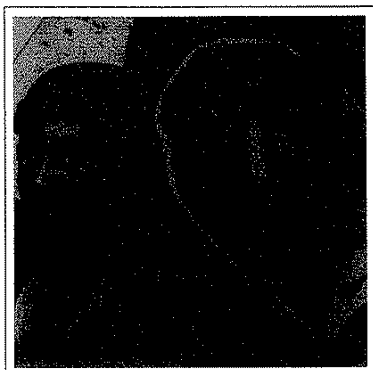


NUMBER 44
FALL 1999

THE VELVET LIGHT TRAP

A CRITICAL JOURNAL OF FILM AND TELEVISION



Published by the
University of Texas Press

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Shipwrecked Spectators: Italy's Immigrants at the Movies in New York, 1906–1916

Vous êtes embarqué.

—Blaise Pascal

Traditional early cinema historiography has long claimed that the nickelodeons, the small, storefront movie theaters that were quite popular in Manhattan between 1906–07 and the early 1910s, embodied the cinema's power to generate—from the bottom up—mass urban recreation through amalgamation and standardization. According to such *vulgata*, the practice of moviegoing was an unmistakable index of the mass co-optation of the working class and immigrants into the life-style of the modern metropolis. New York's movie theaters, together with the earlier but steady narrative developments of American cinema, fostered the social and cultural communion of mass entertainment and mass society.¹

Since the mid-1970s, the speculative horizon of silent film spectatorship has become a site of radically different contentions. In addition to "leftist" historians interested in stressing the presence of working-class patrons in the early cinema history,² "revisionist" and feminist film historians have either accentuated and documented the strong presence of a middle-class film patronage or offered compelling evidence and discussions of the relevance of female public spheres within modern entertainment.³ Likewise, scholars examining the film industry and film narratives have focused on the connection between film's supply/demand and the progressively standardized techniques of film storytelling. While fueled by advanced theoretical approaches (i.e., Marxism, feminism), the relatively new

academic discipline of film history has consistently remained U.S.-centric and rarely (or only nominally) ventured outside the borders of American cinema or audiences.⁴ A few footnotes about Italian or Jewish family and religious organizations or common entertainment habits have, quite consistently, seemed enough.⁵

In this essay I shall attempt to address this subject in a rather different fashion. By focusing on non-American constituencies such as ethnic audiences and foreign films, I intend to radically question, or at least expand, the historiographical perspectives most commonly adopted so far. In particular, I will address an uncharted encounter that occurred from 1906 to 1915–16 between immigrants coming to Manhattan from southern Italy (many of whom had hardly seen a film before) and numerous Italian film productions that were being exhibited throughout that period in the city's movie theaters. The extent of the American commercialization of Italian films has hardly been accounted for in standard film histories. Such a scarcely documented phenomenon forces us to suspect that immigrants ought not be simply regarded as "would-be American spectators of American cinema" but rather as ethnic patrons often surrounded by their own cultural universe and consistently allured and entertained by non-American spectacles.

On a speculative level, such an acknowledgment seems rather elementary, yet its actual bearings on the work of early film historians have been quite inadequate. Master narratives of immigrant movie experience have been organized mainly around tropes of class and gender. Ethnic cultural agencies have served primarily as a subplot or have been left on the cutting-room floor altogether.

By the same token, film histories have downplayed the cross-cultural influences connected to the uniquely international circulation of silent film productions in New York City.

In this essay I would like to reverse such methodological approaches. I contend that the historiographical consequences of seriously acknowledging the relevance of ethnic tropes in a discussion of "film spectatorship in the United States" should appear more urgent and binding. In particular, research areas such as immigration history or ethnic social life and entertainment ought to play a more crucial role. Silent film spectatorship in the United States is a matter solely related neither to American spectators, nor to American films, nor to American popular culture.

As a result of standard approaches, several important questions have remained unasked, questions which acquire a paramount relevance in a case study of Italy's immigrants and film exhibition in New York. Who were these immigrants? What were the conditions of their new settlements? How was their work and leisure time organized, and what role did cinema play in it? Which films did they watch? Had the Italian films screened in the Lower East Side of New York been originally produced for the immigrants' consumption? And if not, what can possibly be inferred from the immigrants' history and identity in terms of their own film experience?

Such questions do not merely illuminate an extrinsic context of moviegoing and spectatorship. They have the potential to subvert the broad (and teleologically defined) presumption that the development of the American film industry meant a quick and inevitable process of cultural co-optation of non-American communities. Several methodological assumptions rest within such a hypothesis: first, that ethnic film reception finds its explanatory rationale in relation to American-produced cinema and its overt ideology and, second, that there must be a causal and linear relationship between actual historical audiences and American films' textually constructed spectators.

Equating movies' textual meaning and their own cultural expressiveness disregards a whole set of cultural references that several films reverberated, regardless of their documentable textual make-up or formal address. Arguing that film images may not certify their cultural signification per se, Noël Burch has developed the concept of "primitive externality." This notion contends that

a film's narrative or formal discourse is located *outside* the picture—either in the spectators' minds or around them in books, newspapers, circuses, oral traditions, and so on, historically far away from our present.⁶

This essay is a project of rescue and restoration of some cultural references which may tell us something relevant about what happened when Italy's spectators watched Italian films in New York before World War I. Thus, the necessary analysis of the circulation and genres of Italian films exhibited in Manhattan will be framed within an equally necessary expansion of both the research perspective and the historical evidence. Within such a wider historiographical frame, discussions exclusively related to films—placed in the final part of the essay—will have a limited space.

First, I would like to briefly examine three historical and cultural domains which, I contend, most deeply fashioned immigrants' identities and communities: the immigrants' patterns of urban settlement, their religious culture, and, with specific reference to the cinema, the film coverage as it appeared in the ethnic print culture. These territories show how important dimensions of "Italian" ethnic life framed the daily negotiation and adjustment of the immigrants' national self-identity. I will argue that the cinematic medium, along with other cultural and historical agencies, helped to create a new awareness of national identity for Italian immigrants, who had always defined themselves in terms of their regional or local background until they came to the United States and started participating in mass culture. Cinema, in this sense, negotiated for immigrants their access to American life through an original and barely examined ethnic self-conception.

Urban and Religious Life

From 1900 to 1914, more than three million Italians came to the United States. The most frequent settlement was New York State, and 80 percent of these newcomers settled in New York City. But were these immigrants Italian? Antonio Gramsci's articles about Italian popular culture, written between the late 1920s and early 1930s, make it clear that to speak of *Italian* immigrants is misleading: such a category was an "immigrational classification" rather than a cultural one.⁷ These were not "Italians" as we now understand the term; their regional and local sense of belonging was

more pertinent (and enduring) than its national correlation. In fact, once off the boat, regional or local institutions, named *società di mutuo soccorso* (mutual aid societies), affected the immigrants' economic and social life more profoundly than the remote and indifferent Italian state. Early in the twentieth century, there were about two hundred very small mutual aid societies and ethnic labor unions in New York City alone. These societies' local miniaturization is connected to a stubborn *campanilismo* but also to the structural lack of an ethnic upper class that could have replaced the working class's financial and cultural limits. Only three or four of the dozens of societies that worked as banks had a fund larger than \$8,000. Yet, like the Jewish *Landsmannschaft* or the German *Turnverein*, these mutual-aid fraternities provided material, human, and legal help, including birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, and even a cheap and reliable midwife, fluent in Sicilian.

Another holdover of the pre-emigration life lay in the reproduction of Italian villages' traditional dispersion, for the main New York City Italian district comprised a geographical map of small and distinct communities.⁸ One memorable report of the day listed the different, co-existing identities of a local clan member from Sicily: "In America he will be an Italian to all members of other nationalities, a Sicilian to all Italians. In Sicily, he will be a Milocchese. In Milocca, he tends to remain a Piddizzuna (clan) who has moved."⁹ Such diversity and complexity of Italianness was also evident in the maintenance of specific dialects and in peculiar hagiographic preferences; every "village" in Italy and every "local enclave" in New York had its own patron saint, a specific day for the *festa*—the noisy street procession—with flags, statues, banners, songs, and foods not necessarily shared by the other "villages."

