

Manetti Bros.: Independent ‘Made in Italy’

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Over the past two decades, the Manetti brothers have been directing films and TV series labelled as *cinema di genere*, which include fiction and comedy. They have emerged with their talent sharpened in contemporary Italian cinematic production through varied genres from thriller (*Piano 17*, 2005) to science fiction (*L'arrivo di Wang*, 2011), and from crime fiction (*Song'e Napule*, 2013) to musical (*Ammore e Malavita*, 2018). The Manetti brothers have created a new ‘Made in Italy’ that carries cultural values and ethical behavior. This is reflected in their most notable and award-winning works such as *Song 'e Napule* and *Ammore e Malavita*.

This article aims to reveal how the Manettis’ productions, as current ‘Made in Italy’ by blending several genres, are also reevaluating Italian identities of cities such as Naples. In the “Napoli dei Manetti” or their productions set in Naples, comedy and noir balance with unrevealed criticism to social typecasting. The use of irony is the Manettis’ way to debunk stereotypes and highlight moral flaws in contemporary society, above all demonstrating several identities coexisting in Italy today.

The Manetti brothers have always been fascinated by the Taviani brothers for their use of whimsical scenes to demonstrate the best and worst of people in their neorealist films. Additionally, their interest in noir genre and Stan Lee’s *imperfect* heroes are also demonstrated through their film productions. This is especially evident in their most recent classic of the noir comic character by Giussani’s sisters, *Diabolik* released in the theaters in December 2021.

In their early career, the Manettis debuted as video directors for Italian singers including Alex Britti, Mietta, Max Pezzali, and Tiromancino. The brothers directed their first experimental films in 1995 with *Consegna a domicilio*, as part of a collection of ten episodes by ten different directors called *De Generazione*. And in 1997, with the *Torino Boys* produced by Rai, the directors received an award at the Torino Film Festival. In 2000, the Manettis released their first horror-comedy film, *Zora La Vampira*, with the participation of Carlo Verdone. The film embodied both directors’ true interest in the horror genre. In 2005 the Manettis proposed *Piano 17*, another horror film.

In 2006, the Manettis presented their first successful TV series on Italian national TV (Rai 2) with *L'ispettore Coliandro*. The series is a crime thriller, based on the novels of Carlo Lucarelli. The series recalls popular crime and action films from the 1970’s and 1980’s, but comedy is a constant part of the series. The protagonist, Inspector Coliandro, is a clumsy policeman whose success in solving crime relies on timely accidents. Incidentally, Coliandro uses colorful expressions originated by his Neapolitan background resulting in contrast not only with a conventional detective, but also with the police district in the city of Bologna.

Giampaolo Morelli as *L'ispettore Coliandro* has become a strong collaborator of the Manettis not only with the *Coliandro* series, but also for the well-acclaimed films *Song 'e Napule* and *Ammore e Malavita*. Both films are set in Naples, the Morelli’s birthplace. It was Morelli who proposed the captivating neo-melodic music theme and the main character of *Song 'e Napule*.

Song 'e Napule (2013) and evokes the *poliziotteschi* of the sixties and seventies¹. The *poliziottesco* genre was loosely modeled on the American detective and action films produced during the same decades.

However, with *Song 'e Napule* the Manettis created a crime-comedy film representative of cultural and linguistic features of contemporary 'Made in Italy' films. It takes us back to the *commedia all'italiana*², even though the distributors (Microcinema) publicized it as "È tutta un'altra commedia" or "it is an entirely different type of comedy". In the history of Italian cinema there has always been a search for identity. Italian cinema is, in a sense, a "work in progress" and a fluid form constantly reflecting and commenting on the ever-changing shape of society (Gieri, 1995).

As it was for postwar Italian cinema, this *new comedy* or *new Made in Italy* explores the identity or identities so ever-present in Italy today. The Manetti Bros. re-elaborate and negotiate upon the comedy genre also outside the national context of the film. In fact, the title itself calls for a Neapolitan expression of origin but also a particular identity.

Therefore, the Manettis distance themselves from Ilaria De Pascalis (2012), who claims that Italian film comedy is a "national-popular" expression and they focus on the multi-cultural coexistence of several dimensions and identities in their productions.

