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Food as Delineator in *Dinner Rush*: A Semiotic of Generational Difference among “Italians” in America

Anthony Julian Tamburri

1. Premise

Like other films dealing with food, Bob Giraldi's *Dinner Rush* (2000) bespeaks and hence discusses food as both identity marker and indicator for shifts in generational dynamics among Italians in America, especially between father and son. My use of the term “Italians in America” encompasses those who were born and raised in Italy, and who then moved to the United States, and, as well, those who are descendants of Italian immigrants. *Dinner Rush* also deals with the identity of Italians in America as members of organized crime, this too a signifier for generational difference and, we might also say, food.¹ Hence, I have in mind the famous scene in *The Godfather* (1972) when Clemenza gives Michael a quick lesson in making pasta sauce, or, even later, the scene in *Goodfellas* (1989) where Paulie is preparing dinner while in jail, carefully slicing and dicing garlic with a razor blade. These are just two of a plethora of scenes in American films that include indelible Italian/American food scenes.²

As I move forward in my analysis of the film, I wish to underscore further my terminology here with regard to the phrase, “Italians in America.” The issue here is that I am not dealing with any notion of what some might call “real” or “authentic” Italian food. Nor do I wish to distinguish between “real” or “authentic” Italians.³ Indeed, such adjectives conjure up notions of superiority vis-à-vis that which is not then considered to be “real” or “authentic”; we have seen much too much of this throughout the twentieth- and into the twenty-first century. This dichotomy indeed continues today with the existence of organizations that consider themselves predominantly if not exclusively Italian. One that comes to mind is ISSNAF (Italian Scientists and Scholars in North America Foundation) whose mission is “to promote scientific, academic and technological cooperation amongst *Italian researchers and scholars active in North America and the world of research in Italy*” (emphasis added), as it states on its website. It is an organization that caters entirely, or so it seems, to Italians who are in some manner affiliated with a North American institution. Indeed, a key phrase of theirs seems to be the recurrent “in [or between] Italy and North America” or some variant thereof. The moniker “Italian American” in either adjectival or substantive form seems not to exist. Further still, ISSNAF seems to be STEM oriented and hence allowing some but notably little space for the humanities.

Instead, I submit that when dealing with any aspect of the Italian diaspora – and indeed members of

¹ See Calabretta-Sajder for more on organized crime in *Dinner Rush*.

² On Italian food in the U.S., see, among others, Cinotto (2013).

³ On the notion of “real” Italians, see Roberto and Sciorra (2017a, “Introduction”).



ISSNAF qualify as members of a diaspora – we need to think in terms of difference, for sure; but any reference to terminology that is comparatively evaluative, if not exclusionary, smacks of arrogance and, consequently by its very usage, denigration of the progeny that is the emigrant. This is what one does, albeit willy-nilly, when s/he adopts such linguistic registers. This, I would further contend, is one of the primary rhetorical and/or conceptual steps we need to take in this post-modern condition during this second decade of the third millennium if we are to free ourselves from the prison-house of restrictive and *de facto* hegemonic terminology, one of those grand narratives' conceptual totalitarisms vis-à-vis notions of “Italian” identity. Yes, I am purposefully channeling Jean-François Lyotard and his postmodern notion of “incredulity toward grand narratives” (xiv) and the further “[de-]legitimation [of] grand narratives” (51).

That said, my use of the term “Italian” – adjective or noun – has as its possible referents all that which is/can be considered “Italian” in the United States or elsewhere outside of Italy for that matter. Further still, I realize that my desire not to distinguished such difference by way of quotation marks and the like may very well create some confusion within a reader/viewer's mind with regard to the polarity one readily perceives in Italian vs. Italian American. But that confusion, I underscore, is purposeful; the very confusion it may provoke could, I would hope, cause my reader/viewer to think twice about the two terms and hence ponder what s/he considers to be the difference that s/he perceives. In so doing, I would hope that the confusion *qua* bewilderment might, even in the most minimal of ways, transform itself into *con*-fusion *qua* bringing closer together what Peirce would call the interpretants of the signs /Italian/ and /Italian American/.

In *Dinner Rush*, Louis, the father of an aspiring *nouveau* Italian cuisine chef Udo, suffers the loss of his old friend and business partner to a criminal element because of gambling difference and turf. At the same time, Louis is bent on retiring and giving over his restaurant to Udo. Throughout the film, a series of seemingly unrelated episodes speaks to the notion of ethnic identity and generational differences through the sign functions we can readily assign to food.⁴

One of the outstanding motifs in *Dinner Rush* is the difference in the conceptualization of Italian food. Whereas in most films we witness the difference between “Italian” and “Italian-American” food, such as in Tucci and Cambell's *Big Night*, in *Dinner Rush* the difference in types is one among “Italian-American” cuisine in the “traditional” sense, one might say “Americanized” Italian cuisine – and not just meatballs but also a plate of hot sausage and peppers – and a newly stylized “Italian” cuisine that is not much different from what one might witness today in some of the more exclusive, trendy Italian restaurants of metropolitan areas such as New York City, especially within the borough of Manhattan. I would contend, further still, that the presence of “sausage and peppers” in *Dinner Rush* as opposed to “spaghetti and meatballs” is in line with the notion of a more stylized Italian cuisine we are to find in Udo's kitchen. For it is Udo himself who underscores the rejection of such a dish when, at the beginning of the film he states to his father in a retort, “We don't make meatballs here anymore!” Yet, it is also Udo who “allows” the sausage and peppers” to be cooked “in [his] kitchen,” as we witness soon after this scene with his father.

