

Checco Zalone's Unguarded Patrimony

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Abstract. Checco Zalone and Gennaro Nunziante's *Che bella giornata* utilizes a terrorist threat to one of Italy's most famous artistic symbols as an expedient to critique what they satirically perceive as an even greater threat to the country's security and stability. This article explores the film's representation of Italy's *raccomandati* culture¹ and its contact with the international Other.

Keywords: *Che bella giornata*; Checco Zalone; Luca Medici; Terrorism; Comedy films; *Cinepanettone* films; Italian cultural heritage; Nepotism; Italy; 21st-century events in films.

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1. The Cinematic Character of Checco Zalone

To say that Checco Zalone has reached a surprising level of success in recent years would be a gross understatement. After achieving a breakout success with *Cado dalle nubi* in 2009, he went on to star in *Che bella giornata* in 2011, *Sole a catinelle* in 2013 and *Quo vado?* in 2015, all three of which are currently counted among the top five highest-grossing films in Italian cinema history.² Comedies associated with Italy's *cinepanettone* genre³ are known to have a wide viewership as well as ample box office earnings and are a veritable cultural phenomenon in their own right (O'Leary 2013), but Zalone and his films have proven to be a phenomenon of an entirely different cut and caliber due a masterful balance of ludicrous comicality and biting satire.

Che bella giornata, which opened in January 2011, is a perfect example of this balance, blending the protagonist's doltish antics and idiosyncrasies with a trenchant social critique that manages to expose the foibles and contradictions of contemporary Italian culture without the slightest suggestion of malice. It is the second of what are now four films in which the same character-construct, Checco Zalone, around whom most events and comical moments in his films revolve, is protagonist. It is appropriate to say "character-construct" instead of actor here because Checco Zalone is not actually an actor but rather a character conceived and played by Luca Medici using a caricatural stratagem that suggests a new *maschera* of the *Commedia dell'arte* tradition fit for the 21st century. Medici endows Zalone with

¹ [Editorial note: Britain's closest equivalent of this pattern of hiring is "It's not what you know: it's who you are", or "it's who you know".]

² According to Movieplayer.it: <http://movieplayer.it/film/boxoffice/italia/di-sempre/>

³ A *panettone* is a nationally and internationally famous Christmas cake from Milan. The setting is in Milan.

biographical traits and professional ambitions that differ in each film according to the particular cultural target both Medici and his faithful director, Gennaro Nunziante, have in their sights. Here their target is the nepotistic class structure in Italy that, in the context of this politically and socially incorrect satire (Incerti 2011), manages to place a tremendously inept dunce in charge of some of the most important works of art in Milan. And although the film's poster (Figure 1) offers no indication of it, this happens to coincide with a terrorist plot to destroy Milan's famous *Madonnina*. That is the gilded statue of the Madonna on top of the tallest pinnacle on the Duomo (cathedral) of Milan.

2. Treating Terrorism as a Theme in a Comedic Genre

American writers and comedians have an understandable sense of reserve when it comes to treating a serious theme such as terrorism using the comedic genre. The terrorist attack in New York in 2001 is remembered soberly even today, and directors of major films such as *United 93* and *World Trade Center* have favored the dramatic genre to cinematically recreate the day's events. Only the most cynical and transgressive comic writers dare make light of them. In countries less directly involved in terrorist threats, this is not necessarily the case. Italian cinema has an especially rich cinematic history regarding the treatment of grave, historical events.

Mario Monicelli's *La grande guerra* in 1959, for example, effectively weds the tragic elements characteristic of Neorealism with the comic and satirical elements common in the *commedia all'italiana*, then in its prime. Alberto Sordi, who played one of the reluctant heroes in the film, was a staple in socially-engaged satires at the time (e.g. *Un americano a Roma*, *Un eroe dei nostri tempi*, etc.) and might be considered a spiritual ancestor of Medici's alter ego. In more recent times, one must cite *La vita è bella* and Roberto Benigni's masterful, Pirandellian irony in his clownish protagonist's approach to life in a concentration camp (Marcus 2000). In light of these examples and the sharp contrast of genres between national cinematic traditions they help underline, it is compelling to see what elements Medici and Nunziante's work contributes to the sociopolitically conscious comedy. Although *Che bella giornata* is not on any level as poetic and poignant as *La vita è bella*, Checco Zalone avoids tragicomedy altogether in favor of the irony, idiocy, blatant gaffes and complete insensitivity that allow him to confront stereotypes and prejudices as his oafish protagonist averts not one but two terrorist attacks without even knowing it.⁴

Terrorism in Italy, of course, is not a new phenomenon. One of the most severe outbreaks of terrorism in the industrialized world began in Italy on December 12th, 1969, when terrorists detonated a bomb inside a bank in Milan's Piazza Fontana, killing seventeen people and injuring scores of others. Robberies, kidnappings, kneecappings, assassinations and numerous other bombings characterized the subsequent "age of lead" that endured for the next fifteen years. One of the worst incidents occurred on August 2nd, 1980, when a bomb killed eighty-five people at the train station in Bologna and injured two hundred more.

The poor distribution of land and resources for the Italian people since the country's problematic unification in 1860 has long been a catalyst for the development of extremist groups, but economic reasons alone cannot bear the blame. As Drake (2006, p. 118) observes, "the politics of revolution and their socioeconomic context have a complex rapport in Italy, involving many factors over time down to today."

⁴ In this sense, the character can be said to be the successor to Peter Sellers' Inspector Clouseau in the series of *Pink Panther* films or Peter Nielsen's Lieutenant Frank Drebin of the *Police Squad!* television series and *Naked Gun* films. Cappelli (2012) and Mastrantonio (2011) have both likened Zalone to Sacha Boren Cohen.

