trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Immigrants in New York: Cinematographic Representations (1898-1914)

Henri Arraes Gervaiseau

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TRANSLATION	Eoin O'Neill
PUBLISHED	April 29, 2021
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	Portuguese
AVAILABLE IN	English, Portuguese
TOPICS	Travel · Cinema
SPACES AND PLACES	Europe · North America
PERIODS	The Steam Atlantic · The Consolidation of Mass Cultures
KEYWORDS	european immigration, new york, representations
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/imigrantes-em-nova-iorque-representacoes-cinematograficas-1898-1914/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Henri Arraes Gervaiseau

Professor titular · Departamento de Cinema, Televisão e Rádio da Escola de Comunicação e Artes · Universidade de São Paulo · Brazil

Henri Arraes Gervaiseau is Professor of Audiovisual Documentary at the Universidade de São Paulo and independent movie maker. His artistic works and scientific publications focus on transnational displacements as well on documentary classic and essayistic films and vídeos. He is author of O abrigo do tempo: abordagens cinematográficas da passagem do tempo (SP: Alameda 2012) and of several documentary and essayistic films and vídeos.

Scenes, episodes, and individuals related to transatlantic movements have been present in the history of US cinema, in a differentiated manner, since the beginning of cinematography, in the form of small and simple records of urban life.

Later, with the progressive consolidation of the US cinema industry in the first two decades of the 20th century, the theme of the coming of European emigrants to America and questions related to this, would serve as a base for the preparation of fictional stories, due to their potential commercial value with the new middle class audience then in formation.

Statue of Liberty, a small film of approximately fifty seconds produced by the Thomas Edison Company, can be considered one of the first cinematographic representations of the arrival of a transatlantic ship in New York port.

VIDEO

View online: http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mbrsmi/lcmp002.m2a01604

> Statue of Liberty, New York. Thomas Edison Company, 1898
>
> **Source:** Library of Congress

In this film, composed of a single shot and dated 3 September 1898, the point of view of the camera is someone situated on the bow of a ship. When the film starts, the camera already frames the ensemble of Liberty Island, which holds the prominent statue of the same name.

The colossal monument is located at the beginning of the film in the center of the frame. As the ships advances the framing alters. At the end of the *travelling shot,* and the film, the statue is positioned in the left corner of the picture.

However, we do not know from what vessel the shot was made or if the cameraman was on a ship coming from Europe when he was filming, ready to finalize its journey at that decisive instant. There is no other human figure in the frame with whom the viewer can identify.

The proposal of the engraving *New York - Welcome to the Land of Freedom,* published years earlier on 2 July 1887, in the weekly publication *Frank Leslie Illustrated Newspaper*, is clearly to offer readers of this widely circulating illustrated publication an angle of the view of the Statue of Liberty similar to that of passengers on a ship transporting them from the Old to the New World.

The point of view offered is of immigrants, portrayed at the moment of entering the port of New York, when standing on the left of the deck they are greeted by a view of the statue, which symbolically welcomes them. The portentous monument, a donation from the French state to the American people, had been opened a few months before, on 28 October 1886.



New York - Welcome to the land of freedom. An ocean steamer passing the statue of liberty: scene on the steerage deck (1887). Frank Leslie Illustrated Newspaper, 02/07/1887

Source: Library of Congress

In their route into the main port of entrance to the New World, after passing Liberty Island, the ships landed at Ellis Island, where between 1892 and 1954, the immigration control center for the port of New York was located, and through which it is estimated that between 12 and 16 million immigrants passed, above all in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Among the first cinematographic records of the entrance of immigrants to US soils, two small films stand out, both centered on the landing of people at Ellis Island. Both are recorded from the point of view of someone on the dock, watching the arrival of a ship or observing the circulation of the flow of immigrants who arrived within some spaces on the island.

The two films belong to the category of film then called *local actuality film*. They showed daily scenes from the city, very popular at the beginning of that century, since the public of the city where they had been shot could expect to recognize themselves on the screen or identify the presence of someone close within the frame.