2. Viewing *Dinner Rush* 1

Among the many significant scenes pertinent to my viewing, two stand out as a hint to things being quite different. First, a point a bit less than mid-film, Ken Roloff makes a most telling statement:

I'm just curious here, watching all these people, star-gazing potential. I wonder, I wonder when it all changed.... When did eating dinner become a Broadway show?

Eating hence is no longer for mere sustenance; it is “a Broadway show,” indeed, a performance, as is apparent throughout the film, executed not only by those who eat but, perhaps even more significant,

⁴ Calabretta Sajder speaks to three characteristics of food in his essay: (1) collateral, (2) character, and (3) aphrodisiac.



by those who prepare the food. To be sure, “star-gazing potential” calls to mind the art critic and the latest artist he is promoting and takes to dinner at Gigino’s. In like fashion, it also refers to Udo, the “star chief,” as he is called by Nicole, for instance. It is thus a two-way street: the art critic, already a famous individual in his own right, comes to Udo’s restaurant precisely because Udo, as well, is a star in his own right. The “star-gazing potential” is hence both internal and external. Finally, with regard to a performance, let us not forget Roloff’s presence, his reason for being at Gigino’s; he too is playing a role, he is a Wall-Streeter who is also an assassin. Indeed, it is ironic to be sure that Roloff poses the question. For it is he who actually has two roles – he engages in two distinct performances, we can readily state – among which he alternates according to the role necessary for the moment and where: “I could have done this in Queens,” he says at the end of the movie to Louis. But as we know by now, Louis had his own reasons for the assassination to take place in Manhattan, in the restaurant he just signed over to Udo.

Second, the difference between the stridently traditional Italian/American cuisine and the *nouveau* Italian cuisine is underscored during the opening scene. The contemporary kitchen that is managed by Udo is juxtaposed to the traditional food that is Duncan’s, and the distinction between the two cuisines is now immediately underscored for the spectator.⁵ Because of its novelty – and, dare we add, complexity of its preparation – we might better understand the *nouveau* cuisine by seeing how it is made. Hence, we are witness at the opening of the film to the readying of the dishes, as those scenes alternate with the lunch conversation between Louis and his friends eating a meal prepared by Duncan. That said, then, whereas with regard to Duncan’s cooking, we only need to see the finished product because, traditional that it is, we should already know how it is made, we do, instead, actually need to see the *nouveau* cuisine being prepared. All of this is a basic situation of familiarity – or lack thereof – with signs and their respective objects and eventual interpretants that results from such semiosis. That said, and in light of one’s lack of familiarity with Udo’s *nouveau* cuisine, in order to bring greater attention to this new cooking process and also facilitate better our understanding, the kitchen scene is in slow motion.

Another aspect to this scene with regard to old world vs. new world is the conversation about nicknames. Such a practice is common among Italian and Italian Americans, especially those of a certain generation. Hence, used here by Louis and his friends only underscores their position in this film as part of the old world. The third aspect of this scene that subtends the entire narrative of the film is the reference to Louis and Enrico’s bookmaking and their issues with Carmen and Paolo, a.k.a., Black and Blue. At first blush it is not clear how seriously dangerous this relationship might be. But very soon after Enrico leaves to pick up his granddaughter from school, we come to understand that it is, to be sure, lethal. The sociopath that he is, Paolo takes delight in killing Enrico, and it matters not that he shoots him in the back, a proverbially cowardly act that only sheds greater light on the inhumane character of Paolo and, by extension, of his partner / brother-in-law, Carmen.

Our first overt clash between the two different cuisines occurs during the conversation between father and son. The two cuisines are clearly distinguished in this scene. Further still, we come to understand that one need not be Italian in order to cook well Italian food. There is, in this regard, an irony to what follows:

“Of course, why would there be Italians in an Italian kitchen? Of course, you’ve got the money.”

Udo “Why do I have to come to the Godfather’s table begging all the time?”

Louis: “It’s tough being a star, isn’t it?”

[...]

Udo: “Why don’t you stick to the bookmaking and let me run this business?”

This conversation references the basic themes of the movie. Identity and the correlation Italian cuisine equals Italian chefs resonates in Louis’s sarcastically rhetorical question of the need for “Italians in an

⁵ Also anticipated here – and we come to understand it better in retrospect – is the notion of identity and its origin; namely, it is a question of nature or nurture. With regard to the literary text, I first dealt with this unusual mode of interpretation in my study on retrospective reading (1990) and subsequently in a book on Aldo Palazzeschi, Guido Gozzano, and Italo Calvino (2003).



Italian kitchen.” Such sarcasm assists in setting up the irony we will soon perceive in Duncan’s presence and in his semiotic function in the movie. Coming then “to the Godfather’s table begging” for money reminds us that there is an organized crime element to the movie’s narrative. Both the notion of *nouveau* cuisine and organized crime, and the inter-related nexus are included in Udo’s question, “Why don’t you stick to the bookmaking and let me run this business?”; it solidifies the pairing and puts the spectator on notice that something related, and unpleasant to be sure, may come to pass.

