a way of giving birth to oneself by inventing fathers as far away as possible from one’s ‘natural’ fathers – namely, postwar French filmmakers who had suffered the humiliating vicissitudes of history»²⁶. The parallel with an Italian-American filmmaker, navigating his way up from an urban immigrant enclave through college education and artistic legitimacy, is not far-fetched: Scorsese’s love for Italian cinema functions as mimicry of that original, founding gesture on the part of his French predecessors. Through the classic Italian auteurs, Scorsese’s “invented” his many far-away fathers. This parthenogenesis was emphasized through events such as the retrospective at Lincoln Center in 1993, in which Scorsese’s films were matched with older titles that had inspired him. Among other American and British films, Italian cinema was represented with 4 classics: *Before the Revolution* (*Prima della rivoluzione*, B. Bertolucci, 1964), associated to *Mean Streets*; *Rocco and His Brothers* (*Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, L. Visconti, 1960) with *Raging Bull* (M. Scorsese, 1980); *Il Sorpasso* (D. Risi, 1963) with *The Color of Money* (M. Scorsese, 1986); and *Accattone* (P. P. Pasolini, 1961) with *The Last Temptation of Christ* (M. Scorsese, 1988). While the obscurity of the Hollywood B-movies «establishe[d] Scorsese’s authority as an expert in American film history», his choices in Italian cinema converged around one very specific moment, the “golden age” of the auteurs, between 1960 and 1964. Whereas the primary framework for discussing neorealism is Scorsese’s own biography, auteur cinema is linked to the director’s artistic and intellectual vision. This split and convergence between “life” and “art” was repeated 6 years later, in the two episodes of *My Voyage to Italy*: one focusing on the neorealist season, and the other focusing on the early years of auteur cinema.

As argued by Alberto Pezzotta (among other critics), *My Voyage to Italy* is constructed as «a series of isolated masterpieces by auteurs, ignoring the wider context»²⁷. Its selection

24 J. Staiger, *The Politics of Film Canon*, “Cinema Journal”, 24, 3, 1985, p. 13.

25 This is the argument laid out by J. Péquignot in *Martin Scorsese et la Nouvelle Vague*, cit.

26 G. Sellier, *Masculine Singular. French New Wave Cinema*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 2008, p. 26.

27 A. Pezzotta, *A Journey Through Italian Cinema*, “Senses of Cinema”, May 2003, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/journey_italian/; see also M. Raymond, *Hollywood New Yorker*, cit., pp. 146-147.

clearly overlaps with what Alan O’Leary has labelled the «“Standard Model” of Italian cinema history», which «retains a tenacious hold in the canon of world cinephilia»²⁸. Scorsese’s endorsement of this model is significant not only in terms of canonization but also, and perhaps even more consequentially, in the reinforcement of Italian cinema’s affective legacy – and by transfer, that of world cinema. Evoking the impact of those films, Scorsese articulates different cultural functions: together with the roots-discovering and heritage-building role discussed above²⁹, he emphasizes the role of *suffering*. The «powerful effect» he describes is produced at once by the sight of suffering *and* by the sight of his family *watching* that suffering³⁰. This structure mimics the construction of the transatlantic bystander/witness, characteristic of neorealism’s mode of address: as eloquently described by Karl Schoonover, in the post-war years neorealist films relied on «scenarios of physical suffering to dramatize the political stakes of vision and the need for an outside extranational eyewitness»³¹. In this representational mode, which legitimized U.S. geopolitical interventionism, «[t]he bystander occupies the paradoxical space of secondary eye-witnessing, a kind of surrogate seeing in which one can always be on the scene, but never of it or trapped in it»³². Scorsese’s recounting of his reactions to *Paisan* (*Paisà*, Roberto Rossellini, 1946) is particularly telling: he remembers identifying, as a child, with the African-American soldier Joe in the Naples episode (thus occupying an imaginary position across lines of race, geography, and age).