The oldest recording, from 24 July 1903, *Emigrants [i.e. Immigrants] Landing at Ellis Island,* produced by the Thomas Edison Company, shows three scenes in two and a half minutes.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.loc.gov/item/00694367/

Emigrants [i.e. Immigrants] Landing at Ellis Island, Thomas Edison Company, 1903

Source: Library of Congress

The film begins with a view of the ship *William Myers*, full of passengers, approaching the wharf at the immigration station in Ellis Island. Next, after it has docked, we can see a walkway being placed to allow passengers descend. The first travelers come down. Shortly afterwards many people disembark, frequently holding young children, full of baggage. No figure can be seen controlling the direction of the flow of immigrants within the frame.

The second film, from 9 May 1906, *Arrival of Emigrants [i.e, Immigrants], Ellis Island,* produced by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, and slightly longer than the former (3 min. 45 sec.), contains a slightly higher number of shots and shows the circulation of the large mass of people, also carrying suitcases and packages, in an open air space on the island.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.loc.gov/item/00694368/

> Arrival of Emigrants [i.e. Immigrants], Ellis Island. American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1906
>
> **Source:** Library of Congress

In all the shots in this film, the presence of uniformized men showing the direction to be followed by the new arrivals is flagrant, frequently in a very impatient manner. We understand that at a second moment the crowd is being moved, along a walkway, towards a ship, which we do not see leave, but which we know, as did New York spectators, will bring them to the large American city.

Notable in this *actuality film* is the absence of any shot located within the building where the immigration control center was actually located. This building only appears as an imposing façade behind the great flow of people who, circulating in the open air, move away from the building heading towards another space, that is initially not revealed.

In observing the trajectory of the flow of people circulating in the first two shots, it is clear, for those who knew the topography of the place, that they are leaving the building. The aforementioned absence in this short film of any shot inside the building is particularly significant, as it is due to the difficulties through which immigrants passed in that internal space (and the fear they felt of being sent back to the port from where they had left) that Ellis Island was called, in all languages, *Isle of Tears*.

Nowadays we do not have precise information about the diffusion of *Arrival of Immigrants* (1906), but it is probable that it was larger than that of *Immigrants Landing* (1903), due to the multiplication from 1905 onwards of Nickelodeons, new exhibition spaces that were often frequented by poor immigrants recently arrived in America, due to the low cost of tickets and the flexibility of their opening times.

The establishment on Ellis Island of infrastructure and a diversified body of specialized staff to exercise control over the entrance of immigrants, ended the previous phase of decentralization and an inferior organization of immigration services. It is related to the rapid growth of immigration in the US in the last two decades of the 19th century, and principally in the first two decades of the 20th century.

It is estimated that the greatest *immigration boom* occurred between 1900 and 1914, with the entrance of approximately 13 million immigrants, a number higher than in any other similar period in the history of the country. Until the penultimate decade of the 19th century, the majority of immigrants were from the Nordic regions of the Old World. Now individuals predominated from the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Southern Italy, especially Italy.

At the dawn of the new century, the magnitude of the new influx and its mode of composition served to exacerbate the xenophobic feelings enrooted in various sectors of society and the US political world since the beginning of the previous century.

Striking in the history of US cinema in this period is the proliferation, when the fiction film industry was emerging, of stories in which protagonists of Italian nationality or origin stand out, represented as impulsive, instinctive, or hot blooded, whose stereotyped profiles are often associated with criminals and criminality.

The *American Mutoscope and Biograph Company,* which produced *Arrival of Immigrants* in 1906, released the same year a short melodrama (*The Black Hands*, 1906, 11 min), which offered in the final instance a negative vision of immigrants and their universe in New York. This vision was also present in short films directed in the following years by D. W. Griffith, in which Italian characters or *Oriundi* are important, as in the films *In Little Italy* (1909), *At the Altar* (1909), *The Italian Barber (1910),* or *Italian Blood* (1911).

One of the rare works, according to recent studies, offering an apparently more comprehensive representation of the immigrant experience is *The Italian* (1914, 74 min), directed by Reginald Barker.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zowTkY7p0VU

> The Italian (1914, 74 mn), directed by Reginald Barker
>
> **Source:** Youtube



The Italian (1914)

Source: Wikipedia

This work is emblematic of the period of transition in which it was produced under the command of the celebrated Thomas Ince. The Italian of the title is Beppo, interpreted by Georges Beban, an actor known at the time for his ethnic characteristics, often playing Italian immigrant characters.