Mediating the difference between the New York worshipping environment and the immigrants' prior religious culture, New York-based Catholic priests (a few from Italy but most mainly of Irish origin) played a major role in disciplining the immigrants' ethnic and religious world. At stake was not only the American Catholic Church's attempt to transform Italian newcomers into American Catholics but also a whole politics of genteel reform which aimed at reforming the "immigrants' devotion" and—in the case of the religious *festa*—also their leisure habits.¹⁰

The religious *festa* and its American permutations were symptomatic events in the dynamics of transformation of "Italian" popular culture in New York. Originally connected to the agrarian rhythms of death and rebirth and emplotted through the religious narratives of local saints, the *festa* became a different thing within a foreign and multi-ethnic urbanity. Denise M. DeCarlo claims that the New York *festa* refigured ethnicity beyond the local village level, and even beyond regional identity, toward a national awareness within the new multi-ethnic setting. For example, the *festa* of San Gennaro, originally connected mainly to the city of Naples, became in New York a religious and leisure opportunity for worship communities formerly unacquainted with the Neapolitan patron saint.¹¹

In the American metropolis, Italian parishes negotiated the most extreme and folkloristic religious manifestations of the immigrants, tolerated their intense moralistic and devotional traditions, and helped them preserve (and construct) a common patrimony of symbolic meanings, memories, and values.¹² Religious officials and institutions quickly began to enter the social spheres of education, medical assistance, finance, and professional development. Kindergartens were opened, banks were formed, and hospitals were built within and around newly established Catholic organizations.¹³ In the long run, "organized life and collective entertainment were sectors of the immigrants' society often identified with religious institutions and symbols."¹⁴

Quite soon, and in a rather contradictory manner, the Church showed a great interest in the film medium on both sides of the Atlantic, though this interest was tempered by concern over the conditions of filmgoing. In Italy, moving pictures entered the parishes when enterprising priests employed projectors and films to expand faith and religious cohesion among the neighborhoods of their community.¹⁵ The same happened in the United States, and not just with regard to Italian Catholic institutions. In local newspapers or in trade journals, one could frequently find articles by clergymen, reformers, clubwomen, and social workers who condemned the moral corruption that the crowded and promiscuous experience of the moving pictures enhanced. But on the same page, enlightened (or simply more acute) Church authorities admitted the superior influence that images were able to exercise on the always-too-busy modern urban audience.¹⁶

Giovedì 4 Giugno.

PROIEZIONI
CINEMATOGRAFICHE

UNA SPEDIZIONE
IN EGITTO
ED IN TERRA SANTA

per il Prof. Dr. A. CACCINI

FARSA
Funerali, Canti e Danze

ovvero
Il Carnevale degli Studenti di Padova
in Prosa e Musica.

PERSONAGGI.

GUGLIELMO			L. Raybaut
AUGUSTO	}	studenti	A. Lenzi
ISIDORO			S. Lentini
ALBERTO			N. Prato
ENRICHETTA			E. Mollica
GIULIA			C. Rinaldi
DARIA			G. Razzetti
VITTORIA			A. Scagni
CAROLINA			E. Mollica
CASSIANO, Zio			L. Parolin
MUSICANTE			R. Biolzi

Direttore L. Raybaut.



PROGRAMMA

PER LE
TRE SERATE
2, 3 e 4 GIUGNO 1914
(ore 8 P. M.)

A BENEFICIO DELLA
CHIESA DELLA MADONNA DI POMPEI
212-214 Bleecker St. - New York



Figure 1. Promotional leaflet for *From the Manger to the Cross* (Kalem, 1912) at Our Lady of Pompeii, New York City, June 1914. Center for Migration Studies, New York, Collection 37.

Unfortunately, the evidence that selected film exhibitions were organized by priests in church courtyards or basements is still rather limited.¹⁷

However, an important record has surfaced which shows the historiographical practicability of this contention. Father Antonio Demo (1870–1936), pastor of Our Lady of Pompeii (one of the most important Italian churches in Manhattan) between 1897–98 and 1933, was particularly sensitive to contemporary popular culture.¹⁸ There is evidence, in fact, that at Our Lady of Pompeii he set up a number of theatrical programs, including films, to raise money for the parish's needs. Between June 2 and 4, 1914, for instance, the parish organized a special benefit weekend with Passion Plays, dramas about orphans, farces about death or Lucrezia

Borgia, religious music, and film shows (*proiezioni cinematografiche*). The circulating brochure even reported the film title, *Una spedizione in Egitto ed in Terra Santa*, with comments from a local cultural authority, Professor A. Caccini. The film was not Italian, however: it was *From the Manger to the Cross*, a Kalem production directed in 1912 by Sydney Olcott which was “issued in separate versions aimed at Catholic and Protestant audiences—with or without a portrayal of the miracle of Veronica’s Veil” and given an Italian title.¹⁹ Interestingly, Passion Plays, on stage or on screen, by narratively embodying the story of Christ, helped to tame the unorthodox ethnic predilections for the troubled lives of patron saints, whose worship threatened canonical religious hierarchies. The film, then, had a double

purpose. As an attractive visual entertainment, it aimed at forging a sense of social community; as a new educational resource, it rectified common devotional "anomalies."

The Ethnic Press

The Italian-American press also helps further our understanding of the experience of moving pictures among immigrants. Ethnic print culture is rarely used by silent film historians, who instead prolong the "fiction of U.S. monoglossism."²⁰ The ethnic press is not, of course, "the voice of the common people." However, it may provide a unique perspective on the ideological struggles between the pressures of adaptation and those of resistance, between widespread modernistic euphorias and equally pervasive Catholic or anarchist dystopias.

At the end of the 1910s, there were twelve Italian-American newspapers of varying circulations in New York City alone, and by the late 1910s, the most popular, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* (1880–1988), sold between 90,000 and 100,000 copies daily. Another important paper, *L'Araldo Italiano* (1889–1921, consolidated with *Il Telegrafo* from 1913), was less successful but was still among the city's best-selling papers with an average circulation of 35,000.²¹

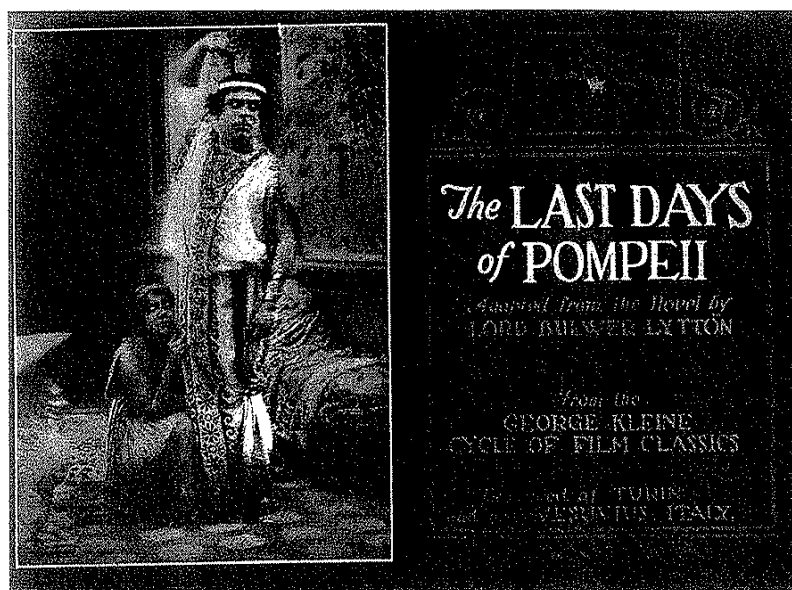
Il Progresso was financed and endorsed by the so-called *prominenti* (bankers and professionals), as opposed to the *sovversivi*, who supported socialist and anarchist papers.²² The *prominenti* of *Il Progresso* were fiercely (and paternalistically) patriotic: they periodically launched nationalistic campaigns ending, for instance, in the establishment of the Columbian quadricentennial in 1892 and the erection of statues and monuments (Columbus, Dante Alighieri, Garibaldi, Giovanni da Verrazzano, etc.), and they championed the names of Italian inventors, artists, and musicians. This nationalistic impetus was accompanied by the acknowledgment that the United States had become a permanent residence for many Italians. The challenge these papers faced was to accommodate the familiar prides and loyalties of Italian identity with the new allegiances of Italian-American citizenship. If, as many commentators have argued, *Il Progresso* did not serve the Italian working class through accurate information on labor conditions and civic events, at least it provided a strong sense of national identity and cohesion.²³

