

The Overwhelming Albatross: Stereotypical Representations and Italian-Canadian Political and Cultural Life

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*The limits of one's language signify the limits
of one's world.*

William Boelhower (1984, p. 26)

Introduction

On May 8, 2002, while watching CBC Newsworld morning, Don Martin, a reporter from the «Calgary Herald», was being asked about the recent *Group Action* patronage scandal that had hit the Liberal government. After discussing the bureaucratic quagmire, Martin was asked what role he felt Alfonso Gagliano had played in the entire situation. Martin, without hesitation replied: «He's sort of the godfather of the whole scandal». For Martin this is the limit of his language. An Italian name is involved and political «corruption», not the exclusive domain of any party or any ethnic group, jumps to a bigoted slur. This is the language that continues even today. The language of the media that without thought or effort continues to create the Other and in this circumstance the Other is an Italian-Canadian.

My present research builds on the work of my MA thesis titled *Challenging Exclusion: Film, Video, Identity, Memory and the Italian Canadian Immigrant Experience* (L'Orfano, 2002a). For the first time in Canada, *Challenging Exclusion* brought together, narrated, wrote, and documented, a body of films and videos, both by and on the Italian-Canadian community and experience, created

over the past fifty postwar years. The work then probed what it means for Italian diasporic artists to be, act and construct «Canadian». It was the goal of *Challenging Exclusion* to develop an interdisciplinary and multifaceted discourse that would begin to write this body of films and videos by Canadians of Italian heritage where silence and absence existed.

The methodology developed was used to critically analyse ethnic-minority representation, action and agency, which was framed against the background of a mainstream media dominated by the negative Italian stereotypes from Hollywood. While the mass media continues to disseminate one-dimensional stereotypical renditions of Italian culture, as Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 3) suggests, the actual «work of the imagination» is taking place in the margins of these sites. Far from being a means of escape, the imagination, for both artist and spectator, has the potential to become the staging ground for action and agency. The absence of intricate and contradictory identity constructions in the mainstream media therefore resounds loudly. In the world of mainstream Canadian film and video production Italian characters and stories that feature chaotic and complex pictures of identity, the pull and push of being Italian in Canada, are rarely seen. While the body of films and videos, found in the margins, do explore a rich complexity of images and stories that create from diverse and multiple perspectives, unfortunately the overwhelming albatross of negative stereotypes continually overshadows and suppresses these works.

As Canada's film space is dominated by the American film industry, the influence of this negative paradigm has its effect on Canadian society and film production. The mass media then in both Canada and the United States, continues to disseminate one-dimensional renditions of Italian culture, the most recent example being the very aggressively marketed and stereotypically vulgar, violent and sexist HBO program: *The Sopranos*, which was also shown on BCE-CTV, a Canadian Public Television Network. In addition to this albatross (L'Orfano, 2002b), the world of film and video has also absorbed, upheld and perpetuated European artistic traditions. Though the prestigious film of Italy is seen as a valuable cinema, this sometimes interferes with the valuing and representation of diasporic Italian spaces and identities. Canadian film and video makers of Italian heritage who use their immigrant, oral, peasant class, and artisanal heritage, will often find their work being judged as culturally «poor» and of «no value» and most often a label of «ethnic» is also applied. It is these labels of «other» and «ethnic» that still pose additional challenges as it seems that this is where the vocabulary begins and ends.

As Tator, Henry and Mattis note,

a racially influenced discourse helps determine what gets defined as «great» literature, music, art, and what gets labeled as «primitive», «exotic», «unauthentic», «ethnic»,

«community» art [...] their case studies illustrate how cultural production and creative processes define and structure meaning, articulate and communicate authoritative messages, and embed powerful and negative images of ethno racial minorities into the collective psyche of Canadian society (Tator, 1998, p. 6).

For Italian-Canadians, one of the struggles over identity and equity is evident. There is little power, tolerance, sensitivity or understanding as a major challenge they face is «to gain control over the production of racist images and representations that permeate Canadian mainstream culture» (Tator 1998, p. 10). Canadian national identity still privileges a Eurocentric hegemony. Critical multiculturalism

deals with empowerment and resistance to subjugation, with the social transformation of social, cultural, and economic institutions, and with the dismantling of dominant cultural hierarchies, structures, and systems of representation. Critical multiculturalism imagines minority communities not as «special interest groups» but rather as active and full participants who are at the core of a shared history. [...] Multiculturalism in this context provides a framework for understanding that diversity can only be meaningful within the construct of social justice and equity (Tator, 1998, p. 261).

