Queer Encounters of the Italian Kind: An Interview with Filmmaker, Marie Martino

Mary Cappello (June 02, 2008)

The first in a series of conversations with (mostly but not exclusively) gay and lesbian writers, artists, filmmakers, and public intellectuals who have some link to Italian or Italian American life and letters. Today's feature: emerging filmmaker, Marie Martino.

Marie M. Martino is an emerging video maker and visual artist based in

Chicago. Martino received her M.F.A. from the University of Illinois at Chicago in the spring of 2007 and has recently shown work at such venues as the 2007 Estrojam Music and Culture Festival and The National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington D.C . Martino served on the Board of Directors for the non-profit, Women in the Director's Chair from 2002 through 2006, where she also held tenure as the organization's Acting Technical Coordinator and worked on the film festival programming committee. She is a second-generation, Italian-American who was raised in the near western suburbs of Chicago.

MC: I've had the pleasure of screening your two brilliant films, Strip and Foreign Bodies, and the first thing I want to ask you about is their formal complexity. It seems to me that your films really demand more than one viewing. They work by way of a raw power combined with a delicate assemblage—a kind of intricate collage-work made up of different genres of film (e.g., home movies, documentary, abstract footage) and with that, different versions or layers of "reality." In a way, your films are the opposite of lyrical: their power resides in their being raw, rough, and discordant. In Strip, for example, the literal act of your family ripping up (or "stripping") linoleum is played against a metaphoric version of yourself wanting to "strip" off layers of clothing at the same time that the sound and images work together violently to expose something. How do you understand the relationships your work is forging between these different registers or types of footage, and whom do you imagine as your audience in an age dominated by speed and sound-bytes?

MM: Oftentimes, during the holidays or whenever the family is gathered together, my father will play old home movies—some of it's in Super 8 and the rest are in various video formats that he, and subsequently, I, shot through the years. On one level, this family ritual of watching these old movies—covering everything from holidays, to familial events, to school plays, and even more mundane camera play--is a way for the family to bond, embrace youth, and remember "happier" past times. These movies definitely work in a way to document and maintain the family legacy, perhaps, though in a somewhat illusory way.

Seeing those movies now, as an adult, particularly as a queer woman, is totally eye-opening. Sure, there's the nostalgia and a sort of sweet sentiment present on the surface, but so much more is actually unfolding on screen. There's a rich and dynamic, fully-loaded narrative there that goes beyond, say, little Frankie's 6th birthday party, to which the time-based mediums of film/video really lend themselves. So, viewed outside the context of home movies, it is plain to see sex and gender issues being played out, the accidental "queerness" of family life, the evolution of identities, and the complexities of relationships that, when originally filmed, the person behind the camera did not necessarily intend to capture. Fascinated by what I saw, I began mining the family footage and inevitably introduced it into my work. Inspired by this, I wanted to go out and capture more footage, even more mundane.

Interestingly, I found myself in this really complicated position as subject, reader, and maker all at once. Assembling the various types of footage (documentary, home movie footage, performance, abstract) functioned as a strategy for getting this multi-faceted point of view across. The formal elements of STRIP and Foreign Bodies reflect this sort of schizophrenic, ever-shifting perspective. This work, STRIP, in particular, is purposefully raw and "messy," rather than slick and seamless. I juxtaposed sounds and images that showed how familial and romantic relationships worked (or failed to) with images of us stripping the floor. Stripping the floor was a violent, physical

process that eventually peeled away the layers, exposing the otherwise hidden foundation underneath. I think the images worked well together to express/suggest something else. In this piece, I want viewers to see the sutures, to feel the interruptions. The form reinforces the emotional feel as well as the themes of the piece.

So far, my main audience has been art gallery or film festival crowds. Though it would be quite easy to do and would make the work much more accessible, I don't think I am quite ready to "distribute" this kind of work online. It was not made with the intent to be seen in such a venue. Ideally, people will view it on a large screen and be engaged enough to spend some time with these pieces.

MC: Strip begins on a boldly queer note as we hear your female lover's voice addressing you: "you're sexy, you're so beautiful, I love you…" And we realize that you are doing this at a family gathering and all that that implies. As the film unfolds, it's not always clear whether you are filming yourself or if your lover is filming you. Does our knowing this matter? And how does the outside/in position of the lesbian in an Italian American family shape what you see or choose to document? I'm thinking of the fascinating way in which snippets of The L-Word are juxtaposed with the feet and legs of your parents as they discuss a Walmart purchase, or how the film is framed by your father asking you "What brings you here?" and your answering, "What generally brings me here?", and his replying, "I don't know." How does queerness subsist in this domicile?

