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A Fistful of Focaccia: Italy and America in Nico Cirasola's *Focaccia Blues*¹

In early 2001, McDonald's opened in the small southern Italian town of Altamura. The restaurant closed in December 2002, with months remaining on the lease. *Focaccia Blues* (2009), a film that combines documentary elements with a fictional tale, narrates the encounter between the giant American corporation and a focaccia shop opened by a local baker nearby. Based on a screenplay by Alessandro Contessa and Alessia Lepore and directed by Nico Cirasola, this film ostensibly about flat bread engages in a much larger conversation about the effects of globalization as it pits the American fast food chain against time-honored customs held by the residents of a small town in Puglia.² *Focaccia Blues* interviews Eric Jozsef, a journalist for the French paper *La Libération* who was the first to report the food fight in 2006. The film also cites Ian Fisher who later wrote about McDonald's short-lived presence in Altamura in the *New York Times*. He quoted the description of this gastronomic clash by food activist and retired journalist Onofrio Pepe (who appears as himself in Cirasola's film): "Our bullets were focaccia. And sausage. And bread. It was a peaceful war, without any spilling of blood." And Patrick Girondi, a Chicago native who had lived in Altamura for more than a decade, explained the outcome of this encounter in Fischer's article thus: "McDonald's didn't get beat by a baker. McDonald's got beat by a culture." (Fisher 2006)

Focaccia Blues depicts the victory of regional, local fare over homogenized products and embraces the tenets of the Slow Food movement, initiated in Italy in 1986 as a response to the establishment of a McDonald's restaurant in Rome's iconic Piazza di Spagna.³ The film includes a medical perspective on eating habits in an interview with Dr. Giuseppe Colamonaco who relates the litany of health woes associated with the consumption of fast, not slow, food. Cirasola dedicates his film to Carlo Petrini, one of the founders of the movement that advocates for good, clean, and fair food for all. Based on the premise that locally grown food is superior, Slow Food attempts to curb the negative effects of globalization that occur when multinationals such as McDonald's challenge local businesses dedicated to traditional methods of growing and preparing food. Restaurants in Italy proudly display images of the Slow Food snail, known for its leisurely pace, to signal their commitment to the movement. This insignia now graces restaurants throughout the world, including establishments run by Mario Batali in the United States. Another slow movement, Cittaslow (Slow Cities), which was founded in 1999, aims to engage local communities and town governments in the appreciation of food, respect for civic and religious life, and preservation of traditions that contribute to the richness of daily living. In Cirasola's film, residents of Altamura affirm those principles as they perform a wide variety of artisanal work while enjoying food raised and grown locally.

In addition to focusing on the international news coverage about McDonald's premature departure from Altamura, *Focaccia Blues* highlights the work of Luca Digesù, the baker who established a focacceria right next door to the fast food restaurant. He is one of many artisans of Altamura who practice 'slow' trades passed down from generation to generation. Cirasola's film interviews local barbers, art restorers, pastry chefs, butchers, cobblers, iron forgers, and saddle makers who face challenges in the modern world. For example, the cobbler explains that he has much less work now that people wear sneakers, the rubber soles of which never need repairs. *Focaccia Blues* documents as well McDonald's clumsy pursuit of zoning and signage permits in an interview with a town official.

Juxtaposed against the story of the humble bread of Altamura, praised by Horace in the *Satires* and, as of 2003, protected by the European Union as DOP (*Denominazione di Origine Protetta*),⁴ and the industrialized fare of a multinational conglomerate, is a whimsical fictional tale, reminiscent of Aesop's fable of the Tortoise and the Hare, which champions the slowness over speed. A love triangle features two town natives, Dante Cappiello (Dante Marmone) and Rosa (Tiziana Schiavarelli, Marmone's wife) and a tall, silent stranger Manuel (the

director's son Luca Cirasola) whose arrival in town, like that of a Western hero, suggests that a showdown is in the offing. Initially, Rosa is attracted to the handsome young stranger with his snazzy car and loud clothing in the same way that local residents were drawn to the air conditioning and novel food offered by McDonald's. Yet Manuel's disdain for the focaccia that Rosa so lovingly prepares leads her to embrace Dante, who has the utmost respect for the fruits and vegetables that he sells. In the end, the girl chooses the unassuming local guy in jeans and a flannel shirt; she rejects the debonair stranger for having discarded local tomatoes from her focaccia. In a send-up of an erotic encounter, Cirasola frames Rosa and Manuel in a seemingly intimate moment. The camera ultimately demonstrates that food, not flesh, plays a critical role in this sensual experience when it reveals that Rosa has been kneading focaccia instead of making love to Manuel.

