The construction of national and/or ethnic identities is an extremely complex process, and its results are often ambiguous and heterogeneous. The formation of Italian-American identity, in particular, was (and still is) complicated by a vast number of factors connected to Italian culture and history, the history of Italian immigration to the USA, and relations with mainstream American society and other ethnic groups.

A first factor contributing to the heterogeneous nature of Italian-American identity is that the Italian-American community includes both first-generation Italian-Americans, or Italian immigrants (usually elderly, as the main migration flows from Italy to the United States waned out during and after the fascist period) and people of Italian descent born in the United States. The so-called ‘generation gap’ is particularly evident in Italian-American communities, to the extent that, as Robert Viscusi (2003) pointed out in a recent lecture, in an average Italian-American home two or three different worlds live together. In fact, although in certain areas of the USA Italian-Americans are the white American ethnic group with the highest rates of unmixed ancestry (Alba 1990: 47), ethnic homogeneity does not entail that all Italian-Americans share or have shared the same linguistic and cultural heritage, nor the same degree of integration within the American society.

In an attempt to voice the uneven stratification of Italian-American identity across the generations, film director Martin Scorsese stated: “my grandfather was Italian, my father was Italian-American, I think of myself as being American-Italian, and my children, I guess, are

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1 In this study, the terms ‘Italian-American’ and ‘American’ will be used with reference to the territory of the United States only.
2 For detailed information on migration waves, see Gastaldo 1987, Golini and Amato 2001.
3 “Storia all’ombra: The Task of Italian American Literature”, lecture delivered in Forlì, Dipartimento di Studi Interdisciplinari su Traduzione, Lingue e Culture dell’Università di Bologna, November 19, 2003.
4 In the Albany-Schenectady-Troy metropolitan area of New York State; Alba’s data were collected in 1984-85 from 524 randomly chosen residents.
American.” Scorsese’s paradigm implies a quantitative view of Italian-Americanness as a ‘hyphenated’ ethnic identity, since it entails the progressive lessening of the Italian side of the hyphen as the American side gains ground. In this perspective, ethnic or national identity is a limited resource, a finite amount, and becoming more American necessarily means growing less Italian. Constructing an Italian-American identity implies losing, or voluntarily dropping, some parts of the original Italianness, and replacing them with mainstream American substitutes. This process is usually termed Americanization, and is motivated by the consideration that, in order to gain a place in American society, Italian immigrants had to accept (at least in part) the American economic, social and cultural status quo. In accepting to replace certain Italian values with new ones, they added American elements to their Italianness, and at the same time they lost the Italian counterpart to the new values.

Such a quantitative approach to ethnic identity should not be considered only theoretical, as it has had important practical applications. In particular, it seems to have been adopted by the government of the United States in its attempts to focus the immigrants’ loyalty to their motherland on popular folklore rather than on political traditions that could threaten American institutions. Following World War I, in ethnic and multi-ethnic public commemorative events and celebrations organized by US authorities, “homage to the homeland as a political structure was largely eradicated and the old world was symbolized only in a narrow band of cuisine, dance and dress. [...] This highly selective view of the ethnic past [...] told of an inevitable and painless transformation of diverse folk cultures into a unified American culture” (Bodnar 1992: 41, 70-73).

It appears that in so doing the (largely Anglo-Saxon and Protestant) American authorities tried to translate into practice the famous melting pot model, which dates as far back as

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5 In a short film on New York’s Little Italy which was part of MTV’s Concert for New York City held in Madison Square Garden on October 20, 2001.
Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, first published in 1782. In order to foster the spontaneous integration (or cultural and ethnic melting) of immigrants into the American value system, celebrations such as “America’s making festival” were established, with the aim of creating a kind of epic public memory based on immigrants’ active participation in the creation of the new homeland. The purpose, however, was not only to accelerate what was thought to be the natural evolution of the American society into a homogeneous mix of heterogeneous components (the ‘melting pot’); rather, it was to gain control over the making and transformation of ethnic identities (Bodnar, *op.cit.*). The economic and political *status quo* would not tolerate foreign threats, and Italian immigrants were first of all implicitly required to discard some important political elements of their original identity, in particular, ideological traditions such as anarchism and socialism, which could lead to participation in workers’ organizations which could challenge the American liberal economy, and which should be replaced by acceptance of capitalism and its rules. Those unwilling to part from their ideological stance were readily condemned by public opinion and repressed by the authorities, especially during the so-called Big Red Scare. Secondly, loyalty to the Italian state as an institution had to be replaced by loyalty to the American nation as it was celebrated by national rhetoric (see among others Zinn 1984). In this respect, the creation of celebrations such as Columbus Day was instrumental to the creation of a public memory of the active participation of Italians in the making of America.

Such institutional efforts, however, never achieved a total Americanization of ethnic groups. In the field of cultural studies, the melting pot model has been challenged for over thirty years now (see for instance Steinberg 1981, Campbell and Kean 1997: 64-66). Several studies have provided

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6 Crèvecoeur (1904: 51) optimistically announced that “that race now called Americans have arisen” from a “promiscuous breed” of “English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” – the main immigrant groups in the USA at the end of the eighteenth century.

