Migrant images in Italian Australian movies and documentaries

Gaetano Rando University of Wollongong, Australia

Before the multicultural boom of the 1970s the involvement of Italians in the Australian film industry is almost negligible. There is an actor with an Italian name, Ernesto Crosetto, in the 1916 version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* and, in the 1930s, Joe Valli and Charles Zolli appeared in films such as *Tall Timbers* (1937) and *Typhoon Treasure* (1938). However these two actors usually played the parts of Australian soldiers or Scotsmen and on only one occasion was Zolli cast in an «ethnic» role as Signor Spigoni in *Splendid Fellows* (1934). In a non-acting role there is the case of Armando Lionello who, in the 1920s, ran the Modern School of Cinema Acting in Brisbane. The school, however, closed subsequent to the considerable scandal caused by the way in which Lionello treated his aspiring actresses and the poor quality of the films he directed such as *Retribution* (1921) written and acted by one of his pupils, Thorene Adair. Another likely Italian name in this early period is that of Thomas Marinato who directed *Sydney's Darlings* (1926).

In the post-war period, dominated by an almost exclusive monopoly of British and American productions, an Italian presence begins to emerge twenty years after the end of the war. In 1966, when over a quarter million Italians had already migrated to Australia, Walter Chiari played the leading role in *They're a Weird Mob* and some two years later he returned to Australian cinema screens in Squeeze a Flower. The box office success achieved by They're a Weird Mob, an Anglo-Australian production directed by Michael Powell, stimulated some interest in Australian government circles in the fledgling local film industry which eventually led to funding programmes. They're a Weird Mob, based on John Patrick O'Grady's best selling novel of the same name published in 1957 under the pseudonym of Nino Culotta, is an extremely humorous film which praises Australian values, attitudes and language and springs from the strongly assimilist attitudes current in Australian society in the 1950s by which all NESB¹ immigrants were expected to become instant Australians. An emblematic case of assimilation is presented in the story of the protagonist Nino Culotta, an educated and cultured Italian-speaking journalist from Northern Italy (hence quite different from most Italians who were entering Australia at that time). During his first year in Australia he is successfully transformed into a beer-swilling brickies labourer who manages to quickly pick up and use the Australian idiom, is absolutely happy to live in Australia which he considers the best country in the world and marries the daughter of a respected Sydney builder of Irish descent.

They're a Weird Mob, however, says relatively little about the life of Italian migrants in Australia which is, instead, the prerogative of a «foreign» production Bello onesto emigrato Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata (1971) directed by Luigi Zampa with

Alberto Sordi and Claudia Cardinale in the leading roles.² Made by Italians for Italians, the film is a comedy about Amedeo, a lonely middle-aged linesman in a small desert settlement near Broken Hill, who convinces Carmela – a spirited Roman prostitute and not the simple country girl Amedeo thinks she is – to come out to Australia to marry him by sending her the photograph of a much more handsome friend. Only after many adventures and misunderstandings on the long journey from Sydney to Broken Hill do the two come to accept each other in their true guises. The loneliness of Italian men in Australian working-class society, their reluctance to look for wives among Australian women (who are regarded as too independent), their self-sacrifice over long periods (which extends to eating parrots) to save money for an uncertain future, are all themes central to the film.

The most notable contribution in this period was made by Giorgio Mangiamele, who emigrated to Australia in 1952 with the express purpose of founding an Australian film industry. His vision was clearly prophetic, however, his role in the emerging Australian film industry was to be a relatively minor one despite his excellent camera work and his ability as a director. Still he is the only Italian included in John Baxter's fundamental work on Australian cinema³ and his first full length feature *Clay* (1965), which explores the subjective responses of a sculptress (Margot) to a fugitive murderer (Nick) and the bond that is created between them, was the first Australian film to be accepted at the Cannes Film Festival. As well as Clay and Beyond Reason (1970) Mangiamele has six short documentary and feature films with an Australian content to his credit, produced between 1953 and 1970, and five documentaries on New Guinea, commissioned by the government of that country, produced in the early 1980s. Of his productions four short features – The Contract (1953), The Brothers (1958), The Spag (1961) and Ninety-Nine Per cent (1963) – are on a «migrant» theme. The first two deal with the difficulties faced by migrants in relation to work and family ties. The Spag is the story of an Italian boy's efforts, which however stop short of breaking the law, to raise money when his father dies and his mother wishes to returnt o Italy. In Ninety-Nine Per cent a short fat Italian immigrant decides to remarry when the principal of the school attended by his son accuses him of not being able to look after the boy properly. Given the difficulties Italian men had in finding wives at the time, he decides to enlist the help of a matrimonial agency and places advertisements in the paper.

