THE ARCHIVE AND ITS SILENCES

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The Archive is in itself a conservative institution: its function is to preserve, to order and to classify materials often found in precarious situations. For their very functions audiovisual archives need to collect, preserve but also make available their materials to scholars. They are expensive operations to run and therefore they often are managed by a state, a university, a cultural foundation or a commercial/private institution. Their motivations in preserving materials are easily detected by identifying the specific institution they represent: national history, a specific heritage, or corporate or private collections. Therefore archives have a task and an implicit agenda, which must be acknowledged if we want to research a certain topic, and look for the "right" archive to search.

In addition, if it is true that History is written by the winners (from a political, social, and ethnic point of view), the national archive aims to preserve a type of visibility (according to the socio-cultural definition elaborated by Pierre Sorlin in *Sociologie du cinéma*[1]), chosen according to criteria of documentation, which automatically select a point of view and exclude certain topics and subjects. For instance LUCE does not contain images of the Resistance, if not the negative ones of captured partisans contained in the German newsreels LUCE distributed during the Republic of Salò. And the partisans were too busy fighting the war of Liberation to think about documenting their actions, which therefore exist mostly as re-enactments in later materials, as in the case of *Aldo dice 26x1* (Fernando Cerchio, 1946).

And it does not come as a surprise that the archive of LUCE does not contain any images of Italian emigration, until the 1950s: considered a national shame, not only emigration was not documented in the official news, but it was erased from national history. The only existing material from the 1920s is a clip entitled *Porto di Napoli*, which is a long shot (and a long take) of an ocean liner in the harbor of Naples, crowded with people, in no way recognizable as emigrants.

Silence is not a matter of reading or interpretation, if not for what it tells us about the politics of the institution: no footage, no visibility. Silence is negation, erasure of an event from public memory, at times forever.

In the past I have worked on some of these "holes," specifically on these two silences, and learnt what can function as a substitute for the audiovisual archive as a source, with a touch of fantasy and luck – which is a key element in any story dealing with archives. We need an authentic sense of History, that is, restituting to the object of study its status as the subject of history. In the two previous cases, we can establish that the antagonistic position of the subject, being he/she an emigrant or a partisan, did not allow for his/her representation: not an objective representation, simply a presentation, an access to visibility. Therefore if we want to see them, we should look in antagonistic sources such as American and Allied newsreels, or American and South American

audiovisual materials, and there we can find documentary images of fighting partisans or struggling emigrants. There might be also another source, motivated by the eventual political-cultural legitimation acquired by the subjects: fiction films. *Paisà* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946) and *Roma città aperta* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) are sound historical sources, as authentic and realistic in the representation of the Resistance (or even more so) than the re-enacted liberation of Turin in *Aldo dice 26x1*. In the case of Italian emigration there might also be American fiction films and a few Italian ones, but it is necessary to navigate through stereotypes, prejudices and strong fictional elements.

An interesting archival and documental source on Italian emigration in America, which is not only audiovisual in nature, is the Ruggeri collection at George Eastman House, in Rochester USA. This collection includes some Italian and Neapolitan films made in New York (*Santa Lucia Luntana*, *Farfariello in The Movie Actor*, *Napoli che canta*) as well as a series of movie theatre programs, which document the distribution of these films in the city. In fact, as discussed by the author in *Piccole Italie, grandi schermi*[2] in the 1930s an immigrant Italian performer in North America had two options: it was possible to move to Hollywood, with the risk of being confined to the background or of being frequently labeled as a negative stereotype; or else one could contrast the negative American attitude towards Italians by remaining in Little Italy and creating a non-assimilated world of entertainment, in the tradition of the home country. For many artists, the second alternative became a necessity with the introduction of sound, when casting was limited by the ethnic mark of the accent, or the ability of speaking English. As a result, the immigrant stage developed new modes of production and broadcasted radio programs in Italian, and even made films. From the cultural point of view, in so doing, it maintained the traditional formats of *sceneggiata* (popular drama with songs) and *macchietta* (comic musical characterization), while in terms of technology and economics of production, it used an American, modern approach. Thus, with the advent of sound in cinema, on the East Coast, ethnic and non-assimilated communities started making films in their own languages, often containing songs, shooting them in the old studios managed by the majors before the World War I (before they moved to the West Coast) such as the Metropolitan studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey.

Here again the socio-cultural identification of the subject of history is crucial: one needs to be aware of the complex and rich experience of the emigrant stage, acknowledging the role Neapolitan music and theatrical formats such as *macchietta* and *sceneggiata* played at the time. This acknowledgment requires a careful inspection of the history of production of the audiovisual materials, collected at Rochester, in order to establish without any doubt, if the film was made in the US or if it was imported from Naples, and subtitled or dubbed for distribution in the US.

