

Cinema and Religion Meet at NYU Thanks to Naples

Luca Delbello (February 01, 2011)



Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò colors itself in Neapolitan colors with a round table featuring the Cardinal of Naples Crescenzo Sepe and Italian-American director/actor John Turturro

Cinema and religion met on January 19 in New York for a unique round table in which the Catholic Church faced American cinema. The protagonists of the event, Cardinal of Naples Crescenzo Sepe and actor/director [John Turturro](#) [2] were moderated by journalist and professor of cinema at NYU Antonio Monda. [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [3], which hosts the Department of Italian Studies of New York University, was the location chosen for the round table, presented by Prof. Stefano Albertini. The excuse for an encounter between such different representatives of our times was their common love for Naples.

Italian-American, histrionic and pure-blooded matador, truly talented character actor, John Turturro was present in his new role of director, committed to tell the customs and traditions of a people. The reality he has analyzed so well in all its nuances is quite distant from the American life he comes



from: it is the reality of the suburbs and piazze of one of the most discussed cities of the world, Naples. His film "[Passione](#)" [4] is a "unconventional and admirable act of love for the city", as Monda stated. "There are places where you simply feel at home", was the moving comment of the director, who spoke about the difficulties of growing up in an Italian-American family in New York and expressed his pleasure in completing a project that is also an homage to his roots.

The director's objective is to "attempt to eliminate all the cliches about Naples", using "the incredible talent of the Neapolitan artists". He reminded the public that his affection and love towards Neapolitan and Italian art isn't limited to the silver screen, but also includes the stage, with the collection "Fiabe Italiane" and "Questi Fantasmi" of the great [Eduardo De Filippo](#) [5]; the only downside, admitted the Italian-American actor, is the absence of good English translations of the important Neapolitan literary and theatrical works.

Also Prof. Monda presented his contribution to his half-home town, his latest novel "Assoluzione". "It is incredible how Neapolitan high and popular cultures blend together", recalling the similarity to another great literary and cinematic classic, "[The Leopard](#)" [6]. The professor continued Turturro's point of view, confirming the existence of many cliches that affect Naples and the difficulties that are met with when presenting its reality, so rich of art and contradictions.

The New York evening was soon filled by the Neapolitan colors and sounds thanks to the atmosphere that the director was able to recreate in his work; he showed the public the first part of his film which was received with a triumphal applause directed to Turturro and his terrific cast; it was strange to see [Peppe Barra](#) [7]'s performances inside of a New York university. The theme of the movie is traceable to Turturro's statement "Naples is the jukebox of the world" and to a certain extent the film is its manifesto.

After the screening, Cardinal Sepe of Naples joined the guests on stage, belated by the New York frenzy after an intense day of appointments. Art, cinema and religion shared the scene to tell Naples in a different but similar way. The event had been announced last December during the New York launch of the [41 Parallelo Film Festival](#) [8] of Davide Azzolini at Casa Italiana. The Cardinal described his own Naples, concentrating upon the incredible "variety of social, artistic and religious souls", since after all "music is Naples and Naples is music", he added. Even the representation of God becomes "artistic" in a city like Naples, where the citizen identifies himself with the Saint and turn to him "as a relative, a friend to turn to". Another topic was the famous Neapolitan solidarity. "If there are three families that are not on talking terms, when one of the three is in difficulty the other two participate in its moment of difficulty". The Cardinal underlined the reason for his New York visit, "dire Napoli", adding that the city's battle isn't over, "we haven't closed the sentence yet", the city hold on in spite of the difficulties and the many problems of yesterday and today.

The evening continued with jokes and laughter. The Cardinal candidly admitted to have known about Turturro only once he had arrived in Naples to direct his work. "Who is this Master Turturro?" was the question he had asked at the time, "if he's a good kid we can allow him to film in the cathedral". In the end this didn't happen but Turturro jokingly expressed his desire to use this permit for a "Passione 2" sequel. The Cardinal at that point answered: "Then I'll sing".

The evening ended with Sepe's surprise gift to the director: a sculpture by Neapolitan artist [Lello Esposito](#) [9], who has been working on Naples and its symbols for many years; Pulcinella, the mask, the egg, the skull, the vulcano, the horse, San Gennaro and its various good luck charms. A special Pulcinella mask was the gift for Turturro, a special prize for having "communicated Naples" with passion and humbleness, in an original and creative way.

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