The advent of multiculturalism in the mid 1970s brought about a considerable expansion in the production of films based on the Italian migrant experience in Australia. As with other forms of Italian Australian artistic expression (and indeed «ethnic» artistic expression in general), this development has occurred largely outside the mainstream although it stands less apart than the corresponding literary and theatrical forms which are to a large extent circumscribed within the Italian community. Whereas creative writing in print has been produced in both Italian and English, albeit generally read by Italian Australian readers, and Italian Australian plays in Italian have found sufficient support within the Italian Australian community to enable their performance, film and television material, because of the need to appeal to a more general audience, has been produced in English or in a mixture of Englishand Italian with appropriate subtitling. The corpus is in the main composed of short features, docu-dramas and documentaries while its main viewing channels are by transmission on the SBS⁴ television network or projection outside the commercial circuit.

First and second generation Italian Australians are, of course, active in other sectors of the Australian film industry without necessarily involving themselves in «Italian Australian» themes. The most eminent example to date is Fred Schepisi who directed, among other feature films, *The Devil's Playground* (1976) and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) before emigrating to the United States. Another director of note is Pino Amenta with films such as *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (1987).

Among those who have had a long-term association with Italian Australian cinema is Melbourne based Rosa Colosimo whose main work has been in the area of films and documentaries on migrant or aboriginal themes. She has been casting consultant for the television series *Women of the Sun* (1981), production secretary/researcher for the television series *The Migrant Experience* (1983) and has produced, directed and written a number of feature films and documentaries. In the Italian Australian area Rosa Colosimo can claim credit for her work as producer/writer of the video drama *The Martini Family* (1979), Italian adviser for the television series *Waterfront* (1984), a not entirely successful venture since the Italian dialogues are sometimes stilted and unrealistic, and producer/co-writer for *Blowing Hot and Cold* (1988), an action comedy which recounts the adventures of an excitable Italian salesman (Nino) and a dour outback garage keeper (Jack) who are forced to live together in the outback gradually coming to accept each other to the point that they can successfully unite for a common cause.

The most memorable Italian Australian work with which Colosimo has been associated to date is as production consultant for Moving Out (1982), a feature film which draws, unacknowledged, on much material from Giuseppe Abiuso's short novel *Diario di uno* scolaro italo-australiano (1975). Both contain close similarities in location, main characters (as well as some of the minor ones), in their themes and in numerous details. However, the Diario portrays an Italian working-class family caught up in a vicious circle of poverty and misfortune. The illness of Mario's father – his coughing and spitting – and his unemployment are very powerfully drawn as are the family context and the relationship of Mario to school. In Moving Out the Condello family seems to have «made it» through sheer hard work and sacrifice. The family's projected move from Fitzroy, an inner Melbourne migrant working class suburb, to Doncaster signifies upward socio-economic mobility. The prospect of leaving his old haunts and friends is one of the two main themes of *Moving Out*, the other being the contrast and conflict between Gino's Italian Australian home environment and the Australian «outside» leading to the acute embarrassment Gino feels about his family and other «wogs» in his progress towards Australianization. The focus on the central character also differs in the two works. Mario's problems at school and the conflict between the two cultures come under close scrutiny in the *Diario* while in *Moving Out* the emphasis is on the generation gap, Gino's love affair and his attachment to Fitzroy. While there is psychological attention to the portrayal of Mario, it does not seem to be as pronounced as it is with Gino. In part this can be explained by the compactness of *Diario* as compared to the longer *Moving* Out as well as the difference in format. There is also a difference of interpretation in the themes of the two works. In *Moving Out* the conflict between Gino and his family is resolved by Gino giving in and going with his parents. He does not leave his family and there is a suggestion that this is due to a partial reconciliation between his Italian and Australian

identity. In the first version of *Diario* Mario chooses to remain in Australia when his family goes back to Italy because he has decided to embark on a quest to find out what it means to be Australian. In a sense Mario's family leaves him. In presentation *Diario* is raw and gutsy while *Moving Out* is less evocative and has less of the smell of life about it, thus presenting a somewhat adulterated picture of the migrant working class experience. The producers of *Moving Out* have glossed over the ugly features of immigrant working-class existence, possibly in part to appeal to the mass consumption, largely Anglo-Australian, market which would find more palatable a story of relative immigrant success in the lucky country.