Among the film titles in the collection, there is *Santa Lucia Luntana* (Harold Godsoe, 1931), a *sceneggiata* which had the significant American title of *The Immigrant*, and was the Italian-American adaptation of a famous Neapolitan *sceneggiata* by the same title, composed by Oscar Di Maio. The dialogue of the film was spoken in three languages, English, Neapolitan and Italian, and the narrative expressed the nostalgia of the Southern Italian emigrant living in New York. *Santa Lucia Luntana* works better than any other documentary, to tell us about the life, the values, the dreams and the dramas of Italian emigrants in New York in the early 1930s, as the viewing of the beginning of the film could demonstrate.

The immigrant's dream, however, was not the American Dream but one of returning to Naples, even though the film gave space to the contradictory effort of at least a partial integration in a society that was really hostile.

Santa Lucia Luntana narrates the troubles of a Neapolitan immigrant in New York, Don Ciccio (Raffaele Bongini), and his difficulties in accepting different (that is, American) attitudes in rela-

tion to family values. He is a widower and works hard to support his family, which includes Elsa (Carmela Fazio) who is dating a rich American but is not formally engaged to him, Mickey (Orazio Cammi), the *guappo* son, and Elena (Yolanda Craluccio), the good daughter who, as many Italian-American women of the time, works in the textile industry and is engaged to an all-Neapolitan man.

Given the rarity of these materials and the difficulty of access, we propose here a close reading of some sequences of the text. The film starts on the notes of the famous song *Santa Lucia luntana*, also known as *Partono i bastimenti*... ("The ships leave…"), the nostalgic chant of the emigrant thinking of Santa Lucia (a popular neighborhood of Naples), which is *luntana* ("too far away"). The song functions as a prologue, accompanied by conventional images of Naples. When the song ends the imaginary journey moves in the streets of the Lower East Side of New York. There is a birthday party: young people dance at the rhythm of modern American music, while Elena and her *fiancé* Mario (Carlo Renard) look at the dancers disapprovingly. Elena's sister, Elsa, hastily introduces her father Don Ciccio to her friends, but leaves him to welcome her American boyfriend, who gives her an expensive bracelet as a present. She hugs him in public and does not introduce him to her father. *Chista è l'Ammerica!* ("This is America!") patiently explains Don Ciccio to a Neapolitan friend, who disapproves of her behavior. The dances become even wilder, while Elsa pulls her skirt up doing Charleston. A gunshot from the street interrupts the party: Mickey is chased by a policeman. Rudely he tells his father "Shut up, old man!" while Elsa complains because he spoiled her party, as the guests leave. In the living room a policeman questions Mickey about the gunshot, but he does not collaborate and does not listen to Don Ciccio, whom he sends away, in Neapolitan and English: "*Iattavenne, papa*. Get out old man." In Neapolitan (which is the only language her *fiancé* speaks) Elena complains with Mario about the attitude of her brother and sister towards her father, who, on his side, may be too soft. Mario comments: "I do not like what happens in this house… In Naples things are different. Children still respect their parents." "I wish I could be there," says Elena, and Mario sighs: "Maybe…" Back in the apartment Don Ciccio apologizes to his Neapolitan friend Gaetano, who notes: "Dear Don Ciccio, you are having a lot of troubles with these children." Don Ciccio tries to make Mickey reason to no avail. He is desperate and Elena cries with her father.

Therefore the two "bad children" are the assimilated ones, seduced by the American way of life, which is symbolized by modern music, easy money (the bracelet) and violence (the gunshot), and which produces disrespect for parents and cultural traditions, as signified by the preference for English. Elena instead speaks Neapolitan with her boyfriend and is affectionately respectful of her father, even if she recognizes his limits, his "softness." Italian-American culture clashed with Americanization on the very issue of the family: the relations, the internal hierarchy. While the film hints at social reality and economic problems as relevant factors in the narrative, family relations and affective ties remain at the core of this *sceneggiata*, according to the Neapolitan traditions of a genre which indulges in sentimental or passional songs, using them as its main asset. But – as a Neapolitan would say – for their parents, children are always *piezz 'e core* ("pieces of heart") and especially for an emigrant, living for his family.

We see Don Ciccio early in the morning (as it seems usual for him) getting ready to go to work together with his friend and neighbor Gaetano, commenting the latest events with him in Neapolitan. The emphasized presence of neighbors throughout the film reminds us of the sense of community which characterized Italian-American life, when people from the same Italian village in America lived in one single street or in the same building: staying together in defense against a difficult world they could also speak the same dialect, worship the same saints, and cook the same recipes, and, as in this film, work together.

