

Giorgio Mangiamele's *The Spag*

Silvana Tuccio

The University of Melbourne

Which film do you cherish the most? From a sentimental point of view... *The Spag*. It is not at the same level technically as the other films, but my heart is in that film. Why, which are the aspects?... the persecution felt by the child because of racism, etc. That's what I saw then. And that is what persists today¹.

We can now begin to see why the novel is called *L'Etranger*. For after all, a person who limits himself to the present tense is unusual. He is a «stranger» among his fellows, with their pasts and their futures, their regrets and their aspirations. Being so unlike them, so «bizarre» as Marie puts it, he is exiled and alone. Every time he opens his mouth he declares himself unwittingly, an exile in society².

The «outsider» as *foreigner*³ is a figure that is a-historical within the context that defines his or her being an «outsider». He or she does not connect to the continuity of linear historical time – for he has not shared the past of the society he has entered from any point of entry. He is a discontinuous element that disrupts the continuity of history, both that of the context in which he inhabits and that which he has left behind. In the new context the «outsider» appears to have no «history», at least on the surface. He is not, at least upon «arrival», connected to any element of that time and place – if not by the desire or a conceived and organised plan to arrive at this time and place, in turn intersecting with a pre-existing «plan» of that society to have newcomers settle in the country for the purposes that were relevant to that historical point in time. Liminal points of passage transport the «outsider» to a destined place, a place that is usually unprepared for this arrival. Furthermore, the act of transporting implies that any «root» is firmly eradicated.

Camus' concept of the stranger, as is elucidated in the work of fiction *L'Etranger*, is focused on the individual. It is the individual who is posited as the element that is disruptive of mores, who introduces a new reflection on what is believed to be the «right» way to behave and to exist both within one's individual moral outlook and in the society he inhabits. Camus' outsider is an individual whose existential nature is *intellectually* segregated from society. Intellectually-based thinking is posited against the «non-thinking» body of people as a society. The violence he enacts is offensive twice over – toward the moral body of the society in which he acts out his life and towards the physical body of an/Other human being. Paradoxically, however, as the narrator would have us believe, the violence is enacted in an «un-thinking» way. Furthermore, the individual «act» of thinking about separateness and «physically» seeing one's detachment in scenarios that depict *L'Etranger's* protagonist in relation to the crowd assisting his trial, the priest's worldview, and the target of his violence, set him up as a person who has «instigated» and «confirmed» his «outsider» status. Kristeva (1991, p. 27) writes: «They give us back (the protagonist's words) – with respect to objects and states – that “separate” lucidity the community's function is to erase».

In the short film *The Spag*, which Giorgio Mangiamele filmed and produced in 1962, the «outsider» is a *foreigner*, and the foreigner is enacting a strategy in order to be at «home» in the alien land: finding work, socialising, being part of the neighbourhood. But Mangiamele is aware, as Camus was, that the status of *foreigner* – just by opening his mouth «he declares himself an exile» – is an intellectual condition and that there is no bridge that might connect one with the history of the place: emotionally, physically, psychically. Confronted with an alien land, the senses are accosted with irrelevance (Camus' absurd), there is no resonance, recognition nor communion with the customs of that society (an absence is felt), the only means left in order not to be overwhelmed by loss (Kristeva, 1991, p. 5) is to intellectually apprehend the «world». Survival, then, is intellectual, and it is creative. For the reality is that one must begin «creating» one's new existence, eking out threads of meaning to intertwine with the new time that is being enacted (the new history) (Agamben, 1993), slowly dissolving the foreign stance, and «creating» the place of one's belonging.

In tapping her own African-American culture, Morrison is also eager to credit «foreigners» with enriching countries where they settle. «After the “please...let us in”», she said «comes the other thing, the creative energy that is carried inside them» («New York Times», 15 November, 2006).