One of the continuing areas of tension for Canadians is that while some ethnic and visible minority groups have begun to receive more understanding and support in relation to the dangers of reproducing their stereotypes and how these can contribute to the perpetration of racism, Italian-Canadians instead, continue to be marginalized. There is a silence in academic research that explores the problem of negative stereotyping from an Italian-Canadian perspective. The awareness of the more complex field of Italian-Canadian history and experience is important. As Will Kymlicka states:

And these stereotypes were themselves often justified by reference to pseudo-scientific arguments about «racial» differences. (It is important to remember that until well into the twentieth century, Eastern and Southern Europeans were viewed as separate «races», and indeed sometimes even as «black»). The idea that all Europeans belong to a single «white» race is comparatively new) (Kymlicka 2001, p. 179).

Italian Canadian Immigration History

Most of the Italians in Canada emigrated from southern Italy and yes, should be considered part of the Southern European immigrant group. They therefore do come with a history of racist policy and practice in Canada with some contemporary challenges despite their supposed «integration». For Italian-Canadians, a racialized social construction has yet to be articulated. This discourse has

begun in the United States for Italian-Americans through texts such as Rudolph J. Vecoli's *Are Italian Americans Just White Folks?* (1997) and Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno's *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (2003) which can be used to help complexify the racial discourse for Italians in Canada.

As the immigration history of Italians in North America does show, there is a link with the experiences in Italy to those in the diasporas. (Bagnell, 1989; Ramirez, 1989; Iacovetta, 1992; Harney, 1993; Stasiulis, 1995; Vecoli, 1997; Harney DeMaria, 1998; Kelley e Trebilcock, 1998; Verdicchio, 1998; LaGumina, 1999; Richards, 1999; Sturino, 1999; Romano, 2000; Gabaccia, 2000; Lawton, 2002; Guglielmo e Salerno, 2003). As many of the emigrants came from southern Italy, they brought a history of racist treatment with them, to their host countries. «The history of racism and intolerance experienced by southern Italians from northern Italians [one can still hear *Milanesi* refer to Sicilians as *Africani*] «partly explained the southern Italian migration in the first place» (Romano, 2000). This inferior and colonial status, along with language difficulties and other immigration factors guaranteed that Italian North American identities would be «pivotally formed to include an absence of resistance to racist treatment» (Romano, 2000).

Both Will Kymlicka's and Himani Bannerji's research make important contributions to this contemporary and complex challenge of Canadian identity. Multiculturalism, because of its legal imprimatur, is here to stay. Our challenges are multiple. As various communities, whether those are divided by colour, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality or religion, continue to try to participate in the dialogue and discussion, it will be necessary to continue to balance collective identities with individual experiences. It is also important to never forget the vulnerability of power: who has it, and who does not. Bannerji's words clearly articulate this problem and its complexity as it relates to the field of culture and its connection to power.

The issue at stake, in the end, is felt by all sides to be much more than cultural. It is felt to be about the power to define what is Canada or Canadian culture. This power can only come through the actual possession of a geographical territory and the economy of a nation-state. It is this which confers the legal imprimatur to define what is Canadian or French-Canadian, or what are «sub» or «multi» cultures. Bilingualism, multiculturalism, tolerance of diversity and difference and slogans of unity cannot solve this problem of unequal power and exchange except to entrench even further the social relations of power and their ideological and legal forms, which emanate from an unproblematized Canadian state and essence. (Bannerji, 2000, pp. 105-6).

Stereotypes

Most mainstream representations therefore, both in Canada and in the United States, continue to reproduce many negative stereotypes of Italians (L'Orfano, 2000 b; Italic Studies Institute, 2001). Italian-North Americans are constantly told that the overwhelming negative media reproductions are not only supported in their representations, but are even legitimized with government financing and artistic awards. Recent Canadian examples are *Mob Stories* (2002) and *Mambo Italiano* (2003), both funded by Telefilm Canada and *Ciao Bella* (2004) funded by the Canadian Broadcast Corporation. American examples include HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999-2004) with its multiple Emmy Awards and its Canadian distributor, the CTV Network, and Dreamworks production *Shark Tale* (2004). With the issue of funding and distribution, then, we are therefore reminded of Smaro Kamboureli's «point of great importance, namely, the increasing awareness that the political and the cultural are inextricably inter-related, that they in fact inhabit the same discursive site» (Kamboureli, 1998, p. 209).