MM: Ultimately, I see STRIP and Foreign Bodies as investigations of the closet and the multi-faceted space in and around it, in the home and extending out into the public or political sphere. My position as both insider/outsider offers me a privileged, albeit, skewed perspective. Consequently, it's a fragmented perspective. Home tends to be complicated place (and I'm sure this is true for most people in general). But in this home, that is, in the world where the videos' action takes place, queerness is sublimated. The domicile relegates queerness to the closet, but queerness cannot be so neatly contained. It seeps out. Actually, in some cases, it butts right up against, it inevitably collides head on with, what are representations of heteronormative values.

While the focus is on one family, it should not be viewed in isolation. There's clearly a bridge between the personal and political, private and public. In her book Authentic Ethnicities: The Interaction of Ideology, Gender Power, and Class in the Italian-American Experience, Patricia Boscia-Mule addresses the question of the alleged division between the private and public with regard to the family. In her chapter on familism, Boscia-Mule argues " . . . the ideology of the family is given, in its concrete enactment, a paradoxical nature: because this ethos, which proclaims the primacy of the family above any other concern, is in fact subjugated to the power of outside pressures, and to the authority of a socially sanctioned family image." The outside pressure to which she refers is part of a mass socio-political network, and holds sway over the family's value and belief system, say the Catholic church. That said, viewing the family solely within the realm of the private obfuscates it significance as a socio-cultural construction and its relationship to ethnicity, gender, class and other socio-political phenomenon. I'm hoping the work will be viewed within a larger socio-political context.

MC: Everyone is well aware of the stereotype that affiliates Italian-ness or Italian American-ness with eating. Would you agree that in Foreign Bodies you take the ethnic stereotype of a love of food and use it instead to produce a meditation on engorgement? I'm thinking of that powerful image in the

film of a throat constricting superimposed on the image of a fork twirling spaghetti. Here, the film enters a sci-fi-seeming realm. It's as though you are trying to show how the body is subject to these ethnic rituals at a molecular level. And the food, even its preparation, rather than encourage a feeling of appetite, is grotesque. I guess one could also say that the brilliant "mockumentary" moment toward the end of the film also dramatizes a particularly insidious use of food—the language lesson that you stage in which you are shown listening through a set of headphones to prompts in Italian which you then repeat back to the anonymous voice that instructs you. The questions begin innocently enough--"Why do you want to study Italian?" "How old are you?" "Do you want to go to the cinema?" until they morph into the telling, "Does anyone know?" "How did your family react?" "Do they pretend not to know?" "Do you talk about it?" "Can your partner come over for dinner?" "Is your partner allowed in your parent's home?" "Do they still love you?" Only to return again to questions that show food as a medium for denial, food rituals as forms of silencing: "Please pass the bread." "Have more spaghetti." Can you comment on this, and are there other experimental films that have served as models for you in using film to explore eating, silencing, and the body in this way?

MM: I was definitely interested in connecting food with being Italian in a different way. I have seen how neuroses can manifest themselves through behaviors in relation to food. Even growing up I noticed that I had relatives with strange or unhealthy obsessions/compulsions related to eating or the preparation of food. Though I didn't fully understand or have the verbiage for it then, intuitively, some things felt a little off . . .

Food is very much at the center of my own family life. In fact, it has been the most accessible way to connect to my Italian heritage. Because food is so central to Italian identity in general, I think it's worthwhile to consider our individual relationships to it, as well as how it is used socially.

I was interested in the ideas of interruption, alienation, and anomaly (ie queer) in Foreign Bodies, and considered food in this light within the realm of the psychological and how it can affect the physiological. Eating food seems like a great metaphor for process and what happens when something is wrong with that process and how it is manifested physically. How do we use food? As a drug? As a buffer of sorts? And sure, there's the idea of engorgement and perhaps, a crisis of containment, that is, holding things inside to the point of collapse. These images are clearly sublimations of some sort of latent desire.

MC: I feel the work of other filmmakers resonating in your images: most particularly, Roberta Torre's Tano da Morire (in the scene in Foreign Bodies where the child is doing a kind of godfather imitation); Ermanno Olmi's I Fidanzati (in the scene culled from a home movie of people in a dance hall); and Scorcese's film in which his parents figure so centrally, Italian American, in the amazing shot of your parents facing forward sitting on the couch in Strip. These are some of my favorite films in an Italian/ItalianAmerican lexicon, so maybe that's why I was "finding" resonances in your films, but does the work of any of these filmmakers speak to you? Or, what filmic traditions do you draw upon to make your work? Given the long and varied tradition of feminist experimental film work by women in the
US, whom do you find yourself in conversation with?