In the film *They're a Weird Mob* (1966), which poses the question of how the *foreigner* «connects» with the new reality, the answer is not by one's own cre-

ative impulse, but by the way one manages to overcome the «humiliation» and «corruption» of one's essential nature enacted by the members of the established society on one's humanity and physical body (Hoorn, 2003, pp. 165-67). Once these «initiation» rituals are completed the *foreigner* must adopt the behaviour that makes up the social exchange and communication amongst the members of that society, and in terms of occupation, he or she must taken on work of the most inferior level. As the lead female protagonist of *They're A Weird Mob* expounds: «one must start at the bottom», and by inference not continue in one's field of work, recounting how her Irish father, once in Australia, turned to bricklaying, rather than continuing to be a sergeant. Difficult to imagine how a business woman would choose to advise the person she will later «fall for» and marry to be a bricklayer and not a journalist, the profession he had practiced, an intellectually-based profession.

In *They're a Weird Mob*, any intellectual status (as a journalist, as a foreigner, as a human being) is suppressed, and any «thinking» about the *foreigner's* past, let alone what he is experiencing is «out of the picture», not entertained, nor suggested. What would Walter Chiari make of this film forty years on? What is certain is that the lead actor Walter Chiari was not a relocated person and would never be. Walter Chiari is an important figure in Italian film history. In contrast, the Australian film industry would not have been able to offer a suitable role to such a preeminent star⁴.

The character of «Nino» in *They're a Weird Mob*, played by Walter Chiari, was useful to filmmaker Michael Powell as a distinctive point of contrast in order to highlight and put on display the features of the Australian sub-culture in question, which in turn were being viewed and represented by a filmmaker from another country, as Powell was in fact English, and did see Australia as an «upside» down place – the opening shots of the film in fact depict this phenomenon in a literal (and rather humorous) way. Therefore, interest in «Nino» went no further than his «contact» with this sub-culture and its «strange» but delightfully idiosyncratic habits or customs – this was, we are led to believe, the «dominant» culture. As for Nino, there is no interest displayed in his past, his family, or other places he has lived. Nino has no history. Instead, as Hoorn brings to our attention, there was explicit interest in Nino's physical body. After all it is the «body» that must be subjugated in order for attitudes of the mind to change, and it is the «body» which provides «erotic» interest, even when the person is being either «humiliated» or «appropriated» for the purpose of displaying an «exotic» subject.

But most importantly, Nino does not «eke out threads of meaning to intertwine with the new time»; he does not dissolve the foreign stance, precisely because it is unmentioned and consequently suppressed. There is no «space» for this kind of «utterance» or «articulation», that is of one's departure point,

where one is coming from – literally, psychologically and filmically. Nino will be nothing more than a «puppet» Australian. He is furthermore, as a foreigner, not aware of his «outsider» status, because the «outsider» in him has been subjugated by the brute force of «integration» or «assimilation»; the initiation rites have worked and he has learnt all that is required of him by the people of that place to find him acceptable. In the end Nino has married the language, the «culture» and into an Irish-Australian family; his being Italian is finally redundant or a token fact. And his «outsider» status has become a sublimated, hidden and poorly assimilated fact.

Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness. (Fanon, 2006, p. 4).

It is not difficult reading Frantz Fanon's words to exchange «black» with «southern European» or any minority group in Australia. And in a film like *They're a Weird Mob*, what is being enforced is the colonizer's imperative. We in fact have no inkling on whether Nino does in fact wish to renounce his Italianness (his southern European «colour») – he appears a docile and acquiescing figure, his transition to «Australian» status is rather quick. But what if the experiment failed and Nino «fought» back or was a «slow learner» – would the mates have got seriously frustrated and nasty? Or what if Nino got frustrated and nasty. The film, in fact, might be seen as presenting a positive image of Italians in a climate that was generally hostile towards anyone of Italian origin, being depicted by the media in a negative way (Hoorn, 2003, p. 169). However, it appears that for such an operation to be successful the onus is on the *foreigner* to display acquiescence (and make himself thoroughly likable), in order for acceptance by the dominant group to take place.

Giorgio Mangiamele, who worked in Melbourne, was aware that the «rites» of assimilation were an expression of violence on the human subject. Mangiamele's appraisal of the social climate in Melbourne in the fifties and sixties, especially with regard to the presence of *foreigners* was critical of the social dynamics both from *within* the foreigners/outside standpoint and from the discriminatory/racist climate which apprehended the foreigner. Since the subject/s of humiliation, violence and discrimination to which Mangiamele was witness, were either himself, his family and the people who had traveled with him from similar departure points in the world – he could not «laugh» or downplay the reality of the human subject vulnerable to the forces of racism

and the demands of either assimilation, and what would later become multiculturalism.⁵ In his cinematic work Mangiamele was in the privileged position of being able to portray the story from the point of view of the *foreigner*, with its rich tapestry of survival tactics, attempts at bridging cultures, settling, creative and entrepreneurial stories⁶, for it is not *how much* they become «Australian» but *how* they become Australian.