Therefore *The Sopranos* is seen as «great» art, while «other ethnic» and «unauthentic» stories are relegated to lives of quiet destitution, desperation and shame. The issues of racism and power continue to rear their ugly heads in society and hence so too in the corridors of cultural «producers».

It is then the purpose of this article to deal more directly with this tension surrounding the negative stereotype of Italian North Americans. This article expands more directly and continues to build on the same themes of the article «Let's Kiss *The Godfather* Goodbye and Bury the Boors, Buffoons, Bigots and Bimbos: The Italian Canadian Experience in Film and video» (L'Orfano, 2002b). In that article, the study organised by the Italic Studies Institute of New York was discussed. That research studied Italian Film culture in American films during the period of 1928-2001. The study took place over the seven year period from 1994-2001 and found that beginning with the sound era in 1928 up until 2001 1,220 Italian related films were produced. Of these, 31 per cent portrays Italians in a positive light or in a more complex way. The other 69 per cent of the total portrays Italians negatively as either mobsters, boors, buffoons, bimbos and bigots. The powerful bombardment of these negative stereotypical images, mostly from our neighbours on the south of our border, have and continue to have their multiple negative effects.

As Martin's words at the opening of this article demonstrate, even in 2002, the language used when dealing with Italian-Canadians includes the language of the cinema. The reel space of films and videos created, regardless of their fiction, are taken as real. This article will hence discuss the particular «mobster» mystique that is still being reproduced and used for profit in the XXI century and still having its negative effect in our communities. What will also be dis-

cussed is the way some Italian-Canadian filmmakers themselves contribute to its reproduction. As Richard Bonanno writes «Vast numbers of Italian American organizations and individuals have outwardly opposed the stereotype, yet there still remains a portion of Italian Americans who communicate their Italian-ness, as Jim Marino points out in what he refers to as the “Godfather paradox”, through an outward expression of [identification] assimilation with and reverence for the *mafioso* as depicted in films like *The Godfather* and others» (Marino quoted in Bonanno, 2001, p. 141). So too in Canada, the «Godfather paradox», persists as some Italian-Canadian filmmakers suffering from this paradox also continue to willingly produce their versions of the negative stereotypes and bigotry, the most recent Canadian example being Italian-Canadians Peter Gentile and Remo Giralto’s *Mob Stories* (2002). This is a four part series that premiered in April (2003) on Canadian History Television and was funded both by Telefilm Canada and the Canadian Television Fund.

However there is and continues to be some resistance to the negative stereotype. This, more positively, is contributing to a new level of consciousness for both artist and spectator.

Godfathers

In 1972 Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather’s* was a blockbuster success and at that time married even more solidly all Italians to the mobster mystique. In Hollywood, meanwhile, as the Italic Studies Institute study showed, an opportunistic film industry followed its success with a slew of spin-off variations (Golden, 1977; Montesano, 1997).

In Canada, though no statistical study exists on how many times the film industry reproduced this same paradigm, evidently Canadians were just as eager to cash in on the film’s success. In 1977 and 1979, the CBC produced two television series titled *Connections I and II* which «captured the imagination of viewers, but raised questions in Parliament as well» (Poronovich, 1979). These episodes were presented as documentaries on organised crime in Canada, however, once aired they were filled with innuendo directed predominantly at Italian Canadians.

According to historian Franc Sturino:

Members of the [Italian Canadian] community from Vancouver to Montreal were outraged by the distorted reportage, and a Gallup poll conducted shortly after the program aired showed that their anxiety was well founded. Fully 40 per cent of Canadians linked Italians with crime; more disturbing, of those who viewed the CBC program, 47 per cent made the linkage, compared to 37 who had not seen it. Another study conducted by sociologists on ethnic groups in Toronto in the late

1970s found that over one-quarter of Italian-Canadians had experienced intolerance and one-third believed that the group was the object of discrimination by employers, figures that were generally surpassed only by Jewish and coloured minorities (Sturino, 1999, p. 824).

Currently Italian-North Americans have faced yet again another stereotypically vulgar, violent and very aggressively marketed program: *The Sopranos*.

When it was known in 2000, that BCE-CTV planned to air HBO's pay-per-use service program on conventional television, The National Congress of Italian Canadians (NCIC) as well as other Canadians wrote to BCE-CTV to complain about this offensive program. According to «La Presse», BCE-CTV received over 2,000 letters of complaint (Morin, 2000). Meanwhile, in the United States the protest against HBO had gone on for three years as every major Italian American organization has spoken out against the program's negative discrimination.