Over the course of these tumultuous years, extreme right- and left-wing movements intersected with factory workers, student protest groups and others at the fringes of the national political spectrum to wreak the kind of chaos and havoc that has been represented in countless cinematic works since.



Figure 1.

Such films about Italy's recent history are overwhelmingly dramatic due to the violent nature of the events depicted and the scars left on the national conscience, one of the most notorious episodes being that of Aldo Moro's assassination by the Red Brigades.⁵ While terrorism in Italy is not at all new, Islamic terrorism is a different case altogether.

An important date in the American-European conflict with Islamic terrorism remains February 23rd, 1998, when an Arabic newspaper published in London printed the full text of a "Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders," an inauspicious document bearing, among others, the signature of Osama bin Laden. The last part of the declaration, the fatwa, laid down that

[...] to kill Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim who is able, in any country where this is possible, until the Aqsa mosque [in Jerusalem] and the Harām mosque [in Mecca] are freed from their grip, and until their armies, shattered and broken-winged, depart from all the lands of Islam, incapable of threatening any Muslim. (Lewis 2003, p. xxvii)

The events in New York three years later and subsequent military operations abroad require no commentary regarding the historical significance and ramifications of this declaration. As an ally to the United States in its War on Terror, Italy committed military resources to both Afghanistan and Iraq and was thus soon itself a target of Islamic extremists. Italians going to see *Che bella giornata* when it opened in January of 2011 were likely to recall two particular moments in their country's recent struggle with Islamic extremists. Most recently, in 2008, authorities uncovered a terrorist cell in Bologna and arrested five Tunisians intent on recruiting new members to be groomed for suicide missions (La Repubblica 2008). Less recently but nonetheless more importantly, viewers were likely to recall that, in 2002, five other men, one of them an Italian art historian, four others Moroccans, were arrested while plotting an attack on Bologna's San Petronio Basilica for the depiction of the prophet Muhammad among demons in hell in a 15th-century fresco (Giusi 2002, Bruni 2002). The involvement of an invaluable work of art in a terrorist plot combined with the fact that the ones plotting the attack were from the Maghreb region in Africa are both conspicuously relevant for the central plot elements in Zalone's *Che bella giornata*.

3. The Film *Che bella giornata* (What a Beautiful Day)

The film's plot is best described by the lead actor himself in an interview (Giampaoli 2011, my English translation):

È la vicenda di un tamarro che da buttafuori in una discoteca della Brianza si ritrova, grazie al vizio tutto italiano della spintarella, nella security del duomo di Milano. Qui incontra e si innamora di Farah, giovane islamica che sta pianificando un attentato proprio alla Madonnina.

[It's the story of a *tamarro* who goes from working as a bouncer in a nightclub to working security at the Milan Cathedral thanks to that all-Italian vice of pulling strings. Here he meets and falls in love with Farah, a young Muslim who is planning an attack there on the *Madonnina*.]

The word *tamarro* presents certain cultural difficulties in its English translation. Sacrificing the colloquial register, it is perhaps most accurately translated as "boorish ignoramus", but the

⁵ Surprisingly, perhaps, films on the mafia have not had the same fate; many of the most well-known films on the Sicilian mafia have been comedies, from Alberto Lattuada's *Mafioso* (1962), to Benigni's *Johnny Stecchino* (1991), to, much more recently, *La mafia uccide solo d'estate* (2013) by Pierfrancesco Diliberto, or Pif, to name a few.

Italian term includes the idea of having an inflated sense of self accompanied by a poor sense of fashion. The name Checco Zalone itself represents a satirical quip: in the dialect spoken in and around Bari, the expression "*che cozzalone!*" means precisely "What a *tamarro!*"

The brief summary we have given in the quotation block effectively highlights, aside from the obvious theme of a terrorist plot in Italy, the two most important aspects of the film: nepotism and artistic patrimony. The terrorist threat as a plot device brings the two themes into contact ingeniously through the central irony in the film's narrative, in that the protagonist's professional advancement due to the former is the key to the salvation of — and yet an even greater threat to — the latter.

The film's approach to Italy's nepotistic culture is present right from the beginning, as Checco attempts to join the *carabinieri* (Figure 2) and follow in the footsteps of his uncle. It may be advantageous to recall the term's Italian etymology that makes the theme particularly relevant in the context of a film in which the protagonist ascends through the hierarchy of the Church's security structure. It dates from the mid 17th century, and is derived from the French *népotisme*, from the Italian *nepotismo*, from *nipote* 'nephew', with reference to privileges bestowed on the "nephews" (called the *cardinal nipote*) of popes, who were in many cases their illegitimate sons.



Figure 2.

While trying to join the *carabinieri*, Checco explains to the colonel interviewing him (played by contemporary Italian comedy veteran Ivano Marescotti), with no shame or hesitation whatsoever, that having such a position would allow him all the personal perks that his uncle has always enjoyed, such as getting into the stadium to see soccer games for free.

When the colonel suggests having the Finance Office run a check on Checco's uncle, Giuseppe Capobianco, now a *maresciallo* in the Puglia region, Checco suggests that he call another of his relatives, Vincenzo Capobianco, who works there and has no qualms about acting similarly in relation to the goods he routinely confiscates. Checco does not get the job, but he does get a break when his relation to Don Bruno, a local priest, gets him hired to help

tighten the security detail at the Milan Cathedral in light of recent terrorist threats to monuments and churches.