A discussion of print culture begs an obvious question about literacy: who could read these newspapers? Usually, American statistics on immigrant illiteracy have been taken at face value. Although Italian immigrants often arrived illiterate and did not all become newspaper readers overnight, I would argue that the number of circulating copies and the content of job advertisements suggest that the number of competent readers was significantly greater than the number of officially literate immigrants (identified by their professions, such as teachers, musicians, or businessmen). In particular, as historians Bruno Cartosio, Gary Mormino, and George Pozzetta have shown, illiteracy did not prevent immigrants from sharing ideas and experiences or from organizing social activities (unions, political militancy, etc.).²⁴ One solution to illiteracy was "collective reading": one reader for several listeners. In addition, immigrants quickly learned the financial and logistic advantages of Italian or English literacy and attended evening schools in order to find better jobs.²⁵

Importantly for this discussion, Italian newspapers printed in New York—both the more mainstream ones and those of radical, socialist, or religious inspiration—tended to address their readers as Italians rather than as Neapolitans or Sicilians. For example, the erection of the statue of nationalist leader Giuseppe Mazzini (Columbus Day, 1892) and the terrible earthquake in Calabria (November 20, 1905) were both represented as events that called for national solidarity, not regional sympathy. Announcements of Italian film screenings would be similarly intensified through the rhetoric of national art sensibility, particularly with reference to the peninsula's renowned natural scenography and antique craftsmanship.²⁶

In terms of popular culture, both *L'Araldo* and, especially, *Il Progresso* regularly reported on three sources of Italian pride: patrón saints' *feste*, opera performances, and theatrical plays.²⁷ But, contrary to common ethnic studies reports, they also occasionally covered the international and Italian developments in film. The Italian-American press did not directly address the phenomenon of filmgoing in New York as it literally exploded after 1906–07, that is, at the beginning of the nickelodeon era. Interestingly, in that period an extremely eloquent column, titled "Cinematografando" (the gerund form of the Italian verb to shoot, i.e., shooting), was first published in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* beginning

Figure 2. Poster for *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Ambrosio, 1913). Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.



September 17, 1907. “Cinematografando” was a collage of astonishing and parodic “short cuts” and comic fragments arranged to achieve effects of abruptness, pure juxtaposition, and ludic disparity.²⁸ By the early 1910s, however, the coverage of film-related events became more specific. This increased coverage ranged from comments on cinema’s competitive rapport with theater to reflections on its pedagogic virtues and flaws; from acknowledgments of the increasing size of the film industry worldwide to notes describing various attempts to create the talking picture.²⁹

Before 1910 there were no film reviews per se in the Italian papers published in New York. Yet the character of film coverage changed with the circulation of historical feature films such as *The Fall of Troy* (Itala Film, 1911), *Dante’s Inferno* (Milano Films, 1911), *Jerusalem Delivered* (Cines, 1911), and *Odyssey* (Milano Films, 1911). These productions capitalized, on the one hand, on the cosmopolitan attraction for visual antiquity and the adaptation of literary classics and, on the other, on domestic resources and assets (architectural sceneries, stage traditions, cheap extras).

As a result, from December 1911 onward the most important Italian films—the costly historical reenactments—were consistently advertised and promoted as “Italian productions” both in *L’Araldo* and in *Il Progresso*, although endorsements were hardly longer than the

headlines and never matched the lengthy examination reserved for them by *Moving Picture World*, the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, or *Motography*.³⁰ Still, Italian-American papers’ coverage of Italian films indicates a great deal about movies’ changing patterns of competition, exhibition, and marketability. If at first these moving pictures played at upscale uptown or midtown theaters and large vaudeville houses, their subsequent runs brought them closer to the ethnic spectator. For instance, *Dante’s Inferno* (Milano Films, 1911) was playing in mid-December 1911 at the Gane’s Manhattan Theater (31st Street and Broadway) for 15 and 25 cents, but by January 20, 1912, it was also playing at the Fair Theater (122 East 14th Street) for 10 and 15 cents.³¹

Yet George Kleine’s distributing decisions about the feature films he had imported—in particular, *Quo Vadis?* (Cines, 1913) and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Ambrosio, 1913)—are most interesting. They show, in fact, the pressures of market competition for these imported costume-dramas and the eccentric routes taken by some of them among different city exhibitors. In particular, Kleine’s strategies expose the (apparently) conflicting trajectories of maximizing the commercial life of costly foreign films—initially purchased and exhibited for highbrow theatrical venues—and of pitching their marketability among working-class Italian immigrants.

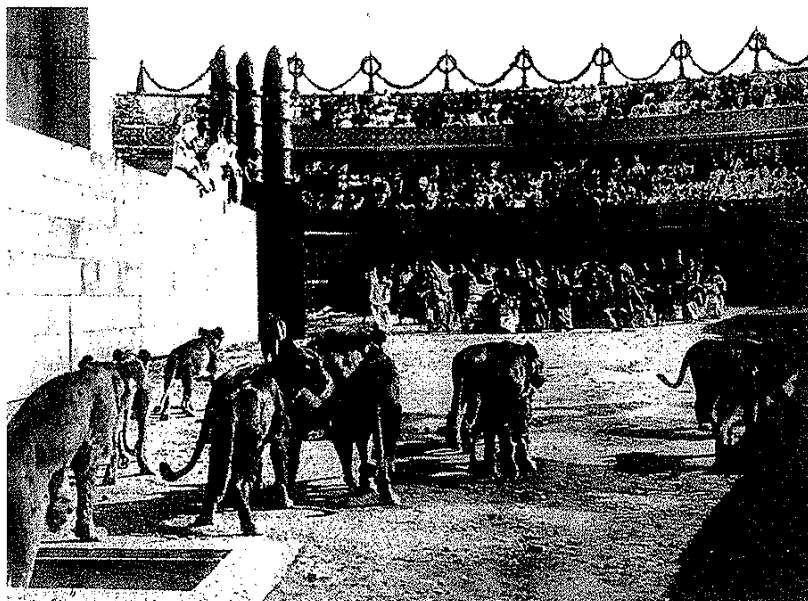


Figure 3. Lions and Christians at the circus arena, *Quo Vadis?* (Cines, 1913). Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

Here is where cosmopolitan cultural settings and preconceptions about art and Roman antiquity met with common Italians' increasing ethnic pride in films. For instance, in mid-October 1913, *The Last Days of Pompeii* was playing both at the 86th Street Theater and at the Bijou (1243 Broadway at 30th Street) for a minimum admission of 25 cents.³² During the same period, another *The Last Days of Pompeii* (*O gu ultimi giorni di Pompei*, Joné, 1913) produced by Pasquali (Turin), Ambrosio's main competitor, opened at the Wallack Theater (northwest corner of Broadway and 30th Street, next door to the Bijou) for prices as low as 15 cents. At the Bijou, Ambrosio's *The Last Days of Pompeii* was advertised as a "Kleine accomplishment" ("George Kleine dà lo squisito dramma cinematografico"), while Pasquali's version was explicitly publicized as an Italian production ("the greatest triumph of Italian cinematography"), enriched by an Italian-American twist ("Produced by Pasquali American Co. New York. President, Alberto Amato").³³ Interestingly, Pasquali's production was emphatically hailed as "such a wonderful spectacle that being the victorious rival over *Quo Vadis?*, no Italian could miss it."³⁴ Beginning on December 20, the same film, retitled *The Destruction of Pompeii* (*La distruzione di Pompei*), probably for fear of copyright infringement, opened at the West Village Bella Sorrento (180 Thompson Street), where owner L. T. Calderone

charged a flat 15 cents for entrance. The ad proclaimed: "Spectacular production of Pasquali Company, in 8 acts and with a length of 10,000 feet!"³⁵

Shortly afterward, Kleine changed his plans accordingly. In September 1913, *Quo Vadis?* was still running at the Astor, where it had opened almost six months before. At this time, it was advertised as a "grand Cinematographic production designed by great Italian artists" and had a fairly expensive admission price: 25 and 50 cents.³⁶ At that cost, and at a forty-block distance, a photoplay proudly announced and reviewed in the Italian press was still not easily affordable. By mid-February 1914, however, the film had opened at a downtown commercial hub, Union Square Theater (56 East 14th Street), with tickets as low as 15 cents—and there, at that relatively low price, the film quickly became the "talk of the town" in the Italian press.³⁷

Meanwhile, shorter Italian films were shown daily on the Bowery. Beginning in 1913, the Italian-American press started reporting film showings at 5 cents at theaters in and around Little Italy: Teatro Cassese on Grand Street, Bowery's Thalia Theater, Bella Sorrento, Jefferson Theater on the corner of 14th Street and Third Avenue, and Teatro Garibaldi on East 4th Street. Although Italian titles are never mentioned, newspaper ads for the Maiori Theater often specified that one out of every six new films per week was from Italy.³⁸

ITALIANI! Tutti all' "Y. M. C. A. HALL"
Bond St., angolo di Fulton St., Brooklyn

Quattro grandi' apprezazioni della
Storia vivente della "Guerra Italo-Turca"
PRESA SUI CAMPI DI LUMIA PER ORDINE DI S. M. IL RE
D'ITALIA

15.000 piedi di portento pellicole cinematografiche prese
agli avamposti. — 800 scene viventi di battaglia vittoriose.