The film's title signals the importance of color while underscoring the divide between Italy, land of the focaccia, and America, birthplace of the blues. In the plural, blues signifies both sadness and the music that sings of that sadness, a genre derived from African American spirituals of the deep south. *Focaccia Blues* underscores the transatlantic fascination for the quintessentially American musical expression.⁵ Color also aids our understanding of the division between good guys and bad guys. In place of the white and black hats that distinguish good from evil in the American Western, Cirasola substitutes garish hues of blue, yellow, and red that are found in comic strips. In that same comic vein, the director inserts a hand-drawn map of the town of Altamura on which toy cars follow the action of his story. The underdog protagonist Dante drives a rickety blue three-wheeler, while Manuel, the American interloper in this lyrical Italian land, drives a flashy yellow Corvette while wearing a gaudy red jacket, which together form the color combination of McDonald's signature golden arches. Manuel's Chevy signals foreignness while Dante's Piaggio exemplifies his native Italy. In this tale reminiscent of David and Goliath, of focaccia and the Big Mac, of Italy and the United States, the diminutive Ape or "bee" initially appears to be no match for the intimidating Corvette, whose name, according to Webster's Dictionary, means "a warship ranking in the old sailing navies next below a frigate". Like its driver, the muscle car fails to impress in the end when it breaks down. Together in the Ape, Dante and Rosa drive at a snail's (or tortoise's) pace past Manuel and his disabled Corvette.

A closer examination of this tale reveals the integral role of cinema in this tale of Italy and America. At the beginning of the narrative, we meet the protagonist Dante, who tells of his work as a greengrocer and of his passion for film. He loves the smell of fresh fruits and vegetables that he procures daily from local farmers. Dante explains his routine and his love for film in the same breath: "Prendo tutta roba bella fresca appena raccolta. Non vado mai al mercato generale perché proprio mi piace l'odore della terra. E poi, come passione mi piace il cinema."

Even before *Focaccia Blues* begins, Michele Placido, in his cameo role of projectionist, reminisces about movies. In a prefatory address to the viewer, the Apulian native and acclaimed Italian director and actor who has starred in many films including *I tre fratelli* (Rosi 1981), *Lamerica* (Amelio 1994), *La sconosciuta* (Tornatore 2006), and *Il caimano* (Moretti 2006), extols the virtues of film, the material and art form, as he inhales the aroma of the celluloid. This scent evokes his uncle's cinema where, as a child, Placido's character watched films and rooted for American bandits. The projectionist explains how movies help us understand life. He also tells of his appreciation of *Focaccia Blues*, the appetite or "gusto" for which reminds him of a pizza. Describing the story as "una piccola grande battaglia", of a small focacceria against the "colosso" McDonald's, Placido asserts that Cirasola's film resurrects the flavors of his youth, which unfortunately no longer exist. Food analogies continue as the camera cuts to the canisters that encase the film, called "pizze" in Italian on account of their shape. Placido shows his appreciation for the good things in life while displaying a pizza: "Abbiamo già tutto quello che ci serve per vivere meglio. Basta sceglierlo." Placido's nostalgia for these old-fashioned cases and the reels they contain has become even more compelling in recent years. As of January 2014 films in Italy are transferred solely in digital format rendering the "pizze" extinct. Paolo Sorrentino's 2014 Oscar-winning *La grande bellezza* is one of the last examples of celluloid filmmaking. These pizzas evoke another comestible – the focaccia of the title – in this contemplation of local versus global, independent film versus international blockbuster, handmade artistry versus industrial production.