Early in the morning Elena too gets up, dresses and sends a kiss towards her (dead) mother's portrait before going to work, while Elsa awakes and calls Mickey at noon: they speak English among themselves and it is evident that they do not work. This ethics of work is a new theme for a *sceneggiata*, and emphasizes the already changed perception of values within the Italian-American community, which aspires to make honest money and accepts hard work, prioritizing the *jobbo* in a way that would be unconceivable in a Neapolitan *sceneggiata*.

Later in the afternoon, in the streets of Little Italy, Don Ciccio shops to fix dinner for the family. At home he tells Mickey that he can talk to his friend at the bank to find him a job, since he is becoming an old man, but Mickey is not interested. Elsa is getting ready to go out but refuses to let her father know where and with whom. Don Ciccio laments in Neapolitan: "America is the land of richness and happiness. But for whom?"

Elena returns home depressed, while Elsa, all dressed-up, is ready to go out, as soon as a car honks for her, but asks her father to button her shoe. It is Elena who helps her, but when alone with her father, she confesses that she has been fired. Don Ciccio worries because she does not feel like having her dinner, and insists: "Do you want me to fix you something else?" and reassures her: *Un jobbo se trova e se nun se trova mangiammo lo stesso* ("A job can be found, and even if we do not find it, we still have enough to eat.") And shows her savings. When Mario arrives they all speak Neapolitan, saying how much they all miss Naples, but Don Ciccio is afraid of being too old to hope to see Naples again. While Mario insists on this dream of returning home, Don Ciccio bitterly notes: *Sta terra si è pigliata tutto: gioventù energia forza e magari la dignità* ("This land took away everything from me: youth, energy, strength and maybe even dignity.") Interestingly enough these bitter comments are expressed in Italian, never in English, as if the filmmakers felt that they were appropriate for the emigrants who shared this non-integrated attitude, in direct criticism to the American dream.

When alone with Mario, Elena explains to him that her (Italian) boss tried to kiss her and she defended herself with her scissors, and complains about how hard it is for an honest girl to keep her job. She complains that her brother does not work, and hints at the weakness of her father: "This house is like a boat shaken by the wind and without a steering wheel. Where can it go?" For Mario the solution is always the same: going back to Naples. "Why don't you come with me, where the people are sincere, and the landscape is beautiful?" The film expresses the tensions developing in this Neapolitan family in New York in reference to work and family relations, blaming the problems onto American conditions of life, and idealizing the home country, or better, their city-Naples. This regional identification is a very strong trait of Italian immigrant culture, which changed slowly only in the 1930s, when the social stabilization caused by the quota which stopped the arrival of Italian workers, sound media (radio and film) and fascism encouraged a stronger identification with "Italianity." The mixing of dialects and Italian with English in the dialogues seems to point to an early phase of this transition, when Italian was not yet the main language for the community and the loyalties seem to be stronger towards the local identity, represented by the cosmopolitan and metropolitan capital of Southern Italy-Naples.

While her father is always looking at the bright side of things, the young woman has lost faith in the possibility of a happy life in NYC. She identifies with her *fiancé* Mario: she dreams to go home, as if the very fact of being there could reconstitute family happiness. Instead things get even worse. In the same night Mickey steals his father's saving account, while Elena cannot sleep, still thinking about Mario's proposal to leave with him for Naples.

In the morning a depressed Don Ciccio decides not to go to work for the first time in twenty years. He receives a phone call from the bank about his son's attempt at cashing his savings. Don Ciccio defends Mickey in front of the (Italian) banker, faking that he authorized the withdrawal.

Again, as with the boss in the factory (who molested Elena), the American institutions addressed by the immigrant are actually embodied by Italians, which makes his condition even bitterer, pointing also to the inescapable unfairness of social relations, which seem to follow him from Italy.

The old man is crying when Elena returns, but she is ready to run away with Mario. When Don Ciccio realizes that he would be left alone in New York after he sacrificed twenty years of his life to bring up his children, Elena is ashamed but cries: "I cannot leave in this house anymore." Don Ciccio recognizes his mistake: "This goodness of mine has created a delinquent" and tells her that Mickey stole his money. He is tempted to call the police and send him to jail, but cannot do so. Bitter with his Americanized children, while confident in the true love of the young couple, he makes his decision to leave New York with Elena and Mario in order to return to Naples. The arrival of Elsa and her American boyfriend interrupts the scene, with a positive piece of news: they are now married. A sign of redemption and positive resolution becomes manifest: maybe a modern immigrant girl such as Elsa, brought up by an honest and caring father like Don Ciccio, can integrate in the new society and become an Italian-American without shameful consequences.