TRE ORE DI SPETTACOLO
Dal primo colpo di cannone all'apoteosi dell'esercito e della
marina.

Per pochi giorni in Brooklyn
PREZZO, 25c. PREZZO, 25c.
GIOVEDI' 2 GENNAIO ORE 8 POM. — VENERDI' 3 GEN-
NAIO, ORE 8 POM. — SABATO ORE 2½ E 8 POM.

LA GUERRA ITALO-TURCA
Tre ore di meraviglioso spettacolo cinematografico all' "Y. M.
C. A. HALL", Bond e Fulton St., Brooklyn, N. Y. : : :
Offerta del "Progresso" ai suoi amici lettori
Per le quattro rappresentazioni di questa settimana.
Mostrate questo Coupon all'ingresso e avrete diritto ad un
biglietto di 25c per soli 20c.

(1911) A 31-4)

Figure 4. An advertisement for *Italian-Turkish War* (Cines, 1911) in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, January 4, 1913: 4.

The panorama of film exhibitions among immigrants from Italy—appearing from newspaper ads and reports about fires or unaccompanied children in movie theaters—suggests that the presence of films and movie theaters in the daily life of those living in the “colony” was widespread. There were several Italian exhibitors, either owners of nickelodeons or of large theaters (offering variety shows, including moving pictures) who often showed Italian films; children flocked to the movie theaters;³⁹ and there was a regular correlation between the Italian films shown and the patriotic tone of various advertisements.⁴⁰

Film's influence in defining and fabricating a proud nationalistic discourse is further evidenced by the appearance of extended articles on the art of filmmaking or reviews following Italian film premieres, especially historical feature films.⁴¹ Along this line, a different but quite symptomatic event occurred in the fall of 1911 after the New York screening of a Vitagraph film titled *Italian Atrocities in Tripoli*.⁴² The film charged Italian soldiers with genocide against the Turks during the Italian-Turkish war in northern Africa. What followed

was a harsh newspaper campaign against Italy's invasion, headed by the *World* and the *New York Times*. *L'Araldo* reacted by organizing a public meeting held at Sulzer Park on November 12, 1911, and by mounting a legal action against Vitagraph, forcing the American film company to withdraw the film from circulation in New York.⁴³ After several months, *Il Progresso* answered by patronizing the exhibition of a series of Italian newsreels, titled *Italian-Turkish War I, II*, and so on (Cines, 1911), first shown for 20 cents at the YMCA Hall in Brooklyn (Bond and Fulton Streets) early in January 1913 and, later that spring, at the Liberty Theater in Manhattan (408 East 116th Street) for 10 cents.⁴⁴ The rhetoric displayed in the huge ads published in *Il Progresso* emphasized the films' documentary quality, their grandiosity (“15,000 feet of moving pictures taken from the front line,” “800 live scenes of victorious battles”), and of course the triumphant outcome of the confrontation (“apotheosis of the army and marine”).

Cinema—and its printed reverberations—enhanced an imaginary reappropriation of identity and a reconciliation of foreign images with the collective experience of displacement or of familiar imagery with an alien geography. Together with the converging crowds of the *fiesta*, “colonial” Italian-American newspapers were an effective agent of mediation and adaptation. In particular, they embraced the film medium by reporting on the social and cultural events connected to the exhibitions of movies, especially Italian ones. Thus they contributed to smoothing localisms and encouraged not an all-embracing modern American identity but a fresh ethnic consciousness. We shall now try to understand how cinema in particular enhanced such imaginary appropriations of identity.

Movie Theaters, Films, and the Circus

According to Ben Singer's most recent research, there were more than 220 movie theaters in New York City between mid-1907 and mid-1909, mainly located in the immigrant settlement areas of the Lower East Side, along the Bowery; in East Harlem, along 125th Street; and in Jewish Harlem and Uptown Little Italy.⁴⁵ Nickelodeons were also present within middle-class neighborhoods and near metropolitan transport hubs such as Union Square.⁴⁶ From these statistics and from other evidence, we know that immigrants went to the movies.

But how did "Italian" immigrants make sense of the films?

In 1908, the Turin-based production company Ambrosio released *The Last Days of Pompeii* and, a year later, *Nero, or The Burning of Rome*. These two films were immediately and immensely successful abroad, including in the United States, marking a decisive change in the reception of Italian-made films.⁴⁷ With these two blockbusters, Italian cinema found a solid vocation in producing epic and historical films, a practice which lasted until the outbreak of World War I.⁴⁸ Italian film historian Aldo Bernardini has shown that between 1906 and 1916, more than sixteen hundred films were exported to the United States—approximately three new films per week.⁴⁹

To explore what these Italian movies meant to Italian immigrants, one has to focus both on their narratives and on the "signifying contexts" of their reception—Burch's "primitive externality." The first step is to discuss one of the most international popular entertainments of the time: the circus. During the second half of the nineteenth century, European circus companies traveled throughout the Italian peninsula, bringing a familiarity with wild animals, athletic exhibitions, and comic routines to a wide audience. Amateurish traveling companies had penetrated rural settlements of the peninsula earlier and more deeply than the *Cinématographe Lumière* ever would. By the turn of the century, cinematic shows restaged similar performances on the screen, often casting former trainers or clowns, but by this time many of the old circus patrons had moved to another continent.

If in the first part of the nineteenth century both Italian and French "families" dominated the circus stage, by 1860 the circus had become mainly a national business; only a few outstanding foreign circuses were able to enter the Italian market. Some of them were French, like Ernest Gillet's or Madama Franconi's, both of whom also exported their unique spectacles across the Atlantic ocean,⁵⁰ but the most striking invasion was by an American circus, Gran Circo Americano, owned by P. T. Barnum, which came to Italy in 1890 and again in 1906 with a "Wild West Show." American amusement park attractions followed, including Buffalo Bill, the Toboggan, and the Niagara Falls.

The circus shows presented a set of cultural images and popular routines fundamental to an investigation of

Italian immigrant film spectatorship. Two film genres in particular bore a strong performative and cultural bond to the circus: comedies and the historical genre, later known in rental catalogs as "epic-athletic." The frequent use by traveling circuses of body-builders and Greco-Roman fights for mythological reenactments, acrobats for equestrian shows, and clowns for comedy scenes had provided immigrants with a prior cultural familiarity with the movies' attractions. Many "Italian" film comedians came from the circus: Ferdinand Guillaume, of the French circus clan Guillaume, was featured in *Tontolini* (1910–12) and *Polidor* (1912–21); another, Raymond "Ovaro" Fran, who grew up as an acrobat and a clown in French circuses, became one of Cines' most successful comics in *Kri Kri* (1912–16).⁵¹ The popularity of those comedies, which staged the crippled adaptation of the human body to the pressing rules and constraints of modernity, may be interpreted as offering a chance of negotiation with the immigrants' new environment and existence. Among them one may single out *L'Avventura di Tontolini* (1912, about the war in Libya), *Polidor e le Suffragette* (1915, about the rise of feminism), and *Kri Kri e il "Quo Vadis?"* (1913, about contemporary cinematic accomplishments).