The themes of the generation gap, cultural differences and divergent, almost irreconcilable, perceptions with regard to gender roles between Italian immigrants and their Australian born children are presented in Christine Maddafferi's A Hard Bargain, televised by SBS TV in 1984, probably one of the best short Italian Australian television dramas produced to date. Its liveliness and zest blend well with the underlying serious impact of the situation. Mario and Angela's parents are from Calabria and, despite having achieved a sound economic position in the new country as proprietors of a large Melbourne furniture store, are still very much tied to the old traditional Italian values of a generation ago, not realizing that things have changed in Italy as well. The very ocker Mario seems to have unlimited freedom to the detriment of his studies and to the advantage of the rock group (*The Italian Stallions*) which he has formed with other Italian Australian friends while Angela, who is more respectful of the family's Italian traditions, is not allowed out and is expected to leave school in order to enter into an arranged marriage with the son of paesani despite the fact that she is a brilliant student and wishes to continue her studies at University. Angela leaves home in protest when she realizes that her parents will not listen to her and in the end it is Mario who is instrumental in striking a bargain with the parents and reuniting the family: he will agree to acquiesce to his parent's wishes and enrol for a law degree provided Angela is allowed to go to University too and is not forced to accept the arranged marriage, a compromise which the parents accept with some reluctance and unaware that Mario does not intend to keep his part of the bargain.

Monica Pellizzari has attracted considerable interest with her short feature films which have won a number of awards. *Rabbit on the moon* (1988) is the story of a young Italian girl growing up in suburban Sydney the 1960s, confused by the conflicting values of her classmates and those of her Italian family. *Velo nero* (1988) relates the desperate loneliness and confused dislocation of an Italian woman who is widowed shortly after arriving in Australia to join her husband. Serafina has no family or social contacts and speaks very little English, supports herself by working as a cleaner but is completely isolated from her environment. The comedy drama *No no nonno* (1990) is the zany narration of an elderly Neapolitan's attempts to avoid being sent to the Sunnyside Rest Home by his family. Nonno, who lives with his son, daughter-in-law and grandson, has a zest and vitality for life which sometimes causes unintentional problems for the other members of the family. He considers it unnatural that elderly people should be placed in a rest home and consequently enlists the aid of his petrol-head grandson when his friend, Gennaro, is placed in one and he himself is in eminent danger of ending up in the same place.

Pellizzari's film sensitively deals with an issue of considerable current concern to the

Italian Australian community – that of the problems of an ageing first generation – from the point of view of the elderly person who finds him/herself treated in a manner which is at variance with traditional values and customs because back home elderly people were valued members of society while in Australia they are secluded and shut away.

Another short feature film which has attracted considerable interest is Luigi Acquisto's *Spaventapasseri* (1986). The film is set in the late 60s and is the highly subjective story of a young Italian couple and their son recently arrived in Australia. The story is presented through the eyes of the son whose mysterious child's world is pervaded by a sense of insecurity created by the insidious pressure for integration imposed by the host society. Also on the theme about how the migration experience has an impact on the child is Franco di Chiera's *La scala*, *lo* scalone (Stairs and Staircases) (1985) which explores the feelings and reactions of Domenic in the face of his mother's unexpected death.

