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On Jungle Fever, True Romance, and Green Book:
African-American and Italian-American Relations in Film
Marc DiPaolo

In Spike Lee’s Jungle Fever (1991), John Turturro plays Paulie, a sensitive, intellectual Italian-American who wants to go to college but feels trapped managing his father’s neighborhood grocery in Bensonhurst. During slow periods, he reads history books, offending the sensibilities of one working-class Italian male customer. To try to demonstrate the value of literacy and historical knowledge, Paulie tells the customer he’s been reading about five Sicilian factory owners in turn-of-the-century Louisiana who gave their black and white employees equal status. In a horrifying turn of events, the local whites became incensed and lynched the Italians in retaliation. Paulie’s sad tone indicates that he feels Italian-Americans and African-Americans have both suffered at the hands of white supremacy and need to stand united against it in modern America. The customer gleans the exact opposite moral from the story, and retorts, “Good, they got what they deserved” for getting involved with blacks. He walks away from the conversation convinced that books are dangerous because they encourage Italian solidarity with non-Italians.

The liminal space that Italian-Americans have historically occupied between “whiteness” and “non-whiteness” has given them the opportunity to choose who they strive to identify more with. As Robert Orsi has argued, Italian-Americans who think somewhat like the racist customer in Jungle Fever have found more economic and social incentive to side with the establishment white culture than they have felt driven to stand idealistically with marginalized non-white Americans. Writing about the same issue, Fred Gardaphe has concluded that Italian-Americans know that they will be accepted as white so long as they behave in a non-threatening manner,
accept the mass media’s stereotypical depictions of them, and ignore the structural racism perpetuated by corporate American culture. In the scholarly essay collection *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (2003), co-edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, Guglielmo observes that, “Italians were not always white, and the loss of this memory is one of the tragedies of racism in America.” Spike Lee’s Paulie is notable in that he does not suffer from this loss of memory and is, therefore, capable of feeling a kinship with African-Americans – and possibly even vote for David Dinkins for mayor of New York over fellow Italian Rudy Giuliani.

Having chosen, more often than not, to embrace “whiteness,” Italian-Americans are thin-skinned enough concerning their relationships with – and level of kinship with – black peoples worldwide that they are prone to violent outbursts of rage when confronted by these issues. Spike Lee has depicted these outbursts on film most often, but perhaps the most famous depiction of an Italian exploding over his “secret blackness” was brought to the screen by Quentin Tarantino.

Tarantino has said more than once that the scene he is most proud of writing is “the Sicilian scene” between Dennis Hopper and Christopher Walken in *True Romance* (1993). Hopper slyly explains to Walken’s Don Vincenzo Coccotti that all Sicilian-Americans can justifiably be called “niggers” because the Moor conquest of Sicily centuries ago gave all southern Italians black blood and permanently stamped them with swarthy complexions. Enraged, Don Vincenzo kills him over the insult. Tarantino said that Hopper’s inflammatory dialogue was gleaned from a gripping history monologue that a black man living in his house gave him years ago. After first hearing it, Tarantino tried repeating the substance of that same monologue to a Sicilian friend, who really didn’t appreciate it. The friend’s negative reaction made Tarantino realize that he had to include the monologue in one of his films. The terror and rage these real and fictional Sicilians demonstrated in reaction to accusations of “having black
“blood” is indicative of a deep societal dread of their losing the status of “whiteness” in American society that they had worked for generations to achieve. This fear also underpins a dread of interracial marriage and miscegenation that extends not only to casual dating but even to friendship between Italian-Americans and African-Americans. It is this dread of any kind of intimacy between Italians and blacks that Spike Lee criticizes Italian-Americans for time and again in his films. Especially in his early works, *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Jungle Fever* (1991), some of Lee’s most memorable villains are Italian-Americans afraid of their own affinity for black people and their culture. For example, the aggressively racist Pino in *Do the Right Thing* declares himself an enormous fan of Prince, Michael Jordan, and Eddie Murphy, but doesn’t consider his fandom inconsistent with his racism because he regards the three men as whitewashed by their success and “not really black.” After all, if black men can become white by becoming famous, so can Italian-American men, like Pino. When the film’s hero, Mookie (played by Spike Lee himself) makes an appeal to Pino’s friendship on the basis of their mutual love of these respected black men, he is flatly rebuffed, making a rapprochement between him and Pino impossible. Another irredeemably racist Italian-American villain is Angie Tucci’s father in *Jungle Fever*, who brutally beats his daughter with a belt when he learns she’s having an affair with a black man.

