



# Promises (Delivered) Across the Atlantic: The Representation of Italian Immigration through Home Movies

Daniel Melfi / Ph.D. Thesis Project <sup>1</sup>

University of Florence  / University of Pisa 

DOI 10.54103/2036-461X/30753

This project investigates the representation of post-WWII Italian immigration to Canada and the US through home movies. Part of an inter-university Ph.D. program organized by the region of Tuscany, this research centres on an analysis of the films preserved at (and is undertaken in collaboration with) Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia, also known as Home Movies, in Bologna. The project highlights two objectives. The first is to develop a new cataloguing and questionnaire model for the collections and their donors. The second is to refine a scientific protocol for the recording of oral history, specifically as it pertains to home movies. The intention is to cultivate translatable models to the North American context by employing ethnographic and anthropologic strategies alongside archiving practices. This way, the project may further expand its scope with a collectively drive film collection and memory gathering aspect in the future in cities where the Italian-Canadian and Italian-American communities are most populous, especially in Montréal, New York City, and Toronto. To elaborate, the project builds on the following research questions: utilizing a microhistorical approach, what do home movies reveal about Italian emigrant experience in the post-WWII period? Furthermore, what is the

value of collecting collective memory (on small-gauge motion picture stock)?

The research involves a close reading of over thirty hours of footage on small-gauge photochemical motion picture stock, recorded in the postwar period in Italy and North America, between the late 1940s and the early 1980s. The films document the daily lives of Italian immigrants that emigrated from Italy from a variety of southern rural realities. Between 1929 and 1985 about nine million Italians emigrated (Del Boca and Venturini 2003). Between 1941 and 1980, about 500,000 Italians immigrated to Canada (Ramirez 1989) while in the same period over 500,000 arrived in the US (Cavaioli 2008). This wave of emigration was caused by a lack of labour opportunities, a poorly organized agricultural economy and widespread poverty in rural regions in Italy, not only in the south but the north as well (Del Boca and Venturini 2003).

The films preserved at Home Movies belong to six separate collections. They range in length from fifteen metres to over 120 metres (approximately four minutes to thirty minutes). The visual texts depict the contrasts between the socio-economic realities that Italians left behind in postwar rural Italy and those that they encountered in Canada and the US at a time of rapid economic



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License  
© The Author(s)

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. thesis co-supervised by Professor Chiara Tognolotti (University of Pisa) and Paolo Simoni, director of Home Movies Bologna. For information chiara.tognolotti@unipi.it and paolosimoni@gmail.com.

growth and expansion. They do, however, also reveal more or less subtle processes of cultural assimilation to their new lives in North America. The research exists at the intersection of film studies, historiography, ethnography and anthropology, employing a microhistorical approach and centring on auto- and domestic ethnographic gazes inherent in the texts. In the process, this investigation reveals the authentic representation of a particularly important moment of European and North American postwar migration. But it also demonstrates the importance and value of home movies and their preservation in a funded institutional context, enabling the digitization and accessibility of these collections for scholars and citizens alike.

By employing a detail-oriented and analytical approach, the research applies the principles of microhistory as developed by Italian historians Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, two of the field's founders and proponents. Specifically, this approach works to shift the focus of the typical macro-historical lens in order to focus on figures not only outside of the historical canon but to do so in a microscopic and analytical fashion. Although Ginzburg and Levi have written extensively on this topic, it has been scholar Efrén Cuevas that has continued to position such an approach in relation to the documentary value of home movies. He writes that a microhistorical perspective "combines historiographical rigor with a creative approach", in response to the realization that, "an urgent need arises to make the everyday visible, to rescue it from the oblivion to which the grand narratives habitually consign it" (2022).

The intention is to reveal previously ignored but indicative facets of a familiar macro-historical context (in this case the massive wave of postwar Italian migration to Canada and the US). This project communicates ways in which such an event might be best articulated through the findings of smaller, detail-oriented investigation into the life of one particular individual, such as a farmer that has left the Italian rural region of Molise and immigrated to a burgeoning

North American metropolis like Toronto. This research's methodology radiates out of the confluence of primary sources, the filmic texts (which are in fact digital scans of the 16mm, 8mm and S8 films), along with research by scholars like Cuevas, Roger Odin, Cecilia Mörner, Michael Renov, Patricia Zimmermann, and Catherine Russell. It does, however, utilize anthropologic and ethnographic tools and methods such as interviews with extant family members and donors of the films. Here, the scientific protocol for recording oral history—as it pertains to home movies—can prove to be not only a key to addressing the research questions of the project, but also offers a quantifiable result for this three-year-long course program. As Mörner writes, ethnographic methods, particularly interviews, can "compensate for the lack of both textual analysis and contextual analysis" (2011). Information gleaned through such encounters can then be cross-referenced with the filmic objects themselves, investigating their projection history, labelling, and organization—all according to the traces on the film stock, containers and reels.

Together with the film inspection reports and existing catalogues, this collage of information, including primary and secondary source material, provides an ample landscape in which to conduct a microscopic analysis leading to discoveries and, more importantly, more questions, which bring the research closer to its goals and objectives. Through an investigation of the representation of post-WWII Italian immigration to Canada and the US through home movies, this project makes an argument for the microhistorical capacity of home movies and their ability to reveal new details about established narratives. The target of this research is to assert the value and importance of home movies preservation and archiving in appropriately funded and accessible institutions.

## REFERENCE LIST\*

- Cavaioli, Frank J. 2008. "Patterns of Italian Immigration to the United States." *The Catholic Social Science Review* 13: 213–29.
- Cuevas, Efrén. 2022. *Filming History from Below: Microhistorical Documentaries*. New York: WallFlower Press.
- Del Boca, Daniela, and Alessandra Venturini. 2003. "Italian Migration." *Institute for the Study of Labor Discussion Paper Series* 938: 1–44.
- Felice, Emanuele, and Giovanni Vecchi. 2015. "Italy's Growth and Decline, 1861–2011." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 45(4): 507–48.
- Ginzburg, Carlo, John Tedeschi, and Anne C. Tedeschi. 1993. "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It." *Critical Inquiry* 20(1): 10–35.
- Mörner, Cecilia. 2011. "Dealing with Domestic Films: Methodological Strategies and Pitfalls in Studies of Home Movies from the Predigital Era." *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 11(2): 22–45.
- Odin, Roger. 2008. "Reflections on the Family Home Movie as Document: A Semio-Pragmatic Approach." In *Mining the Home Movie*, edited by Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann, 255–71. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ramirez, Bruno. 1989. *The Italians in Canada*. Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association.
- Renov, Michael. 2004. *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Russell, Catherine. 1999. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Zimmermann, Patricia. 1995. *Reel Families a Social History of Family Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

---

\* This is a selective, not exhaustive, bibliography.