Other Italian Australian film-makers are Ettore Siracusa whose short feature *Italians* at Home (1991) examines customs, traditions, life-styles, cliches and reality of Italians living in Australia. The film is notable because of Siracusa's a strong visual sense, also apparent in an earlier film, *The Occupant* (1985), centred on the photographer Peter Lyssiotis, the relationship between a Cypriot father and his son and the father's nostalgia for his native land. The realization that the comfort and security achieved by migration come at a great price is the theme of For a Better Life (1990) directed by Nicolina Caia. This film poignantly explores the reactions and feelings of a middle-aged Italian immigrant, his family and friends when he receives the news from Italy of his brother's death and realizes that life in the new land has been substantially an empty one in terms of family ties. Another film by Nicolina Caia, Bread (1991) narrates the attempts of an Italian grandmother to maintain an important aspect of her home culture, the making of bread in the traditional way, while the rest of the family try desperately to assimilate and reject their origins. Yet another clash between traditional Italian values and those superimposed by the host society occurs in She's an Angel (1992) directed by Andrea Dal Brosco. Hailed as «an interesting departure from anglocentric romance» the film explores the personal conflicts which arise when apparently outdated attitudes to chastity and marriage persist in contemporary Australian society. The fight for better working conditions in industries where NESB immigrant workers are exploited is the theme of *Il frutto del nostro lavoro* (*The fruit of our labour*) (1989) by Elvira Vacira. The film is set in Victoria in the late 1950s and narrates the story of Lina who is pressured into marrying a young Italian farmer, leaves him and goes to Melbourne where her experience of working in a clothing factory leads her to participate in the fight for better conditions. Ugo Mariotti has written a number of film and television scripts. Among his efforts are the full-length features Spaghetti for Breakfast, based on Giuseppe Abiuso's Diario (but difficult to promote after the success of *Moving Out*) and *Paese fortunato*, based on Rosa Cappiello's successful novel of the same name. This film was never made since the producer was notable to reach an agreement with Rosa Cappiello.

Together with short features, documentaries constitute another mainstay of Italian Australian cinematographic production. Fabio Cavadini, who emigrated to Australia in 1969, was responsible for the camera work in *Protected* (1975) directed by his brother Alessandro, a 55 minute documentary which relates an Aboriginal protest at Palm Island in 1957. He has

also worked on films related to workers' issues such as *Kemira: Diary of a Strike* (1984) which documents the long and bitter strike in a Wollongong coalmine. A film-maker who is particularly impegnato, Cavadini has co-directed with Suzi Walker *The other side of the coin* (*Il rovescio della medaglia*) (1979). The background to this film is the deportation in 1977 of Ignazio Salemi, an Italian journalist who had come to Australia to found the FILEF sponsored newspaper «Nuovo Paese». Salemi was deported after a long and bitter campaign waged against him by ultraconservative elements in the Italian community who saw the paper, which adopted a left wing political orientation, as undesirable and a threat to their privileged position. Taking its cue from this episode, the film documents a discussion on migrant rights in Australia among a group of Italians living in depressed circumstances in Sydney and explores the darker side of the migrant experience, underscoring the difficulties of everyday existence and the personal consequences of alienation.

In the area of non-fiction, a significant contribution is that made by Australian born Tony Luciano who for many years has been producing the popularized *Variety Italian Style* for commercial television and, subsequently, SBS. Luciano has also produced a documentary on Italian immigrants in Australia for the Italian government (*Australia, terra promessa*, 1986) as well as a series of documentaries on Italian wines (1988-89). Luciano's work may thus be seen as an important link between the two cultures, presenting Italy not only to Anglo-Australians but also to Italian Australians.

Pino Bosi, as well as acting as consultant and scriptwriter for a number of productions. was associate producer and one of the principal actors for the SBS documentary Australia's Faceless Father (1986) which relates the role played by James Mario Matra in the British decision to colonize Australia. Another documentary on the historical aspects of the Italian presence is Norcia and New Norcia (1978), produced and directed by Walter Cerquetti of Perth, which tells the story of the famous Benedictine Abbey in Western Australia. Gianfranco Cresciani was co-writer for the ABC production *The Italians* (1985), a serialized account of Italian migration to Australia in six half hour episodes. By stressing the negative aspects he presents a somewhat unbalanced view of Italian culture and history as well as of the political activity of the Italian community in Australia between the two world wars. One reaction of the community to the series was that it gave exaggerated importance to the anti-fascist movement among Italian immigrants in the years leading up to the second world war. Rick Cavaggion, who works for the South Australian Film Commission, has directed a number of educationally-oriented documentaries on Italian and more general migrant issues such as A Question of Identity (1988) (co-directed with Bruce Ready), which deals with the relationship between the teaching of community languages and multiculturalism. He also directed the videotape production of Osvaldo Maione's play Bitch (1979). Winter's Harvest (1979) directed by Angela Gigliotti and Brian Mackenzie is a documentary on the problematical question of the maintenance of tradition. Four Melbourne families get together to slaughter a pig to make sausages and smallgoods for consumption over the following year but by observing this traditional annual Italian peasant custom they are breaking local laws relating to the preparation and processing of pork products which has to be undertaken in strictly specified conditions.