Moreover, *My Voyage to Italy* blends these early memories with the voice of Scorsese as an already recognized “expert” of film history, concerned with the impoverishment of the new generations’ access to such heritage. Thus, this documentary provides a connection between the discourses mentioned above: the affective heritage of neorealism’s «brutal humanism», and the defense of cultural diversity through the promotion of Italian cinema as «world cinema». This enables the transfer of the neorealist spectatorship’s affective power (from Scorsese as child-spectator) onto his contemporary battle for the survival of world cinema (to Scorsese as “public historian”). In other words, *My Voyage to Italy* creates a consistent narrative, articulating both intellectual and affective components, through which Scorsese’s public image is successfully re-branded.

28 A. O’Leary, *What is Italian Cinema?*, “California Italian Studies”, 7, 1, 2017, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z9275bz>

29 See for example this excerpt, from the voice-over commentary of *My Voyage to Italy*: «Some of these images were so moving that I noticed that my grandparents started to cry. I mean they left Sicily in 1909, 1910, they made their way all the way to America, and here they were seeing on television in effect what they had left behind and what had happened to it, what had become of it. When I looked at their faces, I could see that *this* was who my grandparents really were. And that this was the country they called home. And it was overwhelming, because for the first time, I became aware that this was where I came from». This passage is also commented *ivi*, p. 51; see also the paragraph *The White Ethnic Revival, The New Hollywood, and Scorsese’s Upbringing* in J. Cavallero, *Hollywood’s Italian American Filmmakers*, *cit.*, pp. 47-50.

30 For instance, Scorsese wrote that neorealism was depicting «the war’s harsh reality with images so intensely moving that my older relatives cried and we kids were overwhelmed» (*My Movie Paradise*, “Esquire”, *cit.*).

31 Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision. The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 2012, p. xiv.

32 *Ivi*, p. 73.

Indeed, from the 1990s Scorsese is widely perceived as «as an advocate and activist for filmmakers worldwide»³³, and his efforts increasingly connect the past of Italian cinema to its present. For instance, he has been involved in the distribution of Emanuele Crialesè's *The Golden Door* (*Nuovomondo*, 2006)³⁴ and Matteo Garrone's *Gomorrah* (*Gomorra*, 2009)³⁵, while also providing new visibility to old classics (such as *La dolce vita*, F. Fellini, 1960³⁶). These promotional activities are accompanied by a humanist belief in cinema's role in ensuring «cultural survival»; as he wrote in a letter to the NYT after Fellini's death: «When the world is fragmenting into groups of intolerance, ignorance and hatred, film is a powerful tool to knowledge and understanding»³⁷. Scorsese's "savior" posture has been internalized by players in the contemporary Italian film industry, as attested for example by the open letter in which Valerio Mastandrea appealed for the U.S. director to «save our talents» and to support Claudio Caligari's last film³⁸. The combination of these elements – the distinctive capital in cinematic taste afforded by his expertise, and the affective power of the liberal humanist discourse – constitute the essence of the «Martin Scorsese presents» label, and what it can do for Italian films today.

3. *The «Great Ambassador»: The Role of Scorsese in Jonas Carpignano's A Ciambra (2017)*

This process of cultural accreditation of Italian cinema in the United States has expanded in recent years: moving beyond the promotion of a historical canon, Scorsese has intervened directly in film distribution and executive production. One of the most important cases is probably *A Ciambra* (2017), the second film written and directed by the Italian-American director Jonas Carpignano. The film was mainly produced by Stayblack, an Italian company co-funded by Carpignano, in association with Rai Cinema and several international companies from France (Haut et Court), Sweden (Film i Väst, Filmgate Films), Germany (DCM Productions), Brazil (RT Features) and the United States (Sikelia Productions). It also received the institutional support of Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo (Italy), Ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Développement International,

33 L. Ruberto, *Italian Films, New York City Television, and the Work of Martin Scorsese*, p. 68.

34 Scorsese provided a «short on-screen introduction» to both the theatrical release and DVD in the U.S. (ivi, p. 66).

35 P. Brembilla, *The Critical Reception of Gomorrah Abroad*, March 14th, 2019, <https://www.italiancinema.it/the-critical-reception-of-gomorrah-abroad/>

