

A racist movie in the United States, a progressive masterpiece in Italy? The American and Italian critical receptions of *The Blues Brothers* (1980)

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ABSTRACT

Le recensioni americane e italiane di *The Blues Brothers* (John Landis, 1980) furono influenzate dai rispettivi contesti storici nazionali. Dopo il movimento per i diritti civili e durante una nuova ondata di razzismo, negli Stati Uniti la rappresentazione dei neri da parte del film fu considerata problematica ed esso ricevette numerosi giudizi negativi. Invece l'Italia stava attraversando un'epoca politicizzata e la critica italiana si concentrò sulla distruzione delle auto della polizia e sulle azioni contro i neonazisti da parte dei Blues Brothers; di conseguenza, il film fu interpretato come progressista e quasi tutte le recensioni furono positive.

Parole-chiave. Critica cinematografica; Recensioni; Ricezione critica; Interpretazione; Razzismo

American and Italian reviews of *The Blues Brothers* (John Landis, 1980) from the time of the film's theatrical release were influenced by each country's historical context. After the civil rights movement and a new proliferation of white supremacist organizations in the United States, *The Blues Brothers*' representation and treatment of black people was judged problematic, and the movie received several negative evaluations. Meanwhile, Italy was going through a politically polarized era, and Italian critics focused on *The Blues Brothers*' destruction of police cars and actions against neo-Nazis; consequently, the movie was interpreted as a progressive production, and most reviews were positive.

Keywords. Reception; Reviews; Evaluation; Interpretation; Racism

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When Hollywood blockbuster and musical comedy *The Blues Brothers* – a Universal picture directed by John Landis, written by Landis and Dan Aykroyd, produced by Robert K. Weiss, starring John Belushi (Jake Blues) and Aykroyd (Elwood Blues) – was released in the United States in June 1980, it was not well received by American film reviewers. The movie was criticized for its representation of black characters, and sometimes explicitly condemned as racist. This negative interpretation spilled over into the evaluation of various formal elements. A few months later, however, the Italian critical reception of *The Blues Brothers* was generally positive, and Landis' movie was even considered antifascist.

In order to shed light on – and to compare – these conflicting receptions, the present essay will apply Janet Staiger's historical materialist approach to reception studies¹. Staiger argues that «variations among interpretations have historical bases for their differences», and that these variations are «due to social [and] political [...] conditions, as well as to constructed identities such as [...] nationality»². She adds that not only interpretations, but also «evaluations»³ are the object of political debate. This essay will examine how each of these national receptions was influenced by its context, proceeding with a contextualization of the reviews written by US and Italian critics at the time of the movie's theatrical release.

In particular while analyzing the Italian critical reception of this American movie, in other words while analyzing a cross-cultural and cross-national reception, the article's methodology is also informed by Leila Wimmer's 2009 study on the French critical reception of British cinema, which demonstrates how films are appropriated differently in different national contexts⁴.

The overall reception of Landis' movie is so similar among the writings of each country as to overcome the opposition which usually exists between the

¹ Cfr. J. STAIGER, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992.

² *Ivi*, p. XI.

³ *Ivi*, p. 96. Staiger delves into the issue of constructed identities, especially gender ones, in her next book. Cfr. ID., *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, New York University Press, New York 2000.

⁴ Cfr. L. WIMMER, *Cross-Channel Perspectives: The French Reception of British Cinema*, Peter Lang, New York 2009.

mainstream press (dailies and weeklies) and specialist film magazines⁵. This allows comparisons between different periodicals.

The present essay is devoted to critical reception and therefore does not study audience reception. The Italian reviews in the essay come from the main dailies, and from all the country's film magazines at the time. Due to the greater number of periodicals existing in the United States (compared to Italy), I chose to focus on the most famous American reviews of *The Blues Brothers*⁶, making the assumption that the ones most quoted today were influential at the time they were published.

The first section of this essay gives a general overview of the film's evaluation in the United States and in Italy at the time of its theatrical release. The second section briefly introduces the sociopolitical contexts of the movie's original exhibition in both countries. The third section follows the influence of context on the film's evaluation, showing how social and political factors contribute to the interpretation of a movie.

Scathing opprobrium versus positive evaluation

The Blues Brothers was released in the United States on June 20, 1980, and quickly received several negative⁷ reviews, including from the progressive periodical «The

⁵ Even if for the case of *The Blues Brothers* this opposition does not introduce major changes in terms of reception and rhetoric, I am aware that there are always differences between mainstream and specialist press. Cfr. C. BISONI, *La critica cinematografica. Metodo, storia e scrittura*, ArchetipoLibri, Bologna 2006, pp. 9-12; M. FREY, *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2015, p. 17.