The *poliziottesco* genre was partially born as a reflection of cinema politico, and developed during the years of domestic terrorism in the 1970's and 1980's. As part of the heritage, films can provide a symptomatic contemplation of historical and social experience (O'Leary, 2011). The *poliziottesco*, however, aimed at providing stereotypical law enforcement, vigilantes, and politicians characters to be explicit about the elisions and omissions of the *cinema politico*. Hence, the Manetti Bros. reproduce with their own mark a *new poliziottesco*, which seem to reproduce the stereotypes of this cinematic genre; however, by ridiculing the characters including the law enforcement representatives, it also makes us reflect on a wider framework for the current 'Made in Italy' filmic productions.

In fact, the Manetti brothers have expanded their views beyond both the *commedia all'italiana* and the *poliziottesco* genres creating a new 'Made in Italy' film trend. This blended genre production aims at demystifying stereotypes and ridicule the negativity that the typecasts carry through the use of irony. It is an observation of the several identities coexisting in Italy and it underlines the many aspects of a unique culture such as the Neapolitan.

Song 'e Napule is an original crime-comedy film, having cultural and linguistic features of a contemporary 'Made in Italy' film. *Song 'e Napule* received several award nominations and two David di Donatello awards in 2014 for best musicians, Pivio and Aldo De Scalzi, and best original song, *A' verità*, by Liccardo, Castagnola, Tartuffo, Garofalo & Ricciardi.

The plot develops in contemporary Naples. Paco, a music conservatory graduate played by Alessandro Roja, is a cultivated and unemployed pianist. His mother lands him a position with the Neapolitan police force, and his inexperience in law enforcement relegates him to serving as a guard at a police warehouse. Police Commissioner Cammarota, who is searching for a dangerous killer known as *O' Fantasma*, asks Paco to infiltrate the neo-melodic music band, 'Lollo Love'. The band is to perform at the wedding of the daughter of a camorra boss. Rumor has it that *O' Fantasma* will be at the wedding. Paco, disguised as the band's pianist, must risk his life in the line of duty while playing the music that he used to scorn, yet this experience will change his life.

The Manettis stated, in several online interviews, that the film “è un’idea più originale, non appartiene a un vero e proprio filone...ma ha riferimenti italiani.” (“The film comes from a more original idea, and it does not belong to a specific genre...however, it has some typical Italian allusions”). The allusions and labels are related to the organized crime featured in many contemporary films and TV series such as *Gomorra*³. The theme of prejudice towards southern Italians remains a preference of Italian comedies as demonstrated by the success of *Benvenuti al Sud* (2010) and *Benvenuti al Nord* (2012) by Luca Miniero. However, the Manetti Bros. go beyond the general stereotypes and differences between Northern and Southern Italy. Their new approach to comedy includes the mocking of those films and series focused on highlighting the wrongdoing of criminal organizations, such as the Camorra, operating in Naples.

The rise of Italian productions for cinema and television have increased in the last decades and have created a fascination surrounding the characters of the criminal organizations. Born on the basis of Italian crime-thriller fiction (De Cataldo, 2005), these characters are also attractive for their glamorous and charismatic traits, as Dana Renga (2019) observed. Nevertheless, Marco e Antonio Manetti, while appreciating the cinematic aesthetics of the crime- thriller, decided to use Naples as an attractive background for their comedy-parody productions. It is both an easy way to avoid costly special effects, and a very captivating way to add color to their *new comedy*. The imaginative background and landscapes of Naples surround the ridiculed crime and law enforcement characters.

The Manettis created the *new poliziottesco* and a *new commedia all’italiana*. Undoubtedly, *Song ‘e Napule* follows the line of American detective-action films by the use of quick moving cameras to enhance the action in the film, but it also creates a different vision to Neapolitan society and its interactions with criminal organizations. We can observe that the Manettis, indeed, use Naples as a background to draw attention into the visual culture of the city, which is not always completely visible (Davis, 2018).

Song ‘e Napule reflects cultural and linguistic features that depict contemporary Italy and recall the 1970’s ‘music revolution’ of neo-melodic artists such as Nino D’Angelo. The Manettis are keen to make us notice how, in recent times, the neo-melodic artists have become more numerous and homogenous when compared to the earlier limited local production.