The first part of the film takes part in an idealized "old" Italy. The gondolier Beppo is seen in action in Venice and in the rural interior where his beloved Annette lives. She works with her father growing grapes, in a daily routine marked by Catholic religious rites. Beppo is challenged by his future father-in-law to guarantee his daughter proper sustenance and a home, a romantic plot which aims to awaken the sympathy of the public with the combative and until then smiling figure of the groom.

To achieve his objective, Beppo emigrates to America. Working as a shoeshine boy on a New York street, he manages to bring over Annette, with whom he has a son, Tony. In a scene from a second part, Beppo is inadvertently approached by Corrigan, the neighborhood boss, who gives him money for his support for Casey, a candidate for councilor said to be "a friend of the workers." A succession of misfortunes follows, against the movement of what until then seemed to be a celebration of the opportunities opened by immigration into the American golden land.

Beppo's face undergoes a progressive and disturbing physiognomic transformation, accentuated by numerous close shots of his face. Tony becomes seriously ill and his father desperately seeks to make more money to save him. However, he is robbed and erroneously arrested in the place of the those who robbed him. On the way to prison, he manages to escape from the policeman escorting him and asks for help from Corrigan, who happens to be passing by. However, the latter violently refuses him. Leaving prison Beppo is

told of the death of his son. Dominated by a spirit of vengeance, he plans to kill Corrigan's son with his own hands. At the last moment he gives up and in the penultimate scene, he is seen prostrated over Tony's tomb.

In the search for a large audience, the film brings together a complex juxtaposition of codes. The idealized vision of old Italy offered in the first part of the film, as well as the pathetic scene of the existence of Beppo and Annette in New York, suffering from the hardships of the harsh reality of the beginnings of the existence of poor immigrants in urban America, are representations constructed to evoke the emotional identification of an immigrant public. They are also in dialogue with the social realism also present in other types of fiction films from the same period, such as the *ghetto films*, which in the same scenario of urban vulnerability of the Lower East Side of New York, involve a great variety of melodramas and Jewish immigrant characters. On the other hand, it is notable that Beppo's story is framed in the film by a prologue and an epilogue which dialogues with 19th century artistic traditions considered to be noble, such as literature and theater.

The search for the establishment of this dialogue has to be understood within the American cinema industry's efforts at gentrification. In the first two decades of the 20th century, it wanted to acquire cultural respectability. In addition to the proletarian immigrant audiences who flocked to the Nickelodeons, the new industry sought to conquer the rising urban middle class public, composed amongst others of office employees and some categories of more prosperous workers. [1]