In addition to Placido, *Focaccia Blues* features several media icons from Puglia who call attention to the self-referential nature of this film while underscoring its southern roots. Famous television and film personalities Renzo Arbore (born in Foggia) and Lino Banfi (born Pasquale Zagaria in Andria) act out another more playful battle between the cuisines and reputations of two Apulian towns, Foggia and Bari. The humorous fictional television segments (a sort of 'telecucina') indicate deep pride in local delicacies such as the Cardoncello mushrooms for

which Bari is famous and the Lampascioni onions of Foggia.⁶ The comic rivalry between Arbore and Banfi highlights the film's insistence on regional products and cuisine. Their exchanges also connect this gastronomic war to the United States through references to Afro-American music: Banfi declares that the Bari figures prominently in "No Bari no the trouble I've seen", a deliberate mistranslation of the spiritual "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" while Arbore retorts that Ray Charles speaks of Foggia in his song "Foggia on My Mind" ("Georgia on My Mind"). These soulful citations resonate with the blues of the title.

A cameo appearance by Bari native Nichi Vendola, LGBT activist and President of Puglia since 2005, in the role of a theater owner underscores the sorry state of Italian cinema. In a diatribe similar to Nanni Moretti's critique of the pathetic quality and number of films screened during Roman summers in the first chapter of his film *Caro diario* (1993), Vendola explains to Dante that unless a film includes scenes of horror or porn, it will not be a commercial success. When he announces that "Il cinema è esaurito" he does not mean that his small theater is sold out, but rather that Italian cinema is in decline. He also tells Dante that audiences at the multiplex (which Dante mistakenly refers to as Plexiglas) disrespect the films they have supposedly come to watch as they play, eat, and talk on their cell phones. Dante brings the conversation back to food when he suggests that Vendola might offer local delicacies such as tomatoes, bread, braciolo, olives, artichokes, and Negroamaro wine in the theater lobby. Vendola's small, independent cinema obviously cannot survive with a handful of paying customers. The multi-screen theater complexes, which show mostly American blockbusters, threaten the very existence of such intimate venues. The pair reminisces about earlier, headier days of Italian cinema that produced comic successes such as *Totò e i re di Roma* (Monicelli 1951) or *Totò a colori* (Steno 1952), which Dante confuses with William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), itself a remake of an earlier American production (1925), filmed mostly in Italy and directed by Niblo and Brabin, with Ramon Novarro in the title role. Films featuring Totò were part of a golden age of Italian comedy, before the advent of multiplexes, which, like fast food restaurants, imperil more traditional establishments in Italy.

In *Focaccia Blues*, the confrontation between good guys (Dante, the local inhabitant) and bad guys (Manuel, the embodiment of McDonald's) reminds us of the Western, that quintessential American genre of film. Cinematographer Rocco Marra's shots of the golden fields outside the town of Altamura, which recall the vast plains of the western United States, reinforce that connection. The Western, predicated on the notion of the West as both a direction and a destination, has captivated writers and filmmakers as an expression of imperialist and pastoral yearnings. And the Western was inextricably linked to the quest for expansion in the United States and the policy of manifest destiny, with its narratives of justice and revenge. In the 1960s, Italian directors such as Sergio Leone and Sergio Corbucci manipulated the classical version of the Western genre that showcased the pursuit of civilization as the driving force behind American frontier life, pushing societal mores onward into uncharted lands. The Italian-style western or *western all'italiana* articulated a strikingly new interpretation of the American genre; the qualifier "spaghetti" was coined by critics in the United States to show their distaste for the European appropriation of the typical American story that featured cowboys in dusters with six-shooters on their hips, sheriffs with badges on their chests, and outlaws in black hats trying unsuccessfully to get away with evil deeds. Filmed mostly in Spain as well as in various locations in central and southern Italy, the Italian version of the Western sought to critique American expansionism in the far West, and even farther West in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Despite American critics' attempts to disparage these films as mere "macaroni", the new subgenre of the Western, which highlighted the brutality, violence and evil associated with civilization, took hold. One of the classic examples of the genre, Leone's *C'era una volta il West/Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), exposes the deleterious effects of progress as it recounts the bloodshed and mayhem that ensue when a rapacious railroad baron Morton (Gabriele Ferzetti) and his henchmen (including Frank, played by Henry Fonda in his first role as a bad guy) use violence to seize Brett McBain's (Frank Wolff) ranch in order to control the water supply that is needed for the steam engine that will ultimately pass through Sweetwater on its way to the Pacific.⁷