⁶ For the bibliographical references to these American reviews, cfr. R.S. DENISOFF, W.D. ROMANOWSKI, *Risky Business: Rock in Film*, Routledge, London 2016, nn. 35-39.

⁷ Cfr. D. ANSEN, *Up From Hunger*, in «Newsweek», 30 June 1980, p. 62; G. ARNOLD, *Oh, Brothers!*, in «The Washington Post», 21 June 1980, pp. F1, F5; C. CHAMPLIN, *A \$30-Million Wreck, Minus Laughs*, in «Los Angeles Times», 20 June 1980, p. F1; R. CORLISS, *A Great Rock-'n'-Roll Caravan*, in «Time», 7 July 1980, p. 44; D. DENBY, *Two-Faced Blues*, in «New York Magazine», 30 June 1980, pp. 52-54; D. EISENSTARK, *The Blues Brothers*, in «Jump Cut», n. 23, 1980, pp. 1, 31; R. HATCH, *Films*, in «The Nation», 19-26 July 1980, pp. 92-93; P. KAEL, *Muckrakers and Saints*, in «New Yorker», 7 July 1980, pp. 90, 93-97; A. KENEAS, *The Blues Brothers*, in «Newsday», 20 June 1980, pp. 7, 10; J. MASLIN, *A Musical Tour*, in «The New York Times», 20 June 1980, p. C16; T. MCCARTHY, *The Blues Brothers*, in «Variety», 18 June 1980, p. 22; A. SARRIS, *Can't Stop the Blues*

Nation». It was then distributed in Italy in an Italian dubbed version, starting on November 13, 1980, in Rome and Bologna, and in early December in Milan and Turin (among other cities); for this reason, some Italian reviews of the movie were not published until 1981⁸. Most Italian reviews were positive⁹, and some were very enthusiastic¹⁰.

The critical evaluations of *The Blues Brothers* in Italy were almost entirely at odds with the equivalent evaluations in the United States. For instance, American reviewers criticized what they saw as bad editing¹¹ («Landis cuts back and forth from one camera angle to another in time to the music, [turning the movie] into an editing-table *tour de force*, ruining our pleasure»)¹² and as sloppy filmmaking¹³, while Italian reviewers often extolled Landis' directorial skills for this movie and admired the energetic and rhythmical editing¹⁴. In the United States, Aykroyd and Belushi were judged neither a good comedic duo¹⁵, nor good performers¹⁶. On

Brothers, in «Village Voice», 2 July 1980, p. 33; E. ZIBART, *Belushi & Aykroyd Turn Their Blues into Blabs*, in «The Washington Post: Weekend», 27 June 1980, p. 19.

⁸ Cfr, for instance, E. LEONI, *Risate grosse, talento fino*, in «CM», n. 43, 1981, pp. 19-22.

⁹ Among others, cfr. C. ALBERTINI, *The Blues Brothers*, in «Il Popolo», 16 November 1980, p. 13; A. MAZZA, *The Blues Brothers*, in «Il Tempo», 14 November 1980, p. 10; M. PEPOLI, *Due fratelli scombinati*, in «Il Messaggero», 14 November 1980, p. 10; S. REGGIANI, *Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, i Blues e la banda benefica per pagare le tasse*, in «La Stampa», 12 December 1980, p. 21.

¹⁰ Cfr, for instance, S. REZOAGLI, *Una strepitosa cavalcata con musiche e casicatori*, in «Avvenire», 9 December 1980, p. 8.

¹¹ Cfr. ARNOLD, cit., p. F5; MASLIN, cit.

¹² DENBY, *Two-Faced Blues*, cit., p. 53.

¹³ «[*The Blues Brothers* is] wretchedly shot». ARNOLD, cit., p. F1. «Landis seems no surer of his visual style than he does of his movie's tone, so he tries everything: shots angled from a dog's- or a god's-eye view». CORLISS, *A Great Rock-'n'-Roll Caravan* cit.

¹⁴ Cfr. R. FEGATELLI, *Siamo una jazz-band e questa è una rapina*, in «La Repubblica», 15 November 1980, p. 14; D. GRIECO, *Due uragani a tempo di rock*, in «l'Unità» Roma, 14 November 1980, p. 9; R. SILVESTRI, *The Blues Brothers*, in «il manifesto», 15 November 1980, p. 5; P. PISARRA, *The Blues Brothers*, in «Rivista del Cinematografo», n. 1, 1981, pp. 42-43; G. TURRONI, *The Blues Brothers*, in «Filmcritica», n. 313, 1981, p. 177.

¹⁵ Cfr. ARNOLD, cit., p. F5; DENBY, *Two-Faced Blues*, cit., p. 52.

¹⁶ Cfr. KAEI, *Muckrakers and Saints*, cit., p. 96; ZIBART, *Belushi & Aykroyd Turn Their Blues into Blabs*, cit.

the other hand, Italian reviewers loved Belushi and Aykroyd's acting¹⁷.