After causing a scandal at the entrance one day as he insults a group of Muslim women and two groups of Buddhist and Orthodox Christian emissaries, he is transferred to the roof to guard the Madonnina, and it is as he is taking a lunch break in the Cathedral's Museum that he meets Farah,⁶ who professes to be an Erasmus student of art and architecture but who is really plotting with her brother, Sufien, to detonate a bomb at the base of the famous monument and symbol of Milan. As she schemes to gain his confidence over the course of the film, he teaches her a lot about how his country works (Figure 3).

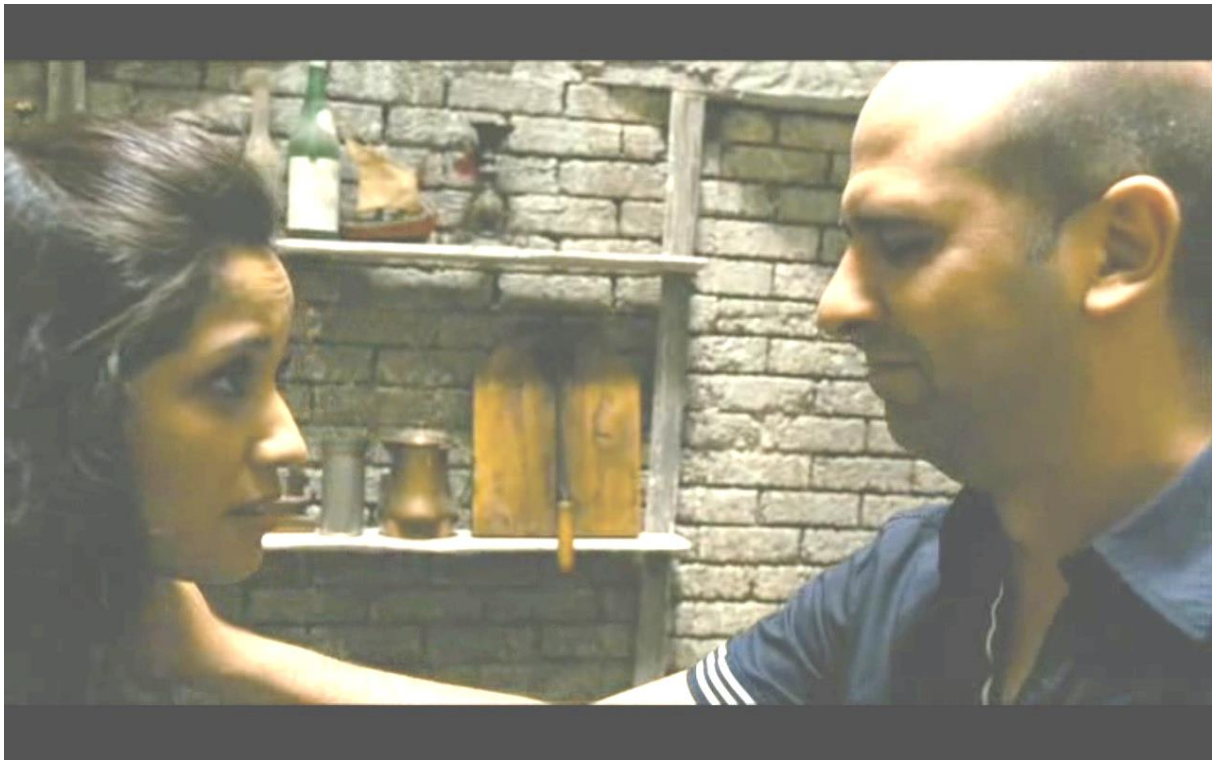


Figure 3.

When she discusses the bureaucratic difficulties of getting construction plans approved, for example, Checco mentions his mother's great-uncle, Stefano Capobianco, who evidently works in the associated government office. Farah asks, "What does that mean?" and Checco laughs, amused at her ingenuousness, and replies, "One day you'll understand a lot of things about this country. You study, right?" "Yes", she says. He responds with a common expletive indicating the futility of academic endeavors: "Qui non si fa un cazzo" ["We don't do shit here"]. In fact, Checco did not attend college and relies instead on family connections. Domenico Capobianco is an important figure in a major bank. Nicola Capobianco works in the Forestry Service, allowing Checco to give his friend Ivano an olive tree as a gift. There is even a Capobianco with a sandwich stand where Checco pigheadedly insists Farah eat; pork is obviously not in her diet (Figure 4). A scene like this may seem disparaging to Arabic sensibilities and indeed, it is intended to seem that way, but by playing on such gaffes the film

⁶ Were it not for the predominance of the film's comic treatment, the protagonist's interaction with Farah would align well with several other films centered on the problematic contact between the Italian male and the female, ethnic other such as Mohsen Melliti's *Io, l'altro* (2006), Giuseppe Tornatore's *La sconosciuta* (2006), Giuseppe Capotondi's *La doppia ora* (2009), and Alessandro Angelini's *Alza la testa* (2010), of which Duncan (2011) offers a compelling analysis.

is careful to cast Italians, whom Zalone synecdochically represents, as those ignorantly at fault. Medici is masterful in this regard.



Figure 4.

In a striking contrast to his uneducated character on screen, Medici attended college and graduated with a degree in *Giurisprudenza*. He is also an excellent pianist. His character study of this oafish, Italian Everyman-with-connections is very carefully conceived and well executed to give relief to the cultural mentality Checco Zalone⁷ represents. This most certainly includes an ignorance of other cultures and religions which the Muslim characters in the film embody. In a particular scene where he meets Farah's brother along with two fellow conspirators who are planning an attack on London, Checco asks them, in an attempt to make small talk, if they live in Islam (Figure 5). Fortunately for him, their amusement outweighs their resentment, and they dismiss the gaffe with raucous laughter and a comment in their native language, "These Italians are so ignorant!" The curious fate of the two conspirators is addressed below.