The "epic-athletic" and historical reconstruction genre films, with their solemn settings and *mise-en-scène*, were associated with the national imagery of the homeland. The reputation of Italian cinema abroad in terms of its spectacular productions was due principally to its direct association with the pompous glory of Rome, house of the secular Empire, spiritual cults, and sexual scandals. Thus *Spartacus* (Pineschi, 1909), *Fall of Troy* (Itala Film, 1911), and *Dante's Inferno* (Milano Films, 1911) were praised by the *Moving Picture World* for their "beauty of form, magnificence of theme, epic grandeur, lofty morality and an appeal to the finest and deepest emotions."⁵²

Italian-American newspapers, in praising the value of these historico-spectacular dramas, reeked with both sensationalism and national pride, although it is likely that the stories narrated were not widely known by immigrants. As a matter of fact, the literary origins of their plots were recognized by only a minority of patrons. Yet films like *Hero and Leander* (Ambrosio, 1909), *Sixtus the Fifth* (Ambrosio, 1911), or *The Sacking of Rome* (Cines, 1910) represented the first steps toward the "colossal film," so named not only for its gigantic

scenographic apparatuses and massive use of extras but also because this "supergenre" merged several other generic traditions: the historical landscape, the filmed novel, and the melodrama, whose cultural tradition was widely diffused among the southern Italian lower classes.⁵³

In merging several genres, the historico-spectacular productions are of interest as formal and cultural phenomena. They fostered two main trends of visual representation: national scenographies of hitherto unseen proportions (made even more spectacular by the unprecedented use of thousands of extras) and the exhibition of glorious figures of Italy's past such as Julius Caesar, Dante, and Tasso, cruel characters such as Brutus, Nero, and Catilina, and muscular and commanding figures such as Spartacus and Hursus.⁵⁴

It is also important to note the films' political contexts. In the first years of domestic film exhibition, the Italian government had been particularly attentive to films' effects and had issued decrees concerning public morality and security as early as 1907. Moreover, the most important production house of the time, Cines (Rome), was financially dependent on Banco di Roma, a banking institution controlled by leading national industrial groups and by the government. As film historian Gian Piero Brunetta has noted, the release of Cines' historical productions was, not surprisingly, timed to the entrance of Italy into a war with Libya in 1911 and thus aimed at gaining a popular consensus for a political decision pressured by industrial and commercial groups' interests.⁵⁵ The construction and shaping of a proud national ideology through propaganda was, in 1910–15, a compelling cultural necessity, and the cinema played its part. The multireel production of *Quo Vadis?* is perhaps one of the most blatant examples of nationalist ideology, as its images of naked bodies engaged in the muscular postures of bacchic dances and erotic pleasures were accompanied by religious (and political) declarations of community, belonging, and fidelity.⁵⁶

Immigrant patrons were not indifferent to the ideological themes of the historico-spectacular films they saw in New York. Together with the mammoth stagings, the peculiar treatment of the eroticized body might have fostered a national cultural patrimony and identity that other institutional agencies (especially, in this case, churches and newspapers) were also nurturing, as I

have shown. Such patriotic allure was to be amplified immediately after the First World War, as the Italian film industry produced acrobatic films like *Maciste* (Itala Film, 1915), *Maciste atleta* (Itala Film, 1918), *Sansone contro i Filistei* (Pasquali-film, 1918), *Sansone acrobata del kolossal* (Albertini Film, 1920), *Maciste imperatore* (Fert Film, 1924), *Maciste contro lo sceicco* (Fert Film, 1926), and *Maciste all'inferno* (Fert-Pittalunga, 1926).

If, in the early 1910s, the display of mighty male heroes such as Julius Caesar, Ursus, and Maciste introduced twentieth-century Italian immigrants to the grand historical origins of their distant homeland, the 1920s adventures of Sansone, Ajax, Galaor, and Maciste helped domestic Italians to become patriots of a nation with a rejuvenated imperial and nationalistic aspiration.

Film history, when exploring the delicate realm of ethnic spectatorship, must venture outside its own traditional borders. The investigation of other cultural and political materials—from church documents to newspapers, from circus advertisements to wartime propaganda—is a useful and necessary methodological step toward hypothesizing the meanings of early films for immigrants. The contrary assumption—that the meaning of past films is transparently available to us—denies the gap that lies between past and present. Such denial has forced some historians to assume direct and arbitrary alliances between past images and past spectators: as art historian Jonathan Crary has noted, "we have been trained to assume that an observer will always leave visible tracks, that is, will be identifiable in relation to images."⁵⁷ Unfortunately, images may not ipso facto tell us the whole story about the ways in which spectators made sense of them. Burch's notion of "primitive externality" is a useful methodological rationale which encourages us to explore historical constituencies apparently lying outside the realm of moving picture exhibitions. In the case of immigrant spectators coming from Italy, the examination of their social and cultural make-up has in fact hinted at directions (localisms vs. national identity) speculatively unforthcoming from the mere scrutiny of the Italian films shown in New York.

Still, historians and scholars, while debating historical evidence and contextual clues, may need to define the legal system of their erudite arguments, their "forum of justice." But as literary critic Jonathan Culler has sharply observed, "while meaning is

context-bound, context is boundless. This is something lawyers know well; context is in principle infinitely expandable, limited only by [lawyers'] resourcefulness, their client's resources, and the patience of the judge."⁵⁸

NOTES

I would like to thank Robert Sklar, Eileen Bowser, Paul Sellors, Ben Singer, William Uricchio, Valerie Walsh, Peter DeCherney, and the anonymous *Velvet Light Trap* reader for important comments on earlier drafts of the essay. Antonia Lant, out of whose silent film seminars this paper emerged, has been invaluable in clarifying my ideas and in encouraging my research project. This is for Irma Lavagnini e Giorgio Cattapan, with gratitude.

Frequent abbreviations used are *MPW* (*Moving Picture World*), *PLA* (*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*), and *AI* (*L'Araldo Italiano*). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. This "democratic" (and paternalistic) line of interpretation holds the oldest lineage, at first with an emphasis on the cultural and educational uplifting of the lower classes, then with a clearer awareness of a new and rising mass culture. As early as 1910, Robert Grau, reporting Edison's statements about the prospective scientific combination of sound and motion, proclaimed that "the workingman will indeed be brought to the level of the wealthy in being able to see and hear for an insignificant sum the productions upon which immense amounts are lavished" (*The Business Man in the Amusement World* [New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1910], 122). Two years later, in *The Stage in the Twentieth Century*, Grau emphasized the unprecedented "access" of moving picture theaters ([New York: Benjamin Blom, 1912], 129). In 1915, Vachel Lindsay stressed the "totality" of the American audience that movies were able to reach while ignoring the presence of ethnic patrons (*The Art of the Moving Picture* [New York: Liveright, 1915; revised in 1922], 38, 93, passim). Interestingly, working classes and children were often paired together in their overt enthusiasm for the new medium. In 1926, Terry Ramsaye described the popular sovereignty of moving pictures in terms of an artistic "appeal to the interests of childhood and youth" (*A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture through 1925* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926], xi), but by 1931 Benjamin B. Hampton maintained that "in the crowded, poorly ventilated nickelodeons, patrician youngsters sat with commoners and their offspring, democratically munching peanuts as they unconsciously created the great army of film fans that later was to dominate the screens of the world" (*A History of the Movies* [New York: Covici-Friede, 1931], 47). And in 1939, even Lewis Jacobs reported that "observers outside the industry began to note that films were becoming for children and the uneducated one of the chief sources for new ideas, points of view . . . morals, canons of convention, culture" (*The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939], 77). Jacobs, however, was more explicit about the relationship between film content and theater audience when he wrote: "America's entry into the war had a profound influence on movie content. Until our entrance into the World War the growth of the middle-class movie audience was relatively slow. . . . Patrons of the better-class theaters had more critical

standards, more security in life, and different interests. To please such patrons, movies had to be more subtle and refined, broader in scope, not quite so simple and forthright as they had been in the earlier days. This development of sophistication was inevitable in the films' growth, but the addition of the middle class to the audience hastened the transition" (271). The rhetorics of working-class assimilation and multi-ethnic confluence have also been articulated through the praised universality of film form. In 1949, Paul Rotha commented: "it was not long before these nickelodeons sprang up everywhere. They were particularly remunerative in the big labour centres, where the universal language of the film appealed equally to mixed nationalities" (*The Film till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* [New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1949], 71).

2. See Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Random House, 1975), 16–18, passim; Robert Sklar, "Oh Althusser!: Historiography and the Rise of Cinema Studies," *Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History*, ed. Robert Sklar and Charles Musser (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 12–35; and Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 38–42. More recent contributions include Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner, 1990), esp. 430–33; Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), chap. 9; Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (New York: Scribner, 1990), esp. 76–77; and Ben Singer, "Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors," *Cinema Journal* 34.3 (1995): 5–35.