36 L. Shaw, *Fellini Forever*, "Variety", June 4th, 2011.

37 M. Scorsese, *The Man Who Set Film Free*, "The New York Times", August 12th 2007; the article is discussed in M. Raymond, *Hollywood New Yorker*, cit., pp. 149-150. His tributes to Fellini continue to this day: while we were drafting this article, Scorsese published a piece titled *Il Maestro. Federico Fellini and the Lost Magic of Cinema* in "Harper's Magazine", March 2021, <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/03/il-maestro-federico-fellini-martin-scorsese/>

38 F. Ferzetti, *Valerio Mastandrea scrive a Scorsese: "Martino salva i nostri talenti"*, "Il Mattino", October 3rd, 2014.

and L'Aide aux Cinémas du Monde program from the CNC (France)³⁹. We can consider *A Ciambra* as a virtuous example of international co-production not only for the nature of the productive members involved, but also because of the participation of professionals coming from a wide array of countries in the film crew. Among all the practitioners involved, the presence of Martin Scorsese (for Sikelia Productions) as one of the executive producers of the film stands out.

A Ciambra is an independent and low budget film with non-professional actors⁴⁰, set in a small Romani community in the Calabria region, which had a limited theatrical release in Italy: distributed by Academy Two in 27 theaters in the whole country (August 31, 2017), the film grossed only €26k in the national market. Before its theatrical release, it premiered in the Directors' Fortnight section at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Europa Cinemas Label Award. Thanks to this, it also received the support of the Europa Cinemas Network, with additional promotion and incentives for exhibitors to extend the film's screen-run in Europe. After its circulation in several international film festivals, *A Ciambra* was distributed in U.S. theaters by Sundance Selects, a New York-based "sibling" of IFC Films, one of the main distributors of European independent cinema in the United States. Released in a very limited number of copies (5), the film grossed similarly to the national market, earning almost \$30k from U.S. spectators. Despite its limited success in terms of box-office, *A Ciambra* was also selected as the Italian entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 90th Academy Awards, but it did not receive the final nomination⁴¹. This raises a natural question: what kind of role has Scorsese played in the production, circulation, and cultural affirmation of the film in the United States?

A Ciambra is the first title to emerge from a film fund via the production partnership of Scorsese's Sikelia Productions and Rodrigo Teixeira's Sao Paulo-based RT Features⁴². This fund was established as a joint venture, aimed at producing first and second films from emerging filmmakers worldwide, focusing on auteur cinema reaching crossover appeal and a commercial audience. About the initiative, Scorsese said: «it's getting harder and harder for young filmmakers to get their pictures made. This fund will provide real support where it's so urgently needed»⁴³. In this specific case, Scorsese and Teixeira provided support throughout the development, production, editing, and release of the film. Emma Tillinger Koskoff, who works with Scorsese at Sikelia Production, revealed that *A Ciambra* was a

39 All the production and distribution data come from the page dedicated to *A Ciambra* on IMDbPro, <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt6802896/companycredits>

40 On this aspect, see C. O'Rawe, *The Non-Professional in the Reception of Italian Cinema Abroad*, "International Circulation of Italian Cinema", October 1, 2018, <https://www.italiancinema.it/the-non-professional-in-the-reception-of-italian-cinema-abroad/>

41 N. Vivarelli, *Jonas Carpignano's 'A Ciambra' Is Italy's Oscar Contender*, "Variety", September 26, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/jonas-carpignano-a-ciambra-italy-oscar-contender-1202573064/>

42 J. Hopewell, *Cannes: Martin Scorsese-Exec Produced 'A Ciambra' Wins Europa Cinemas Label Award*, "Variety", May 26, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/film/festivals/martin-scorsese-a-ciambra-europa-cinemas-label-1202445889/>