In *Song ‘e Napule*, the Manetti brothers delineate the contrast between classical music and new popular trends. They offer an evaluation of the most contemporary social and cultural phenomena, and present a constructive viewpoint depicting the *Lollo Love Band* as an honest group with moral values suffering from being under corrupted management, yet willing to better themselves.

Contemporary ‘musica popolare’ includes Neapolitan neo-melodic. Throughout *Song ‘e Napule*, spectators discover the ‘true identities’ of contemporary Neapolitan song writers and their everyday strive for success.

The film recognizes a social identity and a prominent economic industry originating in Naples that also influence the larger national economy and trends of ‘Made in Italy’ productions. In this regard, Neapolitan neo-melodic music is a strong constituent of Italian culture not differently than cinema, theater, or television.

Most importantly, *Song ‘e Napule* offers some subjects for thought, such as the transformation and evolution of both Italian language and Italian pop music as a cultural and

economic component for the new ‘Made in Italy’. Captivatingly, the Manettis approach language in the social context of Naples, and one of the focal elements of the film is the language used, which represents the links between past and present, between tradition and current usage.

If we comprehend the true meaning of the cultural message, then we can also understand the process of transformation taking place in the social life of contemporary Naples. The social transformations are reflected by both societal behavior and language. With the unification of Italy, Naples together with the rest of the country, went through a process of levelling homogeneity. Yet, Naples has also represented a Mediterranean frontier, which has allowed the population to embrace the characteristics of being amalgamated while still separated.

Language has been one of the most important characteristics of Neapolitan identity. Although during the last decades standard Italian has become predominant in all regions and cities, Neapolitan has been kept alive in all strata of society through music, theater, and cinema. In fact, many Italians can understand the language of classic Neapolitan songs. Neapolitan, thus, has resisted language nationalization in part through its historical multicultural and inclusive culture.

It is clear that developments of duality and stereotypes have been accentuated among Neapolitans themselves, who may share the responsibility for the retention of the stereotypical, where use of the Neapolitan language in a public setting could be deemed “plebian”, while the use of Italian in a similar setting could be viewed as “elitist”. In *Song ‘e Napule*, when Paco initially approaches the leader of the neo-melodic band, he does so use Italian and is mocked as a “foreigner” with a “Milanese” accent. Paco suddenly realizes that he needs to make an important statement: “...Je song ‘e Napule! Song nat’ a Napule e figlio ‘e napoletani” (“I am Neapolitan and son of Neapolitans”).

Language in *Song ‘e Napule* is filtered through the social status, morals, and feelings within the singing context of the film’s plot. It is a sign that times have changed. The Manetti brothers along with Giampaolo Morelli are revitalizing and reinvigorating the ‘*new poliziottesco*’, adapting to current times where Naples is ‘rebellng’ against the labels of corrupted marginal society using the best means of communication: neo-melodic Neapolitan songs. While Paco has the opportunity to interact with the neo-melodic group members, he also realizes that his previous bourgeois stereotypes were not reflecting the reality. Paco starts understanding more profoundly the enthusiasm and dedication that Lollo and his band display between performances at private parties.

Song ‘e Napule, presented a cinematic re-evaluation of Neapolitan culture through the most contemporary popular aspects of music, language, and social customs. *Song ‘e Napule* sustains the necessity of acknowledging popular culture trends against stereotyped preconceptions. This calls attention to the new ‘Made in Italy’, where local and regional customs have a large influence. More importantly, it represents recognition both of positive changes in the elimination of negative stereotypes and of Italy as a multi-layered country. *Song ‘e Napule* is not a film of criticism of societal behavior, but rather a current ‘Made in Italy’ film which depicts the cultural characteristics of Neapolitans under a positive light. Yet, it is remarkable the use of irony which permeates throughout the film making it light and fun instead of a critique to *napoletanità* or the Neapolitan way of life and social customs. The Manettis propose a film with paradoxical irony in their willingness to evaluate and re-evaluate the Neapolitan identity and identities also through visual culture using the city’ landscapes as the aesthetics background.

