Film Reviews

*The Italian Americans.*
By John Maggio.
240 minutes. DVD format, color.

In documentary, realism joins together objective representations of the historical world and rhetorical overtness to convey an argument about the world.

*Bill Nichols, Representing Reality*

What happens when popular fiction is consumed as ethnic fact? How have we gotten to know Italian Americans? These questions lie at the heart of this documentary and are posed in the opening scenes, which alternate between cinematic representations and personal accounts of Italian ethnicity. Film and self-narration produce two ways of knowing, often dramatically at odds with each other. On the one hand, cinematic images entrench this ethnicity as a series of stereotypes in the national imagination. Ethnicity is seen as a fixed way of looking and behaving, as a singular truth: The “nonwhite” phenotype, the authoritative father, the *mafioso* image. The first-person narratives in the film, however, question the various stereotypes head on, showing that Hollywood films create a reality for ethnicity that real Italian Americans do not recognize as their own. Self-representation corrects public misrecognition. Ethnographic testimonies contest, for instance, the poisonous association of Italian Americans with criminality. Taken together, they establish Italian America as a diverse social field, projecting ethnicity as a plurality of truths. If the underworld is not alien to all Italian Americans, to cite a pertinent example, it is certainly alien to a great many of them.

Broadcast nationally on PBS and narrated by Italian-American actor Stanley Tucci, *The Italian Americans* is a two-part, four-episode documentary. Each episode focuses on a particular period in Italian-American history, captured in the respective titles: “La Famiglia (1890–1910),” “Becoming American (1910–1930),” “Loyal Americans (1930–1945),” and “The American Dream (1945–today).” Given that the “power of [cinematic] myth has overshadowed the real history of Italian Americans,” as Tucci narrates, the documentary is preoccupied with the reality of ethnicity. Author Laurie Fabiano, an interviewee in the documentary, confirms that “a great deal of Italian-American culture today has been created by the media; what is considered Italian American is that small slice of Italian-American life that has been blown out of proportion and made into a caricature, and what’s real is getting lost.” The documentary sets out then to reclaim historical truth in the interest of undermining the haunting specter of the myth. Filmic fictions, in our collective imagination, must yield to historical facts. Real history must dispel popular fantasy.

This explains why the documentary places a premium on the authority of objective evidence. In fact, the commitment to realism drives the argument of the film, guides its epistemology, and informs its narrative mode. The politics and the poetics of ethnicity mesh with the factual content and realist style to produce a compelling account of visual historiography.
As such, the claim to realism requires that the documentary cast an inclusive historical net to reclaim forgotten pasts and recuperate family immigration stories for collective remembering (experiences of immigrants, both anonymous and eponymous; Italian leadership in the Lawrence textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912; Italian immigrant anarchism; the restrictions placed on Italian Americans as enemy aliens in World War II) and also to revisit highly publicized historical events (the criminalization of Sacco and Vanzetti).

This historical perspective is particularly comprehensive in the first two episodes, which deliver multifaceted understandings of Italian Americans: the significance of the immigrant family and its close-knit insularity; the early-twentieth-century appeal of political radicalism; bootlegging in the era of prohibition; the emergence of the underworld; Americanization; and Mussolini’s early magnetism for a large part of the community. The documentary takes us to specific locales (e.g., Di Palo Fine Foods in Manhattan’s Little Italy; the Italian-American community in Roseto, Pennsylvania; Our Lady of Mount Carmel in East Harlem; and the Italian fishing community in the San Francisco Bay area) to situate concrete historical events and consequently deliver visually rich micro-ethnohistories. It brings into circulation an impressive array of archival evidence including films, home movies, letters, photographs, songs, sound recordings, commercials, newspapers, official statements, interviews, congressional hearings, and political speeches, all marshaled as objective evidence to ground the reality of the narrated history.

