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## ***Mambo Italiano* in Montreal. Theatrical *Italianità* in Émile Gaudreault's Transnational Queer Comedy**

Because Nino is my lover. If only I could say that out loud. [...] Every time I try to I freeze. [...] Because being gay and Italian is a fate worse than ... Actually there is no fate worse than being gay and Italian. (14:48–15:05)

This is the statement made by Angelo (Luc Kirby) regarding his 'coming out' as an Italian gay man in the comedy, *Mambo Italiano*, by the Canadian filmmaker Emile Gaudreault. Set in contemporary Little Italy in Montreal, the movie narrates the complications that emerge from Angelo's secretive life style, as he still lives with his parents. Filmed in English by a Francophone director, the film was presented at a range of international film festivals and, in view of its auteur cinema and low-budget-character, an international success. The quote identifies the central criteria of identity, namely national origin and sexual orientation that are brought together in this queer, culture-clash comedy. Our contribution will analyze the film in the context of Italo-Canadian cinema, transatlantic queer cinema and trans-national comedy. These three points of reference point out Gaudreault's negotiation of *italianità* in respect to generational and sexual differences. We will thus show that the film deconstructs homogeneous concepts of identity by exaggerating cultural and sexual clichés within a baroque and hybrid aesthetic, crossing sitcom, music comedy and theatre conventions.

### **Retro-Music: *Italianità* and Generation Gaps**

The extra-diegetic opening music of Gaudreault's film is a musical *mise-en-abyme*: "Come è bella la vita quando mi fai l'amore. I dream of your kiss and drawn in your eyes. Spring is the time of the year quando sono sempre felice, walking hand in hand ti amo my love", sings Adam J. Broughton. Italy meets America in this title song called "Montreal Italiano", whereby the tarantella like melody and the voice are reminiscent of the 'italianized' popular music culture of the post-war era. By contrast, the title of the film quotes the Bob Merrill hit song "Mambo Italiano" from 1954, first interpreted by Rosemary Clooney, and, one year later, by the US-American of Abruzzese descent Dean Martin.<sup>1</sup> As in this song, the Italian characters of the movie are nostalgic about the rural Italy of their youth, so that Italy congeals with a nostalgic place of memory. In this sense, the opening sequence shows a visual correspondence through a theatrical staging of the Italian-American imaginary: In a slow pan shot to the first bars of "Montreal Italiano", we see the Montreal skyline, doused in rather drab colors. But when the singing in Italian starts, the camera moves from a bird's-eye view to a 'colorful' market identified by a mural as the Marché Jean Talon in the Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie quarter nearby the Saint-Laurent River. The viewers see vividly gesticulating people, embracing lovers, an immense church presented at an unusual, oblique, very close angle, and then a grocery store called Dante. Between both settings, a piece of lawn comes into view, clipped down to form the words "La petite Italie", thus visualizing the milieu of the unfolding action. We are then led by the small and rotund, ordinarily dressed parents Gino (Paul Sorvino) and Maria Barberini (Ginette Reno), who emigrated in their youth from rural Southern Italy to Canada, during the front credits, all the way to their Italian-speaking allotment garden, where the neighbors, planting and reaping their vegetables, watch and greet them. Although the beginning of the film fixes the action clearly in the microcosmic everyday life of Montreal through the images, the mostly mute performance of the Barberini, accenting their theatrical facial expressions and body movements, already makes it clear that Little Italy is a place where Italy is more of a gesture. There isn't really a strong interest from the characters in the fate of their birth region, their Italian neighbors or the city life of Montreal in general.

These images provide an excellent example of an “imagined community” through their exaggerated staging. In the film, Montreal’s Italians are characterized by a superficial collective community in the sense of *italianità*.

The last term, problematic, among others, because of its ideological positioning between Risorgimento, fascism and the more recent ‘Padania’ movements (Boaglio 2008, 16–34), represents here a collective cultural imaginary (Anderson 1996, 41–42), uniting memories, sentiments and fantasies of the protagonists, related to Italy. *Italianità* thus refers to a nostalgic vision of the immediate post-war rural Southern Italy as well as to the Little Italy of Montreal, where the characters are trying hard to maintain the appearance of a friendly and collective identity by avoiding situations, which could lead to a physical and psychical proximity. Although the movie ends with a “redefinition of family relations” (Baldo 2014, 169), on the surface level, the nostalgic and immobile vision of *italianità*, symbolized by the hetero-normative-symbiotic family concept of the parents, remains dominant. It works as the hegemonical justification that becomes apparent in the cultural pattern of *mammismo*: the *padrone*-like father or celebrating Italian cuisine at the enforced common mealtimes of the Barberini family. Even if the protagonists are from rural Southern Italy, they identify themselves in the New World just as Italians. For the parents, the Canadian outside world remains the epitome of foreignness, presenting the cause for many an educational prohibition in the upbringing of their son and daughter. Frequent phrases uttered by the parents like “That’s not Italian” make it clear that their life in America follows the maxim to avoid or to ignore any events or contacts that might shake their identity. In their microcosm, represented by the frequent close-ups or medium-shots showing details of the interior of their house, it is a priority to achieve the outward ascertainment of a homely, petty-bourgeois happiness under the token of *italianità*. Always the same, topoi of the parents’ generation of *italianità* conjure up a culturally static and thus parodic picture in the movie – both literally and symbolically. But at the same time, as Michela Baldo (2014, 172–178) has shown, in many aspects these clichés of *italianità* are built upon empiric social rituals and psychological conflicts of Italians in Canada, who mostly come from a very Catholic and rural background.