43 E. Keslassy, *Martin Scorsese, RT Features Launch Film Fund*, "Variety", May 16, 2014, <https://variety.com/2014/film/news/martin-scorsese-rt-features-launch-film-fund-exclusive-1201183816/>

film scouted by Scorsese himself. Since there is no official call for entries for the fund, according to Koskoff she and Scorsese both work «to find filmmakers who have strong visual reels. Then we read scripts, and if we all come to a consensus, we work with the filmmaker to finish the process of development, and help them plan production»⁴⁴. Scorsese first saw Carpignano's debut *Mediterranea* (2015), also set in Gioia Tauro (Calabria) and starring the same protagonists of *A Ciambra*, of which it could be considered a twin film⁴⁵. After reading the screenplay of *A Ciambra*, Scorsese called Carpignano to announce his interest. Carpignano recalls: «I wrote him a letter and then sent him a book with all the photos I had taken in the Ciambra over the last 7 years. After a while his support came, and we shot»⁴⁶. Thus, the launch of the project was directly connected to Scorsese's involvement. As revealed again by Carpignano, «Martin changed my life: it took me five years to find the funds for *Mediterranea*, which wasn't even released in Italy. Thanks to him, in two months I had the funds for *A Ciambra*»⁴⁷. After presenting his finished work, Scorsese gave the young director several «tips as a spectator, he described his emotions to me and through him I understood what worked and what didn't. His way of communicating really struck me», observes again Carpignano⁴⁸. The role of personal emotions, which we saw as crucial in the self-narrative of Scorsese as a young spectator, resurfaces here in the phase of production. As an executive producer, Scorsese extended his role even into the final editing decisions⁴⁹. His involvement as a “scout” of young filmmakers searching for funds, providing advice, giving feedback notes, and facilitating them in their final decisions, is therefore intertwined with his personal cinematic experiences and memories. It could not be a coincidence that the first film to benefit from these special funds is an Italian one, directed by a young Italian-American author. As a side note, it is worth remembering that the name of Scorsese's company was originally Cappa Films, and it was changed to Sikelia Productions in 2003: Sikelia, in fact, is the Greek name for Sicily, the region where Scorsese's grandparents came from⁵⁰. Even though *A Ciambra* is not set in Sicily (but in Calabria),

44 T. Obenson, *Cannes: Jonas Carpignano's 'A Ciambra' Is First Film From Martin Scorsese's Emerging Directors Fund*, “Shadow and Act”, May 18, 2017, <https://shadowandact.com/cannes-jonas-carpignanos-a-ciambra-is-first-film-from-martin-scorseses-emerging-directors-fund>

45 L. Ottocento, *Il talento che piace a Scorsese: Jonas Carpignano e "A Ciambra"*, “Fabrique du Cinéma”, September 25, 2017, <https://www.fabriqueducinema.it/cinema/interviste/talento-piace-scorsese-jonas-carpignano-ciambra/>

46 F. Caprara, *L'Italia per gli Oscar punta sulla comunità rom*, “La Stampa”, October 5, 2017, <https://www.lastampa.it/spettacoli/2017/10/05/news/l-italia-per-gli-oscar-punta-sulla-comunita-rom-1.34426415>

47 A. Finos, *Jonas Carpignano: "L'incontro con Martin è stato una svolta, ho avuto subito i fondi"*, “la Repubblica”, September 27, 2017, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2017/09/27/news/jonas_carpignano_l_incontro_con_martin_e_stato_una_svolta_ho_avuto_subito_i_fondi_-176646224/

48 F. Caprara, *L'Italia per gli Oscar punta sulla comunità rom*, cit.

49 A. Anderson, *Oscars: Martin Scorsese-Produced 'A Ciambra' Examines Life on the Margins in Contemporary Italy*, “The Hollywood Reporter”, November 28, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/oscars-martin-scorsese-produced-a-ciambra-examines-life-margins-contemporary-italy-1060904>, and N. Vivarelli, *Jonas Carpignano on His 'A Ciambra' and Getting Notes From Martin Scorsese*, “Variety”, May 25, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/film/spotlight/jonas-carpignano-on-his-a-ciambra-and-getting-notes-from-martin-scorsese-1202444199/>

50 See the IMDbPro page of the production company at https://pro.imdb.com/company/co0141038/?rf=cons_ats_co_pro&ref=cons_ats_co_pro.

the film recalls a specific imagery of Southern Italy, largely coming from neorealist cinema, which is very dear and close to Scorsese.