Being involved very directly and personally in this protest and this research (CBCS, Decision 00/01-0130+, March 8, 2001; and CRCT, Commission Review of the Sopranos on CTV case 6651 Broadcasting Decision CRTC 2003-112, April 9, 2003), I began to keep an informal diary on the number of times this same mobster paradigm has bombarded and continues to bombard Canadians via their television screens. From November 2000 to June 2001, those noted on Canadian airwaves included *A&E's Empire of Crime*, *WTN's Mafia Women* (twice), *TLC's Married to the Mob*, *The Italian Job*, *Mafia*, *Meanstreets* (twice), *Scarface*, *Mobsters*, *The Godfather all three parts* (twice), *Goodfellas* (twice), *The Untouchables* (three times) the film and the series, *TVA's Bonanno: L'histoire d'un Parrain*, *Bonanno: A Godfather Story*, *Capone*, *Analyze This* (twice), *CBC's Omertà Series* (twice), *Donnie Brasco*, *The Undertaker's Wedding*, *The Sopranos*, *Two's a Mob*, *The Massucci Family* and *Capone. The Real Untouchables*. This of course does not include the Italian mobster themed plots that are integrated on such television notables as *Law & Order*, *Magnum PI*, *Murder She Wrote*, *LA Law*, *NYPD Blues*, *Crime Story*, *Spin City*, *Providence*, *Judging Amy* and most recently *Philly* which aired in November of 2001 and made use of the offensive word «guinea».

With regard to even more recent mobster films, during the early months of 2001, *Avenging Angelo* starring Sylvester Stallone and *Beauty and Power* were being filmed in Toronto, and in Halifax, the female version of mobsters in *Wisegirls* starring Mira Sorvino. I did not search out extensively these programs, but came upon them quite randomly as the result of my own television and film watching habits; therefore, I am quite sure I have missed others. More direct research is needed in order to determine whether what I found has increased following *The Sopranos*, as many are once again trying to cash in on its «success», or whether this huge dose of what Pal Di Iulio¹ refers to as

«ethnic pornography», is the normal fare. The numbers definitely concur with the Italic Studies Institute report on the quantity of programs that exist.

Looking more specifically at Canadian films produced by Italian Canadians provides a disturbing picture. Toronto independent filmmaker Sergio Navarretta's *Over a Small Cup of Coffee (Na Tazulil' e Caf , 2000)* includes some mobster characters. The film is about a character Damiano and his desire to pursue his own dreams that do not follow in his father's footsteps. Though this story could have been used to explore more fully the issue not only of cross cultural conflicts, but of conflicting definitions of «hard work» and career choices for first and second generation Canadians, something Tana has done more successfully in *La D rout * (1998), it instead portrays an Italian father who is depicted as a boor, and a cast of stereotypical characters who leave very little appeal or depth. In the filmmaker's Character breakdown in his Press Package, the three characters who are listed in order of importance, after the two main characters of Damiano (the lead) and the Father are Phil (mobster), Johnny (mobster) and Tony (mobster).

Though it is very clear in the script that Damiano's father rejects these characters, for both Navarretta and his character Damiano, the identification is more complex. The script states:

That table only I serve. They love me like a son... always want me to join «their thing» but I have other plans. The fact that they respect me so much really upsets my father. He thinks they're bad guys but I say there is no good and no bad. What we choose to do is essentially our choice, granting appropriate consequences (Navarretta, 2000b, p. 2).

This text does not transfer to the film as the dialogue is simplified even further resulting in the scene with the mobsters having very little to do with the conflicts that are trying to be explored making a viewer wonder why they have even been included. There is however the recognition that Damiano feels a sense of power over his father by being able to connect with these characters as a way to distance himself from his father's world and class, a world in which the character Damiano is ignorant of the kind of human pain and suffering that organized crime has caused.

Navarretta's fascination with mobsters is explored more prominently by Ottawa director Derek Diorio of *Distinct Features*. Diorio's identification with organized crime and criminals seems to take centre stage in at least two of the creative features his company has produced in its four year history. His very first feature debut in 1998, was *Two's a Mob*, a parody of *The Godfather*. Its description reads:

If you're a fan of mob movies then you'll love this Mafia spoof of the Vendetta family and its two loving and loyal brothers who maneuver the underbelly of the crime world in their quest for money, power and well, misguided brotherly love. This parody pays homage to some of our all-time favorite mob films (Distinct Features website).