The second important aspect of the film concerns the target of Farah and her brother's plot. Unlike the tragedy in New York mentioned above that involved commercial, civilian targets, here the target is principally symbolic. While the casualties of a bomb detonated beneath the *Madonnina* are likely to pale in comparison to those in New York (and thereby facilitate the use of such a plot device in a comedy), the plan does accurately reflect modern terrorists' exploitation of the media in order to inspire fear and gain a psychological victory over their enemy rather than a military one (Lewis 2003, p. 147). Sufien and Farah's plot is in fact designed to destroy a part of Italy's history, part of its rich, artistic heritage, as revenge for the country's unspecified involvement in a bombing that evidently killed their parents and destroyed their home; the siblings are from the Maghreb region but the script does not elaborate beyond that. In effect, the *Madonnina* is one of two artistic symbols that represent the Italian patrimony that Checco is so poorly guarding.

⁷ As mentioned earlier, in Apulia "Che cozzalone!" means "What a *tamarro*!"



Figure 5

The second is a priceless painting, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (Figure 6). This is the painting Farah first asks Checco about as he is taking his lunch break in the museum. "The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa?" he asks. "Yes, it's a painting from the 1600's," she says. "The 1600's," he replies, surprised by its age. "And they haven't thrown it out?" The painting acts not only as a device to bring the two characters together but also perfectly contrasts Farah's genuine admiration for the artistic tradition it represents with Checco's complete obliviousness of its significance.

Despite what the director and actor have said about the film's intention to entertain rather than moralize,⁸ it is difficult not to reflect on the rather trenchant irony of an outsider from an entirely different civilization more capable of appreciating a country's artistic heritage than the citizens that this inept custodian can easily be interpreted to epitomize. One should also note that she is admiring a symbol of a religion historically inimical to her own. The painting is even more emblematic in the fact that it is neither real nor a copy of a real work. The prop in the film, as it turns out, was specially made. The director commissioned an original work by his artist friend, Gregorio Smarra, that essentially merges elements from the sculpture by Bernini and a painting by Giuseppe Ribera, thus capturing the spirit of the Italian Baroque in its composite representation (Cantatore 2011). The work also makes for an especially strong contrast of characters and intellectual registers upon which Zalone plays for a sight gag in his puerile mimicry of Saint Theresa's facial expression (Figure 7).

Unfortunately for Checco, after all the previous indiscretions that his employers have so graciously overlooked, mishandling the painting leads to his termination. Farah asks him if she can retake her photos of the painting because of bad lighting in her first attempt. He responds by taking the painting out of the museum, putting it in the passenger side of his convertible and driving it to her (Figure 8). The sequence is an effective comedic exaggeration. The egregious misuse of a priceless work of art by a guardian hired through a

⁸ In an interview (Porro 2011), Medici says that the secret in the most effective satire "è non dare giudizi morali, non fare troppa ideologia".

private connection for personal gain, however, is not at all without precedent. One need only reference Marino Massimo De Caro, the former director of the Girolamini Library in Naples, who was eventually brought to trial for the large-scale theft of rare volumes, several of which he gave as gifts to former senator Marcello Dell'Utri, who was largely responsible for the man's career (Donadio 2013). Since then, approximately twenty thousand rare volumes have been found in Dell'Utri's possession and sequestered (Corriere 2015). This example of corruption is perhaps the most dramatic, but it is helpful in recalling how pervasive the underlying attitude is.

Having completed his latest *faux pas*, Checco returns the painting. He loses his job but no substantial harm has been done, and this is key for the film's entire premise. It tells the audience that, in any encounter with the international Other, Italians are warmhearted, hospitable, essentially harmless and not to be taken too seriously.



Figure 6.

In the case of the two conspirators targeting London, Checco invites them to dinner at his parents' house where they eat copiously and overindulge in raw mussels to the point of getting such a bad case of indigestion the next day that they give up their plan.⁹ Disaster averted. One should note that Checco's father, who prepared the dinner, is a soldier in the Italian Army who has served in Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq. When his guests inquire as to whether he thinks his presence in Muslim countries is appreciated by the people, he explains that it doesn't even matter: he's there to pay his mortgage (Figure 9). He is there, he does nothing and the Army pays him six thousand euro a month. Combatant, he scoffs, he's just a

⁹ A radio journalist later relays a statement from Osama bin Laden ordering all Muslims to avoid mussels. [Editorial note: Note how this detail reflects widespread crass misunderstanding. Both Islam and Judaism consider mussels (and other invertebrate) to be impermissible food for their respective faith community. That an unfortunate extremist is likely to endorse such a precept, is made to taint the precept by association. See more in **Appendix B.**]

cook. In this regard, Rocco Papaleo's character is as representative of Italy's military as Checco is of its citizenry. Neither poses any significant threat.