This brief survey of Italian Australian cinema suggests that it is a relatively recent

phenomenon as a consistent corpus and that it is markedly characterized by certain specific themes and contexts related to the group's experience of migration in Australia, its links between old and new cultures and traditions and its relationship with the wider Australian community. A substantial proportion of feature material relates to the experience of those who migrated to Australia at a relatively young age and grew up in this country. In terms of its production Italian Australian cinema is largely composed of «off commercial» short features or documentaries while the producers, directors and writers are relatively young first or second generation Italian Australians who are also active in other types of cinema and television production.

Italian Australian cinema fits into the «alternative» stream of Australian cinematographic culture presenting an «inside» view of the Italian Australian community and a view from the periphery of mainstream Australian society. Together with other types of «alternative» cinema – in particular one may single out Aboriginal cinema – it reflects the poly-cultural make-up of Australian society and expresses it in a socially meaningful form. Its status may be taken as perhaps yet another example of the lack of cultural negotiation which is a symptomatic and possibly endemic state of the relationship between minority groups and the mainstream and which leads to stereotyping and marginalization in Australian mainstream cinema. This stereotyping and marginalization is manifested in the way in which Italian Australians are portrayed in Australian mainstream cinema and television in terms of theme and contents. Italian characters are working-class, anarchical, unreliable, easily excitable, speak broken English and the older women (especially mothers in law) are fat, petulant and usually dress in black. There are, of course, a few exceptions such as Mouth to Mouth (1978) which explores the unemployment problem among ethnic youth without making astereotype of ethnicity, and the comedy *Emoh Ruo*⁷ (1985), the first film in which recognition is given to the existence of an Italian Australian middle class. Another aspect of marginalization is represented in the way in which Italian Australians participate in the Australian film and television industry. As Rosa Colosimo has observed:

Se un film non tratta specificamente di una minoranza... è quasi impossibile, per chi non abbia l'accento australiano e caratteri somatici anglosassoni, trovare lavoro. Per giunta, se l'attore o l'attrice non hanno tutti i caratteri somatici della loro razza – gl'Italiani, per esempio, devono avere capelli neri, occhi scuri ecc. – non troveranno lavoro nemmeno nei cosiddetti film etnici. Sono quindi meno numerosi dei registi e dei produttori, che sono gia tanto pochi, le stelle dai caratteri somatici non anglosassoni che brillano nel firmamento del cinema australiano.⁸

Italian Australian cinema, together with that of other NESB community groups, presents a largely hidden multicultural aspect of Australian cinematographic culture and has in certain cases attracted audiences outside the narrow confines of the Italian Australian community. Factors which have led to this wider diffusion have been the medium of television, the greater mixing of language and the overcoming of the language barrier represented by the use of Italian through the device of subtitling in English. As such it has tended to provide a link between Italian and Italian Australian culture and traditions and the wider Australian community although its role in cultural negotiation has been negligible as in

the case of other forms of Italian Australian artistic expression such as literature and theatre.