This was followed in 2001 by *The Kiss of Debt* which is described as a «comedic operetta about three people tied together by love, hate, debt and the mob. Sometimes being stuck in a dead-end life is safer than going up against a tough mafia *Don*. But you've gotta take a chance if you've fallen in love with the *Don's* son's wife» (Distinct Features Website).

Further still we have a Montreal filmmaker who has a different though even more disturbing understanding of his *Italianità*. As Agata De Santis pointed out in her interview with filmmaker Leonardo Salvo, «Salvo's films seem to have one thing in common: the "bad guys" are always Italian. He doesn't quite know how to explain it except to say that traditionally, in literature, evil originates in Italy. "I haven't figured it out yet", he adds» (De Santis, 2001, p. 13).

As well, following on the CBC *Connections Series* model of 1979, in September of 2000, at a private film screening in Toronto, local director/producer Janko Virant, discussed with me the next project he was directing because he needed the money: one part of a six-part series, billed as a docu-drama, on the Italian mafia in Canada. This, I was told was a collaboration between History Television, Telefilm Canada and others that were not named. Virant disclosed that possibly over a million dollars in funding had already been put in place and that the producers include «some Italians». That November after numerous telephone calls and voice mail messages back and forth with Rob Gorman, the Assistant Project Coordinator at Telefilm Canada and finally after speaking with Helen Paul, the Project Coordinator, this information from Virant was neither confirmed, nor denied. Project applications and funding information are confidential. According to Paul, I would need to provide more specific details and names of those making the application and even then it might not be possible to get any more conclusive information from Telefilm while projects are «in production». Subsequently in January of 2002, I was told that Virant decided to back away from the project. A colleague of Virant's disclosed that the four part series, each part dealing with a particular Italian Canadian mobster, was presently in post-production. This information was confirmed by the series *Mob Stories* producer, Italian Canadian Remo Giralto. Clearly the «Godfather paradox» is alive and well in Canada. Navaretta, D'Iorio, Salvo and Giralto, not only have assimilated the stereotype but they have willingly reproduced it. In a 1997 article «In Godfather we Trust», written for the 25th anniversary of *The Godfather's* release, John Montesano² writes:

Particularly among young Italian men, much of the metaphorical imagery in [*The Godfather* film] lost out to scenes with guys walking around totting shot guns or meetings held in dimly lit rooms where vendettas are planned because «women and children can be careless, but not men» (Montesano, 1997).

To go beyond those that are reproducing it, the question should be asked: What is the bombardment of this mafia mystique really selling? It is important to include, not only film world experiences and incidents, but as well events taking place in the non-filmmaking communities of Canada and the United States.

Politics

Recently, in Canadian politics, the world of restaurateurs and the world of cinema a number of incidents have occurred that perhaps might begin to answer this question. Coincidentally these have all occurred within the time frame of *The Sopranos* «success». For Joseph Pivato there is no doubt as to the link between the TV series and recent events in the Canadian House of Commons. From a letter to the editor he wrote last year, «*The Sopranos* is racist since it presents a thoroughly negative view of Italians in North America. It promotes bigotry against Italians and other southern Europeans. This bigotry is having its effects in concrete ways. In Parliament, Montreal MP Alfonso Gagliano is accused of having Mafia connections just because he is an Italian immigrant» (Pivato, 2001a). Anna Mancuso, the president of the National Congress of Italian Canadians Quebec Region, responded to a «*La Presse*» article directly with her open letter «And What If Mr. Gagliano's Name Were Tremblay?»:

Now, in the media reports, being Italian means being somewhat dubious, it means being suspect. With one stroke of a pen, the whole community is stigmatized. We're guilty by association...

In short, Mr. Gagliano is Italian, so he's guilty. They're a little more prudent than that in the written press, of course. Journalists never write things in black and white. They take the more insidious route, just hinting and suggesting. That's even worse...

The community also objects to the fact that people of Italian origin always have to face doubts and suspicions about their links with organized crime. Being born in Sicilia, Sicily, does not make a person a *mafioso* anymore than being born in Sorel makes a person a Hell's Angel.

[...] In terms of ethical journalism, the question that the media should answer is this: Would an MP named Tremblay have been the subject of such a sensational lead story under the same circumstances? As members of the Italian community, we're sorry to say that after reading and seeing the media reports, we don't believe a Tremblay would have suffered such a fate (Mancuso, 2001).