This drama, rarely freely chosen, is also the drama of the stranger. Cut off from the homelands of tradition, experiencing a constantly challenged identity, the stranger is perpetually required to make herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogenous present (Chambers, 1994, p. 6).

What is evident in *The Spag*, the short film which Mangiamele declares in an interview, as his favourite, is that «*that* place of belonging» is a highly charged space – violence, nostalgia, dispossession are outcomes – for in *that* space one must, if one is to be less an «outsider» and no longer in exile, as Masters states: make «past and future» meet, come to terms with «regrets and aspirations», be a «fellow» amongst other fellows, in short enact the role of the «living»; and finally as Chambers puts it: «make herself at home». Mangiamele was aware that to represent the point of encounter between the «rights» of a human being in any context (in order not to be relegated or remain in the crushing non-space of the «outsider») that a struggle was to be enacted and/or most importantly *represented*. Mangiamele's struggle is intellectual and in the neo-realist fashion is interested in showing the «reality» of a social situation, even if it is unpleasant or highlights the injustice pertinent to that situation. And in any case Mangiamele's characters speak from within a condition: confronted with racism and oppression they are nevertheless people who have come from somewhere, who have aspirations, who think about their life and the challenges they are facing, and they are apprehending the community and the environment by which they are surrounded. And so, perhaps, the «story» in *The Spag* is that attempt at creating a condition of «home» – whilst dealing with «a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogenous present». The boy is the «bridge» that might allow a connection to take place, a delivery into society and most importantly, into a culture (though it barely exists, being in fact created by the very process of «bridging» place and time).

The making of films for Mangiamele was a continuation of his personal history and aspirations beginning in postwar Italy, but it was also his «intellectual» response to a situation that he was witness to, created by the forces of displacement, the movement of people, the disruption of history. Armando Gnisci (1998, p. 68) writes:

The act of migration tests dignity and courage. It transcends the material determinant of absolute necessity and it divests itself of the collective mask and imaginary of the nation in order to be able to build a proper and human existence, which is anonymous only because it does not yet have a name⁷.

Armando Gnisci cites examples of the *foreigner*-cum-writer in countries where foreign presence is historically significant (through colonization or emigration), including Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka writing in English or French, García Márquez, Pablo Neruda writing in Spanish (Gnisci, 1998, p. 20). These writers, however, do stand above national categories, having transcended their «foreigner» status, as Kristeva (1991, p. 40) delineates: «when your otherness becomes a cultural exception [...] you are recognized as a great artist [...] the entire nation will appropriate your performance». Gnisci (1998, p. 21) argues that foreigners who have settled in Italy and are writing in Italian are to be acknowledged as part of contemporary literature (in fact mainstream publishers have taken up the challenge), recognising that literature can be enriched and invigorated by this very presence⁸. The appraisal of the presence of the *foreigner* in the social landscape of contemporary Italy, is that of a figure who is not only a likely member of the labour force, (and indeed requiring that infringement of human rights be guarded) but also an intellectual and writer (learned people, with degrees, writing in their adopted language)⁹. For Gnisci (1998, p. 20), the new voice in literature is the voice of the *migrante*: «they work like the ancient mysterious priests [...] who were in direct contact with the visceral and incomprehensible languages of the world; for they were the ones who could render them into a language that was comprehensible»¹⁰.

In Australia, an artist like Giorgio Mangiamele found himself up against the category of *foreigner*, both externally constructed, by the impact with the settled and «historically» acknowledged society, but also as part of the individual condition of exile once relocation has taken place and borders accessed. Giorgio Mangiamele found himself in the non-space of the *migrante* (where in terms of human rights no internationally ratified convention has ever existed¹¹). As a figure in exile, an outsider apprehending history, language and identity, aware of the fissures created by transit, and an intellectual, Mangiamele did not succumb to the demands of «silencing» and «categorization».