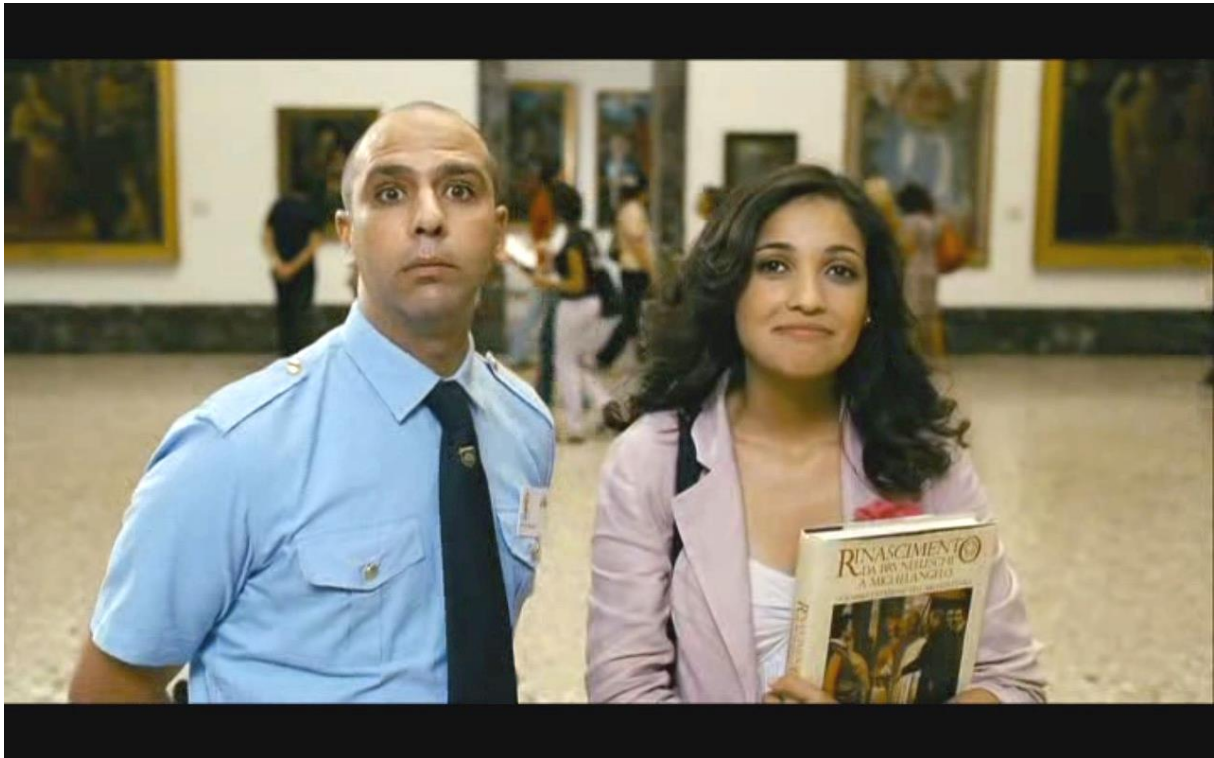


Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 8a (detail).

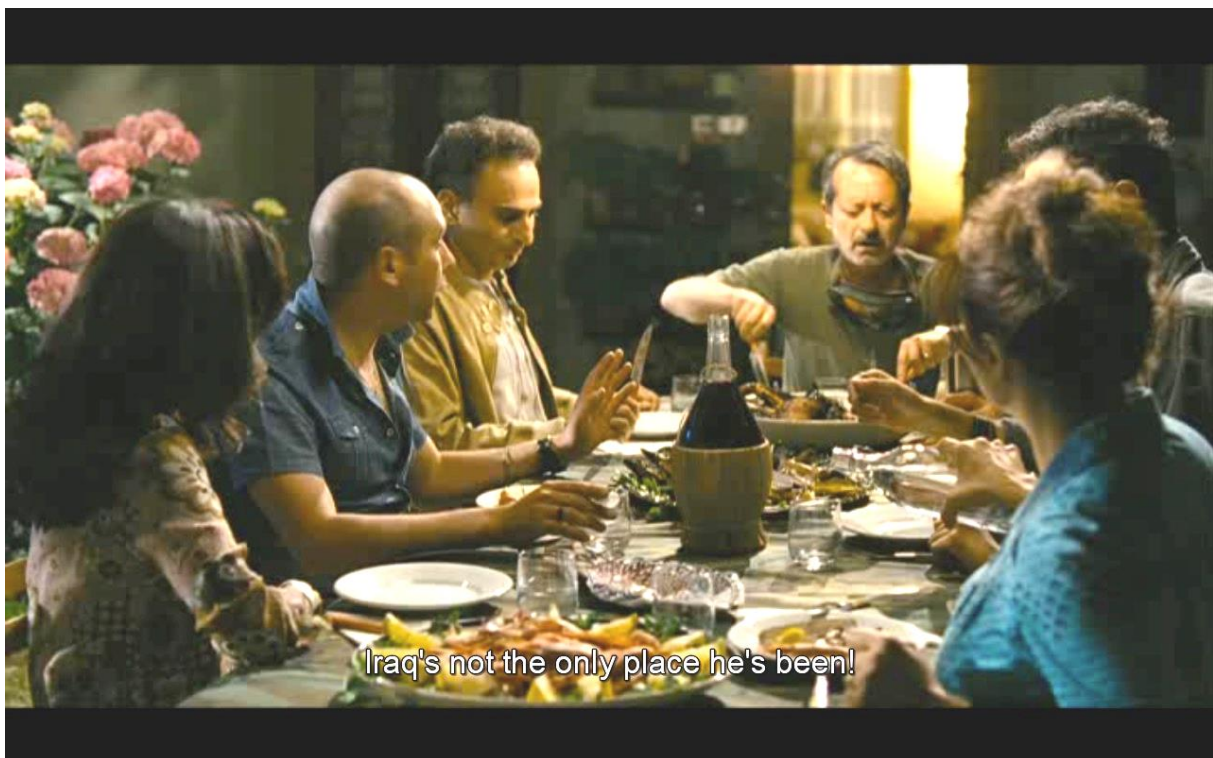


Figure 9.