MM: To be honest, I haven’t seen most of those films you have mentioned . . . though I have seen other films by Scorcese. Even though I work primarily in video these days, I am drawn to a more cinematic aesthetic and appreciate the work of the many "classic" and contemporary filmmakers, as well as that of the avant-garde. I am definitely indebted to the work of new wave feminist video makers of the 90’s, particularly, Julie Zando, Sadie Benning, Elizabeth Subrin, and Jennifer Reeder. I’d have to say that the work of early feminist videomakers of the 70’s has definitely had an influence on the choice to use performance in the works.

MC: There is a lot of metonymic displacement and doubling in your films especially at the level of affect. On one hand, there is a relentless juxtaposition of the tonally upbeat (e.g., the music in the opening scene of Foreign Bodies) with something potentially melancholic (e.g., the home movie of you in a kind of drag as a child, or the vacuity of the carpeted steps, or of the kitsch in the family house you are documenting). On one hand, a girl's youthful enthusiasm making films of her family at Thanksgiving, and the sadness apparent in those people's postures, bodies, faces in the kitchen. At the same time, the sadness and the exuberance keep switching places, for example, later in Foreign Bodies, there is an image of yourself sitting on a couch while absently petting a dog, while the home movie footage from a dance hall suggests that something that made a great deal of sense to your family, and that was even a source of jouissance, remains inscrutable to you or outside of your reach, even as you are its product. To take one last example, you show yourself giving your father a camera as a gift when you were a child, but it is really you who are the family's filmmaker, photographer, and cinematographer. Could you discuss the tension between wanting your family to film themselves and your wanting to film them? Could you talk about the formal structure of your films' address of states of longing?

MM: Both tapes, for me, function as ruminations on unfulfilled desire and loss tied to this notion of family. When I watch those old home movies, they seem to reveal happier times. My parents are youthful and look very happy. My grandparents and other relatives are alive and well. Everyone seems to be having a good time. They made those films, not only because it was, you know, . . . fun, but it was also way of preserving the legacy of the family.

I know that's what my parents see when they look at these older films. But my response is complicated—it's both full of joy and sorrow. Prior to understanding my own queer desires, I did not really appreciate what I stood to lose until contemplating coming out of the closet for the first time. The fear of losing one's family is horrible enough, but then I realized I might also lose something bigger than my family—a connection to my ethnicity. I found my sense of self splitting in ways that I did not know could exist. So, there is definitely a desire to be able to access both my heritage and culture through my family.

So, when I look through the lens, thus distanced both by the medium itself and my current place in the family, my aim is to try to make sense of things as they really were/are somehow. I want to come closer to understanding our fears and hopes and loves and joys and why there isn't room for queerness in the home. Perhaps, having insider/outsider status lends itself to such ambivalence that is probably pretty apparent in the work in the formal sense. The schizo "narrative," oblique framing and layered shot compositions, the way images transition from one to the next, hopefully, all work to leave the viewer with a longing for a resolution that may never come.

MC: One of the most brilliant disquisitions on the family pet that I know is James Morrison's essay, that appears in his collection Broken Fever, entitled, "The Animal's Glance." The pet as mediator of

desire that dare not be otherwise expressed, as gender-bending familial conduit, as site of all sorts of projections and allowances for what can't be expressed between humans—and he pursues this analysis inside of a meditation on how gay members of hetero-normative families learn how to love and be loved (or not). The little dog that appears in Foreign Bodies really seems to be playing a kind of iconic role—the repository of affect inside of that domestic space? A figure more sympathetic than the human faces that your camera alights upon? What is your take on the "family pet"?

MM: This is such a great question . . .

The dog character in my work definitely functions in a few different ways and I love how people have actually taken the time to read his character in such a dynamic way.

One of the best comments I ever received at a formal critique of my work was that the dog was a "Yoda-like figure." He definitely seems to have an awareness and old wisdom about him that the human characters seem to lack. I think my favorite shot in STRIP is when my family is eating and talking at the kitchen table while I shoot them through a hallway, emphasizing the distance between them and me. The only "person" aware of my presence is the dog who looks directly at me in a "knowing" way.

He's the only member of the family that gets to be who he is. Pets are the "foreign bodies" in our families and yet they are usually the most visibly loved and unconditionally accepted. There's this notion of purity that we ascribe to animals and because of that they can be as queer as they are.

That said, the dog definitely works as a site for unexpressed/sublimated desires within the family. Remember the scene at the end of STRIP, when my father asks "What brings you here?" I answer "What normally brings me here?" and he responds, "I don't know . . . " Then he summons the dog, almost reflexively, by patting the couch. The dog wags his tail and we both half-laugh.