This rigidity is evoked visually via the reduced spatial staging of the Barberini house, especially the over-decorated and kitsch dining room located in a stage-like niche of the ground floor. And it is also addressed as Gaudreault, time and time again, refers back to arrested flashes of consciousness in which the actors look straight into the camera, in the direction of the audience, thus interrupting the diegesis. A very impressive example is a scene during the very first minutes of the movie in which Angelo’s father describes his expectations of a culturally homogeneous America, when he moved from Italy to Canada. The head of the family Gino, a Forza Italia supporter, looks into the camera and clearly elaborates on how much he is longing for a space devoid of differences, Canada being a blank page, while we see behind him his wife ironing the laundry. Even after decades of living in Canada, the plurilingual everyday life and the political system seems to be for him and his wife a ‘strange world’. Reducing the cinematic space to a stage-like environment, Gaudreault shows that, for them, Montreal is an indeterminate place: “Nobody told us that there was a two Americas, the real one the United States and the fake one Canada. Then to make the matter even worse, there is two Canada. The real one Ontario, and the fake one Quebec. Eh.” (3:16–3:25)

Other than Italo-Canadian melodramatic movies like Jerry Ciccoritti’s *Lives of the Saints* (2004), based on Nino Ricci’s success novel of the same title from 1990 and featuring the Italian actresses Sophia Loren and Sabrina Ferilli, what is staged here is not the development of a conflict-rife history of immigration and integration of a whole family. The conflict in *Mambo Italiano* is focused (primarily) on love, just like the title song “Montreal Italiano”, only that love on the level of the film plot is gay love of the first generation born in Canada, the spark that kindles the central conflict of the movie.

The so far unsuccessful screenplay writer Angelo (Luc Kirby), the central character of the film, lives in a relationship with the policeman Nino Paventi (Peter Miller), a physically impressive school-friend whom he met again after long years by chance. He finally moved in with him, but that was a long time before he could tell his family about his true sexual identity. After the outing, both friends’ mothers panic and start searching for a wife for *their* sons in order to get *them* “back on the right track”, to “turn” them into real Italian men, as it were. But this outing, initiated by the increasingly passionate (gay) Angelo, leads to a separation with Nino leaving Angelo behind for the benefit of the francophone and blond Pina Lunetti (Sophie Lorain), the woman with whom he will find a family. But despite this cliché-like turning point, the two families are clearly marked by a generation gap. Whereas the widowed Lina Paventi (Mary Walsh) and the Barberini parents are sticking to ‘imported’ homogeneous concepts of Catholic family life and social ascent, the children, Anna (Claudia Ferri) and Angelo, as well as Nino, all in their 20s or 30s, represent an urban East-coast identity, at a first glance. Angelo, especially,

practices publicly urban gay-life, prototypically shown in scenes where he is working at the call-center and volunteering at the gay-hotline, by performing his sarcastic and self-ironic talent through the phone calls and thus creates grotesque situations.

The generation gaps are presented in flashbacks, where we meet Angelo's beloved and eccentric Aunt Yolanda (played by sitcom actress, Tara Nicodemo). She had wanted to lead a different lifestyle but was prevented from doing so by the family's rigid moral values: She had to marry and ended up committing suicide in frustration. But she had wanted to become a movie star and loved to dance and teach Angelo the Mambo (04:14–04:31, 05:51–06:11). Following his self-evaluation, he has always been like her, an outsider within the Italian milieu (St. Pius X High School). Angelo shows neither trace of cultural difference in the sense of a Franco-Canadian *pluriculturalisme*, nor of *italianità*. Frustrated by the life in Little Italy and his law studies, which he pursued for some time in order to satisfy his parents, he works in the call-center of an airline and wants to move to the *omosessuale village* of Montreal and to become an Anglophone screenplay writer. His identity is linked to the trans-cultural title of the film, contrasting with the tarantella song of the starting scene and the rigid form of a traditional *italianità*. The quotation, starting with an apparently nostalgic media reference, a common practice in transcultural films or novels remembering Italian migration from some distance (see Winkler 2013), is never depicted in the film, but obviously remains Angelo's leitmotif: It describes a boy who is full of nostalgia for Southern Italy, however, this image is disrupted after the first lines through his tone, which reveals Angelo's ironic character ("A boy went back to Napoli/Because he missed the scenery/The native dances and the charming songs/ But wait a minute something's wrong"). "Mambo Italiano" paradoxically cites diverse (Southern) Italian regions by mixing up Italian clichés with (South) American topoi ("Hey mambo, no more mozzarella/Hey mambo, mambo Italiano/Try an enchilada with a fish baccalà."). Accentuating the corporal dimension through its melody, the song thus symbolizes a hybrid identity in a transcultural and sexual sense, caricaturing the petty-bourgeois conventions which are far removed from the changing world of the metropolis around them.