Cirasola's film addresses ideological differences by re-imagining history through a variation of the genre (the Western) that is linked inextricably to America. It is precisely Leone's spaghetti western *Once Upon a Time in the West* that plays in the background when Rosa first beholds Manuel at Dante's fruit stand. Various characters from Leone's film appear on a small black and white television as Dante helps the object of his affection select produce. Western-themed music accompanies Manuel's arrival outside Dante's shop; this melody evokes Leone's character whose instrument, the harmonica, is his name. And although Leone's hero Harmonica (played by Charles Bronson, who, like Fonda, was cast against type) does not appear in any of the scenes on television, the

inclusion of a similarly haunting leitmotif signals his presence. Parallels and divergences emerge between Harmonica, who is bent on extracting revenge from Frank for having forced him to take part in his own brother's hanging, and Manuel, an arrogant modern-day interloper in a Corvette who disrespects local specialties such as focaccia. Both Harmonica and Manuel are mostly, if not totally, silent. Leone's hero, according to his buddy Cheyenne (Jason Robards) plays instead of talking, and Cirasola's anti-hero never speaks. Both men encounter gorgeous, voluptuous women (Jill/Claudia Cardinale and Rosa/Tiziana Schiavarelli) only to leave them in the end.

The Western genre, like American fast food, has influenced culture all over the world. In *Focaccia Blues* we are meant to ponder the possible permutations of heroes and villains in this duel between artisanal bread and mass-produced fare. Following Michele Placido's cameo appearance, *Focaccia Blues* opens in the United States, with Puglia native and journalist Onofrio Pepe proclaiming his determination to introduce Americans to Altamura's focaccia. The documentary segment of the film follows the westward direction of this 'civilizing' movement, in which the old world educates the new world in the way of food. Yet the fictional love story shifts direction as a mysterious stranger arrives in Italy from the United States in his foreign car and outfit imitating the trajectory of McDonald's. Cirasola's comic love story recounts a new permutation of migration, from new world to old world, west to east. Just as the spaghetti western critiqued American imperialist expansionism, which resulted in the dislocation of native peoples, both at home and abroad in Southeast Asia, Cirasola's tale of geography as culinary destiny criticizes the invasion of his native Puglia by American fast food. Manuel's name, embroidered on his shirt, resonates with the culture of the southwest of the United States (or Mexico), suggesting perhaps that he is Latino. The selection of a Spanish name recalls an earlier linguistic misnomer given to Italian immigrants in the United States. They were called "dagos", a pejorative nickname derived from the Spanish name Diego.⁸ When Manuel heads east from the United States to Italy, reversing the traditional path which immigrants took a century ago, he dislikes what he finds. The bad guy leaves town empty handed, rejecting both the bread and the woman.

Whereas the traditional way of preparing film "pizze" (film canisters) is no longer viable due to technological advances, the *western all'italiana* (spaghetti western) continues to inform the history of exchange between the cultures of Italy and America. Consider Quentin Tarantino's admiration for another master of the genre, Sergio Corbucci. In ways both obvious and subtle, Tarantino's latest Oscar-winning film, *Django Unchained* (2012) revisits Corbucci's *Django* (1966). For example, Franco Nero, who played Django in the Italian original, meets the new Django (Jamie Foxx) at Calvin Candie's (Leonardo DiCaprio) ranch. When Foxx's character introduces himself to Amerigo Vesepi (whose name, in typical Tarantino fashion, is a playful interpretation of Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian explorer whose name graces North and South America), he tells him that the "D" is silent in Django. To that, the Italian owner of a *mandingo* (fighting slave) responds "I know". And well he should know since the actor Nero inhabited that very same role almost fifty years earlier. In an interview with Charles McGrath in the *New York Times*, Tarantino acknowledged the importance of spaghetti westerns on his oeuvre, including his most recent film:

I've always been influenced by the spaghetti western. I used to describe 'Pulp Fiction' as a rock n' roll spaghetti western with the surf music standing in for Ennio Morricone. I don't know if 'Django' is a western proper. It's a southern. I'm playing western stories in the genre, but with a southern backdrop. (McGrath 2012, 18-20)⁹

How do we define *Focaccia Blues*, with its combination of documentary and fiction? There are no neat parallels between this work and "slow cinema", a form of art film seen in the works of Michelangelo Antonioni, as well as in Michelangelo Frammartino's more recent film set in Calabria, *Le quattro volte* (2010), which focus more on image and design than character and story. Also referred to as "contemplative cinema", this method of filmmaking privileges long takes with little or no narrative. As Elsaesser indicates, cinematic slowness, however represented, may be interpreted as an act of organized resistance in the same way that the Slow Food movement reacts against the velocity of food production and all its attendant problems. He asserts that slow cinema:

counters the blockbuster's over-investment in action, spectacle and violence with long takes, quiet observation, an attention to detail, to inner stirrings rather than to outward restlessness, highlighting the deliberate or hesitant gesture, rather than the protagonist's drive or determination – reminding one, however remotely, of the 'go-slow' of industrial protest, but also the 'organic' pace of the vegetal realm. (Elsaesser 2011, 117)

Whereas Cirasola's film certainly champions slowness, and it allows the viewer to contemplate the filmmaker's native land in the long shots of the countryside, its considerable narrative disqualifies it from this particular categorization.

Focaccia Blues differs from the mockumentary, which contains fictional content in a documentary form, and from the docudrama, which contains documentary content in a fictional form. According to Lipkin et al. both of those hybrid forms have sensitized popular audiences to the aesthetics and form of integrated genres. Indeed, *Focaccia Blues* consciously vacillates between authenticity (documentary material) and hyperbole (fictional love story). Cirasola's film, by combining fact and fiction, transcends both as it stirs viewers to gastronomic consciousness in what Lipkin et al. describe as the power of such hybrid models: "Adding popular reach to formal grasp as they do enables some films and programs, at certain times, to punch significantly above their apparent weight" (Lipkin et al. 2006, 11-26). Yet perhaps the most appropriate designation for *Focaccia Blues* is docufiction, a term coined by Rhodes and Springer (2006, 5), in that this film synthesizes fact and fiction through the dramatic tale that illustrates, in albeit exaggerated fashion, an actual event.

The distinct regionalism that informs this docufiction must be considered as well. Both the director and the co-screenwriter/producer Alessandro Contessa hail from Puglia; Cirasola was born in Gravina in Puglia, in the province of Bari, and Contessa was born in Francavilla Fontana, in the province of Brindisi. Cirasola's earlier films are set in Puglia; for example *Albania Blues* (2000) and *Bell'epoker* (2003) focus on stories relevant to that region, that of Albanian boatpeople and of an elegant and storied community theater respectively. With funding from the Apulia Film Commission, the region of Puglia, the town of Altamura, the province of Bari, and the association "Amici del Fungo Cardoncello", *Focaccia Blues* illustrates the emerging trend of regional over national cinema. As Ravazzoli (2014, 167) points out, the strengthening of regional film production occurs at the expense of a unified national Italian cinema. Such disparate, regionally accented production has positive as well as negative results. While this relatively new phenomenon undermines the commonality of meaning and image in the national cinema, it allows local constituencies to create new meanings, images, and representations according to Ravazzoli.¹⁰

Whereas some critics may contend that the insular nature of regional production, which has increased exponentially in recent years as Ravazzoli documents,¹¹ may result in a provincial perspective, this hybrid film appears to challenge viewers with its creative vacillation between documentary and fiction. What Muscio identifies as "an interesting dialectic between cultural traditions and innovative style" (Muscio 2008, 177-194) in Sicilian filmmaking applies to *Focaccia Blues* insofar as the film, which champions traditional ways of life, tells the story in an unconventional and hybrid format.

