

## *Colloquium*



# COMPOSITE IDENTITIES

Percorsi tra cinema, teatro, letteratura,  
musica, scienze sociali e politiche

A cura di Anna Maria Chierici e Fulvio Orsitto

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*In copertina:*

Marsha Steinberg, *Open Space* (olio su tela, cm 225 × 170), 1975.

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# Delbert Mann's *Marty*: Notes on Italian American Identity

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The first scene of *Marty*, while the opening credits are shown, frames in a static shot a glimpse of a street of an indeterminate American city, busy with cars. Where are we? Then, in the central part of the frame we see a billboard advertising a famous beer from New York City. The non-diegetic music that we hear<sup>1</sup> is the classic score for a comedy, with some melodramatic nuances. Cut. The next shot is on the street, and the camera moves into a butcher truck where a man (later identified as Sam) is bringing a piece of meat inside the butcher shop managed by our leading character, Marty Piletti, an ordinary working-class Italian American man.

This first establishing shot is crucial to set the entire tone of the movie. No music this time, only noises and sonic elements from the streetcars passing by, a few car horns – an ordinary scene from a working-class neighborhood somewhere in New York<sup>2</sup>. We see what seems to be the main challenge of the movie: how to get married. Marty is involved in a conversation with a gossipy woman, an Italian American customer much more interested in Marty's brother's wedding (even though she mixes up the brothers twice) than in what meat to buy. Marty gives her a full report of his family's wedding situation: he has indeed five siblings, three sisters and two brothers, all married. In the background we can see large advertisements for pork tenderloin and stewing beef. Everything suggests a very earthy situation. Finally, while she is paying for her meat, the woman asks what she really wants to know: «When are you going to get married, Marty?» – a refrain that poor Marty will be hearing over and over throughout the whole story.

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<sup>1</sup> The score is by Roy Webb, a famous composer of many RKO movies, especially for Noir and Horror films.

<sup>2</sup> Later we will find out that we are in the Bronx. Marty's house is specifically on Webster Ave. while one of his brothers lives on Webb Ave.

Interestingly enough for the change that the media landscape was experiencing exactly during those years<sup>3</sup>, *Marty* is based on Paddy Chayefsky's one-shot television drama (NBC-TV) of the same name. *Marty* was produced by an independent company (Hecht-Lancaster) and distributed by United Artists<sup>4</sup>. First broadcast in May 1953, it was recognized as a powerful yet ordinary<sup>5</sup> love story that broke new ground and received unanimous excellent responses. The attention and reception were such that it became one of the first television plays to be acquired for adaptation into film. Delbert Mann, who directed the teleplay, was also asked to direct the film. His style, especially his static camera, brought the viewer into intimate contact with the actors, a simple and effective technique that would become Mann's signature.

He certainly didn't expect the movie to change his life. But at its release on April 11, 1955, less than two years after the TV play, the public and critical acclaim was just as enthusiastic as before. *Marty* would go on then to win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and the Academy Award for Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director: an astonishing achievement. For a first-time movie director, that was unbelievable and extraordinary. It was also the first original television drama made into a film that won the Academy Award. Ernest Borgnine, who was not in the TV play<sup>6</sup> and was cast here against type<sup>7</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> In those years a great challenge to Hollywood came from the relatively new medium of television. Although the technology had been developed in the late 1920s, through much of the 1940s only a fairly small, wealthy audience had access to it. As a result, programming had been limited. With the post-World War II economic boom, however, all this changed. By 1955, the same year *Marty* was released, half of all American homes had a television. Various types of programs were broadcast on a handful of major networks: situation comedies, variety programs, game shows, soap operas, talk shows, medical dramas, adventure series, cartoons, and police procedurals. Many comedies presented an idealized image of white suburban family life: happy housewife mothers, wise fathers, and disobedient children were constants on shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* in the late 1950s. These shows also reinforced certain perspectives on the values of individualism and family – values that came to be redefined as 'American' in opposition to alleged Communist collectivism. This is exactly the context within which *Marty* is released. See Briggs, Burke 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See Smith 2004, in particular pp. 242-260.