## Italo-Canadian Image in Cinema and Television

The construction of *Mambo Italiano* around a generation gap within two Italo-Canadian families in Montreal's Little Italy, using common clichés about Italians and gays as the starting point of the story, reveals that the film is not an accidental or improvised production. Not only the "inoffensive and non-provocative" character of the storyline (Leeder 2006, 65), but also the fact that migration from Italy, especially the region of Molise, has led to important Italophone settings and cultural productions in Quebec shows the strategic character of the film project. Gaudreault chose not only a well-established milieu as a starting point but also creates a film which refers to the (Franco-) Canadian success genre per se, comedy,<sup>2</sup> by using the already successful Anglophone play by Steve Galluccio, bearing the same title as his movie, as the basis for the latter. Galluccio wrote the screenplay for the movie together with the director by making some changes, e.g. transforming Nino from an accountant to a police officer and changing the identity of Pina to a rich and foul-mouthed daughter of a constructor, whose enterprise she has taken over (see Leeder 2006).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Gaudreault uses a strong and prominent musical dramaturgy. Besides some original music by FM Le Sieur, such as the "Mambo Mambo" melody or the "La fine del mondo" and the "Montreal Italiano" song (with the lyrics of Broughton, Jeanne Domptier, Steve Galluccio), the film uses famous (Dean Martin) songs of the (post) war era, such as "Return to Me" (1958) for illustrating Angelo's melancholia after the break up with Nino. Initially planning to engage Italophone actors, Gaudreault consequently employs mostly non-Italophone actors from an Anglophone background, as in the case of Angelo, played by the young Kirby from the National Theatre School of Canada, whose repertoire includes Shakespeare and mostly modern and Canadian works (Daniel Brooks, Michael Mackenzie Judith Thompson). Without doubt, an important strategic choice was made to cast the popular Anglophone Mary Walsh and Francophone Ginette Reno as Nino's and Angelo's mothers, respectively. Walsh is known from her appearance in Anglo-Canadian sitcoms on CBC and CBS television shows such as CODCO (1987–92) and *Dooley Gardens* (1999), but she also created a very successful weekly TV show for the same channel, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* (1993–), which combines news, interviews and sketches and is still on air. The even more notable Ginette Reno is not only a popular comedian, but since the 1970s is also a commercially successful signer (in French and English), honored with various awards, among others with a star on Canada's Walk of Fame, several Juno Awards and the Canadian Grammy in diverse categories, e.g. for the Best Selling Francophone Album. Produced by Telefilm Canada in cooperation with other companies, with a budget of about five million Canadian Dollars, *Mambo*

*Italiano* was first released at the Cannes Film Festival, followed by the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (today: NewFest) in May and June of 2003, respectively.<sup>4</sup> It was promoted afterwards at a lot of other international film festivals and nominated for a range of Canadian awards (e.g. Prix Jutra, Genie Awards, Canadian Comedy Awards). On a commercial level, the film proved to be a success, especially in Canada and the U.S.<sup>5</sup> Due to this, Gaudreault and Gallucio adopted their concept of Italo-Canadian comedy. Situated in Little Italy, for another cooperation as screenwriters, they produced the 13 episode sitcom *Ciao Bella* (Jean-François Asselin, Patrice Sauvé, 2014,), produced for Radio Canada/CBC Television, starring Peter Miller (Nino) as Elio Lanza and Claudia Ferri (Anna) as the main character Elena Battista.

This is all the more remarkable since Canadian cinema can look back on a rather long history of migration movies showing not only Francophone productions, but also many other language and film traditions. Canadian cinema is very heterogeneous, so that one can hardly find a label like that of the ‘New British Cinema’ (Heide/Kotte 2006, 181). One might perhaps go so far as to say that it is one of the specific characteristics of Canadian cinema, that it is “de facto multicultural in nature” (MacKenzie 1999), however without migration being broached as the central issue all the time. The Italo-Canadian cinema continues to hold a special status insofar as it has its own movie scene and movie festivals like the annual Toronto Italian Film Festival or the Italian-Contemporary Film Festival taking place in Montreal, Quebec, Toronto and Vaughan.<sup>6</sup> Especially Anglo-Canadian film makers with an Italian background, like Carlo Liconti, Vincenzo Natali, Jerry Ciccoritti and Derek Diorio are quite successful, but – apart from Liconti with films such as *Vita da cane* (2002), *La Famiglia Buonanotte* (1989) and *Cuori in campo* (1989, TV) – the instances they pick out their family background as the topic are few and far between (Diorio: *The Kiss of Debt*, 2002; Ciccoritti: *Lives of the Saints*, 2004, TV).

The cinema and TV Quebecois has a strong proponent in filmmaker and actor Ricardo Trogi, who presented both TV mini-series (*Smash*, 2004) and movies (1981, 2009) of different format, which in part take up Italian issues and time and time again present Italophone actors. For the Francophone *auteur cinema* it is predominantly film maker Paul Tana who deserves mentioning, who since the 1990’s – e.g. in cooperation with Bruno Ramirez und Tony Nardi – has presented productions like *La déroute* (1998), *La Sarrasine* (1992) or *Caffè Italia, Montréal*. Beside him and Jean-Claude Lauzon’s international one-hit success *Léolo* (1992), already featuring Ginette Reno as the Italian mother of the title protagonist, it is in particular the presence of small productions like Italian language short films, which find their themes in Montreal’s or Toronto’s Little Italy, that exemplify the agility of this scene.<sup>7</sup> But Quebec, moreover, possesses a distinct Italian-speaking TV culture. The TV program *Teledomenica*, dating as far back as 1964 (on the air until 1994), was a popular Italophone TV program, followed by others.<sup>8</sup> Starting during the 1980’s, there have even been soaps that Italian authors are responsible for or that are situated in an Italian milieu,<sup>9</sup> among them some that took up homosexuality as a theme. A case in point is the 13-part gay TV series *Le cœur découvert* (Gilbert Lepage) by Radio Canada, produced in 2001 and broadcast in 2003, based on the novel by famous Quebecois author and director Michel Tremblay (*Le Cœur découvert: roman d’amours*, 1986). Tremblay, star author of the modern Quebec theatre by the way, was not only responsible for the screenplay of the series but also for the translation of the theater play *Mambo Italiano* into French (Küster 2007, 189).<sup>10</sup>