On February 28, 2001, a headline in «The Globe and Mail» read «PM calls Alliance MP anti-immigrant: Angry Chretien hurls accusation in defence of MP Alfonso Gagliano». The article went on to report «The prime minister accused Alliance MP Randy White of being anti-immigrant Wednesday after he continued to hound the public works minister about alleged links to a mob family [...]. “When I see these people trying to drag this person in the mud because he is an immigrant who came to Canada [...] it is disgusting to me”, Chretien said to loud cheers from Liberal benches [...] The undertone of all of that is the fact that this gentleman is an immigrant who came from Italy. It is a smear on the people coming from that country» (Canadian Press, 2001c). Though it should be acknowledged that Chretien himself has an acute sense of political opportunism and is using the same kinds of manipulative political tactics that both the media and other politicians often use, it is equally disturbing to note how political patronage, which is sometimes embraced by both the right and the left, takes the huge leap to mafia slurs for a Canadian politician when he has an Italian name. The stereotype in this case makes a deeper cut. Gagliano himself stated «I thought we were beyond that in Canada in the year 2001 [...]. But still some people have that stereotype in their minds» (Canadian press, 2001c). Two months later Gagliano was once again smeared as another headline read «MP sorry for humming Godfather theme». This time «Bloc MP [Serge Cardin, from Sherbrooke, Quebec] apologized in the Commons on Tuesday after he was caught humming the theme from *The Godfather* while a Liberal minister of Italian descent was speaking. He made the apology after he was denounced by MPs for musically suggesting Public Works Minister Alfonso Gagliano had links with the Mafia» (Canadian Press, 2001d). The mafia slurs against Gagliano, as the opening example of this article show still continued.

Meanwhile in Edmonton, also during the month of May 2001, a similar incident was playing itself out. «During his state-of-the-city address Thursday, [Mayor Bill] Smith compared Primo Nebiolo, the late president of the International Amateur Athletic Federation, to Benito Mussolini and a Mafia boss» (Warwaruk, 2001). Edmonton District President of the NCIC, through Carlo Amodio, was quick to respond. He wrote «[w]e strongly deplore this public portrayal and stereotyping of Italians of international stature and in general, particularly when they cannot defend themselves» («Il Congresso», 2001b, p.8). The former Edmonton District President of the NCIC Salvatore Amelio wrote his letter to the Edmonton Journal: «Italians aren’t laughing at tired Mafia jokes: Mayor gives offence, fails to say he’s sorry».

It is also distressing that a number of people in today’s society think it is OK to make comments about others or other nationalities as long as it is done in jest and «no harm» is intended by it. [...]

Why do these associations immediately spring to mind in a political context? Is it a fear of all those who are not part of the mainstream?

Why is it that Mayor Smith thinks it is absolutely justifiable to connect people of Italian origin to the Mafia? (Amelio, 2001).

The use of the «mafia joke» is still very popular, still offensive and still being used within the world of politics as well as written and visual media. As Robert Harney pointed out:

[P]olitical scientist Michael Parenti notes that «every Italian American knows persons who would never utter a racist or sexist remark who seem to think themselves clever when making a joking reference about the Mafioso in our presence. It is one of those forms of bigotry that remain quite respectable». (Harney, 1993, p. 67).

Business ventures

In the world of business and for restauranteurs in both Canada and the United States, a plethora of mobster themed advertising has also appeared in the past few years. *Red Lobster*, *AT&T Communications*, *Milk*, *Blockbuster Video*, *Wendy's*, *Quizno's Subs*, *Stacker 2 Diet Pills*, *NJ's Gibbs College Parent Welcome*, *Mob-B-Que Sauce*, *Toronto Mercato's Eatery*, *Budweiser Beer*, *Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd Mafia Family Getaway* *The Valentino Family Reunion*, as well as Tours of New Jersey mob hangouts, and *Sopranoland* websites and clubs. In Stuart Elliot's 1999 «New York Times» article «Marketing and the Mob: A Marriage of Convenience Now a Madison Avenue Favorite», he writes:

A growing number of campaigns are centred on godfathers, goodfellas and wise-guys, toughs who talk in patois heavily accented in the dese-dem-dose tones of the Northeast and dress in sleeveless undershirts and pinstriped suits. The cornucopia of Corleone wannabes appears in commercials and print ads and on World Wide Web sites pitching a variety of products and services in addition to promoting films and television series with organized-crime themes (Elliot, 1999).

