The Situation

Robert Viscusi (January 20, 2010)

'Guido' is a phenomenon that demands attention. If Italian American social advance were as real, as secure, and as substantial as many Italian Americans believe it to be (I am among these believers), then it would seem not only not harmful, but indeed positively beneficial and necessary, to examine, to discuss, and to reflect upon the power of such a new word. As to the youths of Jersey Shore, they are playing grotesques, like all minstrel-show caricatures. They are amusing—indeed, more so than most clowns with sad eyes. They have clearly found their moment and clearly touched a nerve. To the term Italian American, which has carried so many strings of dollar bills and ropes of sausage, they have added a new chain of fetishes – a tanning bed, a tube of gel, an old summer thong bearing the legend “I Love the Situation.”

Jersey Shore is an MTV reality show that follows eight housemates, aged 22 through 29, spending their summer living together in a house in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. Young adults simultaneously trying and refusing to grow up, they live a life characterized by self-contradiction and cross purposes. As is so often the case in reality television, the mating rituals of consumerist society, brutal and even grotesque, are placed on view, as are the prepackaged sensitivity rituals among the participants, who try to sympathize with one another's wounds even as they conspire to objectify, sexualize, and humiliate one another and themselves as well, pretty much all day and all night, sometimes even when sleeping.

All of this is predictable enough. Reality TV, with its mingling of the minstrel show and the slave market, has been the most popular form of TV in the United States for the past 10 years – Survivor, American Idol, America's Next Top Model, to use only the most obvious examples, have been steady favorites, continually generating conversation at water coolers and on talk shows.
Jersey Shore belongsto that world of conversation. Why do people talk about it?

First and foremost, the characters are notable for the rituals of self-care that define them.

Snooki, a 21-year-old from Marlboro, New York, has her own tanning bed. Wears her hair in a pouf reminiscent of the hairdresser styles of the late fifties and early sixties.

DJ Pauly D also owns a tanning bed. He spends 25 minutes a day applying gel to his hair to produce an effect that girls will want to touch.

JWoww is a 23-year-old club promoter whose 21st birthday present to herself was a breast augmentation, whose effects she dresses to emphasize.

Mike calls himself "The Stituation." The assistant manager of a fitness center in Staten Island, he boasts remarkably emphatic "abs." He calls them "The Situation" because they produce strong interest. He works in a t-shirt shop where he sells thongs that bear, across the crotch, the legend "I Love the Situation."

The four other characters, Angelina, Sammi "Sweetheart," Ronnie, and Vinny are all similarly devoted to degrees of physical culture and self advertisement, but not quite so dramatically as the first four.

Jersey Shore's 'Guido' Outrage (CBS) Determined, even obsessive, rituals of self-presentation belong to the slave-market aspect of the show, a feature it shares with many other popular forms of spectacle – modeling contests, talent competitions, beauty pageants – where the performers burnish their secondary sexual characteristics, hoping to attract prizes or at least buyers. Snooki, for example, dresses like a showgirl, and JWoww displays the perfect domes of her enhanced bosoms, but both occasionally profess their desires to make careers, not as hookers or showgirls, but as wives of Guidos. As Snooki puts it, "My ultimate dream is to move to Jersey, find a nice juiced hot tanned guy and live my life."[1]

There is something incredibly old-fashioned about the ambitions of these souped-up young bodies. And that brings us to the other, more controversial aspect of the series, its minstrel-show representation of Italian Americans. Here is the most provocative statement of the theme, uttered by DJ Pauly D:

I was born and raised a Guido. It's just a lifestyle. It's about being Italian. It's representing family, friends, tanning, gel, everything. Dude I got a fucking tanning bed in my place, that's how serious I am about being a Guido and living up to that lifestyle. My tagline is 'I'm Your Girl's Favorite DJ.' I want the Guidettes to come in their pants when they hear my music.[2]

There are viewers whose response to this kind of statement has the eyeblink speed of a conditioned reflex. There have been two levels of protest.