The argument of capturing real ethnicity by the camera relies on a distinct claim to truth, namely the operation of a natural bond between image and its historical referent. This cataloging of visual evidence organizes the telling of The Italian Americans and asserts its truth value. The narrative strategy follows this consistent edited sequence: Interviewee testimonies perform an embodied knowledge of personal and family history. These personal accounts point to the authority of lived-in experience, albeit textured, as I will explain, with elements of subjectivity. They often create a constellation of statements from various interviewees that reiterate a historical truth. To underwrite the objectivity of the testimonies, the film cuts from personal narrative to corresponding historical images and recorded sounds; it often simultaneously cuts from the interviewee’s voice to the narrator’s voice-over, or to the authoritative perspective of experts (mostly scholars and authors, as identified by the documentary). The juxtaposition of personal recollections with historical footage establishes the veracity of oral history.

The poetics of aligning word, image, and reality repeats itself cyclically throughout the narrative, providing it with its distinct rhythm. This realist convention is most evident, in fact, when the film departs from it. When it comes to featuring historical events where the criminality of Italians is a matter of allegation, the film opts for a visibly staged mise-en-scène to underlie the artifice of the reconstruction. Nonrealist reenactments of the 1890 assassination of Police Chief David Hennessy in New Orleans and the 1919 anarchist bombing of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer’s home in Washington, D.C.—both incidents where Italians were the reputed perpetrators—fall within this category. The factuality of history is contrasted with the fiction of national mythologies demonizing Italians.

In addition to establishing the objectivity of personal accounts, to further the project of realism, the documentary also harnesses the subjectivity of the interviewees.
More than once the camera captures individuals deeply moved in remembering immigrant dislocation and exploitation. Writer Gay Talese, for instance, choking up, overwhelmed by the story of his grandfather’s premature death, a result of unsanitary labor conditions. Laurie Fabiano barely contains her anger when she narrates the abusive circumstances leading to immigrant miners’ deaths, which included that of her own great-grandfather: “These men were used like, you know, like animals. They were sent to do things that . . . really in our day and age we wouldn’t have an animal do.” Similarly, historian Thomas Kessner displays empathy for Fiorello La Guardia’s experience of outsidersness. Lido Cantarutti’s testimony echoes the feelings of his father’s shock and disbelief over Italian Americans being branded enemy aliens at home while their sons were fighting for the United States abroad. And the narrator’s defiant tone underlines this account of imposed assimilation and the concomitant devaluation of immigrant ways: “Italian Americans would not be told how to practice their faith.” Contemporary Italian-American voices ripple with emotions in recollecting the immigrant past.

Instead of working against the film’s stated objectivity, this emotional display offers realistic evidence that advances several of the film’s aims. For one, psychological realism demonstrates the engagement of the interviewees with the immigrant past, in this manner bolstering the claim that ethnicity matters in contemporary Italian-American lives. What is more, affective bonds with family and ethnic history lay open the interviewees’ subjective worlds—their values and feelings—humanizing Italian Americans. If stereotypes objectify ethnicity, subjectivity humanizes it. Subjectivity so expressed could be recognized as commonality beyond the ethnic collective. Anger over exploitation, family loss, unjust treatment, as well as over the way discrimination can damage and limit one’s potential, all register a structure of feeling that opens up the space for empathetic identification for viewers from all walks of life. The documentary dismantles ethnic stereotypes via at least two interrelated routes: the humanization of these “American ethnics,” and the fostering of compassionate intersubjectivity among the viewers.

But any claim to realist representation must confront the fact that historical complexity cannot be captured as a totality. The aim to real representation exists in tension with the consciousness of the partiality of its delivery. The Italian Americans is not an exception to this predicament. The “enormous diversity” of Italian America, mentioned yet not charted in the narrative, represents the excess of reality that the documentary cannot possibly accommodate in its telling. If this impossibility is inevitable, one must reflect on which realities are privileged, which are excluded, and the reason informing this editorial decision.