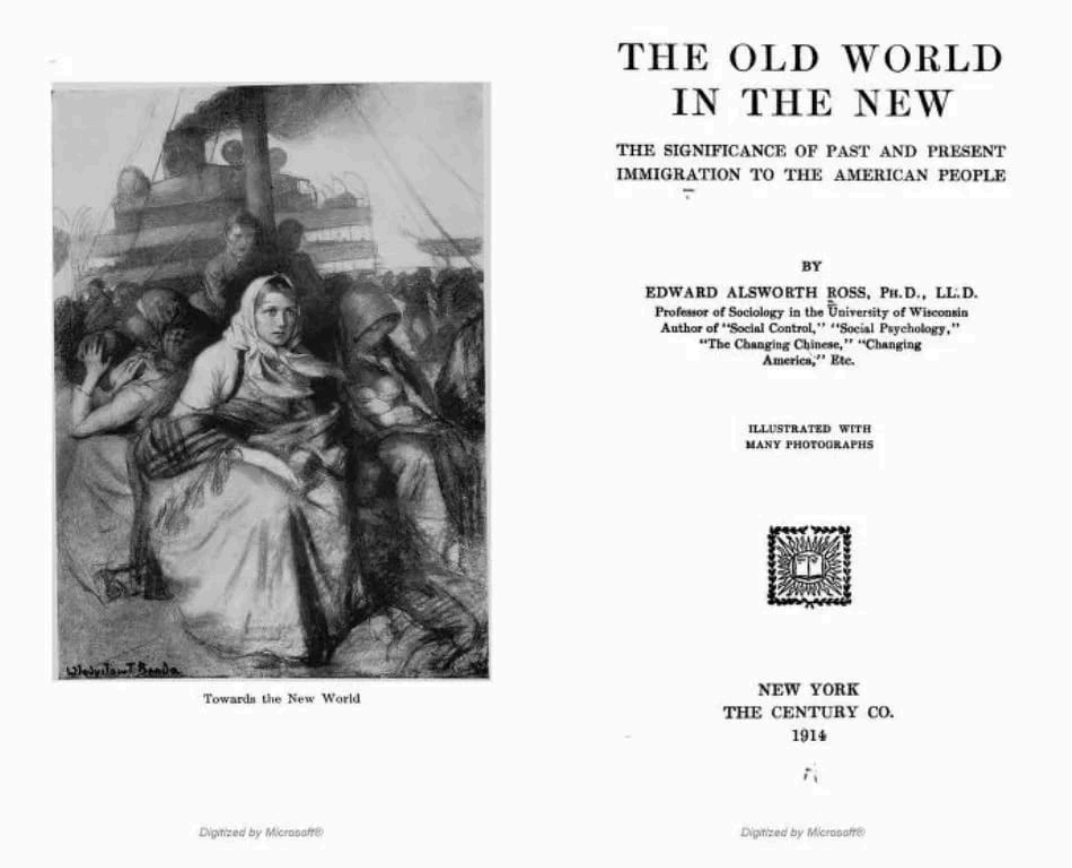
In the first shot of the prologue, we can see two curtains opening, revealing an elegantly dressed man (Georges Beban) inside a bourgeois room, taking a book off a library shelf, whose title is the same as the film. After briefly flicking through the book, the man goes back to the beginning of the first chapter, whose first phrases, which appear on the screen, describe an action we will see represented immediately after, when the diegesis effectively begins.

The epilogue comes just after the scene in which we see Beppo, disconsolate, beside the tomb of his son. The elegant figure of the reader of the prologue reappears, reading the last page of the book. Before the curtains close, marking the end of the film, on the screen appear the phrases of the last page, which describe the scene we have just seen, leaving the individual on the screen pensive. This theatrical framing offers the middle class spectator the opportunity of distance from the harsh reality evoked in the diegesis.

Although Barker's film constitutes a more comprehensive representation of the life of Italian immigrants in America than the majority of films of the period, its story results in a discouragement of transatlantic immigration and also contains, as Norma Bouchard has emphasized, echoes of the strong ascension in the period of the classic repertoire of currents of nativist opinions.

This current, opposed to what were called the *new immigrants*, propagated, amongst other ideas, the belief that the Mediterranean peoples were morally inferior to the Europeans in the North. It was also thought that the coming of immigrants from the South of Europe to America could cause the decline of American intelligence.

This vision of the world was defended in the same year it was released in the book significantly entitled *The Old World in the New* by the then renowned professor Edward Ross, from the University of Wisconsin.



Towards the New World

THE OLD WORLD
IN THE NEW

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PAST AND PRESENT
IMMIGRATION TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

BY
EDWARD ALSWORTH ROSS, PH.D., LL.D.
Professor of Sociology in the University of Wisconsin
Author of "Social Control," "Social Psychology,"
"The Changing Chinese," "Changing
America," Etc.

ILLUSTRATED WITH
MANY PHOTOGRAPHS

NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.
1914

Digitized by Microsoft®

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Edward Ross, *The Old World in the New*, New York, The Century Co., 1914

Source: Archive.org

Effectively while the story unfolds, Beppo acquires traits of *a racialized other*. Facing adversity and injustice, the *Oriundi* promptly adopts criminal, vengeful, and illegal behavior. We can perceive echoes of eugenics when the image of his face takes all the space on the screen.

Considered as a whole, the film resonates the anxieties of American society at that period, which was increasingly embarking on aggressive legislative policies that aimed to regulate "the flow of undesirable immigrants in the name of an imagined cultural, spiritual, and race identity whose echoes can still be heard today." [2]

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NOTES

1 Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon: spectatorship in American Silent Film*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

2 Norma Bouchard, "Screening the silent film: Reginald Baker and the ressurgence of American nativism." *The Cultures of Italian Migration. Diverses Trajectories and Discrete Perspective*, ed. Graziella Parati and Anthony

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