Putting social satire aside at least momentarily, however, Nunziante and Zalone evidently could not resist a modest dose of saccharine sentimentality (not at all uncommon in the romantic comedy genre upon which the film also plays) in the resolution to the film's terrorist plot device. In the end, blunders aside, many of which are re-evoked in a montage set to an upbeat, syntactically suggestive musical piece written and performed by Medici himself, the warmth and humanity demonstrated by Checco and his family lead Farah to abandon her plot. From the dinner above to a lavish baptism celebration in his home region of Apulia, to the scene in which his mother tends to Farah when she falls ill with a fever, becoming a surrogate for the mother she lost as a child, their welcoming cordiality seemingly mitigates the impetus for the siblings' plan. The disarming hospitality of "Italianness" in relation to the foreign Other thereby continues in a sort of cultural commodification reinforcing one of Italy's most common narratives. Luca Miniero and Massimo Gaudioso's apropos translation of the French *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* as *Benvenuti al Sud*, released in 2010, essentially relies on the same strategy, for example, and it is impossible to neglect the moral victory of Benigni's protagonist over Fascist and Nazi cruelty through antics prompted by his devotion as a father and husband. The fact that *Che bella giornata* was intended primarily for the domestic market and still employs the commodification of family, humanity and grace as a means of overcoming deviousness and malice, even inadvertently and despite the protagonist's innumerable shortcomings, suggests an appeal to cultural self-aggrandizement as a central premise of the film. Indeed, Checco's ultimate success in protecting the *Madonnina* depends on it, yet the film's satirical insinuation is arguably much more significant than its sentimental underpinnings.

4. The End: "We were supposed to destroy their history" "Don't worry, Checco will take care of that"

Farah and her brother board a plane to leave the country without destroying the *Madonnina*. Sufien is disappointed but not upset, and Farah's final comment is very illuminating as to why their mission, as it turns out, never even had to succeed. "We were supposed to destroy their history," he says in their native language. "Don't worry," she replies. "Checco will take care of that" (Figure 10).

On the surface, it is a humorous reminder of Checco's ineptitude which is echoed in the promotional blurb that the producers have included on the back of the media case.¹⁰ On a more allegorical level, however, she is implying that it is unnecessary to attack Italy's unguarded patrimony because no one can do more damage than its very custodians. One can conclude that the terrorists' mission in Italy never needed to succeed because, as Farah herself discovers, Italians are already "incapable of threatening any Muslim," to borrow language from the 1998 "Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders" cited above. In a hermeneutic mode of interpretation, *Che bella giornata*, in its politically and socially incorrect humor, can be said to bear a subtle but scathing message of which many Italians are painfully aware, that Italy's worst enemy is Italy itself.¹¹ Their awareness is practically the diametric opposite of Checco's obliviousness so prominently displayed in the film's poster (Figure 1) and relayed in the title, *What a Beautiful Day*. Checco may know all about how important it is to have connections in his country, but he is

¹⁰ "In poco tempo, con le sue 'spiccate' capacità intellettuali, che provocano infiniti malintesi, è lui a diventare la vera minaccia al patrimonio artistico italiano..." (Nunziante et al. 2011)

¹¹ This message is consonant with the work of Caparezza. Like Zalone-Medici, Caparezza is the rapper's artistic name. As Caparezza, Michele Salvemini is much more capable of being ironic in his sociopolitical criticism. He accepted the invitation to be in the film after having refused to be in so many others out of respect for his friends Nunziante and Medici whose sense of irony is similar to his own. (Moretti 2011)

utterly heedless of how damaging the ramifications of such a culture can be. See more considerations in **Appendix A**.

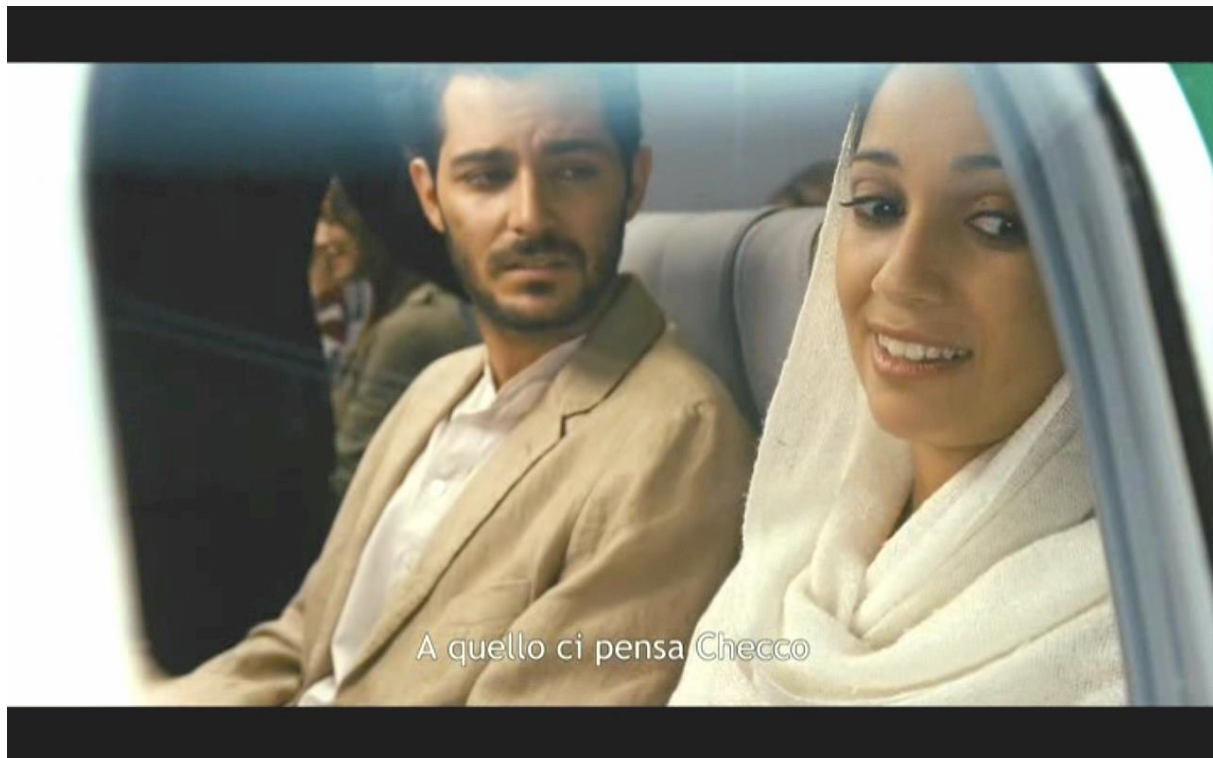


Figure 10.