Louis goes on to tease Udo about the fancy items on his menu, to which Udo responds, “It’s something for the critics, come on.” It’s something, Udo is telling his spectator as well, about how his cuisine – his readying of the various exotically named dishes – is, indeed, part of a performance. Why else, we must ask, would Udo do something for the critics if not then to receive from them the proverbial A+ for an excellent performance? Roloff’s statement about going out to eat as a “Broadway show” clamors loudly in this exchange between Louis and Udo, even if ever so retrospectively. Louis then goes on to tell Udo that his “mother made food, not for the critics, simply elegant, this place smelled like heaven.” And after a brief exchange, with Louis at a loss for words, Udo asks if he is seeking something “traditional,” to which Louis animatedly responds, “Yes, traditional, substantial, something that tastes great, that smells great.” Then, in immediate and total exasperation, he asks where Duncan is. How ironic, to be sure, that it is, indeed, Louis’s own exasperation in seeking out Duncan at the end of this scene that cancels out his previous rhetorical and, to be sure, skeptical question of a cook’s ethnic background, and thus identifies Duncan, a Latino, with, in Louis’s own words, “traditional, substantial” Italian food.

3. Viewing *Dinner Rush 2*

While Duncan is preparing Louis’s favorite dish, the brief exchange between Udo and Duncan underscores the difference in the two cuisines in question and Udo’s seeming disregard for “tradition.” But it also allows us to see Duncan in one of his changing roles as [sous] chef, in this instance preparing the traditional dish of sausage and peppers for Louis, something that Udo clearly allows in spite of his statement to the contrary. In fact, in a seemingly insignificant moment, as this scene ends, we hear though do not see Udo, saying “Don’t burn the sausage!” This, in turn, is yet another telling sign that the gap the viewer might perceive at first blush between both the two cuisines, as well as between Udo and Duncan, is not as wide as it may seem between these two. We understand as much when Udo, having heard that Duncan is looking elsewhere, warns Duncan of two things: (1) his potentially new boss with not “put up with your shit like [he] does”; and (2), more significant, Udo denigrates the other restaurant’s menu as “old, old-fashioned, heavy.” Duncan’s contribution to Udo’s *nouveau* Italian cuisine is, for Udo, obviously important, this is patently clear at this juncture, otherwise Udo would not try to convince him not to leave. Further still, we also readily perceive that Duncan is here to stay, ready and willing to be part of the aforementioned “Broadway show.” What we also see here is that not only is Duncan important for the restaurant’s success, but it is indeed Duncan who takes over the conversation:

Udo: Let me tell you something about this guy, the food is old, old fashion, heavy. It would be a stupid move on your part, don’t do it.

Duncan: Fuck Bulard, okay? We’re turning covers like crazy, more people are going to get laid upstairs than in the last ten years. Udo, *cógelo suavecito!* [lit., “Take it easy!”] Relax!

In a moment when Udo is lecturing Duncan on why he should not quit to go elsewhere, Duncan’s response is anything but the expected explanation/excuse of why he had an interview with Bulard. To be sure, he doesn’t even address the issue. Instead, he takes over the conversation and, in sidelining the discussion about his job interview, he demonstrates an awareness of what is going on in the restaurant as far as covers are concerned. Duncan now tells Udo how good of an evening they are having, that the number of dinners is impressive, and he caps it all off with an exhortation to relax! This scene, I would contend, underscores the greater similarities between Duncan and Udo, something that we wit-



ness later on in the movie. This is that moment, I would suggest, where both Udo and Duncan are on the same level, one encouraging the other and, in the end, both in agreement.

The symbiotic relationship between Udo and Duncan manifests itself in their co-creation of the lobster/pasta dish for the food critic, Jennifer Freely, a sort of dance in which they engage, each one indispensable to the other in order to complete the project. We witness a precision to their preparation of this special dish. Further still, it is not always clear who is mixing the cream sauce or who is heating the champagne. Such uncertainty and/or ambiguity can be perceived as a momentary melding of the two, the one complementing the other in order to form a whole. In addition, there are two seemingly insignificant moments that prove instead most relevant as underlying signage. The first image of this approximately three-minute-long scene is a camera scan after we see the spaghetti in the deep fryer. The camera scans half of the kitchen up to the stairwell where we now see Nicole who and stops at the bottom of the same stairwell and observes the two in action without saying a word to either of them. And if we take close notice, we see that her eyes scan to her left, which is toward Duncan, a glance accompanied by an indelible smile.

Just as she arrives, both Duncan and Udo are, momentarily, framed by the top shelves of the steel table, a portrait for her to observe, we can readily assume. But they are also framed for us the viewers, so we, too, see them now no longer as the apparent competitors they seemed to have previously been, but instead as the symbiotic pair that now works perfectly well together. The camera then scans back toward Udo and Duncan in a side view, the two alone on screen and in this moment metaphorically framed, after which the camera then returns to Nicole who now looks at the both of them, but this time with no smile, after which she readily heads back upstairs.

The framing of Udo and Duncan continues. Once Nicole leaves, the steel table's top shelves momentarily frames them once more. The camera then immediately switches to one of them – we do not know which – as one – the other? – of them, again unidentified, resumes the preparation over the stove. We see only parts of them – e.g., hands, arms, torso – and we see the food, and for the moment we do not know who is who and who is preparing which part of the meal. The only clear marker of identity we do have here is Udo's bracelet as he breaks up the lobster and, a few moments later, sparkles the finished dish with caviar.

There is a third quick framing of the two when Paolo exits the kitchen after having complimented Duncan on the *bistecca alla fiorentina*. This scene figures of import because it is Udo who tells Paolo he cannot be in the kitchen, almost as if to protect indirectly Duncan from his presence, a forecasting of the possible physical altercation that might take place between the two.