## Harmonizing Conflicts and Trans-National Comedy

When looking at Gaudreault’s movie through the backdrop of this Italo-Canadian movie and TV culture, the limits of a national classification become apparent. Although *Mambo Italiano* is situated in Montreal’s Little Italy, the director locates the action in an artificial microcosm, mainly indoors. He makes do with only a few and always the same city shots and, apart from that, works with locally non-identifiable ‘neutral’ exterior shots. Gaudreault’s genre references don’t relate much to Italo-Canadian cinema either – the actors are, with the exception of only a few supporting actors, all *Anglais* or *Français de souche* – but they do tell a lot about current tendencies in North American and European cinema because *Mambo Italiano* joins two trends in contemporary international cinema. It contributes to the gay and lesbian or queer cinema, as can be observed in the Canadian cinema, especially in the works by Léa Pool (e.g. *Anne Trister*, 1986 or *Lost in Delirious*, 2001, with Luke Kirby in a minor role; *Mommy is at the Hairdresser’s/Maman est chez le coiffeur*, 2008) or by the current shooting star Xavier Dolan (e.g. *Heartbreakers/Les amours imaginaires*, 2010; *Tom at the Farm/Tom à la ferme*, 2013) and some other internationally successful productions such as *C.R.A.Z.Y.* by Jean-Marc Vallée (2005).<sup>11</sup> In most of these movies,

gay or lesbian identities are no longer narrated as crises but rather as hetero-normative institutions (like school or the bourgeois family), or representation modes, like cinema genres, are put into question or the hetero-normative matrix is even suspended completely. In *Mambo Italiano*, the conflict about sexual orientation is quite typically sparked by the differentiation towards the familial expectations that come more and more to light under the heading of *italianità*. The petty-bourgeois *italianità* of Angelo's family is parodied by Gaudreault within a genre that has been booming internationally for some years, that is the trans-cultural comedy, where cultural differences are often depicted as parody, but where they – according to the rules of the genre – definitely come to a positive ending. Cases in point are Anglo-Canadian productions like Gilles Walker's *90 Days* (1985) or Joel Zwick's *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), the British *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002), the more recent German movie *Almanya – Welcome to Germany/Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland* (Yasemin Şamdereli, 2011) or the most successful French comedy *Intouchables* (Olivier Nakache, Éric Toledano, 2011).

That means that this choice of genre modulates the ending of *Mambo Italiano* in a typical manner. The conflict of the plot, sparked by the generation differences through different gender concepts, is harmonized in the end: The melodramatic climax, where Angelo, after being left by his boyfriend Nino, distances himself from his parents by means of a powerful and violent discourse against the petty-bourgeois life in Little Italy, is finally followed by a happy ending. The invitation for Nino's wedding symbolizes a turning point in the film, leading to a reunification of the Barberini family. This occasion not only incorporates all the pride of Lina, as an Italian mother, but it is also the only event which can cause a change in the fixed artificial world of Little Italy, where Lina and Maria are mourning the death of her husband and sister, respectively, at the cemetery as if they had died recently, not decades ago. Thus, Angelo's parents have to find their reasons to be even prouder of their son and to reconcile with him before the wedding. The topos of the hetero-normative (holy) family is thus parodied further in the following sequences, but the image is never subverted. The reconciliation scene of the Barberini family (71:45–74:44), where Angelo's mother takes a seat in the confessional, takes place in the same church as Nino's wedding some minutes later. She wants to confess insignificant sins; but next to her isn't the priest, rather her two children, who bribed the priest with wine and cigars. While the Sicilian-born Maria is shocked about this abuse of this holy place, their father joins the children and what follows turns into a declamatorily emotional reconciliation.<sup>12</sup> In this line, the tone of resolution and harmony dominate the further sequences of the film: In the end, when Angelo gets together with his new boyfriend, the gay-hotline activist Peter (Tim Post), the film restages the scene from the very beginning, when Maria and Gino walk with their shopping bags through the allotment garden of Little Italy. As usual, all the neighbors are watching them (80:11–80:45), only that this time, we see the unified Barberini family together with Peter walking in proud union. Mother Maria has her arms taken left and right by the two young men, and the voice-over soundtrack plays "I Will Survive", the hit song written by Freddie Perren and Dino Fekaris and first sung by Afro-American singer Gloria Gaynor in 1978. In other words, accompanied by the memorable gay hymn, the Barberini parents finally manage to follow a "pursuit of happiness" by considering the sexual difference of their son as the *americanità*, as something special within the Italian community.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the film, psychologically speaking, they represent "the capacity for recovery and growth" in a challenging situation (Baldo 2014, 176). In contrast to the past (the death of Aunt Yolanda), this time they overcome the melodramatic crisis by dealing with the emotional and cultural conflict between *italianità* and queerness in an integrative way (Baldo 2014, 176–178). But while the ending accentuates difference by image and music, the conflictual potentials of the plot are realigned for the benefit of the generic aesthetic of comedy.