Following the success and positive reception of the audience for the film *Song ‘e Napule*, the Manettis directed *Ammore e Malavita*, which has the English title *Love and Bullets* also set in

Naples. The film was the winner for best film, best actress in a supporting role (Claudia Gerini), best costume design, best music, and best original score at the 63rd *David di Donatello* awards. Additionally, at *La Biennale di Venezia* in 2017, the film received the *Francesco Pasinetti Award*, and in 2018 the award for best comedy at the *Globi D'oro*. The film was well received in Italy, grossing about 600,000 euros within three days of opening, surpassing the entire gross for *Song 'e Napule*.

Song 'e Napule and *Ammore e Malavita* have several aspects in common, reflecting the Manettis eagerness to present the city of Naples with a positive vibrant culture. They reject stereotypes, which were reflected in Italian crime and TV series productions during the last decades, and they continued to do that through the use of irony.

The film takes the distance from the vision and the aesthetics of the organized crime films and series. Naples is epitomized in a bright view of Le Vele in Scampia, made known by Gomorrah's book and film productions. A group of tourists visits the Scampia neighborhood singing an R&B song. The song's lyrics are mocking the high risk of robbery portrayed in Gomorrah's cinematic productions by declaring pleasure in being pickpocketed in Scampia as the ultimate touristic experience. The hilarious premise leads to more derisive presentations of stereotyped criminal organizations personas including the hit men, hired to kill a key eyewitness, and the Camorra boss.

Ammore e Malavita is a musical set in modern-day Naples. Ciro, an executioner for the camorra, seeks to kill Fatima, the witness to the staged death of the camorra boss Don Vincenzo, also called *O' re d'o' pesce*. Don Vincenzo's wife, Donna Maria, planned the killing of her husband's double to permit the married couple to flee the death sentence imposed by Don Vincenzo's camorra superiors.

Ciro, however, recognizes Fatima as his long-lost teenage love. Fatima, a nurse, is honest compared to Ciro, who turned to crime early in life. Eventually, the couple reunite and Ciro goes straight. The music accentuates the dramatic moments, and while the characters are not fully developed, the musical moments enhance the plot and Naples provides a broad background for the romance.

The plot is inspired by the long tradition of *sceneggiata napoletana*, which represents the sentimental tradition of the Neapolitan theatre during the 1800's⁴. Through the *sceneggiata napoletana*, Naples and Neapolitans are portrayed with human empathy.

The Manettis have stated that Naples has represented a strong inspiration for their revisiting the Neapolitan theatre tradition of *la sceneggiata*. To them, Naples is not identified by crime but by its sense of humanity and benevolence. With a remake of *la sceneggiata*, spectators understand that the brothers intend to enhance the image of Naples by stressing its positive cultural traditions and contemporary life.

As for *Ammore e Malavita*, producer Carlo Macchitella suggested that the Manettis create a sequel to John Turturro's film *Passione* (2010). However, the Manettis preferred a comedy to the documentary structure, and created their original crime-love story underlined by Neapolitan music. Their choice of singer Franco Ricciardi as one of the main characters in the film was made because of their appreciation for Ricciardi's singing the traditional Neapolitan song *O' Motoscafo* (originally performed by Pino Mauro in 1974). The song deals with the true tragic stories of cigarette smugglers during the 1970s. However, the use of mockery is once again the focus of their

cinematic production. In the film, Franco Ricciardi is Gennaro, the right-hand man of the camorra boss don Vincenzo who will weave the love story of Ciro and Fatima. Ricciardi, in addition to acting in the film, is also one of the soundtrack performers. The soundtrack won the Nastro d'Argento award. The artist from Scampia previously won his first award in 2014 at the David di Donatello for the Best Original Song 'A Verità, in *Song 'e Napule*.

For the Manetti brothers' cinema and music represent the key to their artistic expression especially when they choose to reevaluate the social values of a city such as Naples always in a humorous way but never to criticize. In an article by Benedetta Bragadini for the *RollingStone* in 2017, the Manetti Bros. affirmed: "C'è un mix unico di tradizione e innovazione in questa factory partenopea. [I napoletani] sono avanti anni luce e non se la tirano...Napoli è da sempre la città più colta d'Italia e chi lo nega, nega la realtà. Se accetti questa verità puoi permetterti di criticare i suoi difetti. Altrimenti è tutta invidia." ("There is a unique mix of tradition and innovation in this Neapolitan factory. [the Neapolitans] are light years ahead and don't boast about it either. Naples has always been the most cultured city in Italy and those who deny it deny the reality. If you accept this truth you can allow yourself to criticize its defects. Otherwise it's all envy").