Cirasola's film portrays an Italian triumph of focaccia and spaghetti western, of food and cinema. It also affirms the power of small films such as *Focaccia Blues*, which was produced on a relatively slim budget (approximately 350,000 Euros) and had limited distribution (it has yet to be shown in commercial theaters in the United States). With only a few copies in print at the time of its debut, the film remained in cinemas for almost a year and won special mention in three award categories, Nastro d'argento (2009), Ciak d'oro (2009), and Globo d'oro (2010). *Focaccia Blues* illustrates how tradition, combined with novel ideas, prevails. The film's director and his protagonist Dante, like his illustrious 14th century namesake, continue that legacy of innovation within convention today.

Notes

¹ This essay began as an introduction to *Focaccia Blues* at New York University's Casa italiana in December 2013 at which the director, Nico Cirasola, was present. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this essay for their careful reading and insightful comments.

² For a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the local-global issue see Robertson, Roland. "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity." In *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstone/Scott Lash/Roland Robertson. London: Sage, 1995: 25-44.

³ According to the Slow Food Manifesto, in order to combat an unhealthy lifestyle that developed with the advent of machinery in the industrial age, humans must seek to repudiate the fast (food and lifestyle) and return to slower, more authentic eating habits. The Manifesto declares that the battle must begin in the kitchen where "To escape the tediousness of 'fast-food', let us rediscover the rich varieties and aromas of local cuisines." The documentary, *Slow Food Story* (2013), written and directed by Stefano Sardo, recounts the story of the movement's foundation with a particular emphasis on the role of its founder, Carlo Petrini.

⁴ This designation, similar to the *Denominazione di origine controllata* for wines, certifies food products whose origins are identifiable by taste, texture, or smell; all of the ingredients must be grown in the region in which the food is produced. In the case of the *pane di Altamura*, the yeast, grain, sea salt and water must come from the region and certain types of wheat – Apulo, Archangelo, Duilio and Simeto – must be used. See Martin, James. "Wandering Italy." Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://wanderingitaly.com/blog/article/405/pane-di-altamura-dop>.

⁵ For a discussion of the reception of the blues, as well as jazz, on the European continent, see Wynn, Neil. *Cross the Water Blues: African American Music in Europe*. Jackson, MS: Mississippi UP, 2007.

⁶ These onions, which are the bulbs of the tassel hyacinth (*muscaria comosum*), are famously difficult to prepare; they require much attention in order to be edible.

⁷ See my chapter entitled "The Evolving Western: From America to Italy and Back in *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone, 1968) and *Kill Bill: Volumes 1 & 2* (Tarantino 2003 & 2004)." In *The Transatlantic Gaze: Italian Cinema, American Film*, ed. idem. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014: 61-83.

⁸ For a history of discrimination against Italians in the United States, see LaGumina, Salvatore John. *WOP! A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States*. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1999.

⁹ For a more detailed comparison of the works of Sergio Leone and Quentin Tarantino, see my chapter "The Evolving Western: From America to Italy and Back in *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone 1968) and *Kill Bill: Volumes 1 & 2* (Tarantino 2003 & 2004)." In *The Transatlantic Gaze: Italian Cinema, American Film*, ed. idem. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014: 61-83.

¹⁰ See also Tiziana Ferrero-Regis. "Rolling Away from the Centre." In *Recent Italian Cinema: Spaces, Contexts, Experiences*, ed. idem. Leicester, UK: Troubadour Italian Studies, 2009: 3-41, that focuses on the period between 1980-2006, which featured first the decentralization of Italian film production followed by the development of regional film commissions in the period from 1990s.

¹¹ Using geographical information systems (GIS), Ravazzoli examines the nodes of Italian film production. She notes that whereas Milan, Turin, Rome, and Naples were historically centers of the Italian film industry, the first decade or so of the twenty-first century has evidenced a marked increase in regional production since the advent of regional film commissions in 1997. Puglia, along with Sicily, are the regions that have shown the most growth. See Ravazzoli, Elisa. "The Geography of Film Production in Italy: A Spatial Analysis Using GIS." In *Locating the Moving Image: New Approaches to Film and Place*, ed. Julia Hallam/Les Roberts. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2014: 163.

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