Finally, I think the dog provides some comic relief. Parts of STRIP and Foreign Bodies are so intense, but he arrives at moments just by being his real dog self. The scene where my parents are talking about prices of laundry detergent at Wal-Mart and the dog sleeps with his tongue falling out of his mouth always gets laughs.

MC: You once expressed unease to me about what you considered to be the "personal" aspect of your filmmaking and its relation to the "personal" dimensions of nonfiction writing. I don't think of your films as personal at all--they are so complexly crafted that the thing a viewer should be paying

attention to is the art, and I don't mean by this something like form divorced from content. Your work isn't confessional, or even narrative--so in that sense it's not simplistically "personal." You're taking on some heavy duty issues relative to identity, class, ethnicity, the family, the body, gender, performance, food--a whole host of things, and making an extraordinarily thoughtful statement about them. I think you are really onto something in your deft crafting of a great deal of material that otherwise goes unrecorded and unspoken, unseen. Can you offer a language for some of those silences, or would you prefer that people see your films and let a conversation arise from them?

MM: I agree that the work isn't necessarily "confessional," and I think that my initial statement was representative of where I was at in my process at the time. While the work may reveal some small details about my family life and its members, it is a construction that wrangles in and focuses on certain themes of family life. It does not in any way represent a family portrait or a complete picture of what my family is like.

I did have to emotionally distance myself from the images to be able to fashion them into something, so I created a rule that I would treat all of the footage like randomly found footage of someone else's family. This means I used images responsibly, but also in a way to fulfill the purpose of the work. This made it easier to make difficult choices in the editing room. The people in the work are characters in an experimental video. Post-manipulation, they cease to be who they really are (i.e. my family members). The videomaker's mark is all over the imagery, and, no one watching would ever contest that this claimed to be an objective investigation. Even though I used some documentary footage to construct the "narrative," it is clearly not a documentary video.

MC: The sound or silences in your films require as much attention from an audience as the images do. The interplay of ambient, extra-diagetic sound, and images makes me want to ask how you make the choices that you do? How do you decide when to use sound as a structuring device, or as an interruptive, or as a commentary?

MM: The use of sound is key to my practice as a moving image maker. It is used in combination with the images in such a way that it both reinforces (if not fully defines) and, often, disrupts the nature of the space. My soundtracks are very layered and their elements are precisely controlled. Diegetic sound is used in scenes with relevant dialogue, but much non-diegetic sound is used as well to suggest a psychological space and/or employ a counterpoint to the image. My only self-imposed rule for sound is to be open to what could work. That said, my strategy is usually specific to the piece at hand.

For example, in STRIP, the sound of birds twittering, almost obnoxiously, is repeatedly used in combination with images associated with my parents and their house. This sound is most noticeably exploited in the portrait image of my parents; tactically, it shifts from being ambient sound in previous scenes to one that expresses an emotional state in the portrait scene. In some instances, sound is key to the unfolding of the story, namely in STRIP during the scene in which I take off the costumes, the ones my parents wore in their dance number. As I struggle to undress, the audience hears a static-y telephone message from my ex-girlfriend that implies that there was a break up, a circumstance that the audience is unaware of until that point of revelation.

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C: Could you clarify for me: are both of these films videos?, because I have to say they have a grainy, even in some cases super 8 or 16 mm film feel to me (I don't mean, of course, only to imply the home movie footage). How do you achieve those film textures with your video camera?

MM: They are both videos, excluding the footage that was transferred from 8mm. Some of the effects are merely artifacts of the process of physical degeneration--loss of resolution, static. Some effects are purposefully generated while editing.

MC: What are you working on now? Where do you want your filmmaking to take you next?

MM: Well, I've been moving away from this kind of work for now . . .

I am currently working on another experimental video that focuses on the instrumentalization of vision and the ramifications on our ability to see (or fail to see). I am particularly interested in how that is manifested through the slippery images generated by war technology and popular culture, among other things. The working title is Head Toward the Light. It was inspired by reading Paul Virilio's The Vision Machine.

I am also going to be making a short video doc on a
Chicago artist by the name of Finess Mays. He constructs these complex, 2-D images with cracked mirrors.

Lastly, I started writing a screenplay which I am hoping to finish by the end of summer. It's a feature-length narrative. I don't normally work in this vein, so it's going to be a huge challenge, but I expect to learn a lot!

MC: Since my IADP Blog tag is "Cicchetti," I'd like to close by asking you: what do you do when all that mainstream culture has to offer (I mean, the main meal) fails to satisfy? What's your favorite

snack?

MM: Unplanned naps and honey-flavored lip balm.

Links
[1] http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/cinema1212381655jpg