<sup>5</sup> Or it would be better to say, as we will try to argue, this story is magnificent *because of* the fact that is about ordinary people.

<sup>6</sup> Rod Steiger was the leading actor in the teleplay and the reason the production did not ask him to be in the movie was simple: who would have gone to see the movie with the same actors of the teleplay? The role for the leading female character also changed, from Nancy Marchand to Betsy Blair.

<sup>7</sup> Borgnine made his first memorable impression in films in *From Here to Eternity* (directed in 1953 by Fred Zinnemann) as 'Fatso' Judson, the sadistic sergeant who beats Frank Sinatra's character, Private Maggio, to death. From one Italian American to another, we could say... Sinatra won the Academy Award for that movie, and Borgnine won the same award for *Marty*. Chayefsky and Mann saw something beyond brutality in Borgnine, and after *Marty*, the Italian American actor was offered more diverse roles. Over a career that lasted more than six decades, however, Borgnine was never able to escape typecasting completely. Although he did another Chayefsky screenplay, starring with Bette Davis as a working-class father of

took home the top honor over fellow Best Actor nominees Frank Sinatra, James Dean, James Cagney, and Spencer Tracy. Some of Hollywood's legendary directors, including Elia Kazan, watched (probably in awe) as the Best Director award went to Mann – a demonstration that story, performance, and direction always count. Word-of-mouth enthusiasm about the film then grew for several decades<sup>8</sup>. Neither color nor new projection and sound techniques could make *Marty* any better than it is. Although filmed on a modest budget, there is no evidence of anything being spared in production values. The film is indeed concerned with an Italian American family, yet the theme is universal, and many viewers may experience a degree of identification with the story. It's a quiet, simple movie that conveys a warm, human, sometimes sentimental experience, and, more important for our perspective, it also finally depicts an Italian American character in a radical different way.

In the 1930s and 1940s, but in fact even later, the fascination of Americans with the mafia in the representation of Italian Americans in movies was not simply the search for the thrill of violence, but the idea of order as one has it in a family (*l'ordine della famiglia*), seen as a group capable of protecting its members. This might be one of the reasons why, in a confused and uncertain society in which most people feel helpless and defeated, the mafia genre continued to exert charm on a community in search of new values<sup>9</sup>. And Italian American family values are at stake also here in *Marty*, even though

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the bride in *The Catered Affair* (Richard Brooks, 1956), and even appeared in a musical, *The Best Things in Life Are Free* (Michael Curtiz, 1956), playing a Broadway showman, the vast majority of the characters he played were villains. One of his best known was as Lee Marvin's commanding officer in *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967), about hardened prisoners on a World War II commando mission. But he worked in virtually every genre. Filmmakers cast him as a gangster, even in satirical movies like *Spike of Bensonhurst* (Paul Morrissey, 1988). He was in Westerns like Sam Peckinpah's blood-soaked classic *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and crime dramas like *Bad Day at Black Rock* (John Sturges, 1955). He played gruff police officers, like his character in the disaster blockbuster *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), and bosses from hell, as in the horror movie *Willard* (Daniel Mann, 1971). He even twice played a manager of gladiators: in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (Delmer Daves, 1954), and in the 1984 TV miniseries *The Last Days of Pompeii*. As for his Italian heritage, Borgnine as a boy spent several years of his childhood in Italy, where his mother returned during a long separation from her husband. But they eventually returned to Connecticut, and he graduated from high school there.

<sup>8</sup> The meetings at the bar, the stag-attended dances, the sad discussions about dating girls and the question «What do you feel like doing tonight?»: for all these reasons *Marty* became immediately popular. In 1994, *Marty* was selected for preservation in the Library of Congress' National Film Registry, and in between it also won several major Catholic awards, citations from Jewish Human rights groups, the General Federation of Women's Club, and so on.