Migrancy, on the contrary, [as opposed to travel] involves movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming – completing the story, domesticating, the detour – becomes an impossibility (Chambers, 1994, p. 5).

In fact, Mangiamele did not dwell on any idea of return or homecoming, immersed as he was in the here and now of his situation and the contemporaneity of his work, where images (and he could only capture these in the place he was inhabiting), had to provide him with a meaning and with an art form – in short they had to work for him, and he in turn was propelling the force of history, and the breaking of barriers that the condition of exile demanded. The challenge that Mangiamele faced was nothing less than that of developing and creating a language, both visual and cultural, by which to apprehend the «history» or the confrontation with the artificial «void» of historical connection. Mangiamele's filmic language like Camus' literature work to place the «outsider» within a historical framework – where one does not yet exist, for this kind of «separate» or «separated» individual.

For Camus, the «outsider»¹² has renounced all connection to place, time, customs, people, arriving at an extreme position where an appraisal must be made of one's intentions or motivations in relation to life: either to continue «to live» because there is meaning to be found, or «to die» (even symbolically, spiritually, culturally) because there is no meaning (the absurd is prevalent in all things). In fact, *L'Étranger's* protagonist chooses the latter option. The *foreigner* as *outsider* is in a similar position: the question posed is whether to continue to make meaning, and/or to find it where it seems lost, buried or in conception, or to lose sight of any kind of meaning and retract upon perpetual nostalgia or reliance upon a previous «value» system, for example, related to a previous or preceding «nationhood», or to retract into a self-referral system which assures the «purity» of one's thoughts and «consensual affirmation» of one's actions, though within a void.

As Albert Abou Abdallah states in conversation with Amina Crisma: «The life of the *migrante* is a life of thresholds»¹³. And Amina Crisma adds:

On the topic of «thresholds», of an opening that becomes fertile acquisition, [...] I wish to talk about Francois Cheng, born in China in 1929, living in France since 1949... in his autobiographical novel he evokes the intense solitude and the sense of displacement of the foreigner exiled in an alien land [...] in contrast to this experience, in which the most difficult aspect is the sense of foreignness in relation to oneself, «not being able to connect the past life with the present, non being able to fully tell anyone about it», follows the experience of «finding one's way, and finding oneself»¹⁴.

Creatively apprehending one's life and connection to the surrounding environment, to go beyond nation and nationality and create something new, seems to be the means by which a *foreigner* can enter *history*. Perhaps, but the relevant point is that Mangiamele wanted to *tell* someone – perhaps in Italy, perhaps

for posterity, how the condition of the *migrante* in Melbourne in the 1950s was pictured. Papastergiadis (2003, p. 9) provides an anecdote on the importance of the «development of a visual language» in this case, for indigenous Australian society:

The complicated process of developing a visual language that could both reflect back a sense of continuity but also speak into the spaces that they were coming into as the salutary achievement of the artists. Perkins describes this struggle to both reveal the survival of traditional culture and articulate new innovative forms of communication through the concept of «parallel universe». In this mapping of the world, it is from within the dialogue between culture and politics that identity is formed.

Mangiamele was an artist whose social conscience was finely tuned, his work on pertinent issues through cultural means is political in nature – observing and representing (rather than denying). He took the means that he had to speak and to show what was happening in Melbourne during those turbulent, disorienting and distressing years. And throughout this drama he worked to develop his visual language – a language that took account of the human subject not for the purposes of fetishism, propaganda, or ridicule, but as a figure caught up in the machinations of global shifts and movements, and who found him or herself in that particular time in history (global history) in an Australian city. The people in Mangiamele's films had arrived from elsewhere in the world, a place that was quite specific, readable and relevant. This other place and other life broke into the narrative and created a layer of meaning to the superstructure of his work. Iain Chambers (1994, p. 3) writes: «History is harvested and collected, to be assembled, made to speak, re-membered, re-read and rewritten, and language comes alive in transit, in interpretation».