Scorsese's role as a «the great ambassador of the film» is very frequently and publicly recognized by Carpignano himself⁵¹. His work was not, in fact, limited to arranging funding, but continued in the promotion of the film. After the premiere at Cannes Film Festival, Scorsese observed that *A Ciambra* «is a compelling and accomplished film», and he added: «the world is so realized, so intimate, that I felt as if I was living alongside its characters and Carpignano himself. What he does with his young lead, drawing from him a mature and complex performance, is truly remarkable. A moving and beautiful picture»⁵². Scorsese is not like other well-known auteurs who, putting their name on a film directed by younger filmmakers, limit their involvement to an impersonal means of promotion. He publicly spoke about the film, with the purpose of ensuring it a distribution life. It is not by accident that Scorsese's name is largely quoted by most of the U.S. critical reviews of the film: critics frequently connect it to Italian cinema of the past, with several references to neorealism – and thus to the canon mentioned above⁵³. Again, Scorsese's public or backstage interventions are not limited to the distribution phase: for example, in 2018 he wrote a letter to the Academy members, in order to convince them (without success) to include the film in the final nominees as the Best Foreign Language Film⁵⁴. As a final accomplishment of his role, on the 23rd June 2018 Scorsese participated in a conversation, organized by the Cineteca di Bologna in the context of Il Cinema Ritrovato film festival, with three Italian filmmakers: Matteo Garrone, Alice Rohrwacher, and Jonas Carpignano. The event took the form of a collective interview with Scorsese, conducted by the three filmmakers, together with the actress Valeria Golino. Here, he connected again his personal memories as a young spectator of Italian films in New York with his role in the promotion of Italian cinema in the United States. At the same time, Garrone, Rohrwacher, and Carpignano recognized the crucial role of Scorsese not only as a *maestro* who inspired their cinematic poetics, but also as an undisputed ambassador of Italian classical and contemporary auteur cinema in the United States⁵⁵.

51 A. Finos, *Jonas Carpignano: "L'incontro con Martin è stato una svolta, ho avuto subito i fondi"*, cit.

52 J. Hopewell, *Cannes: Martin Scorsese-Exec Produced 'A Ciambra' Wins Europa Cinemas Label Award*, cit.

53 C. O'Rawe, *The Non-Professional Actor in the Reception of Italian Cinema Abroad*, "Cinergie. Il Cinema E Le Altre Arti", 18, 2020, pp. 73-83, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2280-9481/10925>

54 A. Finos, *Jonas Carpignano: "L'incontro con Martin è stato una svolta, ho avuto subito i fondi"*, cit.

55 See *Alla corte di Martin Scorsese, Garrone, Golino, Rohrwacher e Carpignano insieme sul palco*, "la Repubblica", June 24, 2018, https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/cinema/2018/06/24/news/martin_scorsese-199884916/, and L. Di Nicolantonio, *Lezione di cinema di Martin Scorsese al Cinema ritrovato: "Il cinema è un'esperienza irrinunciabile"*, "Il Cinema Ritrovato", June 24, 2018, <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/lezione-di-cinema-di-martin-scorsese-al-cinema-ritrovato-il-cinema-e-unesperienza-irrinunciabile/>. See also the video-recording of the event at the Cineteca di Bologna YouTube official channel: *Conversazione con Martin Scorsese*, June 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mV1_pJ-Muo&list=PLx3uAGILdftDkSEhC1efhZOaSF35hD2dy&ab_channel=CinetecaBologna

4. The «Godfather» of Italian Cinema: The Role of Scorsese in Alice Rohrwacher's *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018)