An attentive and critical viewer is likely to register this obvious observation: As the narration nears the recent past, the documentary weakens its commitment to inclusive history. One reason for this partiality has to do with the scope of the film’s argument: The aim to topple the Mafia stereotype overrides the interest in capturing a wider range of Italian-American realities. Instead of comprehensive representation, the documentary adopts a particular narrative strategy, turning its gaze on ethnic achievement. Though the scale of Italian-American success has been immense, the argument posits, stigmatization has been instrumental in curbing this ethnicity’s potential. While pervasive and deadly in the past—resulting in mob cold-blooded
killing and lynching, as well as limiting the careers of artists (like Rodolfo Valentino) and their political and social influences (as in the case of Frank Sinatra)—it perniciously lingers to affect the near present. In the aftermath of World War II, fear of discrimination, for instance, drove many young people to cultural inwardness and away from university studies. Prejudice stymied Mario Cuomo’s early career in law, and the prospect of Mafia stigmatization kept him from running for the U.S. presidency. As Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia puts it, this association was “the thing that hung around [Italian Americans’] neck.” Still, the documentary emphasizes that despite the limitations on socioeconomic mobility imposed by prejudice, the success of Italian Americans has been impressive. Lifting the stigma, a political project to which the film contributes, will only propel Italian Americans to even fuller heights of distinction.

The strategy to combat negative mythologies, then, is to attach a positive image to the targeted collective, a dialectic that disciplines a great many identity narratives of European Americans. The dominant society renders an ethnicity inferior or dangerous, and in doing so it dictates the terms of subsequent ethnic self-representation. I bring attention to this dialectic in The Italian Americans in order to illuminate a certain containment of Italian ethnicity in the telling. Take, for instance, the 1989 racially motivated mob killing of an African-American teen in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, at the time a predominantly Italian-American working-class neighborhood. The documentary revisits this much-publicized incident and explains it obliquely as a reflection of an isolated, cloistered community. But this perspective localizes racism, and in so doing it neglects a much wider historical issue. It exhibits a reticence to probe beyond this isolated incident and venture into larger controversies of Italian Americans negotiating the privileges of whiteness often against people of color. Engagement with this turbulent history would have directed attention to highly charged interracial tensions and animosities, issues that academic Italian American studies have amply documented. Yet these realities on camera would have tempered ethnic self-celebration. In turn, their absence from the camera’s record of empirical evidence illustrates the rhetorical dimension at work in the documentary’s claim to realism, namely the selective hiding of unsettling historical truths.

The historiographical tradition of writing the biographies of leaders whose rhetorical charisma, socioeconomic power, or civic vision inspired and directed the collective is an integral component of the documentary; but again, there are striking absences. The documentary explores the fascinating lives of Italian-American men such as Amadeo Giannini, founder of the Bank of Italy in San Francisco; Arturo Giovannitti, poet and charismatic public speaker; Fiorello H. La Guardia, New York City mayor; and Mario Cuomo, New York State governor. The film does acknowledge women politicians too, such as the rise of Geraldine Ferraro to U.S. vice presidential candidate, but it otherwise largely ignores the leadership and activism of Italian-American women.

It is lamentable that biographies of women activists are conspicuously missing. Stories of Italian-American women leaders, through the lens of second-wave feminism, for instance, could have produced insights into how gender, class, and ethnic oppression shaped lives. Any discussion of how women negotiated the criminalization of ethnicity is absent, even though women are at the center of this discourse as reproductive
citizens, mothers, sisters, lovers, companions, or wives. Inattention to this history starkly underlines the masculine bias of the narrative, also present in the exclusively male third-voice narration.