3. For the former, see Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theatres, 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," *AFI Report* (May 1973): 4–8; now in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 59–82; Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1977; New York: Arno Press, 1980) and "Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan, 1906–1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon," *Cinema Journal* 17.2 (1979): 2–15, now in *Film before Griffith*, ed. John L. Fell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 162–75, and "Manhattan Myopia; or, Oh! Iowa!" *Cinema Journal* 35.3 (1996): 75–103; and Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). For the latter, see Judith Mayne, "Immigrant and Spectators," *Wide Angle* 5.2 (1982): 32–40; Judith Mayne, *Private Novels/Public Films* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988); Miriam Hansen, "Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?" *New German Critique* 29 (Winter 1983): 147–84; and Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

4. See, for instance, Janet Staiger, "Class, Ethnicity, and Gender: Explaining the Development of Early American Film Narrative," *Iris* 11 (1990): 13–26; Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992), esp. chaps. 1 and 5; or Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*. In his study on film exhibition, Gomery makes only cursory references to ethnic film theaters and offers no remarkable methodological rearrangement even when making radical statements such as the following: "It must be remembered that the United States was, even as talkies came in during the late 1920s, a nation of first-generation immigrants. Two of every three Americans consciously

claimed membership in an ethnic community, either as foreign born or their descendants" (171). Rather different are the contributions of Lary May (*Screening out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980]) or Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio ("Dante's Inferno and Caesar's Ghost: Intertextuality and Conditions of Reception in Early American Cinema," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 14.2 [1990], now in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996], 217–33; *Reframing Culture: The Case Study of Vitagraph Quality Films* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993]; "Italian Spectacle and the U.S. Market," *Cinéma sans frontières*, ed. Roland Cosandey and François Albèra [Montreal: Nuit Blanche Editeur, 1995], 95–105; and "Dialogue: Manhattan's Nickelodeons. New York? New York!" *Cinema Journal* 36.4 [1997]: 98–102). All of these works show interesting convergencies in sorting out international factors at work in the formation of an American mass urban culture. By correlating the prominence of European films and immigrant patrons with the consequential attempts by the American film industry and progressive groups to "regenerate the American soul," May shows how challenges to Victorian values and Protestant optimism produced both a fundamental unstiffening and an intensifying of middle-class moral and gender codes (34–42). Similarly, Pearson and Uricchio discuss the "melodramatic bourgeoning emplotment" of film narratives during the 1910s and include in their analysis the historical feature films (i.e., *Last Days of Pompeii*; *Quo Vadis?*; *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome*) produced in Italy but actually adapted from international bestsellers, stage plays, and circus pyrodramas of cosmopolitan circulation. They also unearth several professional constituencies of social control (e.g., architects, fire underwriters, and civic investigators) only indirectly involved in the moving picture show but quite proficient in fashioning it as a respectable, bourgeois, all-American entertainment. (See *Reframing Culture*, 33–48, and "Italian Spectacle.") Recently, early film scholars have started to address early cinema's cross-national influences. See Richard Abel, "Booming the Film Business: The Historical Specificity of Early French Cinema," *French Cultural Studies* 1.1 (1990), now in Abel, ed., *Silent Film*, 109–24; "The Perils of Pathé, or the Americanization of Early American Cinema," *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. L. Chaney and V. R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 183–223; or Cosandey and Albèra, eds., *Cinéma sans frontières* and *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

5. Interesting exceptions are represented by the works of Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985); and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). As social historians, each has ventured into wider historical territories such as ethnic entertainments, factory work, family life, health care, dance halls, and amusement parks but ultimately at the expense of a systematic investigation of the movies' cultural role. More recent works on moviegoing in small-town America have focused on either black moviegoing in a Southern town, e.g., Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Com-*

mercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896–1930 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), esp. 161–79; or on itinerant exhibitors and the gendered construction of the (young) movie fan, e.g., Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 1–28, 133–49.

6. Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 188–89.

7. Antonio Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1977), esp. secs. 2, 3, 5; and David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, eds., *Selection from Cultural Writings* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), esp. secs. 5, 6, 9.

8. Historically, the South of Italy maintained over the centuries agricultural and isolated settlements; its people, mainly peasant farm laborers, had been living in small, close-knit villages since feudal days, when the organization of public safety was deficient and living in communities provided a form of self-defense against frequent and violent threats from the outside (Normans, Bourbons, or simply local bandits). As for similar patterns of settlement, for instance, residents of Sannicandri (Apulia) mainly lived in a line running for two blocks along Hester Street between Mulberry and Elizabeth. Both sides of Mulberry, from Canal to Broome Street (a distance of four blocks), housed Neapolitans, either former citizens of Naples or Italians coming from the variety of surrounding small interior villages such as Sant'Arseno, Ricigliano, Sarno, and Teggiano. The Abruzzi region clustered its native sons and daughters in a section of upper Mulberry Street near the crossing of Spring and Mott.

9. Charlotte Gower Chapman, *Milocca: A Sicilian Village* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1971 [1935]), 27; quoted in Silvano M. Tomasi, *Piety and Power: The Role of Italian Parishes in the New York Metropolitan Area* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1975), 168.

10. Tomasi described the emergence and growth of the Italian American parish in the following way: "The historical growth of the Italian parishes follows three major stages of development, after initial and sporadic religious interest in Italian immigrants, before the heavy immigrations of the 1880's. At first, an attempt was made to include the Italian immigrants in the existing Irish parishes. Then a policy of clear separation was adopted and a building period followed. Finally, a return seems to take place of a fusion of Italian, Slav, Irish and other groups into a new and still emerging social amalgam defined as 'Middle America'" (62).

11. Denise DeCarlo, "The History of Italian Festa in New York City: 1880 to the Present," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1990, 233–34.

12. Such negotiation could occur thanks to the strong ties that the Italian local church had with non-Catholic religious organizations particularly opposed to the loud and carnivalesque parades of the festa.

13. The earlier Columbus Hospital (20th Street, between Second and Third Avenues), now known as Cabrini Hospital, was built in 1888 by the Italian church of St. Joachim. By the same token, the "genteel" world looked at the Italians not only as *mafiosi* or as Old World craftsmen but as the swarthy army of the pope for the domination of America. These feelings were part of an anti-Catholic and racist stereotype which also caused some ambitious Italians to convert to Protestantism to gain power and overcome ethnic barriers.

14. Tomasi, *Piety and Power*, 168.

15. Aldo Bernardini has described the twofold attitude of the Catholic Church in Italy: *defensive* through morality leagues, clerical publications, or ecclesiastical authorities; *active* and almost managerial in the appropriation of the new medium for its own pastoral purposes. One should not be surprised to find out that, on July 15, 1909, a decree by Cardinal Respighi for the Roman vicariate officially forbade priests and the clergy to attend moving pictures theater—during the very same year that a “Catholic Federation of cinema users was founded, probably within the Milan-based oratories’ federation, with the task of guaranteeing the supply of moral movies to the already numerous Catholic cinemas. A special commission had to revise and check the moral standards of such film. It was composed of priests and published the moral classifications of movies, thus originating a habit that would last until the present day” (“An Industry in Recession: The Italian Film Industry, 1908–1909,” *Film History* 3.4 [1989]: 356). Also in 1909, the first Catholic production house, Turin’s *Unitas*, was created, and Catholic organizations in Naples helped the local *Troncone Bros.* film company develop a solid market of movie exhibitions (Aldo Bernardini, *Storia del cinema muto italiano* [Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1981], 2: 202). See also Bernardini’s “Les Catholiques et l’avènement du cinéma en Italie: promotion et contrôle,” *Une invention du diable? Cinéma des premiers temps et religion/An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema*, ed. Roland Cosandey, André Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning, (Sainte-Foy, Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1992), 3–11.

16. Among the examples of this apparently contradictory phenomenon, one might quote from “Moving Pictures to Invade the Church” and from the adjacent “Notes and Comments,” which appeared in *MPW* on June 27, 1908: 542. On one side of the same page we read the opinions of respected reverends like T. G. Brashear of Parke Memorial Church: “Anything that accomplishes good is to be commended if the means are right. There has been a tendency, some people think, to make the church a lecture bureau, but Christ used various illustrations to make Himself understood.” On the other side, we can read a detailed account of a trial regarding films’ perverse appeal: “That moving pictures sometimes corrupt the morals of children was brought yesterday in the Children’s Court.”