The Manettis enjoy having fun while working on their productions. Their productions have always been on a limited budget. However, the aesthetics for this film, as it was for the previous *Song 'e Napule*, are the city's imaginative landscapes. There is no need for special effects when the visual culture of Naples is given by its own sceneries.

Some scenes resemble American action films. The speed-boat chase in Naples bay in *Ammore e Malavita* seems similar to *De Javu* (2006) starring Denzel Washington, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (2015) starring Henri Cavill and Armie Hammer, and *The Tourist* (2010) starring Johnny Depp and Angelina Jolie. Yet, the Manettis' films set in Naples aim to critique the negative stereotypes created by successful international films and TV series dramas. Naples for them is a boisterous cultural center of theatrical, musical, and architectural elements all in harmony. *Ammore e Malavita* portrays Naples as not just a troubled city but one with human empathy.

Giampaolo Morelli is the protagonist in *Ammore e Malavita*, as it was in *Song 'e Napule*. The lead actress, Serena Rossi, is perfect as Fatima given her vocal talent. Initially, Fatima is seen as naïve, but she leads Ciro through a total change in life. Claudia Gerini, in her supporting role as the Camorra boss's wife Maria, is a ferocious and dominant character suggestive of the *Gomorra* TV series' women.

Ammore e Malavita is an unconventional film compared to big-budget contemporary Italian films and series with more global distribution. Yet, it has been well received by the audiences and it has grossed very high at the box office considering its contained budget.

After the success with *Ammore e Malavita* in 2018, it was the time for the Manettis to create their own production company. *Mompracem* s.r.l. was a collaboration among the Manettis, the producer Carlo Macchitella, and Beta, a German TV production company. The collaboration seeks to offer emerging directors the opportunity to create their own original cinematic productions. The *Mompracem* label website states, "The main characteristic of *Mompracem* is dynamic production, a genuine workshop of ideas, that operates and works outside the most canonical scheme, without losing sight of the main objective: the quality of entertainment."

In sum, the Manetti brothers seek to promote popular entertainment through their cinematic productions. Their new 'Made in Italy' carries on supporting the cultural values and ethical

behavior which were reflected in their most notable works *Song 'e Napule* and *Ammore e Malavita* set in Naples.

The choreography of the scenes of their films set in Naples is deliberately sloppy to create an anti-comedy climax. The action scenes are somewhat derivative of American-style cinema, but so much for the action, but for naturalistic landscape aesthetics. The Manettis acknowledge the complex mixture of several influences that make Naples a unique place in which the spectators can realize that there are several identities coexisting in Italy today.

Marco and Antonio Manetti claimed: "Nel costruire le nostre storie tendiamo a sdrammatizzare e a smitizzare tutto, nella vita e sul set. Questo perchè nella vita vediamo che esiste sempre un risvolto della medaglia per ogni persona... Pensando a questo, è inevitabile pensare alla comicità." "When we create our stories and plots, we have the tendency to downplay and diffuse everything in life as well as on the set. This is because we know that everyone sees life differently... and this consideration leads inevitably to humor."

Through their mixture of humor and thriller, the Manetti Bros. create a clear trend in the Italian film industry. Within this milieu, their films set in Naples confirm their distinct stylistic characteristics that perfectly blend pop culture and social issues. Furthermore, these movies clearly promote a distinct Neapolitan identity.

¹ The Italian *poliziottesco* is a genre or sub-genre that differs from the more traditional *poliziesco* as it focuses less on mystery and investigation, and more on political/ societal corruption and the actual crimes. *Mario Merola, one of the most popular stars of the *Sceneggiata*, is also one of the main actors of *poliziottesco* set in Naples.

² Beginning with the late 1950's, the *Commedia all'italiana* featured the evolving post-WWII social and political issues, depicting themes and topics such as gender, poverty, cultural changes, under a tragicomic light.

³ *Gomorra*, both the 2009 film and the TV series (2014-2021), are based on Roberto Saviano's book of the same name.

⁴ *La Sceneggiata* developed on the traces of *café' chantant* in Naples during 1920s and 1940s as a popular theater representation, which alternates singing to dialogue with a dramatic vein.

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