The fourth and final framing of our two chefs occurs as they finish up the preparation of the special dish for the food critic. This framing is from the top, a bird's eye view as we now see them, momentarily, shoulder to shoulder to each other, and, then, Udo finishes the special meal and Duncan places the vegetables in the serving dish. The scene then immediately switches to a close up of each of them, as Udo rounds the steel table to go upstairs with both dishes in hand and turns back to Duncan to thank him seriously, as Duncan, in turn, in a close-up states with a seemingly mischievous smile, "I love it when you talk dirty, baby." Ryan Calabretta Sajder sees this as an example of "the sexual nature food can and indeed does produce" (p. 205). By all means! Such interpretation is further signaled by a number of scenes, one of which is when the "food nymph" takes at least three sucks on the fettuccine to get it all into her mouth, each suck accompanied by a moan of a distinct sexual nature. In the same manner, however, I do wonder if we might not see a hint of homo-eroticism in this statement, given the complex relationship between Udo and Duncan as chefs and, to boot, the two of them as concurrent lovers of Nicole: a complementarity at this juncture of a much more complex nature. The fundamental complementarity of the two chefs is of course suggested early on in the movie, as I mentioned above as we saw in the scene where Udo believes he must convince Duncan to stay. Such complementarity, I would contend – conscious for sure on Udo's part – is further punctuated twice in all of this: (1) when Udo throws Paolo out of the kitchen, and (2) when Udo, with both plates in hand, as just mentioned, stops and turns to thank Duncan in the most profuse of ways, by simply stating, "Duncan, thanks!"

The respective relationships that both Udo and Duncan have with Nicole create a complex and cu-



rious situation. Curious because it piques our interest and arouses our desire to scrutinize such a triad; complex for all the obvious reasons among which the two men are engaged in an affair with the same woman and they all work in the same restaurant. Further still, these relationships take place in an uneven work environment, as Udo is the son of the owner and, de facto, Duncan's supervisor. So, at first blush, it seems to be a situation that is, to use a description by Mookie in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, nuclear.

Thinking now just in terms of logistics and physicality, all three characters involved in this double-layered affair constitute to a certain degree a trinity, with Nicole as the uniting figure. During the time span in which the movie takes place, Nicole and Udo engage in sex in the office off the kitchen at the beginning of the evening. Duncan is aware of as much when he arrives and goes in to change his clothes; he finds Nicole's earrings. In the course of the evening Duncan and Nicole will also engage in two secret meetings one of which ends in sexual intercourse.⁶ Nicole, as just mentioned, is the central figure, the lynchpin, if we may use such a term, in this complicated situation. She is, one might surmise, the literal intermediary between Udo and Duncan. As the two chefs sustain each other in their profession, they oddly gain strength as well in their individual relationship with Nicole, each wanting it to continue.⁷ This, of course, can lead us to see this triangle as a metaphorical *ménage à trois*, which actually encourages the two men to try to keep alive each one's relationship with Nicole.⁸

The complexity then is also in the spatiality of what we can categorize as the "once removed." Namely, as Udo and Duncan each engage in their physical relationship with Nicole – and each one is aware of the other's liaison – then the desire to continue with Nicole is, once removed, a desire to be indirectly engaged, albeit metaphorically, with each other on this level as well as all the others. Still, and, again, metaphorically speaking, we are also in the realm of the androgyne, "the One which contains the Two" (Singer 6). According to Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, this is the eventual re-merging of the two original halves of the androgyne, having been previously cut in two by Zeus:

... the purely sexual pleasures of their friendship could hardly account for the huge delight they take in one another's company. The fact is that both their souls are longing for a something ... to which they can neither of them put a name, and which they can only give an inkling of in cryptic sayings and prophetic riddles ...
(Plato, 192 c-e; emphasis added)

Such re-merging demonstrates "how far back we can trace our *innate love* for one another, and how this love is always trying to reintegrate our former nature, *to make two into one*" (Plato 191d; emphasis added). This is yet another question, I contend, that is begged by Duncan's seemingly ludic response, "I love it when you talk dirty, baby." It calls to the fore the significability of text with regard to either, if not both, the androgynous or the homoerotic. The jury, I would submit, is out on the final deliberation of the text's significability.

⁶ What is important here is that these two meetings take place outside of the restaurant; they take their tryst off site.

⁷ It is true that one might see the relationship between Nicole and Duncan a stronger one. One might also assume that the relationship is more important for Duncan than for Udo, as Udo is most complacent at the end of the evening when Nicole tells him that the relationship between her and Duncan is "serious."

⁸ Udo as "star chef" will eventually choose his role as celebrity over his relationship with Nicole, as we saw in the end, also because his role as a culinary creative genius also gets him special attention from women, as we know from the back story with other women as well. In this sense, Udo is a Lothario type, one of a few unpleasant characteristics he seems to possess.



4. Viewing *Dinner Rush 2*

The assassination scene at the end of the movie proves equally constitutive as fertile ground for a broad range of potential significability of this cinematic text. I would point to a more curious use of Italian toward the end of the film; and to a certain degree, it goes beyond code-switching and, to be sure, we might speak in terms of intentionality shifting from that of the character – this would be a narrator internal to the text, the homodiegetic, overt narrator – to that of an unidentified “narrator” – this would be a narrating voice external to the text, the heterodiegetic, covert narrator. When Black and Blue go to Louis’s favorite spot to talk, which is in the basement in front of the toilet, a number of questions are begged at this juncture. First, we have the juxtaposition of the importance of a topic at hand being discussed – in this case Black and Blue wanting to take both the bookmaking business and the restaurant – in the basement and, to boot, outside the men’s room. Second, the notion of Italians in the basement is by now proverbial and archetypal; we all remember, for instance, the history of the Italian language mass celebrated in the basement of churches run by the Irish. Third, against the more usual lore of bringing the important discussions to the kitchen, here, Louis brings an “important” conversation to the toilet, which, in turn, questions the significance of the topic at hand as well as Louis’s lack of respect for Black and Blue.⁹ In the end, Louis does not show up. In so doing, Louis has totally dismissed Black and Blue as interlocutors with respect to the business item at hand. Further still, his disdain is such that he has them killed, literally, in the toilet, something planned well in advance, as we find out in the brief car scene with Louis and Roloff:

Roloff: I could have taken care of this out in Queens. Look at the mess you have now.
Louis: My son can handle it.