17. Movie exhibitions in churches are mentioned—e.g., *PLA*, March 5, 1914: 3. But we don’t know of similar initiatives adopted in the preceding years. Yet one may also find curious (and presently rather opaque) information on the subject. As early as 1905, in the Italian newspaper *L’Araldo Italiano*, the sale of a “mundane” phonoscope is said to be organized by an unspecified Church Supply Co., Inc., from New York. See *AI*, November 18, 1905.

18. Today the address of the church of Our Lady of Pompeii is 25 Carmine Street; until 1927, it was 210 Bleecker Street (with adjacent space at 212–214), close to several nickelodeons. See Singer’s maps in his “Manhattan Nickelodeons.”

19. Tom Gunning, “Passion Play as Palimpsest: The Nature of the Text in the History of Early Cinema,” in *Une invention du diable?* 111n4. On the *Kalem* film, see Charles Keil, “From the Manger to the Cross: The New Testament Narrative and the Question of Stylistic Retardation,” and Herbert Reynolds, “From the Palette to the Screen: The Tissot Bible as Sourcebook for *From the Manger to the Cross*,” in *Une invention du diable?* 112–20, 275–310. On the spectacle of

Passion Plays, with particular attention to their New York exhibitions, see Charles Musser, “Passions and the Passion Play: Theatre, Film and Religion in America, 1880–1900,” *Film History* 5.4 (1993): 419–56. Further material related to stage shows (unfortunately not related to film exhibitions) can be found in the theater programs of *Our Lady of Pompeii*, preserved in the Special Collections at the Center for Migration Studies (Staten Island, NY). The image here reproduced is from Collection 37, Box 12, Folder 144.

20. I am adopting an expression used by Rudolph J. Vecoli in his “The Italian Immigrant Press and the Construction of Social Reality, 1850–1920,” *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, ed. James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 17–33—probably one of the best accounts on the complex ideological constituencies of the Italian-American press. Vecoli informs us that “the fiction of U.S. monoglotism” is from an announcement by the Longfellow Institute of Harvard University for a seminar entitled “Languages of What Is Now the United States” (29n6). For several data and information here discussed, I am indebted to Vecoli’s essay.

21. For an initial survey on ethnic press, see Robert E. Park, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922); and George E. Pozzetta, “The Italian Immigrant Press of New York City: The Early Years, 1880–1915,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 1 (Fall 1973): 32–46. Pietro Russo’s *Catálogo collettivo della stampa periodica Italo-Americana, 1836–1980* (Rome: CSER, 1983) offers a detailed account of Italian-American press, citing over a thousand periodicals in the Italian language published in the United States between 1850 and 1930. A remarkable study on the subject is a doctoral dissertation completed by Bénédicte Deschamps at the University of Paris VII in 1996, “De la press ‘coloniale’ à la presse italo-américaine: Le Parcours de six périodiques italiens aux Etats-Unis (1910–1935).” I would like to thank Haiyna Myroniuk and Susan Staiger of the Immigration History Research Center of St. Paul, Minnesota, for bringing Russo’s manuscript and Deschamps’s dissertation, respectively, to my attention.

22. On labor press, see Bruno Cartosio, “Italian Workers and Their Press in the United States, 1900–1920,” and Elisabetta Vezzosi, “Class, Ethnicity and the Acculturation in *Il Proletario*: The World War Years,” *The Press of Labor Migrants in Europe and North America, 1880s to 1930s*, ed. Christiane Harzig and Dirk Hoerder (Bremen: Publications of the Labor Newspaper Preservation Projekt, 1985), 423–42, 443–55; and Dirk Hoerder, ed., *The Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s–1970s: An Annotated Bibliography*, Vol. 3: *Migrants from Southern and Western Europe* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), esp. 1–10.

23. See Victor Greene, *American Immigrant Leaders, 1800–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 122–37; and Pozzetta, “Italian Immigrant Press,” 32–41.

24. Cartosio’s “Italian Workers” and “Sicilian Radicals in Two Worlds,” in *The Shadow of the Statue of Liberty: Immigrants, Workers, and Citizens in the American Republic, 1880–1920*, ed. Marianne Debouzy (Saint-Denis: PUV, 1988), 127–38. In their research on the cigar industry in Tampa, Florida, Gary Mormino and George E. Pozzetta (*The Immigrant World of Ybor City* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987]) have also discussed the institution of the reader (*el lector*), a custom imported from Cuba and hailed among radicals in Florida as a cherished right. The *lector* used to read to ethnic workers (mostly Italians and Cubans) on the job from a raised platform, mostly on

subjects related to proletarian themes. As one lector reminisced, "The lectura was itself a veritable system of education dealing with a variety of subjects, including politics, labor, literature, and international relations." Another one recalled, "We had four daily shifts. . . . One was used to read national news. Another was devoted to international political developments. The third concerned itself entirely with news from the proletarian press. And lastly the novel—mostly Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, Miguel de Cervantes, and Alexandre Dumas" (102 ff.).

25. Enrico Sori, *L'Emigrazione italiana dall'unità alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1979), 38.

26. Several were the films hagiographically devoted to important figures of Italian history or literature, such as *Dante e Beatrice* (Life of Dante, Ambrosio, 1913) or *Garibaldi* (Cines, 1907). National pride was widely expressed after the success of *Giuseppe Verdi nella vita e nella gloria* (*The Life and Work of Verdi*, Labor Film, 1913) exhibited at the Thalia Theater (46–48 Bowery), reviewed in *PLA*, May 23, 1915: 2.

27. Announcements for *feste* were published almost on a daily basis; advertisements for operas and plays also appeared daily since every issue of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* published a specific column titled "Arte e Artisti" ("Art and Artists"). Italian musicians, opera singers, and stage performers played at high-class venues such as the Metropolitan Opera House, the Academy of Music, and Carnegie Lyceum, as well as at various locations in the Lower East Side, such as Teatro Garibaldi or Teatro Cassese, and, along the Bowery, the People's Theatre, Thalia Theatre, Caffè Ferrara, and Teatro di Varietà A. Maiori. On Italian theater in America, see Anna Maria Martellone, "La 'rappresentazione' dell'identità italo-americana: teatro e feste nelle Little Italy statunitensi," *La chioma della Vittoria*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Florence: Ponte delle Grazie, 1997), 357–91.

28. Yuri Tsivian has found a similar column in Russia, titled "The Cinematograph," which was published as early as 1897 and also did not explicitly deal with current or specific film shows. See Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 10. "Cinematografando," later renamed "Cinematografo" (a noun instead of a verb), offers a remarkable instance of the cultural reverberation of film aesthetics and moviegoing. The column, in fact, without mentioning any film in particular, referred to a peculiar location of amusement, a unique technological apparatus of entertainment, and a specific mood of distraction. With Miriam Hansen (*Babel*, 29), we might say that the performative structure graphically produced by the newspaper column reproduced the "variety format" of the early film shows, that is, a short-term but incessant sensorial stimulation, and provided a physical and imaginary site of experience.

29. See, for instance, *PLA*, March 25, 1913: 3, July 1, 1913: 3, September 13, 1913: 2, and December 25, 1913: 2.

30. For discussions on the critical reception of Italian films in the U.S. film trade periodicals, see Davide Turconi, "I film storici italiani e la critica americana dal 1910 alla fine del muto," *Bianco e Nero* 24.1–2 (January–February 1963): 40–56; and Pearson and Uricchio, "Italian Spectacle." Consider also the numerous editorials on foreign film industry written by Stephen Bush for *MPW* throughout 1913.

31. *AI*, December 14, 1911: 4, January 20, 1912: 2.

32. *AI*, October 20, 1913: 4. See also Kleine Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Box 32, "The Last Days of

Pompeii and Quo Vadis?, Distribution in the U.S., 1912; 1926," and Box 69; "Schedule of Releases, 1913–1918."

33. *PLA*, October 19, 1913: 3.

34. "Nessun italiano può mancare di vedere questo meraviglioso spettacolo vittorioso rivale del *Quo Vadis?*" *PLA*, October 19, 1913: 3.

35. *Il Telegrafo*, December 20, 1913: 3, "La spettacolosa produzione della casa Pasquali in 8 atti e lunga 10,000 piedi."