5. Concluding Remarks

Judgments notwithstanding, the film is meant to entertain rather than moralize, and the filmmakers' intentions should be respected.¹² And while a satire of this style and caliber is very effective for its cultural relevance as well as the actor's performance and wit, one should not neglect to note its strong cathartic element.¹³ Its satirical commentary on nepotism is reflective of what one might perceive as a cultural strategy of catharsis in that many Italians have precisely this vein of sarcastic disregard for the political class and for any hope of bureaucratic efficacy.

A wave of Twitter responses to an Islamic State threat on Rome, on February 19th, 2015, reveals as much: when ISIS posted a message warning Italians of their imminent arrival, Romans replied with warnings about traffic, tips on local restaurants and general complaints

¹² "Il motivo del film sarebbe il contrasto con tutte le altre commedie «sul rapporto tra figli e genitori, storie d'amore, Nel peggiore dei casi, corna. Si cerca di essere corretti nel senso becero del termine. Noi vogliamo invece mettere il dito nella piaga, toccare nervi scoperti. Non abbiamo paura di niente.» Il film fatto per far ridere, non da porre domande." (Incerti 2011)

¹³ O'Leary explores this notably in his volume on the *cinapanettone* (2013). Comedies that are far less socially-engaged than *Che bella giornata* certainly have a market in Italy, appealing to an almost palpable need for escapism. Yet, a more engaged figure such as Checco Zalone connects with a growing wave of immensely popular satirists such as Luciana Littizzetto, Maurizio Crozza and even, to a certain extent, Pif, who provide what appears to be the right balance between pure entertainment and knowing sarcasm, resulting in a more effective catharsis.

about their dilapidated infrastructure, poor civic services and, in at least one case, the fact that Dutch soccer fans had gotten there first (Taylor 2015).

Che bella giornata's comicality is wholly reflective of this attitude. The comedy speaks to Italy's strengths, weaknesses, incongruities and vices in a playful sketch that courts reality just enough to elicit laughter while avoiding the bitter tears hiding on the other side of the comic mask.

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(Appendices overleaf)

Appendix A: With Friends Like These, Who Needs Enemies? An Independent Parallel Occurrence of the Idea Behind Farah's Humorous Final Comment

Ephraim Nissan

In the still from *Che bella giornata* as shown in Figure 10, Farah's final comment is there is no need to destroy Italy's cultural legacy: *A quello ci pensa Checco*. "Checco will take care of that." The present appendix has the purpose of showing that the idea of leaving it to the locals to self-destroy, an idea ascribed to fictional terrorists, turns up humorously elsewhere as well in current Western discourse, which is arguably without that other occurrence depending upon the film *Che bella giornata*.

Simon Jenkins is a former editor of the London newspaper *Evening Standard*. He authors opinion pieces about London's built environment. In an article published on 2 June 2015 (Jenkins 2015), he discussed a phenomenon affecting some very wealthy neighbourhoods: residents' life is turned into a misery once neighbours obtain permission to excavate their basements, sometimes adding several floors underground. Jenkins (2015) began: "The rich are at each other's throats again. The battlefield, as usual, is basements". A particular case prompted the article: an actor with an intellectual penchant had put for sale a house in Hampstead he had built thirty years earlier, because the man at the bottom of his garden", a footballer,

wants a cinema, gym, swimming pool and, from top to bottom, a spiralling 40ft fish tank with wrap-around stairwell. That is what [the singer] Madonna and the Beckhams [a footballer and his wife, a former singer] have, and fellow footballer Stephen Ireland is said to want a shark pool under his kitchen.

One of the paragraphs in the article by Jenkins claims:

Every upmarket Londoner knows that basement wars are not just about ballrooms versus swimming pools. They are new money against old, liberty against authority, beauty against ugliness, good against bad. Normal suburbanites fight over noisy dogs and Leylandii [*sic*]. Rich ones fight over subterranean watercourses, reverse filters and tanking volumes.

In the next paragraph, Simon embedded an idea quite akin to Farah's final comment in the film *Che bella giornata*:

If I were an Islamic State fifth column in London, I would not waste time blowing up Tube [i.e., underground] stations. I would submit planning applications for swimming pools under every other house in Holland Park. Hysteria would break out. The British ruling class would split down the middle and destroy itself.

Arguably, the gist of the idea turning up independently in more than one place is because of the given set of ongoing international conflicts, along with something akin to the proverb "With friends like these, who needs enemies?" Zwicky and Zwicky (1986) is a scholarly paper about punning. Its subtitle is punning on that proverb. The article is entitled "Imperfect puns, markedness and phonological similarity. With fronds like these, who needs anemones".

References of Appendix A

Jenkins, Simon. 2015. "Spare Us the Futile Basements Wars of London's Wealthy: The Row Between Tom Conti and Thierry Henry Just Shows How Vulgar London's Top-End Property Market Has Become". *Evening Standard*, London, 2 June, p. 14.