<sup>9</sup> See Gambino 1974. *L'ordine della famiglia* for Gambino identifies an «unwritten but all-demanding and complex system of rules governing one's relations within, and responsibilities to, his own family, and his posture toward those outside the family. All other social institutions were seen within a spectrum of attitudes ranging from indifference to scorn and contempt» (Gambino 1974, pp. 3-4).

in a way that is completely different from the gangster movies one watched and read about in the previous pages of the present volume. «Marty's family, hard-working, patriotic and decent, has had nothing to do with gangsters or revolution. They are the type of people who have made this country, for whom Hollywood attention was long overdue» (Wolf, Grau 2014, p. 307)<sup>10</sup>.

The sociological implications of *Marty* are also related to the historical period and Chayefsky's background. The writer and the producing team of *Marty* were connected with the postwar Hollywood left, and when Chayefsky met producers Harold Hecht and Burt Lancaster, they were active supporters of the Hollywood Ten. At that time Hollywood felt the anxiety of Cold War fears, to say the least<sup>11</sup>. The House Un-American Activities Committee hearings targeted suspected Communists in Hollywood and when Senator Joseph McCarthy called eleven «unfriendly witnesses» to testify before Congress about Communism in the film industry in October 1947, only playwright Bertolt Brecht answered questions. Eventually, more than three hundred actors, screenwriters, directors, musicians, and other entertainment professionals were placed on the industry blacklist<sup>12</sup>, including the co-protagonist of *Marty*, Betsy Blair. Some never worked in Hollywood again; others directed films or wrote screenplays under assumed names. Chayefsky was part of this environment: «Acquaintances from that time remember Chayefsky in heated political discussions, critical of the left but from a position of shared concern about left-wing issues» (Smith 2004, p. 261).

Back to our first scene. Marty's first customer goes on: «What's the matter with you? You should be ashamed of yourself», and so does his second one, both Italian American women. And on and on, we would imagine. Marty behaves like a gentleman, bites his tongue, and does not react. At least not until he meets up with his best friend, Angie, and his other mates in their favorite men's bar, where everyone looks like a late teenager. Only two subjects dominate their conversation: sports and girls. Marty grabs a couple of beers for Angie and himself, sits in their favorite booth, and, after a familiarly boring interaction, they seem to face another lonely Saturday night: «What do you feel like doing tonight?» they ask each other. Angie would like to try something new and insists that Marty calls a girl, «That big girl we picked up»

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<sup>10</sup> The quote merges two extracts from two reviews of *Marty* from «Time» and «Hollywood Daily Reporter».

<sup>11</sup> Along with the consequences of the Korean War (1950-1953), a seminal event in the Cold War conflict that has been removed and forgotten by the American perception. While the original purpose of the war was the political reunification of North and South Korea, the growing ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union dominated the conflict from the start and ensured that its effects would be felt far beyond the Korean peninsula. See Cumings 2011. Marty served in the Army for some time between WWII and the Korean War.

<sup>12</sup> See Barranger 2008.

at the movies a month earlier, with another lady friend; «I'll take the skinny one», he adds<sup>13</sup>. Marty feels overwhelmed and says, quite enraged:

Listen, Angie: I've been looking for a girl every Saturday night of my life. I'm 34 years old and I'm just tired of looking, that's all. I'd like to find a girl. Everybody's always telling me: 'Get married, get married.' Don't you think I want to get married? I wanna get married. Everybody drives me crazy! I don't wanna wreck your Saturday night, you wanna go somewhere, you go ahead. I don't wanna go.

Angie calmly replies that he has the same situation with his mother, always asking when he is going to get married. Poor Marty and Angie! Saturday after Saturday, night after night, «the ineffable loneliness of the two young men crying out from under the seeming inanity of their talk» (Wadsworth 1955, p. 117) continues.