## Auteur Cinema: Transcending Little Italy

Beside these inter-medial references to theatre and TV, Gaudreault also moves beyond citing and exaggerating the "familiar family-couch-centered aesthetics of the traditional family sitcom" (Leeder 2006, 65) by a number of intra-medial references. They are presented in the sense of a "repetition with a critical difference, which marks difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 1985, 6). These references not only clarify the director's orientation along the lines of the European-American *auteur cinema*, but they emphasize the theatrical quality of the setting even further. During the course of the development of the action, it becomes clearer and clearer that not only does Angelo feel that he is in the wrong place in Little Italy, just like his aunt had in her time, but that also the rest of the family has a hard time upholding the petty-bourgeois role under the token of *italianità*. This becomes particularly evident, after Angelo had moved out, in his sister Anna, who can't stand living together with her parents, more and more. Anna rather turns into the image of a dark and beautiful, but garishly painted urban

neurotic, who doesn't find a husband, takes Valium pills, and changes her psychotherapist once a week so as not to give away too much of herself to any one person. The scenes of her with ever-changing therapists run through the film – the climax has her mimicking a therapy session with her brother in order to help him after the split up with Nino, both drinking from a bottle of red wine. They become not only a running gag, but they are, as the call-center and gay hotline-scenes with Angelo, also a structuring aspect of the film. Again, this element is a doubly effective parody: In trying to help her brother, Anna is clearly marked by the collective spirit of the film's staging of Italian family, but at the same time she is also representative of a new generation, trying to solve individual problems by referring to assistive resources from outside of Little Italy. As her brother is unsuccessful in doing so in his character, Anna is clearly the most exaggerated character of *Mambo Italiano*, additionally representing the typical urban neurotic, originally created by Woody Allen and afterwards mainstreamed by various TV soaps (*Sex and the City*, 1998–2004, or *Desperate Housewives*, 2004–12). She is characterized as a heterosexual woman, whose ideal man would be someone like Nino: a good looking Italian man, tall and muscled, with dark eyes and hairs. She is shaped by the constant panic of engaging in emotional and corporal contact with other people, their psychotherapists, but also with her surroundings, illustrated in the scene where she discovers her brother with Nino naked in his bed, thus discovering his homosexuality and only calming down after taking some valium pills and running out of the house immediately thereafter (15:26–15:50).

At the same time, Anna is also a highly artificial figure: Her level of behavior as well as that of her appearance she is reminiscent of Pedro Almodóvar's early cinema – she seems to be a woman 'on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown'. Her garishness reminds the audience of the excessive and extravagant characters presented in Almodóvar's films such as the mentioned *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988) or *The Flower of My Secret* (*La flor de mi secreto*, 1995). In this film, the diva-like neurotic female main characters Pepa (Carmen Maura) or Leo (Marisa Paredes) are assisted by Marisa and Rosa, played by Rossy de Palma respectively, two minor characters with a flashy eye and nose. The main characters are both beautiful, but they have been left by their lovers and for a great part of the films lead rather unhappy lives, abusively taking sleeping pills and drinking excessively. Not only Anna's style, but also her wish to marry, contrasted by the fact that she is never in company of a man, creates some doubts about her sexual identity.

Just as the character delineation of Angelo's sister does not fit within the framework of soap opera aesthetics, this also holds true for the aesthetical condensation of several interior scenes. A striking case in point is the scene in which both mothers give a dinner party in the Barberini house in order to find a wife for their sons. The living room, with its differently structured and flowery-patterned wallpaper and sofas held in green-brown-beige hues and the generally over-stuffed furnishing, sets the frame for the unification of all characters in one room. The space appears like a theatrical stage where the guests sit in one row, all excited and tense, only getting up when they speak. Rounded doorframes allow a glimpse into adjacent rooms that seem like back stages and show similarly ornamental wallpaper and sofa covers, which do not fit together. If not before, then the rigid congregation turns into a operatic one when Nino's melodramatic mother Lina appears, all dressed up with her lips and nails painted red, wearing a red top. While Angelo's parents are sitting on the sofa, the other characters move around, seeming displaced in this interior setting by their aesthetics alone. The names (Nino, Gino, Lina, Pina), which only differ in one or two letters, add to the comic confusion. When Lina learns that her son had sex in his car with Pina Lunetti, like Angelo an ex-school-friend, she loudly cries "Yes!" four times and sits down, content and superior, as the wedding of her son seems to be the only thing which can rebound her from the death of her husband.

In the Paventi family, the heterosexual matrix is saved, the movie, however, presents exactly this *italianità* pattern as a parody by the staging of the scene and the accent on the reduced and immobile social environment of the protagonists (38:20ff.). The meeting of the Barberini and Paventi families is the climax of the film. It reveals the betrayal of Nino by the words of Pina, the only character who speaks some phrases in French, and shows Nino at the same time as a *mammone*, who hesitates to tell Angelo the truth and fulfills the expectations of his mother in the end. The presentation and statements of what is fictitious as well as the non-communication of the real family conditions are also staged in this climatic scene by means of a baroque aesthetics of exaggeration, a strongly artificial ambience in the form of a hybrid aesthetic.