The Spag, like all of Mangiamele's early films, is marked by the Italian stories within it – there are no scenes shot in Italy, nor is there historical footage (this would be the work of filmmakers in the eighties), but the «nationality» or the «racial» background of the leading protagonists is Italian. The boy and his immediate family are of Italian origin. The story is about them. All the other characters are angloaustralians: the friend, the landlord, the hooligans, the show-owners. The family are, of course, also *foreigners*, for they do not know the language (though in the filmic space they all speak English), they eat food that is not angloaustralian (such as spaghetti, hence the title of the film), they are unstable and displaced – looking for work, dealing with nostalgia, learning the language, in short «working» to survive. Trinh Min Ha (1991, p. 194) writes:

Yet, for those who remain strangers in their homeland and foreigners in their new homes, feeling repeatedly out of place within every familiar world, it is vital to question settlement, as well as to make it easier for the diversely unsettled ones to bear the anxieties of unwanted seclusion. Home and language in such a context never become nature. What in their underlying assumptions tends to recede into dogma or orthodoxy has to be made visible in their skillfully kept invisibility.

Home and language in such a context never become nature. The *foreigner* has an important role to play in the act of establishing a connection with the context of his new time and place, within which his foreignness will slowly dissipate, not because he transforms and inhibits his «nature» and adopts «other» behaviour but because in the act of making himself visible – he needs to speak about his history – where roots once were established, acknowledge this life in an/other time and place. In *The Spag* the character of the boy is set up to act as the bridge which promises to detail the passage of a leaving and arriving (he is our witness), he will connect the past to the present and future, remembering the other place and other tongue, he will not only learn the new «ways» dictated by the environment and society, but he will make *his* way. The boy is the becoming and transforming into «naturalness» and the exploration of the meaning of the journey undertaken and the intersection with an/Other history. But hopes are greater than the pain meted by reality. Enacting one's visibility requires resources that are perhaps denied or suppressed by the violence of overt or discrete racism (and/or other forces). Mangiamele is fond of this short film not only due to the depiction of racism, which he apprehended as quite real, and the connection to the boy, as perhaps the childlike wonder/horror that he might have experienced (or even his young children), but because he identifies with the struggle, to overcome oppression and to be somebody (and not an «outsider») within that particular society occurring in that time and place, which he must have felt was a right. Chambers (1994, p. 6) writes:

To come from elsewhere, from «there» and not «here», and hence to be simultaneously «inside» and «outside» the situation at hand, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive arrangements along emerging routes.

Notes

- ¹ One of the few existing interviews with Giorgio Mangiamele, (Lampugnani, 2002, p. 24). Other interviews by Graeme Cutts (1992), Quentin Turnour (1997).
- ² Brian Masters (1974, p. 23) writing on Camus.

- 3 The foreigner and outsider are two existential figurations of the human being that tend to overlap, at times they are synonymous, often an outsider status defines the foreigner. However the outsider status also defines any figure that is excluded (voluntarily or involuntarily). The outsider status is an existential condition. The intellectual has an affinity with the outsider.
- 4 Recently, some Hollywood actors, including Harvey Keitel, Susan Sarandon, have starred in Australian films.
- 5 As, Sneja Gunew and Ghassan Hage argue, multiculturalism has worked to maintain categories, and as has excluded many from decision making processes and roles, for the «multicultural» minorities are set against the dominant majority.
- 6 The stories that circulate on Italian settlement in Australia tend to dwell on elements concerned with public life (businesses, clubs, careers, etc.), rather than any appraisal of the deeper challenges due to being «foreign».
- 7 My translation.
- 8 Today, in Australia, being raised to national status, might happen to expert chefs who nevertheless must retain their «Italianess» (never be Italian-Australian) in order to communicate authenticity. Though, of course, in Italy, these expert chefs remain completely unknown.
- 9 See Comberinati (2007)
- 10 My translation.
- 11 The UN convention on the rights of the migrant workers and their families (1990) has not to date been adopted. See page «I diritti umani delle persone migranti» in www.dirittiumani.donne.aidos.it and www.migrantsrights.org Global Campaign for Ratification of the Convention Rights of Migrants.
- 12 Camus' *outsider*, however, does not recognise the humanity of the person to whom he negates life, and in this way, has in turn generated another outsider (defined by his cultural difference, rather than indifference to culture).
- 13 See Crisma, Amina, «Intervista tete-a-tete sul concetto della soglia», in *Trickster*, Year 1, 1, June 2006, Università di Padova, Web magazine www.trickster.lettere.unipd.it.
- 14 *Ibid.* My translation.

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