On the other hand, we might ask trying to be in his shoes: what can an unattractive Italian American New York butcher like Marty hope for? When he goes back home, or rather, when his mother summons him to go home, a very interesting and important subplot has developed. While Marty was at the bar with Angie, in fact, we learn that Marty lives with his mother, Theresa (Mrs. Piletti), in a big house and that Mrs. Piletti has a sister, Catherine (or Caterina, as Theresa calls her in Italian), who lives with Marty's cousin Tommy, his wife, Virginia, and their son. Theresa and Catherine are Italian immigrants who still can speak their native language, are both widows, and have a stereotypical obsession with their sons. And there are problems between Catherine and her daughter-in-law. The young couple is complaining with Marty's mother about aunt Catherine's interferences, asking Mrs. Piletti to agree to the sister moving in with her and Marty. She agrees almost immediately, acknowledging that Catherine can be problematic, but first they need to ask Marty. Marty agrees; he really doesn't care about the whole situation that much. After he agrees to take care of his aunt, all Marty wants to do instead

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<sup>13</sup> There is an obsession in the script and the movie regarding physical appearances and perception that tells us a lot in terms of what type of stereotypical idea of a woman American, and Western society in general, was developing in those years. «Playboy» was founded, in fact, in 1953, and there is one scene in *Marty* where one of his buddies is 'reading' an issue of «TV Girls and Gags» with a blonde girl in her bikini on the cover. «I wonder where they find those girls», one of them asks, while at the same time, Marty is nervous because his mother could come back home any minute and find them with that magazine. What is worse, they undermine Clara for her looks. First Angie asks if they made out the prior night, and then when he finds out they *just* talked he gets mad and jealous again and says: «She must be some talker. She must've been about 50 years old». Another pal comments: «You don't want to hang around with dogs. Gives you a bad reputation». Let's also not forget that the first scene of jealousy from Angie happens the night before when he runs into Marty and Clara. They all look like teenagers anyway and act very immaturity. Marty himself, feeling the pressure of his peers, and the pressure from his own mother, comments in a very mean and disrespectful way: «I told this dog I'd call her up today about 2:30».

is talk business with his cousin Tommy, «the accountant in the family». Marty wants to buy the butcher shop where he has been working for years. Is that a good idea? Is it too risky? He asks about down payment and how he wants to deal with it, but Tommy doesn't have time to discuss it. Virginia seems to be in complete charge of his schedule. Tommy offers to talk to him the next day, just after the Sunday mass, that we discover is an important moment for these Italian American families. Family, religion and gender relations have always played a key role in Italian American cinema and *Marty* is no exception.

Marty is a little worried because his boss wants an answer by Monday, but Tommy, even though Marty (and Mrs. Piletti, his aunt) just solved a big problem for him and his family, doesn't reciprocate the favor and postpones giving his expert advice. Advice that Tommy won't be able to provide calmly and professionally, or at least in a friendly way, the next day when he and Virginia take Catherine to Marty's house, because Tommy perceives himself as a disloyal son who is abandoning his poor mother. He experiences a welter of emotions and storms at Marty: «What do you want to buy a shop for, will you tell me? You got a good job, no wife, no responsibilities! I wish I was you, boy!». Marty tries to make the point that he specializes in selling «Italian meat» but Tommy replies angrily, again at his wife more than at Marty: «Who buys Italian meat anymore? Do you think my wife buys Italian meat?». It would be interesting to analyze this commercial aspect, but here the point is again all about family relations. In fact, Tommy interrupts the conversation, begging Marty: «Will you see that my mother is comfortable?». Family here is perceived by Tommy as a constraint and also as an ineludible obligation. He cannot understand Marty's dream because he is feeling overwhelmed and guilty for what he is doing to his mother and not able to confront his wife as he wished. The power of gender relations here is central.