## Framing Difference: Theatricality and Television

Besides the appealing sound-track, there is another element keeping the parodic episodes of the life of the Barberinis together. The plot of *Mambo Italiano* focuses not only Angelo as the main character, but it is also told through his eyes, especially the first 18 minutes, which narrate a condensed version of the family history from the emigration of Maria and Gino up to Angelo's emancipation. They not only illustrate the autobiographical story told by Angelo's voice-over, but also his phone call to a gay hotline, which he contacts after his involuntary separation. This is shown for the first time directly after the title credits and the Barberini parents' walk through Little Italy (02:37ff.). In a cross-cutting, we see Angelo on the balcony calling the gay-hotline on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the gay-hotline volunteer Peter taking his call, before several memory scenes show key episodes of Angelo's family life, which he is telling Peter (03:05–06:42). Scenes of the whole family in Angelo's apartment and of the parents in their house are faded in, followed by sequences showing the family history in contrasting aesthetics: a black-and-white documentary scene with a ship and a railway thus recalling (Angelo's parents') transatlantic post-war migration to Canada, a photograph of Angelo and his sister from the 1980s and a short animated sequence of the Barberini house in a video game aesthetic, followed by theatrical kitsch scenes associating the family life with past decades and shots from Angelo's childhood and youth, which he spent with his sister, Aunt Yolanda and his school-friend Nino. Simply through this condensation, the contrasting combination of audio and video and the often overcharged images, alienating and 'freezing' the characters, the history of the Barberini family is endowed with a highly ironic character. For Angelo's nervous-hysteric phone call is identical to the voice-over commentary, thus holding together the diverging film material – the movie utilizes audio and video in the technique of non-literal speaking in a clearly contrapuntal manner, e.g. when Angelo ironically says, "Thank God for my exciting social life" and we see him sitting at his parents' table with the family arguing (8:45ff.).

Staging the petty-bourgeois *italianità*, by means of the stylistic device of contrast as well as the overly theatrical acting of the characters and accentuating the ambivalence of hiding and exhibiting, is a leitmotiv in *Mambo Italiano*. In other words, Gaudreault clearly uses inter-medial procedures by referring to highly artificial and theatrical settings. When Angelo moves out from his parent's house in Little Italy to the historic city center of Montreal, this takes place in melodramatic circumstances. In a scene shot before the house of the Barberini, Maria is crying melodramatically without stopping and Gino advises his son to go away without looking back, before he makes the same operatic gesture as his wife. The scene is underlined by the popular Neapolitan folk song *O sole mio*, the audio track describing a perfect sunny day with fresh air after a storm, contrasting its melody and lyrics with the melodramatic gestures of the stage-like scene.<sup>14</sup>

The theatrical character of Gaudreault's staging is even more striking in the scene of Nino's marriage with the beautiful, but slightly vulgar Pina, who has no other wish than to marry and to have children, situated in the enormous historicist church in Little Italy: During Angelo's departure from home with his car, scenes are cut in from the marriage, e.g. the catalogue-like prototypical heterosexual couple, but also of Nino's mother weeping and screaming with joy, or of the priest relating some embarrassing details from Nino's childhood. As a viewer, one would expect a scandal – at the very latest when the priest asks whether anyone has any objections to the marriage, and we see Angelo waiting in his car, then getting out of it. But instead, it is in fact the late-comer Rosetta (Pierrette Robitaille), a neighbor, who receives a nearly opera-like appearance that interrupts the marriage ceremony: She lets the door fall shut with a loud bang, excuses herself with grand gestures and a double "scusate", and makes a big fuss when looking for her seat. It soon becomes apparent that Angelo has not dressed up for the marriage but rather for a visit to the gay hotline where he picks up Peter for a spontaneous rendezvous. In other words, the scene plays with the expectations of the audience by parodying a 'typical Italian' wedding with its overly opera-like acting and the contrapuntal montage. But it's not only the petty-bourgeois Little Italy that is depicted as a parody, but also Angelo's gay world. One of the cliché topoi that is referred to is his being different, his digression from any kind of *italianità* and his orientation along the lines of *americanità*. In this regard, his relation to his already named Aunt Yolanda, who was full of joie de vivre, serves as the oldest point of identification. Decades ago, she wanted to leave the rigid family model behind to become a movie star. Despite her tragic fate, even this story is grotesquely exaggerated via memory pictures from Angelo's mind, showing him with his aunt in excessively ornate scenes in retro style – not only musically, but also pictorially.

The aesthetic of such scenes and their integration in the film not only reveals the static world of the characters, but also Gaudreault's play with what Paul Grainge (2000, 28–30) called an "index of commodities" and an "Economy of pastness", representing the "mood" of broad layers of society longing for an idealized past,

but also choosing strategically an aesthetic "mode". They create and cite, for example the fashion of retro-style, which has become popular in the American media industry of the 1990s and 2000s in order to satisfy specific market niches. The composition of the film with its episodic structure, popular music dramaturgy and artificial settings, contrasting image aesthetic, hard cuts and warm colors are reminiscent of the TV of the 1970s and 80s but also of American soaps and sitcoms (see Bignell 2010; Creeber 2008). More concretely, *Mambo Italiano* is in some respects similar to the "newer breed of sitcoms like *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997, Jace Alexander *et al.*) and *Malcolm in the Middle* (Fox, 2000, Todd Holland)", for example on the level of room structure and styling, "the warm gloss of its colour and lighting schemes" (Leeder 2006, 65). In other words: At the macro-structure, Gaudreault stages his family melodrama in the style of a well-made contemporary US-American soap and parodies it at the same time, on the level of aesthetic as well as film plot: Just like in *Bad Men* (2007ff.) or the *Sopranos* (1999–2007), the (historicizing) scenery of the presented locales is moved into the foreground by the Barberini home and its 1970s and 80s furniture and wallpaper. After Yolanda's early death, the only option of escape from the petty-bourgeois family life for little Angelo is the TV. There, he doesn't identify with the Italo-Canadian channels but with the North-American mainstream. The boy spends his afternoons in front of the TV set and writes down the dialogs (6:38), among others from the successful US-American 1980s TV series *Dynasty* (1981–91), about the oil tycoon Blake Carrington (John Forsythe) and his clan. The show focuses on love and power intrigues in the South of the U.S. and, among others, the conflict of the conservative but a-moral Blake with his liberal, value-based, homosexual son Steven (Al Corley).