An article published in September 2018 by the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica* presented Martin Scorsese as «Alice Rohrwacher's Godfather». It also revealed that, after watching *Happy as Lazzaro* (*Lazzaro felice*, A. Rohrwacher, 2018) Scorsese sent a letter to the director to praise her latest work. He wrote: «*Happy as Lazzaro* is one of the most beautiful and unique films I have seen this year», and «Alice Rohrwacher is a filmmaker of rare talent who, with this film, consolidates her position in the world of cinema», because she «masterfully blends past and present, using the pages of history to show us the contradictions of humanity»⁵⁶. Thus, a year after his involvement in Carpignano's *A Ciambra*, Scorsese decided to act as an executive producer also for *Happy as Lazzaro*. Even if these two collaborations seem to follow similar paths, several elements of difference between the production and promotion in the United States need to be underlined. Firstly, *Happy as Lazzaro* is mainly produced by Italian companies (La Tempesta and Rai Cinema) but, just like *A Ciambra*, is also an international co-production, with the involvement of German (KNM, Pola Pandora and ZDF), French (Arte and Ad Vitam) and Swiss (Amka Films and RSI) productions. It also received the support of institutional bodies, such as the Italian Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo, the French CNC - Aide aux cinémas du monde, and the Swiss Office Fédéral de la Culture. And as in Carpignano's case, we can consider this film an international co-production not only for the companies involved, but also because of the participation in the film crew (in the roles of cinematographer, editor, casting director, etc.) of several “foreign” professionals. Conversely, we must note that Scorsese's *Sikelia* is not directly involved in production funding, though Scorsese's name does appear as an executive producer⁵⁷.

The film has an estimated budget of €5.2 million and grossed globally almost \$1.9 million. Before its theatrical release, exactly like *A Ciambra*, it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the award for Best Screenplay. As for other Italian auteur films premiered abroad, the “passage” through an important film festival was a prestigious occasion to gain international attention⁵⁸: in the nine months since its official release, the film was presented in more than 25 festivals all over the world. The U.S. seemed particularly welcoming towards *Happy as Lazzaro*: not only for its presence in festivals in New York, Austin, and Chicago, but also for its selection as one of the year's best foreign films by the National Board of Review, the Film Independent Spirit Awards, and the MoMA Film

56 C. Ugolini, *Scorsese “padrino” per Alice Rohrwacher: “È una cineasta di raro talento”*, “la Repubblica”, September 22, 2018, https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/cinema/2018/09/22/news/scorsese_padrino_per_alice_rohrwacher_e_una_cineasta_di_raro_talento_-207078033/

57 All the production and distribution data come from the page dedicated to *Happy as Lazzaro* on IMDbPro, <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt6752992/companycredits>

58 D. Garofalo, E. Morreale, *Il cinema italiano all'estero e la sua legittimazione culturale: i film festival e la critica specializzata*, in M. Scaglioni (ed. by), *Cinema Made in Italy. La circolazione internazionale dell'audiovisivo italiano*, Carocci, Roma 2020, pp. 77-93.

Department⁵⁹. Nevertheless, *Happy as Lazzaro* didn't get a theatrical release in the U.S. due to its acquisition by Netflix, which released it in its U.S. digital catalogue on November 30, 2018. This is likely one of the reasons why the film was not selected by Italy as its Best Foreign Language Film for the Academy Award nominations. Ira Deutchman, who runs a program funded and sponsored by Istituto Luce Cinecittà and the Italian Trade Commission for the promotion and distribution of contemporary Italian films in U.S. theaters (and who is also member of the Academy), observes that *Happy as Lazzaro* wasn't supported by his program because Netflix, who bought the exclusive distribution rights for the U.S., had no theatrical plan. Following Deutchman's logic, the reasons behind Netflix's interest in Rohrwacher's film are most likely political and strategic: with this acquisition, as in other similar cases, Netflix was probably not looking to support national auteur cinema, but rather it aimed to promote a specific idea of world cinema that transcends borders⁶⁰. There seem to be two clashing interests here: on the one hand, Scorsese's support of emerging filmmakers from all over the world, as well as Italian auteur-driven films linked to a specific canon; on the other hand, the new distribution paths pursued by OTT platforms, in which theatrical release plays only a secondary role. Considering this, the role of Scorsese in the executive production of *Happy as Lazzaro* is quite ambiguous, compared to his clearer involvement in *A Ciambra*.