Let's go back to where we were the day before – our crucial Saturday night. After Tommy and Virginia leave, Marty shuts the doors of the living room and calls the girl he discussed with Angie before. Why did he change his mind so quickly? He clearly feels lonely. The scene is extremely emotional. The girl doesn't remember Marty at first and Marty has to remind her the whole evening they spent together with Angie and her other girlfriend. It was a casual evening, a movie and then burgers, a month earlier. Finally, she remembers Marty – or she pretends to remember him, we cannot be sure. Marty asks her out for the night – it is Saturday night, after all – but she is caught off-guard, or maybe she is already genuinely busy, who knows. In any case, she says no, thanks. The camera moves in and now we have a close-up of Marty's face. This a very standard technique of framing a single character to convey isolation. All our attention and focus are indeed only with Marty and even the phone call is all from his point of view, we never see or hear anything from the young lady. Marty has his eyes closed now while trying to invite her out for next Saturday or the Saturday after that. She refuses. Marty, always polite even though desperate and hopeless, says: «Oh, I mean, I understand that...» with a crack



in his voice, and the phone call ends. The camera backs away from Marty's face, he opens his sad eyes, and sad music fills in. Cut to the kitchen. Finally, we see Marty enjoying his time eating a big dinner served by his mother. But Mrs. Piletti asks *the* question of the day: «So, what are you gonna do tonight, Marty?» exactly at the same time Marty is putting a big spread of parmesan cheese on his pasta. Poor Marty; nobody wants to leave him alone.

The influence of Italian Neorealism on American social cinema was understandably huge in the 1950s, and Chayefsky's and Mann's admiration for Vittorio De Sica, Cesare Zavattini and Roberto Rossellini is undeniable. A few movies come to mind that were probably of some importance for *Marty*: *Umberto D.* (1952) by De Sica, where the story follows a retired old man as he struggles to survive during Italy's postwar slow economic recovery; and *L'amore* (1948), in which Rossellini directs Anna Magnani<sup>14</sup> in two short films about love and loneliness. The submissive realism of characters and events that give them the immediacy of ordinary and day-to-day existence is central in Neorealism and in *Marty* as well, even though there are obvious differences. They reveal the ordinary with loving attention to the little things of life, with simple and linear narratives. Mann's static camera gives value to the common dialogue that matches the ordinary actions and problems of life<sup>15</sup>, while at the same time deep and moving emotions.

The same Saturday night, pushed by his mother to go out to the Stardust Ballroom (the place is «loaded with tomatoes»<sup>16</sup>, according to Marty's cousin Tommy, who suggested it to his aunt before), Marty finally meets a potential match, Clara (a marvelous Betsy Blair<sup>17</sup>). They connect thank to Marty's com-

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<sup>14</sup> In the same year as *Marty*, Anna Magnani won the Academy Award for Best Actress for *The Rose Tattoo*.

<sup>15</sup> If we consider the five movies that won Best Picture at the Academy Awards before *Marty* we would discover that we would have only one movie deeply interested in the social-economic reality of those times and that therefore has strong connections with *Marty*: *The Waterfront* (1954) by Elia Kazan, with Marlon Brando, on corruption on the waterfronts of a town in New Jersey. The other four are two over-the-top dramas: *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950), about a highly regarded but aging Broadway star; the aforementioned *From Here to Eternity* (on the sufferings of three U.S. Army soldiers); one musical like *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951), with wonderful dance numbers choreographed by Gene Kelly and set to George Gershwin's music; and one huge project shot in Technicolor, and released by Paramount Pictures, *The Greatest Show on Earth* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1952), set at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

<sup>16</sup> That is a derogative old-fashioned way to describe young ladies. Later another Marty's friend defines a lady an «odd squirrel».