O&A with "Jersey Shore" star "The Situation" Snook the Night The first is very general, and very

familiar in nature. Many Italian American organizations have joined this protest. Angelo DiMino, president of UNICO National, says the show “sends the wrong message.” “This type of programming represents a direct affront and attack by MTV on the character of Italian Americans, the fourth-largest ethnic group in America.”[3] The Order Sons of Italy in America and the National Italian American Foundation have taken similar positions, calling on MTV to take the show off the air. This response is hardly surprising; nor, in the general marketplace of ethnic stereotypes, is it out of place. Italian American civic organizations, devoted to supporting the social advance of Italian Americans, must respond this way when anyone presents the identity Italian American in a way that causes it to lose what they perceive as social value and/or prestige. In the days of The Godfather and The Sopranos, these organizations took similar positions.

The protest has the character of a class defense. Italian Americans are rising in the world. Doctors, lawyers, writers, professors, Supreme Court Justices, the Speaker of the House, corporation presidents and CEOs—pillars of respectability abound. Jersey Shore, though it does not feature gangsters, ignores all this move in the direction of quiet refinement. Rather, it brings the meaning of the expression Italian American back to the world of the working-class, where beauty is all on the surface, and long-range consequences, so beloved of the upwardly-mobile, have nothing to do with it. The stars of Jersey Shore are not interested in delayed gratification. Their position is made firmly clear by Snooki, speaking on the Wendy Williams Show:

The Italian, whatever, national, whatever their organization is, they don’t understand that 'guidos' and 'guidettes' are good-looking people that, you know, like to make a scene and be center of attention and just take care of themselves.... [These national organizations] are old-fashioned. They don't know that; they think it's offensive, because maybe in their time it was offensive, but now it's kind of a compliment. So they don't understand that and that is what we are trying to say. They are way overreacting to the show. We're 22 to 29 just having fun at the shore. They are just taking it way out of proportion.[4]

I felt like eating ham and drinking water. Ham. "Hair 101" (The Daily News) To which the leaders of Italian American organizations might reply, “Fine. Enjoy yourselves. Just understand that you are defaming a brand-name that we share with you.” And of course they are right. The entry of Italian Americans into elite social groups has not kept pace with their academic and economic achievements. For example, 4.6 percent of college professors are Italian American, a portion close to the Italian American presence (5.6 percent) in the general population. But the Italian American presence in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the leading elite intellectual group in the nation, is 1.3 percent, a figure suggestive of the unspoken barriers and diminished value that still attaches to their shared identification.[5]

What shall we make of problems like this? The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of the City University of New York, whose mission and goals include “heightening awareness, fostering higher education, and conducting research to deepen understanding of Italian Americans’ culture and heritage,” announced a lecture and discussion on “Guido: An Italian-American Youth Style” for Thursday, January 21, 2010, to be led by Donald Tricarico, a sociologist and author who has studied this subculture, and by Johnny DeCarlo, a self-identified Guido. It would seem appropriate to have a serious discussion of something that many Italian Americans see as a serious threat to their social advance.

But no.

Instead, this event brings us to the second level of protest. A wide variety of persons has protested the presentation of this colloquium. Arthur Piccolo, writing on i-italy.org, takes the line that the very term Guido is so offensive that it ought never to be uttered, much less studied and discussed, by an Italian American, not even a scholar trained to analyze social facts. Piccolo gets so angry about this that he writes, “Meet Dr. Donald Tricarico who regardless of his ancestry does not deserve to be called an Italian American.” [6] Piccolo, like many others, attributes a peculiar negative power to the word.

Meet the Cast 'Jersey Shore' Cast Reacts to Snooki Getting Punched in the Face (ET) It is not easy to disagree with him, but it is also necessary to do so. For the word Guido has a complex meaning, and

to read it as having a simple valence, negative or positive, is to miss the eloquence of the phenomenon it represents. Guido is a word in process of transvaluation, according to Donald Tricarico. "Guido is a slur, but Italian kids have embraced it just as black kids have embraced the N word. In the same way that radical gays call themselves queer."[7]

In fact, the entire ensemble of Guido behaviors presents Italian American culture in a funhouse mirror, with meanings distorted and turned upside down. The emphasis on virginity and female virtue in the traditional Italian American family recurs here in the caricature of maternal abundance in the florid display of copious mammaries and child-bearing hips. Angelina says, "I have real boobs. I have a nice, fat ass." [8] Given her name, it is not difficult to see her as advertising herself as a candidate for Italian American wedlock and motherhood.