At this point, the inference can only be that Louis had already planned the entire evening. He now figures as the puppeteer, to use a visual referent, of the Godfather he truly is. Udo’s early sarcastic reference to Louis’s table as the “Godfather’s table” at the beginning of the movie now comes full circle as the accurate reference it was from a semiotic viewpoint unbeknownst to us at that moment. Only now in retrospect does it acquire this meaning as well.¹⁰

What also becomes important at this juncture is that the fundamental, basic evaluative process that we witness through the actual assassination is anticipated by Paolo’s use of Italian at this point; he turns to Carmen and states, “Vado a pisciare.” A reference in this moment to such a basic discharging of bodily waste is not, I would contend, a casual coincidence. Further still, the choreography of switching scenes back and forth – not dissimilar to the inimitable baptism scene in *The Godfather* (1972) – adds to the possible, if not probable, interpretant of a condemnation of organized crime, Carmen and Paolo’s attempt to muscle Louis out of his restaurant in addition to the book-making business. Once Paolo enters the bathroom he finds Ken Roloff, the most affable Wall Streeter we previously met at the bar. But we find out at this moment that he is also a contract killer. Roloff’s assassination of Paolo, especially, with the latter urinating into the toilet, brings together two forms of waste that need to be eliminated if not eradicated: – the murderer Paolo and bodily waste. Indeed, Paolo falls between the toilet bowl and the urinal, with his last word, to Carmen, having been the above-mentioned “pisciare,” a three-syllable word in Italian whose first two syllables afford greater emphasis on the bodily waste than the English monosyllabic infinitive “piss.” Italian, thus, or one’s knowledge of Italian, is potentially more fulfilling (pun intended) with regard to the spectator’s greater understanding of the above-mentioned nuances of the situation at hand; the linguistic enhances the visual and the contextual, which together create a greater semiotic interpretant.

⁹ It is of common opinion that the kitchen is, according to Lara Pascali, the “social center of the home... where Italian women typically prepare food, families gather for dinner, entertain guests, and celebrate holidays” (49). While not part of my discussion, Pascali goes on to underscore the importance of the kitchen in the basement, especially after World War II in areas around Toronto, Montreal, and New York.

¹⁰ On the semiotics of retrospective reading, see my essay on the *retro-lector* (Tamburri 1990).

As the assassination takes place, the montage is as follows. As soon as Paolo falls covered in blood between the toilet and the urinal, the scene switches to the kitchen where the cooks meticulously prepare the many of the 263 dinners the restaurant will end up serving by evening's end. Roloff then turns toward Carmen and shoots him as well. Likewise, as he falls, the scene switches back to kitchen as in the previous scene. All of this is in a slightly slowed down projection, as if to be sure, among other things, that these two diametrically opposed scenes stand out. The newness of Udo's cuisine and all that it pertains now overshadows the murder of Paolo and Carmen, two small-town criminals who, to this moment, lived according to old-school criminality often associated with Italian Americans. To top it off, once Carmen falls to his death, the switching of scenes this time is no longer to the kitchen. Instead, we see a group of customers applauding after which there is an immediate switch to Carmen who definitively falls to his death at the bottom of the stairwell; given the seriality of the switching of scenes in this montage, it is not at all far-fetched to consider the applause in this moment also for Ken Roloff's success in eradicating waste. All this, as soon as Paolo's head first hit the mirror once he is shot by Roloff, and the entire scene is accompanied by the pop song "Oh what a night!". Such a sequence surely figures in its own right as, in general, a condemnation of the "old world," as it does, in particular, a condemnation of Carmen and Paolo and their bullish behavior.¹¹ Hence, in the end, Udo's *nouveau* Italian cuisine is highlighted in the positive while the murderous bullying behavior of the small-town organized criminals is stamped out once and for all. The potential semiotics of it all at this juncture are now most apparent.

5. Identity

Be it implicitly or explicitly, identity is one of the thematics that undergird this movie. From the beginning, notions of Italian identity are manifested in one form or another. As should be apparent at this point in our viewing, /food/ is the sign through which such notions are articulated. Who should be working in an Italian kitchen and who should not constitute a major question from the first ten minutes of *Dinner Rush*. This per force also begs the question of what it means to be Italian; in a sense, it becomes for Louis a question of nature versus nurture. Seemingly, then, one is Italian only if one is somatically Italian; that is, s/he has Italian genes, otherwise, anything else is, well, "You can't have everything," as Louis tells Harold toward the end of the movie. Hence, Italian food, that which has to be prepared as it used to be by such individuals who were of Italian descent, is the main sign that communicates notions of what constitutes "real" Italian food and "true" Italians.¹²

As I have rehearsed elsewhere, Daniel Aaron was one of the first to have dealt with the notion of hyphenation within the general discourse of American literature.¹³ For him, the hyphen initially represented older North Americans' hesitation to accept the new-comer; it was their way, in Aaron's words, to "hold him at 'hyphen's length,' so to speak, from the established community" (Aaron 1964, 213). It further "signifies a tentative but unmistakable withdrawal" on the user's part, so that "mere geographical proximity" denies the newly arrived "full and unqualified national membership despite ... legal qualifications and ... official disclaimers to the contrary" (p. 213)¹⁴. This, of course, then sets the stage for a number of reactions on the part of the new-comer. Such social phenomena and their impact, I submit, are apparent in the storyline of the film *Big Night* (Scott and Tucci 1996). Old-world vs. new-

¹¹ This is not dissimilar to my analysis of Michael Corleone's tie, which I discussed in a previous venue (Tamburri 2011, 80-91).

