



The Secret History of Italian Americans on TV

Joey Skee (March 06, 2011)



Pausing the flickering image of the cathode ray tube.

The 1960s television program [The Man From U.N.C.L.E.](#) [2] recently became available on Netflix and I immediately moved the DVDs to the top of my queue. While I was a big fan of this spy show when I was kid, I had never noticed that the secret entrance to the headquarters of the international intelligence agency—"in New York City, on a street in the east 40s"—was through "Del Floria's Tailor Shop." After a quick search I discovered that the shop owner controlling the access was [a sixty-year-old Italian immigrant named Giovanni](#) [3].



Just as I was making this little find, historian Nancy Carnevale and culture studies scholar Laura Ruberto, editors of Fordham University Press's "[Critical Studies in Italian America](#) [4]" series, emailed the editorial board for suggestions about a proposed anthology on Italian Americans and TV. While much has been written about Italian Americans and cinema—the latest book being [Mediated Ethnicity](#) [5]—little has been done from the perspective of the cathode ray tube.

Anthony Tamburri addresses this "paucity of critical studies, especially books" [in his recent essay](#) [6], "The History of Italian American Film and Television Studies," attributing it to "the continued problem of minimal scholarly attention paid to Italian Americans and a lack of interest about representations of Italian Americans on television that seems to exist even among scholars in Italian American studies." This dearth is reflected even in his article in which TV Italians play second fiddle to their celluloid counterparts, two pages to seven.

DVD releases and the Internet now provide access to TV programs previously unavailable, offering the possibility of a nuanced reflection. I imagine the Italian immigrant's "ordinary tailor shop" as a metaphoric gateway to the secret history of Italian Americans on TV that warrants our scholarly attention.

An obvious place to begin is with the notion of the stereotype and programs like the dago minstrelsy that was [Life with Luigi](#) [7], [Renzo Cesana](#) [8]'s ludicrous Latin Lover in [The Continental](#) [9], and the mafia drama [The Untouchables](#) [10].

One approach would be a straight forward content analysis of various episodes, which, I believe, has yet to be done from an Italian-American angle. American Studies scholar [Laura Cook Kenna takes a different approach](#) [11] to perceived biases in TV programming by scrutinizing the successful anti-defamation efforts against *The Untouchables* thus contextualizing this previously unexamined history.

Another type of audience reception was touched upon in Herbert Gans's [The Urban Villagers](#) [12], a sociological study of Italian-America slum dwellers in Boston's West End in the 1950s. These working-class folks engaged with mass media through a strategic form of critical "detachment":

West Enders enjoy making fun of the media as much as they enjoy the programs. As one of my neighbors put it, "We heckle TV just like we used to heckle the freaks at the circus when we were kids." Television commercials are sometimes watched raptly, and then bombarded with satirical comments which question exaggerated or dishonest claims and meaningless statements. West Enders do not enjoy watching satire, but they do enjoy creating their own in response to what they see. They also are sensitive to media content which allows them to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the outside world. Thus programming which praises politicians as honest, which implies that middle-class characters who talk about morality also act that way, or which suggests that businessmen are more interested in community service than in profit is debunked in no uncertain terms.

During this time period, the young Martin Scorsese was watching Italian neorealist films on New York television. Listen as he movingly describes that experience and, in particular, the reaction of his Sicilian-born grandparents.

Communication professor Chiara Francesca Ferrari, on the other hand, examines the [transnational media flow of American programs aired on Italian television](#) [13], unpacking the subsequent linguistic and cultural transformations of such endeavors.

There are whole genres worth exploring: [variety shows](#) [14], [game shows](#) [15], [domestic](#)



[comedies](#) [16], [police procedurals](#) [17], [cooking shows](#) [18], [reality shows](#) [19], [music videos](#) [20], [cartoons](#) [21], [commercials](#) [22], and countless [parodies](#) [23] and [spoofs](#) [24].

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[Harvey Birdman: The Dabba Don](#)

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I would be remiss if I did not mention the [Calandra Institute's ITALICS](#) [26], the twenty-year-old "TV magazine" broadcast on CUNY-TV.

For all the obvious programs and characters, from [Fonzie](#) [27] to [Joey Tribbiani](#) [28], from [Pinky Tuscadero](#) [29] to [Marie Janella Barone](#) [30], little known moments from this secret history are waiting to be explored, like the [1956 teleplay "Anna Santonello" on the Kraft Television Theater](#) [31] or [Johnny Staccato](#) [32], the Greenwich Village jazz pianist/private detective played by the incomparable [John Cassavetes](#) [33].

Does anyone remember Paul Gigante, the "half-black, half-Italian police detective" played by [Giancarlo Esposito](#) [34] in the short-lived comedy [Bakersfield, P.D.](#) [35]?

A linguistic analysis of TV programs would be an interesting avenue to explore, using perhaps the episode when [Darrin was bewitched to speak only in Italian](#) [36] or this kitchen table exchange from *Everyone Loves Raymond*.

Post-World War II Italian migrants, another little-studied subject, are often depicted on TV, usually in comedies.

One might easily understand the newcomer appearing on *I Love Lucy* which was set in New York but Mario Vinchenti and his family arriving in [Mayberry](#) [37], North Carolina?!

Scholarly studies flourished with the artistic and commercial success of *The Sopranos*. We are beginning to see serious consideration of [subjects like race](#) [38], gender, sexuality, and class emerge in the wake of the global hit *Jersey Shore*.

All too often Italian-American anti-defamation activists reject the scholarly study of media, maintaining that Italian-American academics, in particular, need to ["defend or promote our heritage."](#) [39] Such a philistine position ends up serving not the needs of an "Italian American community" but the tenuous claims these cultural judicators make to being "ethnic leaders."

The actress [Betty Garrett died last month](#) [40] and I was reminded of her role as Irene Lorenzo,



neighbor and foil of the bigot Archie Bunker in the 1970s hit *All in the Family*. Her character and that of her husband Frank, played by [Vincent Gardenia](#) [41], were refreshing depictions of Italian Americans on TV. The couple was politically liberal and Roman Catholic, with the handywoman Irene working outside the home and the househusband Frank taking pleasure and pride in cooking.

The open-minded Irene and Frank Lorenzo make welcomed guides to lead us through Giovanni Del Floria's passageway and into a world yet to be discovered.

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Thanks to [Laura Ruberto \[51\]](#) and [Anthony Tamburri \[52\]](#) for several cited references and links, and to Rosangela Briscese for her assistance.

Related Links: http://www.tvacres.com/ethnic_italian_a_e.htm [53]

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/italianambib.html> [54]

Source URL: <http://test.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/life-people/article/secret-history-italian-americans-tv>

Links

- [1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/16850manfromuncledeffloria1299015028jpg>
- [2] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjmOkqU6Roo>
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