Happy as Lazzaro is the third film directed by Alice Rohrwacher, who also presented her previous film at the Cannes Film Festival (*The Wonders/Le meraviglie*, in 2014). In 2015 she was interviewed, together with her sister Alba, by Sofia Coppola in a special article published in *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*⁶¹; a year later, the New York Film Festival welcomed her as its 2016 artist-in-residence. In March 2018, in his acceptance speech for the David di Donatello Career Achievement Award in Rome, Steven Spielberg cited Rohrwacher as one of the best women directors in the world⁶². As a consequence, at the time of the premiere of *Happy as Lazzaro* at Cannes (May 2018) she was a well-known auteur to U.S. cinephile audiences. Since she could not be considered any more as an emerging filmmaker in 2018, she wasn't able to obtain Sikelia-RT Features funds. For this reason, Scorsese entered as an executive producer only during the distribution/promotion stage of the film. Rohrwacher revealed that Scorsese joined her project after it was completed, and screened it as part of his continuing interest in supporting up-and-coming filmmakers. She also stated that Scorsese «provided great enthusiasm», and that he «really wanted to support this movie, which he deeply loved. To me, having such a great *maestro*

59 S. Guerini Rocco, *Italian World Cinema: Alice Rohrwacher's 'Lazzaro Felice' Abroad*, "International circulation of Italian cinema", April 16, 2019, <https://www.italiancinema.it/italian-world-cinema-alice-rohrwachers-happy-as-lazzaro-abroad/>

60 D. Garofalo, *Cinema Made in Italy. An Interview With Ira Deutchman*, "International Circulation of Italian Cinema", August 8, 2019, <https://www.italiancinema.it/cinema-made-in-italy-an-interview-with-ira-deutchman/>.

61 S. Coppola, *Sofia Coppola Interviews the Sisters Behind Her Favorite New Film*, "T: The New York Times Style Magazine", August 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/17/t-magazine/alice-alba-rohrwacher.html>.

62 *David di Donatello. Cerimonia di premiazione 2018*, "RaiPlay", March 21, 2018, <https://www.raipplay.it/video/2018/03/David-di-Donatello-2018-464b6c19-0fb4-4d51-9371-0beefdf964.html>.

and master of cinema, somebody who is deeply committed to the protection of cinema as a way to preserve memory, it was such a huge joy. Just knowing that somebody of his caliber loved the movie»⁶³. Once again, Scorsese's dedication in supporting the film came from his own spectatorial emotion: his commitment was not just a matter of funds (which directly influence the distribution life of a film), but above all a matter of taste and cultural legitimacy. In another interview Rohrwacher gave to *The Film Stage*, she revealed that it was Scorsese who contacted her after watching the movie, and that he became executive producer to «help the movie come out in America» («[Scorsese] said that without repeating the past this movie manages to bring new life to a lot of cinema history. The kind of cinema history he has a lot of attachment to, and that he closely protects. He sees an invocation in this film of a lot of films that he is fond of»)⁶⁴. The role played by Scorsese in the Netflix acquisition of the distribution rights of *Happy as Lazzaro* is not clear. However, it is possible that Scorsese was involved in promoting the nomination of the film to the Academy Awards. In any case, his presence as an executive producer, as well as the words he dedicated to the film in several public occasions, have certainly helped its widely positive critical reception in the United States. As a matter of fact, using again Scorsese's words, the fact that Rohrwacher «masterfully blends past and present» is discussed in several reviews, with specific reference to the Italian classics Scorsese «is fond of»⁶⁵.

Despite the decision to strictly limit the U.S. release to the Netflix catalogue, a number of informal theatrical screenings were organized in New York. Ira Deutchman observes again that this is a precise distribution strategy carried out by Netflix «just to have reviews»⁶⁶. The participation in international film festivals, the theatrical release (even if following the limited film-event scheme) and, of course, a positive critical reception are all elements that contribute decisively to the legitimation and global prestige of a certain type of foreign cinema that would otherwise struggle to emerge in the U.S. In this context, the participation of Scorsese at these events was certainly crucial to legitimize and create a reputation for the film. Therefore, it is unlikely that without any theatrical openings in New York the film would have been included in the “prestigious” charts by *The New York Times*' Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott as, respectively, the 5th and the 2nd best movie of 2018⁶⁷.