36. As announced in *PLA*, February 12, 1914: 4.

37. *Ibid.* Interestingly, Sienkiewicz, the author of the novel *Quo Vadis?* had already become the subject of a few enthusiastic articles. See, for instance, *PLA*, September 16, 1913: 2.

38. For announcements of the weekly Italian film in the program, see *Il Telegrafo*, October 21, 1913: 2, November 2, 1913: 2; also *PLA*, March 31, 1914: 4, where the film screening at the Maiori is publicized as "of Italian interest."

39. See *PLA*, January 9, 1913: 2. A most serious violation was registered on February 9, 1913, when officials for the Children's Aid Society discovered that twenty kids were watching films in a movie theater (owned by Michele Toccio and Giuseppe Rossi) located at 76 Catherine Street, and that the children had obtained a ticket discount by presenting coupons found in some cigarette packets. See *PLA*, January 14, 1913: 2, January 31, 1913: 2, February 20, 1913: 2.

40. Unspecified "Weekly Entertainments for Italians" had taken place in the Big Hall since January 1913. The program of these free gatherings included music, instructive lectures, and a film, possibly a comedy. See *PLA*, January 18, 1913: 2. At the Florence Theater, a publicity announcement reminded readers that, thanks to the return of manager Salvatore Calderone, the best and longest films were shown there, especially Italian ones. ("Tutti i giorni vengono esibite pellicole lunghissime, capolavori delle migliori case europee, specie italiane"; *PLA*, April 5, 1913: 2).

41. On November 27, 1913, *Il Progresso* published a lengthy interview with Cines director Enrico Guazzoni on the new historical feature film *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (*Antony and Cleopatra*). The tone of the interview was enthusiastic and acclamatory, and nationalistic allusions constantly made their way into the article: ancient figures and atmosphere were said to have been perfectly re-created through the mixture of "high patriotic ideals and sensual pleasures typical of the life of those past times." The article concluded by emphasizing that the uniqueness of the Cines production would persuade spectators to applaud the "glories of Roman eagles everywhere triumphant" (*PLA*, November 27, 1913: 7).

42. The film is not listed, at least with this title, in the checklists published in Anthony Slide's *The Big V: A History of the Vitagraph Company* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 169–323; or in the one edited by Davide Turconi and Paolo Cherchi Usai in P. Cherchi Usai, *Vitagraph Co. of America: il cinema prima di Hollywood* (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1986), 443–634. Possibly, the film in question is either *War*, a one-reeler released on December 8, 1911, or one of the monthly newsreels, titled *The Vitagraph Monthly of Current Events*, launched by Vitagraph on August 18, 1911. The series was to become the *Hearst-Vitagraph Weekly News Feature* and appear twice weekly. The "friendly bond between Hearst and Vitagraph," as Slide put it (61), marked the encounter between cinema's picture newspapers and Hearst's "yellow journalism" which, a few years before, had effectively molded public opinion against Spain by reporting Spanish atrocities in Cuba during the 1898 Spanish American War.

43. Similar results followed in Baltimore, in Massachusetts, and in Canada. See *AI*, December 14, 1911: 4, January 2, 1912: 5.

44. *PIA*, January 4, 1913: 4–5. With a coupon found in *Il Progresso*, the YMCA spectator would gain access to the theater with a five-cent discount on the twenty-five-cent ticket. (See *PIA*, March 10, 1913: 4.) The announcement of the show at the Liberty Theater is in *PIA*, March 17, 1913: 5. The film series in question, *Guerra in Tripolitania*, was composed of fourteen serialized single reels and had already been exported to the United States in December 1911, according to Aldo Bernardini, *Archivio del cinema muto italiano Volume I: il cinema muto, 1905–1931* (Rome: ANICA, 1991), 263.

45. Singer has found evidence for “only” 220 theaters although, as he acknowledges, the official documentation of the 1908 Christmas Eve closing of nickelodeons, through a memo written by New York’s police commissioner to Mayor McClellan dated December 11, 1908, mentions as many as 315 theaters. George B. McClellan Jr. Papers, Container 4 (1908), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, quoted in Singer, “Manhattan Nickelodeons,” 7.

46. Singer, “Manhattan Nickelodeons,” 1–15, 31–32. This historical evidence appears to contradict earlier scenarios drawn by revisionist historians like Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery who emphasized middle-class patronage in their research. Later, Robert Allen’s “Manhattan Myopia” problematized Singer’s findings and methods due to the lack of convincing research on the issue of qualitative differences among theaters. Singer (“New York, Just Like I Pictured It . . .,” *Cinema Journal* 35.3 [Spring 1996]: 104–28) counterargued that the revisionists’ claim needs to better clarify the cultural and social fabric of the so-called middle-class patronage.

47. *MPW* reviewed *Nero* in a long editorial titled “The Qualities of Imported Film”: “It was no simple comedy scene, but one demanding all the magnificent effects of ancient Rome shown with perfect literality. Gorgeousness of procession, brilliancy of costume and acting, and finally the great conflagration of Rome: such a marvelous realism of effect that as we sat and watched this colored part of the film we seemed, as it were, to hear the cries of the victims. The story of Nero the tyrant, of course, is familiar to every schoolboy” (*MPW*, November 6, 1909: 636). A year earlier, Porter had made a *Nero and the Burning of Rome* for the Edison Manufacturing Company (April 1908) which had been singled out for possessing “the dignity of history.” See Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 415.

48. Italian producers and distributors were particularly sensitive to the possibility of exploiting the natural and architectural wonders of Italy’s landscape on which the tourist trade had always depended. And, as *MPW* often stressed, “The question heard on every hand, ‘Have you seen *The Fall of Troy*?’ stamps this great spectacular production as the picture of the week. . . . For historical productions like *The Fall of Troy*, the European manufacturer has it all over the American producer. The old country is, of course, more full of opportunity, and its history is more prolific of incident” (*MPW*, April 29, 1911: 935). I have discussed more in detail the impact of historical films

among Italy’s immigrants in Giorgio Bertellini, “Italian Imageries, Historical Feature Films, and the Fabrication of Italy’s Spectators in Early 1900s New York,” *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*, ed. Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 30–44.

49. From Bernardini’s *Archivio* one may count the number of Italian films distributed year by year in the United States: 8 in 1906; 35 in 1907; 105 in 1908; 191 in 1909; 255 in 1910; 254 in 1911; 277 in 1912; 293 in 1913; 173 in 1914; 32 in 1915; and 0 in 1916. The total of films distributed in the 1906–16 period equals 1,623. More accurate statistics should also indicate the amount of footage exported per year, divided by genre, production company, and distribution outlets. It is not yet clear, in fact, how many of these films were historical mythological reenactments, although this genre was doubtlessly the most distinct and remarkable.

50. In 1853, Henri Franconi, member of one of the most important circus families, played a major role in bringing the Hippodrome to New York. On this subject, see Gianfranco Pretini, *Antonio Franconi e la nascita del Circo* (Udine: Trapezio Libri, 1988).

51. For these data, I am indebted to a systematic survey published in 1985 by Aldo Bernardini (“I comici del cinema muto italiano”) in a special issue of *Griffithiana*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai and Livio Jacob (October 1985): 24–25. The issue was entirely devoted to Italian comedy and comedians.

52. Stephen Bush, “Gauging the Public Taste,” *MPW*, May 11, 1912: 505.

53. This cultural “Southern question” has been fascinatingly explored by Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), esp. chaps. 1, 7, 10.

54. On the subject of “strong men” or *uomini forti*, see Alberto Farassino and Tatti Sanguinetti, eds., *Gli Uomini Forti* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1983), 29–49.

55. Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano: il cinema muto, 1895–1929* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1993), 26–56.

56. The success of Roman themes and revivals for popular entertainments was not only an Italian phenomenon, and, indeed, it might be surprising to note that *Quo Vadis?* was not an Italian original script but a widely acclaimed novel written in 1896 by a Polish novelist, Henryk Sienkiewicz. See Allen Klots Jr.’s introduction to Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Quo Vadis?* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1955). On the presence of cultural taste for Roman plots and settings in Western theater and cinema (an important issue which deserves its own specific discussion), see David Mayer, *Playing out the Empire: Ben-Hur and Other Toga Plays and Films, a Critical Anthology* (London: Clarendon Press, 1994), 1–29, 90–103.

57. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 150.

58. Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 148.