These «business ventures» have been and continue to be challenged by Italian-North American organizations and individuals. For Italians in Canada, a double standard exists as Amelio pointed out in his Letter to the Editor published in both «The Edmonton Journal» and «Il Congresso», «Although politicians continue to talk about the value of multiculturalism in our country, when pressed on specific issues they continue to marginalize such ethnic groups and continue to promote the stereotypes. As is evident from my examples, far too often comments of this nature are made with reference to people of Italian

origin» (Amelio, 2001). Though Sturino was writing about the mafia stereotype in the 1970s, his words are as relevant today in the twenty first century:

The mafia stereotype was an extraordinarily effective weapon by which the established elites could (through ad hoc expediency, rather than by design) successfully block challenges to their hegemony by mobile Italians in the political and economic fields. The mystique, based on gangland reality, had mass appeal; it could be converted into profit by promoters such as filmmakers, journalists, and restaurateurs; and was almost endlessly elastic (Sturino, 1999, p. 824).

Actors

The anxiety of Italian-Canadian and Italian-American organizations against what this overwhelming amount of mafia stereotyping is selling *should be* understood. Along with the it being used in politics, business and the print media, what is proving more disturbing, is the information that has been uncovered on the film front, specifically the actor front. The «endless elasticity» is holding true when we explore the actors who play these parts.

«[T]wo-time Genie award winner Tony Nardi (*La Sarrasine* 1992 and *My Father's Angel* 1999), one of [Canada's] finest actors, has left his agent of seven years, Dana Crackower, and her agency ETM» (Posner, 2001a), after refusing to audition for the role of a «greaseball Mafioso» in the latest rendition of ethnic pornography. In a March 2001 article in «Macleans», Nardi complained about being typecast in Italian stereotypical roles despite his versatile linguistic range. (Deziel, 2001, p. 33). In April of that same year, «The Globe and Mail's» Michael Posner exposed the ugly story of Nardi's split with his agent over this same issue. Nardi, in a five-page letter to ACTRA, stated «I am not a professional Italian. I'm a professional actor... I'm not ashamed to be Italian. On the contrary. It's playing a cultural stereotype I have a problem with» (Posner, 2001a). By coming forward publicly, Nardi does risk his «career to make this protest against the powerful forces of film producers and directors» (Pivato, 2001b, p. 8). Meanwhile as the result of Nardi's complaint, his Toronto union the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA Toronto), filed a formal grievance on his behalf. Sadly on August 1, 2001, the grievance was denied after TAMAC the agents union failed to support ACTRA. In its letter ACTRA alleged that Comerford had exercised «a coercive use of power» in his treatment of Nardi. According to ACTRA President Richard Hardacre, «As long as actors can be threatened and bullied by even one casting director, there will always be a problem... Our members are infuriated» («Canada News Wire», 2001).

Since Posner's exposure of Nardi's sordid story, attention continues to be directed at this problem. In June, Pivato wrote in «Il Congresso»:

Since Nardi's courageous protest other actors have come forward to complain about misconduct and misrepresentations. Actor, Frank Pellegrino, says he is «torn between the need to support my family and my disgust at the stereotypical and unimaginative view of Italians [that often pukes itself up on my fax machine in the form of a script... (Posner, 2001b)] My dilemma is always the same: «Why am I being put in this horrible position of having to regurgitate clichés in order to remain working?»

[...] We have often suspected that many Italian-Canadian and Italian-American actors did not voluntarily play all those stereotypical Mafia roles in all too many crime films. Now to the courage of Tony Nardi and Posner we know that some are coerced into those despicable roles against their own consciences and the protests of their own communities. If they want to work at all, or ever, they are forced to do these roles which depict Italians as linked to organized crime. Where is the artistic freedom here? Italian communities across North America have been protesting programs such as *The Sopranos*, now we know how some of these films are produced. It is not about art or freedom of speech but about money and power of communication conglomerates like HBO and Time Warner». (Pivato, 2001b, p. 8).

During his recent interview as part of Telelatino's *Persona Series II*, another Canadian actor and Genie award winner Nick Mancuso (*Ticket to Heaven*, 1982) explained that he too has played a few mobster parts during his acting career. While discussing this role he went on to state:

However, in terms of the overall shape of it, there is just so much crap of that type that's being made there's stereotyping and there's stereotyping [...] Italian Canadian actors rarely get an opportunity, *rarely* get an opportunity to do anything other than that. There are wonderful actors here, but I don't see enough of their presence in the standard Canadian media relative to the number of people that we represent, the third largest population in Canada. So that tells you something. It tells you something (Mancuso, 2001).