7 It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the episodes of discrimination (including lynchings, overreactions to strikes and unfair trials such as the famous Sacco and Vanzetti case) of which Italian-Americans, especially anarchists, communists or socialists, were victims. Accurate accounts can be found in Vecoli 1972, Avrich 1989, LaGumina 1999, Mangione and Morreale 1992, Michaud 2001, and Gerstle 2001.
evidence of the loyalty of ethnic minorities to their own ethnicity, showing that even over the
generations, American ethnics tend to identify more with their ‘otherness’ than with the American
society at large. A number of models have been provided as alternatives to the melting pot,
including the “mosaic” or “salad bowl” metaphors (Campbell and Kean 1997: 65), implying that the
American identity is a non-homogenous mix of ethnic ‘chunks’ which will not melt together, or the
hybridity model, which highlights the dialogical nature of ethnic tensions and draws on a concept
employed by Bakhtin (1990) with reference to the language of novels and used also to discuss
colonialism by Young (1995) and Bhabha (1990, 1994).

The practical side of anti-melting pot theories is the generalized ethnic revival which
emerged in the United States as early as the 1960s and 1970s (Vecoli 1987: 218). Such waves of
ethnic revival went hand in hand with an increase of the social and political awareness of ethnic
‘minorities’, leading to their ever more active participation in American public life. This
simultaneous increase of ethnic loyalties on the one hand and visibility and activism in the
framework of American lobbying and politics on the other hand clearly goes against the theory of
identity as a finite amount. In fact, in the case of ‘hyphenated’ identities (such as Italian-American
identity), both the ethnic and the American side of the hyphen tend to grow simultaneously in terms
of self-consciousness and visibility.

Another interesting aspect pointed out by the new theories on ethnic identity in the United
States is that the ethnic side of the hyphen does not necessarily correspond to the original national
identities taken to the New World by first-generation immigrants. Some studies go so far as to
describe ethnic identities in the USA as the result of invention processes (Conzen et al. 1990), in the
sense that ethnic groups must constantly negotiate or re-construct their collective identities in order
to cope with changing situations, and in so doing, they actively and consciously create original
constructions, based on the national identities they (or their ancestors) left in their original
motherland but also bearing major influences of the socio-cultural context of their new home (see
also the concept of ‘invented traditions’ in Hobsbawm 1983).
The concept of invented ethnicity or nationality is particularly relevant in the case of Italian-Americans. In fact, an Italian national identity was an unknown and inconceivable concept to the vast majority of the early immigrants. Even leaving aside the social, educational and political differences between the several waves of Italian immigrants to the US, one cannot ignore the fact that nominally ‘Italian’ immigrants were actually tied to separate regional identities, and brought to the New World several regional cultures, traditions, languages, experiences and memories, each of them dramatically different from the others. Such differences often resulted in hostility and antagonism within the Italian community, especially between northern and southern Italians. It was only after some time and shared experiences, such as the realization that other ethnic groups and the ‘Wasp’ mainstream society tended to show hostility towards all Italians, that a shared ‘Italian’ identity emerged among Italians in the US, encompassing even those immigrants who had never traveled out of their Italian regions before crossing the ocean, and had never attended school, which served as one of the main means of ‘Italianization’ in the period between the unification of Italy and the diffusion of the mass media (Viscusi 1993; Malpezzi and Clements 1992: 33-37). Italian-American identity as a container for all immigrants coming from Italy and their descent was therefore invented on American soil, as before coming to the United States Italian immigrants had never been aware of their alleged ‘Italianness’. The invention of Italian-American identity allowed the creation of an interest group that could negotiate its power relations with other groups and mainstream society. This was particularly necessary vis-à-vis the emergence of negative stereotypes about Italian-Americans.

Stereotyping (or categorizing) the Other is a natural cognitive process, as Lakoff (1987) would say. Similarly, shifting from the cognitive perspective to a cultural one, stereotyping is the result of the necessary conversion of Otherness into a known entity, without which any understanding and communication would be impossible:
one ought to remember that all cultures impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free-floating objects into units of knowledge. The problem is not that conversion takes place. It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving those other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be.

(Said 1979: 54)

The ‘natural’ process of stereotyping, however, was exacerbated by the further simplification imposed upon the image of Italian-Americans by the American media – a process which the Italian-American community was initially unable to counter, as the low English literacy rates and the generally poor financial conditions among the first immigrants prevented their access to media such as the press and the radio (and later, cinema and television), otherwise widespread in the mainstream society. The popular media, too, often driven by a commercial understanding of “the benefit of the receiver”, contributed to the transformation of the Italian culture into the mirror image of the stereotypes held by the American population.