A powerfully persuasive convention in documentary, realism is the preferred mode of historical narration for television networks and commands institutional power. This is not the space to propose an alternative, poststructuralist visual historiography. It is necessary, however, to not only identify the limitations of this realist documentation, as I have done herein, but also to discuss its implications in the wider terrain of race discourse in the United States. In structuring the telling of history around the theme of struggle and success, *The Italian Americans* embeds itself within politicized *topoi* of European American historiography. No doubt hard work, perseverance, sacrifice, and discrimination make for an indelible component of the Italian-American experience. But the telling of this story has been manipulated politically when toil and determination are cast as the sole causes propelling European Americans to the middle class and into the heart of the American Dream. This explanation certainly fuels ethnic pride. But it circulates by implication an ideology that misrepresents race-based poverty. Following the bootstrap account of socioeconomic mobility, the poor have only themselves and their culture to blame for their failure to rise. Empirical scholarship exposes facts that the narrative of self-propelled success displaces from plain view. Historically, institutional racism facilitated the mobility of European Americans while it posited all sorts of obstacles to African Americans. The narrative of struggle and success operates as a *white ethnic* narrative in that it feeds displaced analogies between European Americans and African Americans to extol the former as hard working and stigmatize the latter as dysfunctional. The irony is apparent. Setting out to depose the myth of Italian-American criminality, the documentary implicitly circulates another, the myth of European Americans as a cultural exemplar. Determined to protect an ethnicity, it tacitly harms impoverished people of color.

Can we imagine identity narratives beyond ethnic celebrationism? Several threads in the documentary may offer routes for further reflection. Italian Americans have a history of positioning themselves at the forefront of combating labor injustices. Those who cross boundaries, often at great personal risk, on behalf of the disenfranchised gain distinction. In addition, central to the Italian-American experience is the deep recognition of the psychic and social cost of discrimination. The documentary highlights yet another thread, namely the value Italian Americans place on the erudite and eloquent spokesperson capable of illuminating issues for the public. “Mario Cuomo was a hero to me. He thought deeply about things and spoke eloquently,” author Maria Laurino notes admiringly. The fluent poise of an array of interviewees in the film further performs this value too.

The conclusion brings about an additional thread, this time connected with the future of Italian Americans. It registers anxiety over the effects of assimilation, as individualism works against family bonds and community, resulting in a “decay of social cohesion,” the price of suburban assimilation. Ongoing travels to Italy demonstrate that the longing to reconnect with family, heritage, history, and culture animates Italian-American lives. How to preserve Italian-American identity in the United States? The documentary closes on a somber, poignant note, using the desire to reclaim
a fuller understanding of ethnicity as an antidote to assimilation. It features the value of the performative arts, specifically opera, as a significant venue in this ethnicity’s revitalization; but in its eagerness to dismiss the media image of the mob, it skirts the question of Italian-American accomplishments in the creative visual and literary arts that also contribute toward this reclamation project.

Combined together, these aforementioned threads interweave into a history—some aspects of it rooted in the immigrant experience, others developed through Americanization—that speaks to ethnic concerns as it simultaneously points to issues beyond ethnicity. Such a reading of the Italian-American story would join questions of cultural preservation to a historical consciousness of the effects of exploitation and discrimination on vulnerable groups. It brings into conversation the particularity of ethnic identity and the universality of injustice. What if knowledgeable and charismatic public speakers narrate Italian-American identity in a manner that brings together a concern with particular ethnic interests and the interests of stigmatized collectives? Or that articulates a politics not only of ethnicity but also of interracial solidarity? Such narratives will no doubt require the speaking of certain unpleasant truths in the interest of more genuine historical knowledge. Italian-American scholarship has already ventured into this territory. Poets and writers practice this ethos too. What is more, their voices often offer otherwise unexplored venues for the making of new Italian-American identities. Will a critical mass of journalists, filmmakers, and popular writers be willing to take on the challenge? Their collaboration with scholars and artists to articulate to the public this historical consciousness and visions of the future is yet another frontier for Italian-American cultural production to cross, most likely touching upon controversial issues. But for this very reason it remains an integral component of ethnic historiography and public scholarship.

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Works Cited


*Hope: Le nuove migrazioni.*
By Alex Kroke and Gianluca Vassallo.
A VXK Films Production, 2013.
75 minutes. DVD format, color.

In a rhythmic stream of entrancing images, New York City’s lights in extreme soft focus—as seen from inside a moving taxi—transition to quick successive shots of anonymous individuals and groups of people in domestic spaces partially obscured by the verticals and horizontals of windows, doors, and stairwells. These images, in turn,