Thus, TV soaps have a major role in the film on more than one level.<sup>15</sup> Gaudreault not only parodies the simplicity of the dialogues from a soap sequel, he also creates a complex intermedial aesthetic: Nino and Pina are sitcom-like beautiful, but flat characters, mainly worried about a charming physical and stylish appearance. Whereas Nino is characterized as a mainstream, compatibly ideal son, policeman and future husband (hiding his identity of a bisexual), especially Pina is clearly staged in scenes, which are reminiscent of urban American sitcoms, for example when she is preparing herself for the wedding and sitting at the dressing table in a rose bra and a white bathrobe. Her fingers are entwined in her bouffant and blond curls, while we see beside and behind her four friends with teased hairs and identical dresses whose color is that of the wall-paper. The camera catches her from the perspective of the mirror, in which Pina is looking, and turns around the scenery. Whereas Gino, as the family patriarch, is reminiscent of James Gandolfini with his corporality and behavior, who played the main character Tony in the *Sopranos*, Angelo, at a more abstract level, is characterized as a cliché-like soft and extrovert gay figure, for example by the music accompanying him, apparently on his way to the wedding of his ex-boyfriend Nino but with the final destination of joining Peter from the gay-hotline in his office, which quotes the jingle from *Sex and The City*. More than that, TV is the domain that stimulates his career wish, while at the same time placing his difference on a new level: In contrast to all other characters, Angelo is more and more identified with the queer scene, pushing Nino towards his outing, which he finally conducts by himself after a few visits to the *omosessuale village*. The 1980s discourse of concernment serves as a symbol for this, paradigmatically depicted by the gay hotline, which, on the one hand, contrasts with the regular shots of his mother in the confessional and his sister on a psychotherapist's couch, but, on the other hand, guarantees them anonymity, thus avoiding a 'real' and daily form of relationship.<sup>16</sup>

But beyond the motive of characterizing Angelo as gay, the hotline also constitutes an important part of the narration as Gaudreault introduces the element that frames the episodic narration of *Mambo Italiano* with Angelo's call. Furthermore, it adds a new milieu and development of the action to the film: Angelo goes to the gay-hotline to get in touch with other people in crisis. Due to his nervous personality, he fails as a hotline volunteer, but he ends up falling in love with his supervisor Peter. With him, the technophile, artistic loner manages to finally overcome his melancholia and to get on TV, after all, as a successful author by writing a comedy about what he knows best: his family. A short scene focusing on an enforced common meal of two parents with a daughter and a son, an exaggerated version of those scenes that the spectator of the film knows already from the Barberini's house, is introduced in the last seven minutes of the film. It brings together, in a very obvious way, those two media which aesthetically structure Gaudreault's film, theatre and soap, as Angelo's parents are sitting in the public audience of the TV-studio, laughing out loud about their own melodramatic attitude within their petty-bourgeois life. By dissolving the conflicts of the Barberini by repeating them on a studio stage in the form of a comedy in a more stylized turquoise (retro-) aesthetic, this scene symbolizes thus the paradigmatic *myse-en-abyme* of Gaudreault's comedian shaping of the melodramatic. This is also shown by the following TV interview of Angelo and his producer about the show, where Angelo mentions that his family experience had

some impact on him while writing the script. With some sadness in his voice he remembers his Aunt Yolanda, the “coolest of my relatives”, who loved practicing the mambo, while the other family members stuck to their tarantella. By citing in this manner actress Tara Nicodemo, who had her first TV appearances in episodes of international sitcoms such as *Tales from the Neverending Story* or *All Souls* (both 2001–2002), as well as a line of the hit song “Mambo Italiano” (“Hey mambo, don’t wanna tarantella”), he calls his comedy not only a tribute to his aunt and his family, but also anticipates on the TV ‘stage’ the harmonic ending of the film under the token of a transcultural *italianità*.

## Conclusion

For the Barberini family, the meeting turns out to be a horror scenario: After the announced break up with his boyfriend, Angelo heavily insults his parents and their petty-bourgeois attitude in the form of an inappropriate and long tirade, breaking with his usual behavior as well as the aesthetic of the film. Angelo accentuates here that his family is for him a “locus of non-communication”. He calls his parents’ home a “prison of guilt and fear and lies” in which he spent nearly 30 years and which he is sick and tired of. He accuses Maria and Gino of leading a ghetto existence in Little Italy, where they reproduce their limited South-Italian existence (43:44ff.). What is told here in a stage-like monologue scene could be the basis for a melodrama, and Angelo himself is well aware of this, for at the end of his tirade he stages himself as a polemic commentator of this scene, right after he is slapped in the face by his sister as a rebuttal of his misdemeanor against his parents: “And there we have it. The slap. The end to the quintessential Italian melodrama. It’s been a lovely evening, but I really must go. I hope you all enjoy your lives in your respective cocoons. If anyone of you would like to get in touch with me, I’ll be living in the real world” (45:05–45:27).