Is it too far-fetched to see in this working-class culture a powerful force of nostalgic (i.e, home-seeking) behavior, Southern Italians who seek out their ancestral and stereotypical darkness with tanning beds in their rooms, into which they lay themselves down like Orpheus descending into the Underworld, farmers' grandchildren who exaggerate their fertility with their grotesque miming of sexuality, twenty-first century breeding partners still looking for simple fidelity to an ethnic identity that, in practice, they often do not know how to achieve. Two of the most feverish mate-hunters among them, Snooki and Pauly D, spend much of their time pursuing partners who are, respectively, Irish and Israeli. Guido, with its double value, positive and negative, is a term flexible enough to represent an Italian American identity that both is and isn't something in particular.

The level of linguistic inventiveness and of cultural improvisation present here is evident not only in the words but in the stunning remarks that emerge from the characters' mouths.

JWoww: "I am like a praying mantis, after I have sex with a guy I will rip their heads off. "[9]

Sammi Sweeetheart: "Go home. You don't belong here. You don't even look Italian!"[10]

Mike "The Situation": "G.T.L. baby. Gym, Tanning, Laundry."[11]

Vinny: "These kids are robots... Gym, Tanning, Laundry... that's how they make the guidos. I don't follow those rules at all... I can see if it was Basketball, Pool, Beach." [12]

It is the wit of people living in a borderland, negotiating the need to seem certain even when nothing can be ascertained.

This is a phenomenon that demands attention. If Italian American social advance were as real, as secure, and as substantial as many Italian Americans believe it to be (I am among these believers), then it would seem not only not harmful, but indeed positively beneficial and necessary, to examine, to discuss, and to reflect upon the power of such a new word. Are we mature enough, sensible enough, secure enough in our sense of our own inheritance, to engage in such reflection? I want merely to point out that the achievement of high social and intellectual status in the United States requires that we look firmly at the things we most instinctively dislike and fear about our selves, both internally and externally.

Internally, we need to ask, have we really distanced ourselves from our working-class roots so little that the very signs of these roots, appearing on a television show, must enrage and disgust us? And if so, why?

Externally, we need to ask, do we need to be responsive and responsible to every person that tries to define our relationship with our inherited identities? If I am Italian American, is it not within my power to write about that in my own way, in terms that no one else needs to use or accept?

As to the youths of Jersey Shore, they are playing grotesques, like all minstrel-show caricatures. They are amusing—indeed, more so than most clowns with sad eyes. They have clearly found their moment and clearly touched a nerve. To the term Italian American, which has carried so many strings of dollar bills and ropes of sausage, they have added a new chain of fetishes – a tanning bed, a tube of gel, an old summer thong bearing the legend "I Love the Situation."

[1] http://www.jerseyshorequotes.com/cast/snooki_quotes.htm [2]
[2] http://www.inkandbeans.com/2009/12/best-quotes-from-premiere-of-mtvs.html [3]
[3] http://iaonevoice.blogspot.com/2009/11/mtv-shore-show-slurs-ia-community.html [4]
[4] http://www.usmagazine.com/moviestvmusic/news/italian-american-alyssa-milano-mtvs-jersey-shore-upset-me-20091112 [5]
[5] Richard Alba and Dalia Abdel-Hardy, "Galileo's Children: Italian Americans' Difficult Entry into the Intellectual Elite," The Sociological Quarterly 46 (2005) 3-18.
[6] http://iaonevoice.blogspot.com/2009/11/mtv-shore-show-slurs-ia-community.htm [6]l
[7] http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1947338,00.html#ixzz0d5Fq75Co [7]
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[11] http://www.jerseyshorequotes.com/cast/the-situation_quotes.htm [10]
[12] http://www.jerseyshorequotes.com/cast/vinny_quotes.htm [11]

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