Ever since the release of these films, it is not uncommon to find Italian-Americans who are critical of Spike Lee for going too far in dramatizing Italian-American racism, and caricaturing an entire ethnic community in the process. While it is understandable that many Italian-Americans would smart at Lee’s depiction of racism in their community, there are several mitigating factors that make the issue more complex than it first appears. The first is that Lee is arguably dramatizing a legitimately widespread crisis in Italian-America, most notoriously
highlighted by the killing of Yusef Hawkins by a mob of angry Italians who had assumed he was in Bensonhurst to be with an Italian woman. Another mitigating factor is that Lee includes likeable Italian-American characters in his films, including Paulie and Sal’s younger son Vito in *Do the Right Thing*, who comes across as sympathetic because he is friends with Mookie and defends him from being badgered by Sal and Pino.

And yet, even Spike Lee’s villains are sometimes rendered in shades of grey. Danny Aiello’s Sal, who occupies the role of antagonist in the film, is a troubling figure given his lechery, hypocrisy, and ethnic nationalism. Nevertheless, he has positive qualities. For example, the pride he feels in feeding his pizza to generations of Harlem children is laudable, especially since he discusses it in terms of having the opportunity to watch them grow up. The promises of advancement he makes to Mookie immediately before the climactic confrontation also seem to come from a place of genuine affection. In general, Spike Lee’s first impulse is to live with ambiguities rather than settle conclusively on simplistic characterizations and moral lessons.

Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever* is particularly salient to this discussion because it is about an interracial relationship between characters played by Wesley Snipes and Annabella Sciorra – Flip and Angie. The plot centers around a charismatic, arrogant, middle-class black man who derails his idyllic family life by having an affair with the Italian-American temp working in his office. As a mixed couple, Flip and Angie felt the impossibility of settling either in his Harlem or her Bensonhurst, so they set up a love-nest in neutral ground in the Village. However, the Village only offers them the illusion of sanctuary. Throughout the film, characters who are jealous of or offended by their relationship relentlessly accuse them of being possessed by “Jungle Fever” – a lust inspired by and tainted by the legacy of slavery. When Flip is almost shot by the police for play wrestling with Angie in public, he feels that their cause is hopeless and
ends the affair. His justification for the break-up is that he doesn’t really love her. He’s been suffering from “jungle fever” all along, just as his father and best friend said. Also, he was adamant about never producing a mixed-race child with her, so there was no way they would be together long-term in any event. Whether it is due Lee’s writing and directing or Sciorra’s acting, Angie appears so quietly offended by Flip’s words that viewers might well interpret both her love for him and desire for children with him as genuine. The film does leave open the possibility that she may be deluding herself on these points. It also allows viewers to read Flip as deliberately misrepresenting his feelings as shallow to make the breakup easier on them both.

Viewers of the film who have become invested in the relationship are rebuked by Lee through Flip, who tells Angie she’s a fool if she believes in Walt Disney style happy endings. Also, in dedicating the film to Yusef Hawkins and opening it with his portrait, Lee makes it clear from the outset that he would regard it as artistically and morally irresponsible to make a film about a successful interracial relationship between a black man and an Italian-American woman in a world in which Yusef Hawkins was murdered.

And yet, as the disastrous Flip-Angie relationship comes to an end, the sensitive Paulie tries to begin his own romance with a friendly, well-educated black customer who knows him well-enough to repeatedly urge him to apply to college. When he asks her out on a date, she seems initially skeptical of his advances, but agrees to it. Their storyline comes to an unresolved end when Paulie fights both his father and his racist customers over his affection for her, and walks away from a brawl bruised but determined to pursue the relationship.