<sup>17</sup> At the time, Blair, married to Gene Kelly, was having problems due to her Marxist sympathies. She wanted this job badly and it was only through the lobbying of her husband, who used his major star status and connections to pressure United Artists, that Blair got the role. She was a great performer almost completely blacklisted from Hollywood also for her progressive causes, working on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Independent Progressive Party.

passion for her, he dries her tears<sup>18</sup>, and the pair of lonely hearts feel they have something in common almost immediately. They laugh and spend a beautiful time together and when Marty goes back home, after escorting her to her house in Brooklyn, he is as happy as a lovebird. During the many hours spent together they open their hearts and tell each other their problems, their aspirations, their past events that were very important. This way we get to know that Marty as a student, even though not brilliant, liked difficult subjects (German, math). His father unfortunately died of heart attack when he was only 18 years old. After he served in the Army, at 25 years old he went back home, feeling lost and not knowing what to do next. His brother Freddie decided to get married and Marty was stuck home with his mother and three unmarried sisters: «In an Italian house that's a terrible thing», he says. Clara is listening sympathetically and almost smiles at this last statement, but Marty goes on: «So I just went to pieces. My poor mother used to be so worried about me».

He also had suicidal thoughts (like the main character in *Umberto D.*). He couldn't take advantage of the GI Bill and never went to college because he felt obligations to help his mother and family. So he started working as a butcher, and he is very self-conscious about his job, not «an elegant profession». And what is even more important, «It's in a lower social scale». Years flew by as they always do and now Marty is stuck with his mother and feels he will never get married. He is very sensitive<sup>19</sup>, «completely negates the stereotypical macho, Latin Lover image of the Italian American male» (Bondanella 2004, p. 43), and he is not afraid to open his heart to Clara. Clara, on the other hand, is not Italian; she is apparently an only child, graduated from New York University and has a fine career opportunity ahead of her. But she is not Italian, and this is a big problem for Mrs. Piletti. Or is that just an excuse?

With Esther Minciotti as Marty's mother<sup>20</sup> who first urges marriage and the opposes it, and Augusta Ciolli as his aunt who is the unwanted mother-in-law in her son's household, Mann has chosen a pair of Italian American character actors who infuse realism, with inevitable stereotypical elements, into their roles<sup>21</sup>. Minciotti and Ciolli were both in the movie and in the teleplay. Same thing for Joe Mantell, as Angie, Marty's supposed best friend, who undermines Carla to protect his own looming loneliness, contributing another wonderful role to the drama, not to mention his latent homosexual feelings toward Marty. «Why were you impolite last night, Angie?», Marty asks his

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<sup>18</sup> Clara is in fact 'dumped' during her date in a very disrespectful way. Marty witnesses the scene and tries to be nice to her.

<sup>19</sup> When Marty is having dinner with his mother before going out the Saturday night, he shares with her all his pain and inferiority complex: «Whatever it is that women like, I ain't got it. I went to enough dances, I got hurt enough».

<sup>20</sup> For further investigation about Italian and Italian American mothers, and their stereotypical representations, see Morris, Willson 2018.

<sup>21</sup> In a very similar fashion, the character of Serafina Delle Rose (Anna Magnani) in *The Rose Tattoo* is built.



friend on his attempted way to call Carla on Sunday as he promised her. «You got me mad, that's why», Angie replies, after eating from the same plate as Marty, a clear sign of familiarity and affection. Angie was offended because after the dancehall he looked for Marty everywhere, and Marty preferred to spend time with Clara instead. Angie is clearly jealous. And later he adds, angrily: «Do you want to come with me tonight or with that dog?». Frank Sutton, Walter Kelley, and Robin Morse are also excellent as neighborhood pals who talk about sports, girls, and even Mickey Spillane<sup>22</sup>, but are unlikely prospects for dates. Jerry Paris (Tommy) and Karen Steele (Virginia) score as an arguing<sup>23</sup> husband-and-wife faced with a mother-in-law problem.