63 K. Erbland, 'Happy as Lazzaro': Martin Scorsese Added as Executive Producer to Alice Rohrwacher's Potential Oscar Entry, "Indiewire", September 21, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/09/happy-as-lazzaro-alice-rohrwacher-martin-scorsese-1202005479/>.

64 J. Encinas, Alice Rohrwacher on 'Happy as Lazzaro,' Humanity's Loss of Innocence, and Martin Scorsese's Support, "The Film Stage", December 1, 2018, <https://thefilmstage.com/alice-rohrwacher-on-happy-as-lazzaro-humanitys-loss-of-innocence-and-martin-scorseses-support/>.

65 See, for example, A.O. Scott, 'Happy as Lazzaro' Review: This Modern Fairy Tale Is an Instant Classic, "The New York Times", November 29, 2018, [https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/movies/happy-as-lazzaro-review.html?;](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/movies/happy-as-lazzaro-review.html?) J. Brunner, A Contemporary Fairy Tale Of A Film Offers Insight Into A Nation, "Forbes", September 29, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jerylbrunner/2018/09/29/a-contemporary-fairy-tale-of-a-film-offers-insight-into-a-nation/?sh=75432db666c2> and G. Lodge, Cannes Film Review: 'Happy as Lazzaro', "Variety", May 13, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/film/reviews/happy-as-lazzaro-review-1202808832/>

66 D. Garofalo, *Cinema Made in Italy. An Interview With Ira Deutchman*, cit.

67 M. Dargis and A.O. Scott, Best movies of 2018, "The New York Times", December 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/05/movies/best-movies.html>.

The screening with the most resonance was the one organized at the Film Society at Lincoln Centre on September 21, 2018, at the presence of Scorsese himself, who presented the movie together with Rohrwacher. Recalling this event, the Italian filmmaker observes how «the most surprising thing at that moment was to hear Martin Scorsese’s words and to be able to explain with him my point of view on the film», and that «it was really exciting to work with him»⁶⁸. Unlike the case of Carpignano, with Rohrwacher (who was already known to niche audiences in the U.S) Scorsese’s job was mainly to seal her auteur status, connecting her films to the cinematic canon that he historically contributed to build. It is not a coincidence that, after Scorsese’s involvement in *Happy as Lazzaro*, Rohrwacher became an even more recurring name in the United States. As a final accomplishment, in December 2019 a retrospective on the entire filmography of Alice and Alba Rohrwacher was organized by the MoMA in New York⁶⁹.

Here we have seen two different modes of intervention by Scorsese in the diffusion of contemporary Italian cinema in the United States. Where in the case of *A Ciambra* we are dealing with an involvement both in the production and pre-production phases, as well as in the promotion and distribution of a film directed by an emerging director, in the case of *Happy as Lazzaro* there is an intervention focused on the level of promotion and public legitimation of an already “prestigious” (while still not widely known) auteur, such as Rohrwacher. Both films adhere, in form as in content, to the “certain tendency” shared by Scorsese in his promotion of Italian cinema’s canon. However, both *A Ciambra* and *Happy as Lazzaro* also position themselves within the perspective of contemporary world cinema⁷⁰, through their involvement of different kinds of international subjects in their production and distribution, and by benefiting from the festival system on a more properly promotional level. Scorsese’s failed attempts to promote both films for a nomination at the Academy Awards as Best Foreign-Language Film are evidence of this double articulation: on the one hand, to keep the Italian identity of these works firmly in place; on the other, to also brand these films through the legitimacy of “world cinema” linked to their global production and distribution.

68 A. Giordano, *Alice Rohrwacher: «La mia vita dopo Lazzaro felice»*, “Esquire”, March 30, 2019, <https://www.esquire.com/it/cultura/film/a26985040/alice-rohrwacher-regista-intervista/>

69 *The Wonders: Alice and Alba Rohrwacher*, The Museum of Modern Art, December 4-23 2019, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/film/5179>

70 On this perspective see R. Galt, K. Schoonover (ed. by), *Global Art Cinema. New Theories and Histories*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2010 and G. King, *Positioning Art Cinema. Film and Cultural Value*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2019.