Don Ciccio leaves behind the key of the empty American apartment, and puts it under the portrait of his dead wife, left in New York in order to protect Mickey and maybe redeem him. The portrait of the dead mother is one of the few prominent elements in a decor which is otherwise rather essential.

After five years – as an inter-title explains – the dream has come true: on a painted backdrop of an elegant villa in Naples, Mario, Elena and their baby, together with Don Ciccio and Mario's sister, read aloud a letter from Mickey, who not only sent them the money to buy the house, but also announces his return. In the final scene, he kneels in front of Don Ciccio, asking for forgiveness, after explaining that he made all his money by working hard because he wanted to become like his father: honest, sincere and good. "Now I am a real man" says Mickey, aware of the real values which constitute manliness in Naples (an important statement in terms of gender roles, and a corrective for those who think that Southern Italians brought with them in the US a macho concept of manliness).

The film ends with Mario's sister singing Santa Lucia Luntana, the song of the beginning which now closes the circle with a new meaning, given that in the final scene the emigrants who left are actually back in Naples.

The nostalgia and the dream of returning home, expressed by the song and the film *Santa Lucia Luntana*, were not mere feelings, but actual choices. Between 1860 and 1950 returns amounted to half of the total emigration from Italy (reaching 63% in the decade 1910-1920). Thus the film represents a reversed version of the American dream: returning home. As expressed in the dialogues taking place in Italian or Neapolitan, the film reveals the bitterness of the American dream, the discovery that money was not that easy to make in America too; that work was really hard, and the family risked its dissolution. The two "bad" children are the "Americanized" ones, speaking English and evidently seduced by the American way of life, contrary to Elena, who in fact goes back to her roots, in Naples. Leaving aside the dream-like happy ending, this Italian-American *sceneggiata* expresses tragic feelings – painful homesickness and disillusion about the American experience. It appears projected backwards, returning both culturally (as a *sceneggiata*) and narratively back in Naples.

From a cultural point of view this film is exemplary of the slow transition of Italian immigrants in NYC into a more integrated culture, and specifically of the closing phase of the integralist resistance to assimilation. While the film represents mostly a nostalgia of the home country, of its traditions and values, the knowledge of the American ways of life and of communication are also

evident. The film is marked in its very text by the signs of this process. The plot and the acting style of *Santa Lucia luntana* evoke Neapolitan popular theatre, but not without exceptions: the young women dress and dance as American girls, even if the film closes on a very traditional rendering of the song. From a thematic point of view, *Santa Lucia Luntana* is characterized by a traditional "Neapolitan" plot, but the prominent role of work and money "Americanizes" the motivations of the characters. In its text the film offers a representation of the very process of "hyphenation," the construction of the Italian-American identity, with the preservation of Italian cultural roots and the interaction with American culture and values. Contradictions are still predominant, but the process of integration has started.

Another section of the Ruggeri collection which is of great interest is that of the theatre programs, which document not only which films were seen in the film theatres frequented by Italian emigrant in New York, but also how they were promoted, how many films were imported and how many were in English – that is the development of an immigrant film culture. In fact some of these programs also report the association of the titles in double bills, or the persistence of live shows together with films.

Italian emigrant culture is almost totally ignored in Italy, and the Ruggeri collection in Rochester is an incredible source of information not only about film-related matters, but in more general terms, as it reveals different phases of linguistic, cultural, visual and mediatic assimilation and resistance of the Italian community in New York.

In recent times we have learned how commentary and words often take over the operation of meaning, and this is indeed how audio can kill visuals – the opposite of silence. The noise of fragmented information on the web sometimes is identical to a form of silence, because it does not constitute a coherent discourse about the object. Today more than the invisibility of the events the problem seems to be the excess of the visible representation that becomes spectacularization, the fictionalization of the real world, as in the case of the Twin Towers or the Japanese tsunami.

And yet, which holes can we still expect and hypothesize in film history? Those regarding minorities, obviously: gender, social class, ethnic or national groups. Which are the subjects missing from the roll call? Or whose traces are casual? Can we map these gaps, this invisibility? Which are the alternative sources that allow us to find them?

1 Pierre Sorlin, *Sociologie du cinéma: ouverture pour l'histoire de demain*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 1977.
2 Giuliana Muscio, *Piccole Italie, grandi schermi*, Bulzoni, Roma 2004.