Angelo is commenting on this scene in the form of a *mise-en-abyme* by describing the life of his family in their *italianità* housing estate as unreal and his life in Montreal’s historic city center as real. In doing so, he characterizes his own identity once again in contrast to his family and the Little Italy, linked in his vision to the prototypical and artificial melodramatic Italian taste. But the melodramatic is here also in Angelo’s narrative mode, which shows that despite his liberalism and radical wish to break with his family, he seems to be not only the most melancholic, but also the most melodramatic figure of his family, tightly linked to the medium of theatre. In other words, the media plays a central role in Angelo’s process of identity, but in a tricky way. Unlike his Aunt Yolanda, he is able to fulfill his childhood dream to become a screenwriter for TV. But his soap looks much more like boulevard theatre than a modern quality TV series. Even though he is characterized by his behavior and facial expressions during the major part of the film as a failing figure, Angelo can find his luck in the end. But in order to fulfill the “pursuit of happiness”, he has to overcome several media obstacles, for example his work in the call-center and the gay-hotline. The ‘old’ media of the telephone thus prototypically reveals the function of media references in the film, compensating the lack of communication between the family members (Leeder 2006, 65). As the inter-medial references form a patchwork quilt not lending itself to any great *récit*, in the end, the world of media is replaced by the ‘real world’ in the person of Angelo’s new friend Peter and the reconfiguration of his family. The title of the film, with its reference to the Bob Merrill song, is thus realized by the ending, as the Barberini family overcomes the heterosexual *italianità* by integrating the Anglo-Canadian Tom and accepting his love for Angelo. Metaphorically speaking, the traditional and rural spirit of the South-Italian tarantella is thus finally replaced by the model of the Mambo, symbolizing a trans-continental *americanità*:

Hey cumpà, I love how you dance the rumba  
 But take some advice paisano learn-a how to mambo  
 If you’re gonna be a square, you ain’t-a gonna go nowhere  
 Hey mambo, mambo Italiano, hey hey mambo, mambo Italiano  
 Go, go, Joe, shake like a Giovanni  
 Hallo, che si dice? You get happy in the pizza  
 When you Mambo Italiano

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A reminder of the famous dancing scene for *Mambo Italiano* featuring Sophia Loren and Vittorio de Sica from Dino Risi's *Pane, amore e ...* (1955).

<sup>2</sup> Actress Sophie Lorain also features, alongside with popular Rémy Girard, in Denis Arcand's comedy *The Barbarian Invasions/Les invasions barbares* (2003), which also won the Academy Award for the best foreign language film in 2004. The production started with a similar budget as *Mambo Italiano*, but became a big box office hit. Making about 1.3 million entries only in France, it is up until today, the most successful Franco-Canadian film comedy. See <http://www.filmsquebec.com/box-office-des-films-quebecois-en-france>, accessed March 20, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly the debut performance of the play in 2000 in Montreal did not take place in English but in French. It was created by the Compagnie Jean Duceppe under the direction of Monique Duceppe (Küster 2007: 189).

<sup>4</sup> Playback Staff. "Cinemaginaire preps new films from Arcand and Gaudreault", June 22, 2001, <http://playbackonline.ca/2002/06/24/qs-20020624>, accessed March 20, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0330602>/business, accessed March 20, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.italianfilmfest.com> and <http://icff.ca>, accessed March 20, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. André Liné Beauparlant: *Elvis italiano* (2002), Steve Sanguedolce: *Sweet Blood* (1993), Adriano Valentini: *Il piano* (2008) or Riccardo Togni: *Il tango della neve* (1997)

<sup>8</sup> The archive is later cleared as a documentary by Tana (*Ricordati di noi*, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Riccardo Togni: *Smash* (2004, mini-series, TV); Roger Legault/Jean-Louis Sueur: *Sémi-détaché* (1987, 1 sequel by Marco Micone).

<sup>10</sup> The English debut performance took place in the Centaur Theatre (2001), directed by Gordon McCall, see <http://www.agencegoodwin.com/fr/artistes/steve-galluccio>, accessed March 20, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Brokeback Mountain* is an American-Canadian production and was shot mainly in Canada. For more on the story of queering sexuality in Canada see Waugh 2006.

<sup>12</sup> In order to uphold the impression of a well-functioning, petty-bourgeois family, all four decide at once to leave the confessional with beaming smiles in order to show the whole community the appearance of a happy family. Like posing opera singers, they come forth out of the confessional, but the church is empty. The title melody is played, the father embraces his son and says "Hey Boss. Thanks a lot you for giving me back my *famiglia*." (73:26–74:20)

<sup>13</sup> Only Rosetta the neighbor, seconded by her husband, holds up the position of the last defender of the collectively nostalgic identity of Little Italy. She had an appearance already during the front credits and entered the church at Nino's wedding like a diva; now she skeptically looks into the camera, holding a wooden pot full of harvested vegetables and utters the movie's closing commentary: "Hm. At least Angelo could have had the decency of finding himself a nice Italian boy!" (80:57–81:10)

<sup>14</sup> The subject of moving out in the sense of the cultural pattern of *mammismo*, commented by Angelo's voice-over commentary ("It's a cultural thing. As Italians we leave the house out of two ways, married or dead" [9:33ff.]), comes back in another scene of the film in the form of an announced catastrophe. His mother and father are visiting his apartment for the first time. Already before entering, they are shocked by the fact that Angelo is living in an old and historic building and not a new one like their house in Little Italy. But it gets worse: Angelo's apartment was invaded and ransacked by a thief, leaving chaos behind. While Angelo's sister has a glass of wine in the middle of the day and her father speaks of an act of terrorism against Italian people, Maria cannot wait until the police arrives and tries to tidy up the apartment in order for her son to give a good impression, vis-à-vis the police.

<sup>15</sup> See Leeder's (2006, 64) analysis of the movie, arguing that TV can be considered as "a hybrid of film and theatre".

<sup>16</sup> For the metaphoric relevance of confessions in respect to intermedial references ("confessional talk shows") and other structuring elements in the film (e.g. Anna's psychotherapies, the confessional family dinners) see Baldo (2014: 171, 177–178).

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