¹² On the notion of "real" Italians I refer the reader to Ruberto and Sciorra.

¹³ I have discussed this at length in both English and Italian in different venues (Tamburri, 1991, 1998, 2010).

¹⁴ Aaron is not alone in discerning this multi-stage phenomenon in the ethnic writer. Ten years after Aaron's original version, Rose Basile Green spoke to an analogous phenomenon within the history of Italian/American narrative; then, she discussed her four stages of "the need for assimilation," "revulsion," "counterrevulsion," and "rooting" (Basile Green 1969). As I have already discussed in another venue (Tamburri 1991), I would contend that there are cases where a grammar rule/usage may connote an inherent prejudice, no matter how slight. Besides the hyphen, another example that comes to mind is the usage of the male pronoun for the impersonal, whereas all of its alternatives – e.g., *s/he*, *she/he*, or *he/she* – are shunned.

world and Italian vs. Italian-American are rolled into one, and the conflicts, negotiations, lack thereof, and potential resolutions all become apparent.

From a sociological perspective, in turn, Irvin L. Child discussed three types of individuals who inhabited at one time the Italian/American community of New Haven, Connecticut. In a study published in 1943, he spoke about three different types of reactions: “The In-group Reaction”; “The Apathetic Reaction; “The Rebel Reaction.” These three categories, I would contend, have their analogies in what we shall see later in Charles Sanders Peirce’s three cognitive categories¹⁵.

I shall in fact start with Child’s “in-group reaction,” as I see it closest to Peirce’s category of “firstness.” The in-grouper, we are told, “strives primarily for acceptance by the Italian group and acts in such a way as to please fellow Italians rather than to gain the favor of Americans” (Child, p. 118). Joseph Lopreato, years later, sees this turn inward as an assertion of “the superiority [this individual sees in] his nationality group over other nationality groups” (1970, p. 73); and here we can readily include the so-called American nationality as well. Such a reaction, Lopreato is convinced, “offers the individual the chance to express the hostility that accompanies his striving for group status and is heightened by frustration of that striving” (1970, p. 74). This, thus, brings to mind Louis, who, as shall become apparent, is obstinately tied to his Italian identity.

Child’s second category that proves pertinent to this viewing/reading is his “apathetic reaction.” Here, we find that the individual “retreat[s] from the conflict situation”; and in the “course of this retreat the emotional and significance of the facts and symbols of nationality building are blurred and diminished” (Child, p. 151). The apathy here lies in his desire not to take sides. Instead, he “feel[s] the same toward everybody” (Child, p. 164) and thus does not express any preference over either group. “His strategy,” Lopreato believes, “is to quietly gain a certain degree of acceptance in both cultures by refusing to maintain any consistent nationality level” (Lopreato 1970, p. 70). Here, I have in mind Duncan, who as we shall see, is constantly trying to negotiate both the Italian and the American.

Finally, Child’s third category, “the rebel reaction,” is characterized by a “predominance in the individual of the tendency to achieve complete acceptance by the American group” (Child, p. 76). And, Child continues, “[a]ttainment of this goal requires that the individual rid himself of habits and associations that mark him as Italian and become as completely as possible an American” (Child, p. 76). What is also curious about this individual, according to Child, is his conviction that his Italian-ness is “a barrier to his acceptance in American groups,” and that his “effort to overcome the barrier [is] by showing that he is capable of acting like an American” (Child, p. 78). He is, as Lopreato also underscores, “impatient to become thoroughly American *in the shortest period possible*” (Lopreato 1970, pp. 69-70); and he “exerts even more effort to reach the goal of higher education status” (Child, p. 82). Here, of course, I have in mind Udo.

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What then can we finally make of these characters who seem to represent three different individuals from one person to the next? In line with Child to a certain degree, we would not err to look at these three stages from another perspective, a cognitive Peircean perspective of firstness, secondness, and thirdness as rehearsed in his *Principles of Philosophy*¹⁶. All three stages, for Peirce, represent different modes of being dependent on different levels of consciousness. They progress, that is, from a state of non-rationality (“feeling”)¹⁷ to practicality (“experience”)¹⁸ and on to pure rationality (“thought”)¹⁹ – or, “potentiality,” “actuality,” and “futuribility.”

¹⁵ I would also point out that Child’s three stages may indeed have their analogs in the different generations that Joseph Lopreato (1970) and Paul Campisi (1948) each describe and analyze: i.e., “peasant,” “first-,” “second-,” and “third-generation.” With regard to this fourth generation – Lopreato’s and Campisi’s “third generation” – I would state here, briefly, that I see the writer of this generation subsequent to Aaron’s “third-stage writer,” who eventually returns to his/her ethnicity through the process of re(dis)covery.

¹⁶ Peirce offers numerous versions of his definitions of these three modes of being and examples throughout his writings, especially in this volume (1960 *passim*).

¹⁷ “By a feeling, I mean an instance of that kind of consciousness which involves no analysis, comparison or any process whatsoever, nor consists in whole or in part of any act by which one stretch of consciousness is distinguished from another” (1.306).