Although today several studies optimistically highlight that negative or buffoonish/picturesque clichés such as the gangster or the restaurateur are now waning (see for instance Brunetta 2001), other analyses of American popular media (such as Mitrano and Mitrano 1996) reveal that the use of stereotypes in the portrayal of Italian-Americans is still substantial. The analysis carried out in the present study confirms the latter view: even when films like Big Night are labeled as ‘non-stereotypical’ depictions of Italian-American life, they still must rely on stereotypes, albeit positive, to convey the idea of Italian-Americanness. Before moving on to the presentation and analysis of the corpus, however, a brief description of the kind of stereotypes which will be discussed here must be provided.

1.1. Stereotypes and clichés: purpose of the study
A certain degree of vagueness and ambiguity seems to linger about the term ‘stereotype’; it is therefore necessary to specify how the term will be used in this study.

A first distinction should be drawn between what I term visible and invisible stereotypes. The same voices which are raised against the ‘stereotype’ of the Italian-American gangster or mafia boss can be heard praising Italian-American food or music as important elements of Italian-American identity, while they, too, are part of the crystallized image of Italian-American life portrayed by the media. It seems that the negative connotation usually attached to the term ‘stereotype’, taken to be a necessarily ungrounded prejudice, prevents Italian-Americans from realizing that recurrent media images about their community and identity should not be judged simply as ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’ on the grounds of their alleged truth or credibility. Any recurrent generalization, even if it is a reliable depiction of a given aspect of Italian-Americanness in a certain period, tends to apply to the whole ethnic group and remain rooted even after the conditions which justified it disappear, influencing the social perception of the community:

once a stereotype has emerged within a culture, it takes up a life of its own and influences social behavior in ways beyond that of the actions of any individual. At this time, stereotypes depend not so much on direct perception (and misperception) of the social environment as on the existing manifestations of those stereotypes in the behavior and language of the society.

(Stangor and Schaller, 1996: 25)

Thus, certain positive stereotypes may not be consciously seen as such until they become inconsistent with the self-perceived identity of the ethnic group they refer to. Moreover, the positive stereotypes conveyed by the media tend to be consciously or unconsciously adopted by the

8 “[...] A preconceived, standardized, and oversimplified impression of the characteristics which tipify a person, situation, etc., often shared by all members of a society or certain social groups; an attitude based on such a preconception. Also, a person or thing appearing to conform closely to such a standardized impression” (Brown, 1993: 3053). “[...] something repeated or reproduced without variation: something conforming to a fixed or general pattern and lacking individual distinguishing marks or qualities; esp: a standardized mental picture held in common by members of a group and representing an oversimplified opinion, affective attitude, or uncritical judgment (as of a person, a race, an issue, or an event)” (Babcock Gove et al., 1993: 2238).
stereotyped group, thus initiating a self-stereotyping process which deeply influences the
construction (or invention, see section 1.1) of ethnic identities. I therefore term the positive
stereotypes which are accepted by the stereotyped group ‘invisible stereotypes’, as the stereotyped
group usually tends to be unaware of their over-generalizing nature and to consider them as truths
about its own ethnicity, thus understanding them as models to comply with.

‘Visible’ stereotypes, on the other hand, are those ethnic or cultural traits that are recognized
as ‘untrue’ or ‘incorrect’ by the stereotyped group. They usually belong to the field of social stigma
or carry otherwise undesired connotations. Visible stereotypes may refer to a simplified description
of what is seen as a typical member of a given community: with reference to Italian-Americans,
instances of visible stereotypes are the mafia boss or gangster and all his acolyte figures (made
popular by the tradition of mafia films and, more recently, by the Sopranos series): the tough guy,
the wiseguy, the goomba (compare), etc. In order to distinguish this kind of ‘complex’ stereotype
from the individual stereotypical traits contributing to denote or stress its Italian-Americanness
(such as eating Italian food, listening to Italian music, showing Italian family values, etc), I will call
images such as the mafia boss, the barber, the restaurateur, the Latin lover or macho, etc. ‘clichés’
as opposed to ‘stereotypes’. Fictional works (novels, films, commercials etc) often resort to clichés
for ‘ready-made’, easily identifiable characters.

It must be made clear that the purpose of this study is not to describe clichés, but to analyze
the traits which convey the idea of Italian-Americanness, deconstructing the mediated image of
Italian-American identity. Following the principle that “all cultural forms can be analyzed ‘like a
language’” (Barker and Galasiński 2001: 2)\(^9\), the isolation of the smallest units of ethnic
representation is of paramount importance for the definition of ethnic or national identities, as it
leads to the identification of the constituents of a grammar of represented identity.

In this study, the focus will be on the representation of Italian-American identity in films. As
emerges from the accurate diachronic synopsis provided by Bondanella (1999), cinema has always

\(^9\) Barker and Galasiński refer to a concept first used by Barthes (1957, 1964).
been generous with stereotypes and clichés about Italian-Americans. Although in his synopsis Bondanella concludes that in the near future the figure of the Italian-American will disappear as a separate entity, and Italian-Americans will be only characterized as Americans, the analysis in chapter 3 will suggest that this future might not be as imminent as Bondanella expects.