Endnotes

- NESB stands for «non English speaking background» and is used to refer to immigrants who come from countries of a different language and culture than Anglo-Celtic ones.
- ² The film was released in Australia with English subtitles as *Girl in Australia* (1972).
- ³ John Baxter, *The Australian Cinema*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1970, p. 102.
- SBS stands for Special Broadcasting Service. The SBS is a government funded radio and television network established in 1975 (radio), 1979 (television) whose function is to transmit programmes, either locally producedor imported, in languages other than English. The rationale for establishing such a service was that the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission the national government funded radio and television network) and the commercial stations broadcast exclusively in English material which is locally produced or from the USA or the UK. The SBS brief also includes the production of documentaries, dramas, short features and series on «ethnic» and multicultural themes.
- G. L. [Giuseppe] Abiuso [but written under the pseudonym Mario Carlesani], *Diario di uno scolaro italo-australiano / A Diary of an Italian Australian schoolboy*, Multicultural Education Project, Maribyrnong High School, 1975 [mimeographed] and published in its definitive version in Joe Abiuso, *The Male Model and Other Stories*, Adelaide, Dezsery Ethnic Publications, 1984, pp. 100-160. A novel based on the film has also been published: Helen Garnerand Jennifer Giles, *Moving out*, Melbourne, Thomas Nelson, 1983, and was reputed to have sold ten thousand copies within six weeks of publication.
- Luigi Acquisto has also directed a full length feature *Hungry Heart* (1987), produced by Rosa Colosimo and Nick McLean, which relates the love story of a young doctor and a wool classer and presents strong comic and absurd elements. Although the young doctor, Sal Bono, is of Italian origin, ethnicity and migration are peripheral to the central romantic theme.
- ⁷ Our home' spelt backwards.
- ⁸ Rosa Colosimo, «Cinema e televisione», *Il Veltro*, 1-2, January-April 1988 [Special issue on «L'Australia multiculturale: il caso italiano», pp. 167-86.
- It has been claimed that the SBS has an audience share among Anglo-Celtic Australians which is slightly less than that of the ABC.

Movies

Mutiny on the Bounty (1916).

Tall Timbers (1937).

Typhoon Treasure (1938).

Splendid Fellows (1934).

Armando Lionello, *Retribution* (1921)

Thomas Marinato, Sydney's Darlings (1926).

They're a Weird Mob (1966)

Squeeze a Flower (1968).

Luigi Zampa, *Bello onesto emigrato Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata* (1971) with Alberto Sordi and Claudia Cardinale.

Giorgio Mangiamele, Clay (1965).

- -- Beyond Reason (1970).
- *The Contract* (1953).
- *The Brothers* (1958).
- The Spag (1961).
- Ninety-Nine Per cent (1963).

Fred Schepisi, The Devil's Playground (1976).

- The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978).

Pino Amenta, Boulevard of Broken Dreams (1987).

Rosa Colosimo, Women of the Sun (1981) television series.

- The Migrant Experience (1983) television series.
- The Martini Family (1979), producer/writer of the video drama.
- Waterfront (1984), television series.
- Moving Out (1982) production consultant.
- Blowing Hot and Cold (1988), producer/co-writer.

Christine Maddafferi, A Hard Bargain, televised by SBS TV (1984).

Monica Pellizzari, Rabbit on the moon (1988)

- Velo nero (1988).
- *No no nonno* (1990).

Luigi Acquisto, Spaventapasseri (1986).

Franco di Chiera, La scala, lo scalone (Stairs and Staircases) (1985).

Ettore Siracusa, Italians at Home (1991).

- *The Occupant* (1985).

Nicolina Caia, For a Better Life (1990).

- Bread (1991

Andrea Dal Brosco, She's an Angel (1992).

Elvira Vacira, Il frutto del nostro lavoro (the fruit of our labour) (1989).

Spaghetti for Breakfast.

Alessandro Cavadini, *Protected* (1975), a 55 minutes documentary.

- Kemira: Diary of a Strike (1984).

Alessandro Cavadini and Suzi Walker *The otherside of the coin (Il rovescio della medaglia)* (1979).

Toni Luciano, *Australia, terra promessa* (1986), a documentary for the Italian government. Walter Cerquetti, *Norcia and New Norcia* (1978), produced and directed by.

Pino Bosi, Australia's Faceless Father, SBS documentary (1986).

Gianfranco Cresciani was co-writer for the ABC production *The Italians* (1985).

Rick Cavaggion and Bruce Ready, A Question of Identity (1988).

- Bitch (1979.
- Angela Gigliotti and Brian Mackenzie Winter's Harvest (1979).

Mouth to Mouth (1978).

Emoh Ruo (1985).

Luigi Acquisto, Hungry Heart (1987), produced by Rosa Colosimo and Nick McLean.