Clara is a working-class schoolteacher and, unlike Marty<sup>24</sup>, she is not filmed at work but instead, the night she meets Marty she talks about her job and her passion and aspirations to become a department chair. She is definitely a sensible young lady yet at the same time a modern woman not afraid to challenge from the first moment Marty's mother's authority. Mrs. Piletti is confiding with Clara about her sister feeling useless and unwanted since she cannot assist her son anymore, or at least not in the way she would like to. «What's a mother's life but her children?» she asks Clara, rhetorically. «A mother should not depend upon her children for her rewards in life», Clara replies to a stunned Mrs. Piletti on their first and only encounter. And talking about the situation with Tommy, Virginia and Catherine, Clara also comments: «As a rule, I don't think a mother-in-law should live with a young couple». This is similar comment to one Mrs. Piletti made to her sister when she was trying to convince her to come live with her and Marty. But now Mrs. Piletti is very annoyed and the next day, just before Sunday Mass, she tells Marty that college girls are only one step away from hookers and insists he not bring Clara home again, because she is not Italian. Those are indeed extraordinary comments, brave, modern and ahead of their time. Clara contests Mrs. Piletti's values and the mores this Italian American woman has tried to pass along to her son. The destiny that her sister Catherine foresaw for her – to be abandoned by her son once he gets married – might happen soon. Clara is also sensitive, respectful, shy and sweet. No wonder Betsy Blair fought hard to play this role.

The modernity of this discourse is strongly connected with the general modern sexual approach of the movie. Latent homosexuality pervades the film: Marty prefers to spend time with his friends and fears engaging in heterosexuality intimacy, fearing as well to challenge the attractions of male companionship. Chayefsky is interested in showing the «latent homosexuality in the 'normal' American male» (Wolf, Grau 2014, p. 306). He also stated, «The

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<sup>22</sup> In particular, they talk about Spillane's character Mike Hammer, a cynical misanthrope, and his way of treating women as an example to imitate.

<sup>23</sup> When we get to know them and Virginia is telling Theresa about their problems with Catherine, when she states that she doesn't have any privacy with Tommy, she says, in a very defining statement: «We can't even have a fight!».

<sup>24</sup> Or Susan, in the aforementioned *From This Day Forward*.

man who proclaims how virile he is could very well be a man who is so unsure of his virility that he needs to re-establish it over and over again» (Wolf, Grau 2014, p. 307)<sup>25</sup>. The movie gives ordinary people access to a sort of democratic sexuality, romance and love, while offering, as we hope to have demonstrated, among a few other movies of the same period, a different representation «that countered the more stereotypical portraits offered in prior films» (Cavallero 2011, p. 43)<sup>26</sup>: sweet and lonely Borgnine<sup>27</sup> can therefore meet a «deglamorized» (Wolf, Grau 2014, p. 308) Betsy Blair. This is the power of common people.

The transformation of motivation for Marty here is crucial. He is finally able at the very end of the movie to cast aside the family values and moral issues as well as the peer pressure for the dream of a new life: he wants to be successful in his job and start a new family with Clara. Marty is telling us and demonstrating to himself that the values of the postwar middle class can be countered by familial interests and camaraderie with the friends he grew up with. Marty and Clara show themselves and their world that working-class reciprocity and true love are really possible, even though the marriage can, or has to, create a separation from the social and economic relationships they had growing up. «I used to think about leaving home. We're afraid to go out on our own. It's a big step to go out on your own», says Marty, foreshadowing his choice at the end of the movie, exactly because that could mean cutting his bond with his social, economic and cultural background. Thanks to his conversation with Clara, Marty finally understands that he needs his mother and his friends more than they need him.

«Marty's democratic romance may have seemed to challenge» many aspects of the conventional love story and «the normative presumptions of middle-class superiority» (Wolf, Grau 2014, p. 309). Here we have two people that in just one night are starting to support each other in their tough professional and personal choices. That Saturday night, Clara says to Marty, encouraging him to buy the butcher shop: «I've known you for three hours, but I know you're a good butcher». They understand and respect each other: «You're an intelligent, decent, sensitive man», comments Clara. And she makes a sweet comparison between Marty and her students: «If you were one of my students, I'd say go ahead and buy the butcher shop. Anything you want to do you'll do well».

Marty, on the other hand, supports Clara and tries to convince her that a career opportunity as Department Head in the New York system, «especially in the science courses», even though the job is a little far from Brooklyn (it's in Port Chester), is something not to be missed, especially if her biggest worry is

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<sup>25</sup> See also Wadsworth 1955, pp. 109-124.