If firstness is the isolated, *sui generis* mode of possibly being Peirce tells us it is, we may see an analog in Child's "in-group reaction." For it is here, Child tells us, that the individual "strives primarily for acceptance by the Italian group"²⁰. In this sense, his sensorial experiences, his/her "feelings," as Peirce calls them, constitute, to borrow from what Aaron stated about the first-stage writer, the "very stuff of [his/her ethnic] material" (1964, p. 215); for he is adamant "to please fellow Italians [and remain with them] rather than to gain the favor of Americans," as we saw above with regard to Child's study. Namely, those recordings of what s/he simply experiences, without the benefit, or dare we say desire, of any "analysis, comparison or any [other] process whatsoever ... by which one stretch of consciousness is distinguished from another." While there is some sense of comparison in Child's "in-group reaction," I would beg my reader's indulgence insofar as the member of the "in group" remains indeed firmly ensconced within the group of origin, as Child tells us. That said, this person does not give in to any form of "influence" vis-à-vis his or her way of thinking that would then modify any perceptual behavioral patterns due to his "world of fact or experience," as Peirce would say.

As Child's second individual shifts from the initial stage – "that kind of consciousness which involves no analysis," or if it does, provokes no modification of behavior, Peirce would tell us – to the "apathetic," s/he now engages in some form of analysis and comparison, two processes fundamental to Peirce's secondness. This individual, that is, becomes aware of the dominant culture – "how a second object is" – and does not retreat into his original culture as does the "in-grouper." The "apathetic" individual undergoes, as Peirce would tell us, a "forcible modification of ... thinking [which is] the influence of the world of fact or *experience*." The result, then, is, as we saw above, a "retreat from the conflict situation" that subsequently blurs and diminishes the "symbols of nationality building," with the hopes, as we saw Lopreato underscore years later, of gaining "acceptance in both cultures by refusing to maintain any consistent nationality level."

Child's third category – "the rebel reaction" – transcends the first two categories of loyalty to national origin and a desire to avoid conflict precisely because he sees his national identity, as we saw above, as "a barrier to his acceptance in American groups." He is aware of the various stumbling blocks that identification with his *italianità* could create and thus is adamant at demonstrating that his is, as Child stated, "capable of acting like an American." For that "element of cognition [thirdness, according to Peirce] which is neither feeling [firstness] nor the polar sense [secondness], is the consciousness of a process, and this in the form of the sense of learning, of acquiring mental growth is eminently characteristic of cognition" (1.381). Peirce goes on to tell us that this third mode of being is timely, not immediate; it is the consciousness of a process, the "consciousness of synthesis" (1.381), which is precisely what this third-stage, individual does. S/he can transcend the intellectual experiences of the first two stages because of all that has preceded him/her.

What we now witness with these three types of Italian Americans is a progression from a stage of visceral allegiance to National identity to that of incredulous "impatien[ce] to become thoroughly American *in the shortest period possible*" (Lopreato 1970, pp. 69-70), with passage through that secondary stage of the "apathetic" in which the individual hopes to be able to straddle the bridge between the two different cultures. In the end, then, we have three distinct phenomena of identity: (1) a strong allegiance to one's national origins; (2) in contrast, a desire to amalgamate—indeed, reconcile the differences between them—one's culture of origin with the host culture; and (3) further still, an unmitigated adherence to the host culture. Thus, the notions of Child and Peirce come into play in our re-consideration

¹⁸ Secondness, as "the mode of being of one thing which consists in how a second object is" (1.24), provokes a "forcible modification of our ways of thinking [which is] the influence of the world of fact or *experience*" (1.321; emphasis textual).

¹⁹ "The third category of elements of phenomena consists of what we call laws when we contemplate them from the outside only, but which when we see both sides of the shield we call thoughts" (1.420).

²⁰ I make this distinction in order not to contradict myself vis-à-vis Peirce's use of the term "real" when he discusses secondness. There, he states: "[T]he real is that which insists upon forcing its way to recognition as *something* other than the mind's creation" (1.325).

of Italian/American identity.²¹ In the end, we have three distinct phenomena of identity: (1) a strong allegiance to national origins; (2) in down-playing a strong allegiance, the desire to amalgamate one's culture of origin with the host culture – indeed, reconcile the differences between them; and (3) further still, an unmitigated, *sui generis* adherence to the host culture. Louis, Duncan, and Udo constitute a new trinity of representation of these three identitarian phenomena.

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At this juncture, one may wonder about the inclusion of Duncan in this paradigm. After all, he is not Italian, and this we can assume by (1) the music that accompanies him, and (2) his own use of Spanish, however rare. Nonetheless, the shifting definitions of “Italian” cuisine and, we must not forget, of “Italian” cooks, allows us to step beyond the traditional conceptualizations of what the adjective Italian now can and might signify. Louis, already at the beginning of the film, questioned the definition of “Italian” as in restaurant and cuisine when he rhetorically stated for that moment in the movie, “Of course, why would there be Italians in an Italian kitchen?” However, re-considering this question now at the end of the movie when he meets Harold for the first time, we might now re-conceptualize what we mean by Italian and, hence, by Italian identity. Louis asks, “Are you new here?” Harold responds, “Yes.” But he also states that he is not Italian, to which Louis laughs and says, “You can't have everything.” Well, perhaps we can.