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Appendix B: Remarks about Mussel Avoidance in Checco Zalone's Film

Ephraim Nissan

While explaining and discussing in Section 3 the plot of the Checco Zalone film *Che bella giornata*, Carlo Anelli explains: "In the case of the two conspirators targeting London, Checco invites them to dinner at his parents' house where they eat copiously and overindulge in raw mussels to the point of getting such a bad case of indigestion the next day that they give up their plan. Disaster averted". Note 8 remarks: "A radio journalist later relays a statement from Osama bin Laden ordering all Muslims to avoid mussels". My own editorial note stated in addition: "Note how this detail reflects widespread crass misunderstanding. Both Islam and Judaism consider mussels (and other invertebrate) to be impermissible food for their respective faith community. That an unfortunate extremist is likely to endorse such a precept, is made to taint the precept by association", and then referred to the present appendix.

There are several things to say about religious dietary laws. Bear in mind that the aetiologies of dietary restrictions on this or that animal kind vary, among schools of Islam, and that the very lists differ, among those schools. In the rest of this note, I use some text from a writing project in progress of mine. Philippe Gignoux (1994) developed a useful comparative survey of dietary restrictions in pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism and Islamic Iran; see especially Sec. IV and Table 4 on pp. 30–31 in Gignoux (1994).

That table has five columns (Mazdeans, Ḥanafīs, Ismā'īlīs, Zaydīs, Imāmīs), and twenty-one rows (wild ass or onager, hare, eel, horse, rock badger, lizard, floating fish, non-fish in water, jerboa, hyaena, hedgehog, fox, creeping things, serpent, birds of prey, mule, domesticated ass, beasts of prey, pig, dog, camel). The relevant rows are those for eel, floating fish, non-fish in water, and perhaps creeping things, whereas an important omission is catfish. For the eel, Gignoux gave its status among the Mazdeans as unknown, among the Ḥanafīs as permitted, among the Ismā'īlīs as sometimes prohibited, among the Zaydīs as "RP" (not in the key list, probably to be read as "AP": absolutely prohibited), and among the Imāmīs as absolutely prohibited.

For floating fish, Gignoux gave their status among the Mazdeans as absolutely prohibited, among the Ḥanafīs as sometimes prohibited, among the Ismā'īlīs as absolutely prohibited, among the Zaydīs sometimes prohibited, and among the Imāmīs as absolutely prohibited. By "non-fish (in water)", Gignoux meant "aquatic animals other than fish". He gave their status among the Mazdeans, Ḥanafīs, Ismā'īlīs, and Imāmīs, as absolutely prohibited, but among the Zaydīs as sometimes prohibited.

Robert Burton ("Democritus Junior"), near the reference to note 3186 in the Gutenberg Project's online version, based upon a 19th-century version with modernised spelling of the 1652 edition of his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, originally of 1621, claimed of the "Turks":

Many foolish ceremonies you shall find in them; and which is most to be lamented, the people are generally so curious in observing of them, that if the least circumstance be omitted, they think they shall be damned, 'tis an irremissible offence, and can hardly be forgiven. I kept in my house amongst my followers (saith Busbequius, sometime the Turk's orator in Constantinople) a Turkey boy, that by chance did eat shellfish, a meat forbidden by their law, but the next day when he knew what he had done, he was not only sick to cast and vomit, but very much troubled in mind, would weep and [6560] grieve many days after, torment himself for his foul offence.

For creeping things, Gignoux gave their status among the Mazdeans and the Imāmīs as absolutely prohibited, and as sometimes prohibited among the Ḥanafīs, Ismā‘īlīs, and Zaydīs. Dietary norms affected various peoples in antiquity, and this was noticed by various Greek scholars. Porphyry, a scholar from the late third century C.E., in his treatise *De Abstinentia*, II, 61 remarked: “For it would be a terrible thing, that while the Syrians do not taste fish and the Hebrews pigs and many of the Phoenicians and the Egyptians cows, and even when many kings strove to change them [perhaps the Jews in particular?] they preferred to suffer death rather than to transgress the law, we choose to transgress the laws of nature and the divine orders because of fear of men or some evil-speaking coming from them” (translated by Stern¹⁴ 1974–1984, Vol. 2, no. 454, and reproduced in Schäfer 1997, p. 75, cf. p. 240, n. 48). “In general, he [Porphyry] views Judaism as superior to Christianity, and thus it is not surprising that he shows a certain understanding of the Jewish abstinence from pork (which may have been supported by his disapproval of eating any meat)” (Schäfer 1997, p. 75). Schäfer (1997, p. 70) remarks: “The Jews and the Egyptian priests are coupled in Sextus Empiricus’ (second century C.E.) statement that ‘a Jew or an Egyptian priest would prefer to die instantly rather than eat pork, while to taste mutton is reckoned an abomination in the eyes of a Libyan, and Syrians think the same about pigeons, and others about cattle’ [*Hypotyposes*, III, 223]. In contrast to Epictetus, this statement is markedly neutral: different people behave differently ‘in respect of food in people’s worship of their gods’ [*Hypotyposes*, III, 222], and there is nothing surprising about it. Dietary laws, like the prohibition of eating pork, belong to the worship of gods, and they are as diverse as the belief in different gods.” The two quotations from Sextus Empiricus’ *Hypotyposes* appear in English translation in Stern (1974–1984, Vol. 2, no. 334).

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¹⁴ Prof. Menahem Stern himself, a historian, died as the result of an act of terror: having been born in 1925, he was knifed on 22 June 1989, while walking to the Jewish National and University Library at the university campus on the hill of Givat Ram through the Valley of the Cross in Jerusalem, a route he did every day.