<sup>26</sup> See also Bondanella 2004, pp. 43-46.

<sup>27</sup> Again, let's not forget that Borgnine was famous for his interpretation of the sadistic character of staff sergeant 'Fatso' Judson just two years before.

just moving out of her house and not helping her parents anymore. For Marty, the situation is clear: «We're just afraid to go out on our own». «I'm afraid of being lonely», says Clara, and that message of course resonates in Marty. He also offers to go to Port Chester and visit her, or call her anytime she feels «blue». Marty is offering her his pure, unconditional friendship: an act of extraordinary intimacy. When finally, and almost abruptly, Marty calls Clara after a day of thinking about whether he should, everything becomes clear in his head. First, he vents against his buddies, when he hears all around him the old refrain («What do you feel like doing tonight?»). Then he exclaims: «Miserable, lonely and stupid! What am I, crazy or some? I got something good here! Why am I hanging around with you guys? You [to Angie] don't like her, my mother don't like her. She's a dog and I'm a fat, ugly man! All I know is that I had a good time last night!». And so, in a moment of heroism, the last scene is an excited and emotional Marty calling Clara: «Hello, Clara?». *Marty*, as we see, is not a classic romance, not at all, but a much more interesting love story situated within a particular social context. The film is extraordinary because it is about ordinary and lonely people defined by social rather than individual circumstances. It's an unconventional love story where the journey of falling in love with somebody is not that important; what really matters is to understand and focus on the challenges of romance and marriage in spite of everyday social and economic restraints and also family adversities<sup>28</sup>.

If historically Italian Americans have assimilated<sup>29</sup> into American culture mainstream better than other ethnic groups<sup>30</sup>, Marty is able to do that by believing in the American dream (hard work and education can result in progress and improvement in life) but only provided that he has to tear apart two stereotypes of Italian traditionalism: unconditional love for family, and loyalty<sup>31</sup> to friends. During their night together strolling in the streets of New York, Marty never asks Clara if she is Italian: he only inquires whether she is Catholic! After tormenting himself for the whole Sunday, because his possible choice of dating Clara is not approved of nor encouraged by neither his family, here completely embodied by his mother (Marty doesn't ask for advice to any of his numerous siblings) nor by his peers, Marty finally chooses Clara over both his lethargic pals and his traditional Italian mother. Both mother and

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<sup>28</sup> See also Wolf, Grau 2014. Other movies that anticipate or follow this pattern are, for example, *From This Day Forward* (John Berry, 1946) or later *Nothing But a Man* (Michael Roemer, 1964). Making these stories was a project by progressive writers and directors who were not part of the studio system.

<sup>29</sup> Regarding the concept of assimilation, see Jiménez 2017.

<sup>30</sup> See Bondanella 2004, p. 11, and also Connell, Pugliese 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Moreover, «Particularly important was the idea of loyalty – of loyalty to the family, loyalty to one's hometown or *paese* in Italy, and loyalty to one's neighborhood in America. Loyalty [...] was often a hindrance to assimilation» (Connell, Pugliese 2018, p. 1).

Angie, and the other friends as well, are scared of being lonely<sup>32</sup>. Along with that phone call, Marty seems willing to try starting a new life with a conflict of loyalty, embracing new values and challenging, if not betraying, his own culture and beliefs: maybe for Marty *this is* the beginning of his American dream.

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<sup>32</sup> Being lonely, without her son, as aunt Catherine foresaw, is probably the real reason Mrs. Piletti doesn't like Clara, and not the fact that she is not Italian. For Angie is the same since Clara is a solid reason for Marty to start a new life without him. «If we have enough good times together, I'm gonna get down my knees and I'll beg her to marry me!» Marty tells Angie in the end, and the fear of being left alone pushes Angie to dislike her. The fact that she might not be attractive enough is not his real reason to undermine her.