In an essay of mine in the collection *Re-Mapping Italian America*, I address the notion of a re-conceptualization of the definition of the adjective Italian in reference to the idea of the “Italian” writer. My premise is one based on the notion of an identity being defined not by one's familial heritage and/or geographical provenance but instead by one's socio-behavioral and cultural experience; namely, her/his daily activities in life vis-à-vis those things that fall squarely within the realm of “a largely Italian milieu, and not necessarily only in Italy” (Tamburri 2017, p. 67). As such, it thus “unfolds in that way specifically because s/he feels [it] as part of his/her ordinary existence, and not in any honorary or affected sense, but actually *effective*” (Tamburri 2017, p. 67).

As I did then, I shall cite here once more what Rebecca West wrote close to thirty years ago about a concept of Italian and/or Italian/American identity, of someone who is not of Italian origin but who lives out his/her daily activities – be they professional or personal – if not specifically within, then at least for the most part close to what is coming to be called *italianità*, or s/he lives her daily life *italianamente*:

By bringing non-Italian or Italian/American perspectives to Italian literature and culture [...], we implicitly (and at times explicitly) question essentialist views of ethnicity. I could go so far as to say that I am, by dint of twenty-five years of study, scholarship, and professional engagement in Italian culture and literature, a kind of “Italian/American” (or “American/Italian”). This identity is not to be found in my genes, my blood, or in any part of my material body, but rather in my orientation, my knowledge, and my commitment. [...] Similarly, adopted cultures may be seen in the same light as adopted children. If those children are more truly the children of their adoptive parents who nurture and cherish them than of their biological parents, then perhaps an adopted culture is eventually as much (or in some cases even more) “mine” as it is that of someone born into it. I recognize that I may never “feel” Italian or Italian/American in the same way that natural sons and daughters of Italian culture may feel, but I would at the very least like to believe that my investment in that culture has marked me more than superficially as someone who is part of *italianità*” (p. 337).

If we accept just the very basics of what West is saying, that she in some way – and maybe on the strength of “twenty-five years of study, research, and responsibilities having to do with Italian culture and literature,” belongs within the rather vast confines of *italianità*, we must then include in this world of *italianità* not only also those who, while born and raised in Italy, live elsewhere, and in our case, in

²¹ I would be remiss here not to propose the notion that there may indeed be the distinct possibility that these three phenomena may also be present, at different stages of course, within the overall trajectory of a single writer's career. Namely, while they may indeed distinguish three different classifications of writers, they may also, conversely, characterize different stages in the development of a writer throughout his/her career.

the United States, but we then should also include those who, while not born into an ethnicity, possess nevertheless an orientation and knowledge of, as well as a commitment to, all things Italian and to which they pertain²². Indeed, I would submit that we can do so quite easily from a scientific point of view if we are willing to break free from those arbitrary, and dare I say, limiting confines. In so doing, we thus recognize that kaleidoscopic mosaic that is North America, as I classified it more than thirty years ago²³, and what now resonates in what Michele Cometa states in his *Studi culturali* with regard to the “migrant” writer: “The mosaic of identities that migrant writers carry around with them is much more complex and variegated” (p. 107), as is true, as we have seen above, even in the case of someone like West. Following, then, such an intellectual trajectory with regard to migrant writers, writers of other limitations, and/or of ethnic ones, we can only end up colliding—and happily so—with the Bassettian discourse of “italici” and, in the broader sense of the concept of “Italian” identity, we thus find ourselves in an “Italian” world that surpasses every restrictive, reductive, and essentialist conceptual barrier. This, ultimately, I would submit, should be our end goal in our continued endeavors to change paradigms.

Now, with this as a conceptual backdrop, we can readily understand how, within this filmic world of *Dinner Rush*, Duncan is very much part of the “Italian” milieu of Gigino’s restaurant, which constitutes our semiosphere as viewers – that space within which sign processes operate and outside of which semiosis cannot take place. As viewers, that is, we are engaged in the textual world of the film we are watching. Hence, and in like fashion, for Duncan, his world is the world of Gigino’s, an Italian restaurant owned and operated by “Italians.”

Thus, in re-visiting Child’s three stages, it becomes clear that Duncan – the Italian social construct that he now is – finds himself situated literally between Louis and Udo. In such a position, and given what we have seen, he surely manifests the apathetic reaction. There are two episodes we have already witnessed, each of which underscores his desire, on the one hand, to “please his [cohort Italian Americans such as Louis]” – i.d., his preparation of Louis’s sausage and peppers dish – and, on the other hand, to gain acceptance and recognition from Udo – i.d., his co-preparation of the special lobster dish for the food critic Jennifer Freely. Duncan thus inhabits that middle space of Child’s apathetic reaction between Louis the “in-grouper” and Udo the “rebel.”

That said, then, “[i]n our post-structuralist world of all sorts of borders having been readily traversed, diminished[, if not completely eliminated, and all sorts of concepts and terminology re-defined], this [notion of a] new ‘Italian’ ... allows for a more profound understanding of the current situation at hand, as well as for a more fertile field of study of the trans-national discourse in which Italians engage but that, from a hegemonic point of view, do not [always] recognize. The insistence on a limited and, dare I say, limiting [notion of what it means to be ‘Italian’] restricted to Italy-born and bred can only stifle the critical voice that wishes to make the evident connections that indeed exist under a more broad umbrella that we can still – and, I would underscore, *should* – readily call “Italian” (Tamburri 2017, p. 75).

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²² If we enlarge further this concept of West’s, we find ourselves in the end converging with the concept of “Itali-city,” which Piero Bassetti has been promulgating since 2002 and which he elaborated in (2008).

²³ I addressed it for the first time in my *To Hyphenate* (1991) 48-51, and later in my *Una semiotica* (2010, pp. 62-64).



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