In the United States actors Paul Sorvino and John Turturro (Zwecker, 2001, p. 32) have refused to play stereotypical Italian roles again, making their statements after they have established successful careers, while a younger and new-to-the-business actor, Jennifer Guerriero, has left theatre, in part, to pursue a career in social work, because of the difficulty of winning roles which were not stereotypes. She states:

I did get very discouraged when I went on auditions, that is a fact. There is a trend now, «Multicultural Casting». They want lots of Black, Latino, and Asian people, in addition to white people. But in order to have a nice contrast, they would

pick very white looking whites. I didn't fit in anywhere. When I was cast, I always played a «Tough talking chick» or a «Woman of loose morals», (if you know what I mean) (Guerriero, email Oct. 22, 2001).

Recently even James Gandolfini, *aka Tony Soprano*, who has also been playing stereotypical mob roles for a decade, has been quoted as saying «I don't think I will do a Mafia character again. I want to get away from the violence a little bit, because it is starting to bother me personally» (Rush and Molloy, 2001).

The question should definitely be asked: Are these actors playing their parts as professionals, as pawns, or a bit of both? Do they really have a choice? Though Fanon was not discussing the mafia mystique or the «Godfather paradox», his words do resonate in this context.

Fanon asks us to remember the violence of identification, the material practices of exclusion, alienation, appropriation, and domination that transform other subjects into subjected others. Identification is not only how we accede to power, it is also how we learn submission (Fuss, 1995, p. 14).

Conclusion

As this article has tried to establish, the negative stereotyping of Italian-North Americans is a continuing problem. As noted, the powerful domination of Canadian mainstream media with the negative stereotypical rendition of Italian-North Americans has definitely influenced the creative product and identifications of some Canadians as well. Money and power are seductive bedfellows. The stereotype is repeated over and over again sometimes by actors and filmmakers who are Italian. They do this at times because they need the money and at other times because they feel it is a creative endeavor. Yet the most dangerous reason of all for participating in its reproduction is because these actors and filmmakers suffer from the «Godfather paradox» that has taken hold of their psyches. Like Coppola who took the job of directing *The Godfather* because he too needed the money, it seems that actors and directors of Italian heritage can get stuck in a vicious cycle.

This financial success therefore has a human price that begins with our artists and ends with the creation of false and hurtful perceptions in our communities that go beyond the reel to the real. As we are seeing, sometimes at great cost, but with great spiritual rewards, the cultural stereotype can be actively resisted and does not have to be passively adopted or embraced. The actions of the protestors, as well as the actions of actors such as Nardi, which are only recently starting to be discussed, are all contributing towards raising the level of consciousness on this difficult problem, both within Italian-North American

communities as well as within the mainstream of our society. This bodes extremely well for the national cinemas in both Canada and the United States that are being challenged to make room for Italian-Canadian and Italian-American representations that go beyond this one-dimensional paradigm. More importantly it is hoped that the result of this challenge to how Italian-North Americans are represented will have a positive effect on the language used and the perceptions that are developed when referring to Italian-Canadians and Italian-Americans. However as some of the examples in this article demonstrate, the language of the cinema is and continues to be extremely powerful, and limiting in defining our communities. It is also noted that the mainstream albatross of Hollywood conglomerates and their Canadian affiliates on the northern side of the border, are formidable opponents. Corporations will only let go of this financially rewarding negative stereotype when individuals stop watching, stop reproducing and stop buying it. For individuals however, the bigger challenge will be in understanding the stereotype's racist history both past and present, while also resisting its controlling effect and dangerous influence.

Notes

- ¹ Pal Di Iulio is the President and CEO of Villa Charities in Toronto and in his letter of protest to BCE-CTV re: *The Sopranos* he referred to the defamation of Italians as «ethnic pornography». His letter, one of many, was included in the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council Complaints-CBSC Decision 00/01-0130+, March 8, 2001.
- ² John Montesano is presently the Vice-President at *Telelatino Television* (TLN), one of Canada's Ethnic broadcasting stations created in 1984 to support both Italian and Hispanic audiences. It now broadcasts *The Sopranos* series after the majority interest in TLN was purchased by Corus Entertainment Inc. who brought *The Sopranos* to western Canada. Today it now broadcasts this show via TLN to central Canadian homes and to ethnic audiences. While Montesano was more sympathetic to this problem of negative ethnic stereotyping with his 1997 «*Globe and Mail*» article on *The Godfather's* 25th anniversary, today he and the remaining shareholders of TLN which include prominent members of the Italian Canadian business community, demonstrate with their broadcasting of *The Sopranos* that the «Godfather paradox» persists and is supported at TLN.

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