Unfortunately, Lee has twice lost Oscars to films that handle race-relations in a more trivial, “feel-good” fashion – first Driving Miss Daisy and then Green Book – and he is understandably bitter about it. Both films depict unlikely friendships blossoming between whites
and blacks who grow to love one another driving many miles together around the Jim Crow South. The utopian feel to these films, created by the lovable characters and their “happy tears” endings can encourage viewers to feel as if the films themselves have “solved” the problem of race in America, thereby leaving viewers off the hook from doing the real work of peace, reconciliation, reparations, and the dismantling of systemic racism. As Lee grumbled, “Every time someone's driving somebody, I lose.”

[Other film narratives about black/Italian relations in America, including those by Italian-American writers and directors, often portray Italian-Americans just as unsympathetically as Spike Lee does in terms of race, and there is rarely a Walt Disney – or Green Book – happy ending in sight. Martin Scorsese’s Mean Streets (1973) features a brief but significant subplot in which Harvey Keitel’s protagonist, Charlie Cappa, briefly considers going on a date with a black woman before standing her up. During its second half, the 1993 film A Bronx Tale, written by Chazz Palminteri and directed by Robert DeNiro, becomes primarily concerned with the blossoming romance between a teenage Italian-American boy who falls for a black girl. Their relationship is put under stress when racial tensions between their neighborhoods escalate, but they fight to stay together despite the crisis. It is an open-ended film, and not overly “Disney” in its depiction of the young romance.]

In A Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of the Gothic (1999), cultural critic Mark Edmundson has noted that there are two competing impulses in American cultural history: the gothic and the transcendentalist. The gothic impulse suggests that humans and human society are irredeemable, will never heal from the wounds of the past, and can never successfully improve in the future. The transcendentalist impulse suggests that the future will be more utopian, past injustices can be overcome, and redemption and progress are
always possible. Edmundson concludes that the American sensibility has become nearly uniformly gothic, and the transcendentalist impulse can be found virtually nowhere in American culture, politics, or spiritual life. However, he has identified an American preference for “facile transcendence” in which a predominantly Gothic narrative is supposed to provide an unearned and unconvincing happy resolution as a reassurance that happy endings are possible, even in a Gothic world. *Green Book* falls squarely into this category, as a film that lays bare all the challenges inherent in redeeming a racist character like Frank, while offering no compelling narrative about how he, emotionally and psychologically, can transform from a hard-core racist into a man who would have an authentic, lifelong friendship with a black, gay man, no matter how rich and famous. Films such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever* are high art that depict, in unflinching terms, the grim reality of our current racial divide without offering predictions of what the future holds. As an artist, Spike Lee is telling the truth as he sees it, and is not promising either a happy ending for his characters or a bright future for America. He is interested in telling the truth about *where we are now*. The task of forging a better future is what he leaves up to us.

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1 The history book Paulie is reading appears to be in the same vein as Richard Gambino’s book *Vendetta* and its film adaptation, about the lynching of eleven Italian-Americans in New Orleans on March 14, 1891. Paulie would be interested in Gambino’s work, as well as scholarship by Donna R. Garbaccia, James R. Barrett and David Roediger, who have chronicled the many ways in which Italian-Americans were not granted the same rights and social status as “whites” but, nevertheless, were accorded more respect and opportunities than African- and Asian-Americans.

In recent years, several notable works have appeared delving into the topic of black and Italian-American relations. Among them are the scholarly monographs *Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge* by John Gennari and *In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen* by Samuele Pardini. Other scholars who have written about the positive and negative aspects of black-Italian relations include Matthew Calihman and Stefano Luconi, as well as contributors to a 2016 special issue of *Italian Americana* concerning the *Creed* and *Rocky* film franchise edited by Nancy Caronia, and a 1997 collection of essays edited by Dan Ashyk and Fred L. Gardaphe called *Shades of Black and White: Conflict and Collaboration Between Two Communities*. Among one of the most notable artistic representations of Italian and black Americans united in suffering is Mary Bucci Bush’s 2011 novel *Sweet Hope*, about Italian and African Americans working on a cotton plantation together in the early twentieth century south. A character as sensitive and introspective as Paulie would likely be interested in reading any of these works.