Some positive reviews were printed in the United States¹⁸. Archer Winsten, the longtime film critic for the «New York Post», considered *The Blues Brothers* an «extraordinary movie»¹⁹ in an article written just a few years before his retirement. Not all Italian reviews were positive, either: the famous critic Callisto Cosulich signed a mixed review for the daily newspaper «Paese Sera»²⁰.

Both the American and Italian critical evaluations included unique features that could be found in one country but not in the other. For instance, a unique feature of the Italian critical reception was the highlighting of «nonsense»²¹, «paradox»²², and the surreal²³ in *The Blues Brothers*, along with the fact that Italian reviewers saw it as a positive characteristic, since they were in the midst of discovering the concept of (comic) *nonsense*, a term which had recently been imported from the English language and was still used and written in its original English form.

Nonsense humor was not the only reason for Italian reviewers' highly favorable evaluations, however. The main causes of the positive Italian critical reception, and of the negative American views, can be found in the social and political contexts of the two nations at that time.

Sociopolitical contexts

The United States had already experienced mass opposition to discrimination against black Americans: the civil rights movement²⁴, the vast protest movement

¹⁷ Cfr. V. BOARINI, *Due fratelli un orfanotrofio e tanti guai*, in «Il Resto del Carlino», 15 November 1980, p. v; A. FALVO, *Fracassone e divertente*, in «Corriere d'Informazione», 9 December 1980, p. 17; TURRONI, *The Blues Brothers*, cit.

¹⁸ Cfr. for instance, C. MCGOWAN, *Blues Brothers Hilarious*, in «Billboard», 28 June 1980, p. 79.

¹⁹ A. WINSTEN, *Don't Miss the Blues, Brother*, in «New York Post», 20 June 1980, p. 33.

²⁰ Cfr. C. COSULICH, *Un musical d'inseguimento*, in «Paese Sera», 14 November 1980, p. 12.

²¹ Cfr. FEGATELLI, *Siamo una jazz-band e questa è una rapina*, cit.; E. MARTINI, *L'irridente dissidenza del catacomico*, in «Cineforum», n. 202, 1981, pp. 16-20.

²² BOARINI, *Due fratelli un orfanotrofio e tanti guai*, cit. (my translation); MARTINI, *L'irridente dissidenza del catacomico*, cit., p. 17.

²³ Cfr. TURRONI, *The Blues Brothers*, cit.

²⁴ For a history of the civil rights movement, cfr. H. ZINN, *A People's History of the United States*,

which started with the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and continued through the Sixties. It was the first time that black (and white) Americans rose massively against the discrimination which black citizens were still forced to endure in the United States.

Towards the end of the Seventies, discrimination and racism again made the front pages of American newspapers. First of all, there was a new proliferation of white supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan: by the late Seventies, the KKK had tripled its membership²⁵. *The Blues Brothers*' Illinois Nazis were based on the real National Socialist Party of America (NSPA), whose headquarters were in a previously all-white neighborhood of Chicago, where the NSPA demonstrated against 'new' black neighbors. In July 1978, the NSPA organized a rally in Chicago's Marquette Park to celebrate the US Supreme Court's recent decision affirming their right to demonstrate on First Amendment grounds. These real events are summarized by the explanation that a policeman gives the Blues Brothers for a traffic jam in the middle of a park: the neo-Nazis «won their court case, so they're marching today». That part of the movie is almost a reenactment of the 1978 NSPA Chicago rally and counter-demonstration against it – with the fictional addition of the brothers driving into the rally and forcing the Nazis to dive into the river.

Other signs of a resurgence of racism against black Americans include police brutality, which led to the Miami riot in May 1980, in the wake of the not-guilty verdict for the four white officers involved in the killing of Arthur McDuffie in Dade County (of which Miami is the county seat)²⁶. This is the historical atmosphere that led to the election of conservative Republican Ronald Reagan as President of the United States just a few months later, in November 1980²⁷.

In the late Seventies and early Eighties, racism was also an issue in Italy. In May 1979, a group of young Italians burned alive Ahmed Ali Giama, a Somali man who was sleeping rough in a Rome square²⁸.

Longman, London 1994, pp. 442-459.

²⁵ Cfr. *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, edited by R.D.G. Kelley, E. Lewis, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 574.

²⁶ Cfr. *Ivi*, p. 573.

²⁷ Cfr. R. PERLSTEIN, *Reaganland: America's Right Turn, 1976-1980*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2020.

²⁸ For the account of this violent and gratuitous action, cfr. G. CRAINZ, *Il paese reale. Dall'assassinio*

But the public discourse surrounding race was completely different: while black Americans' struggle against discrimination was already widely acknowledged in the United States, the principle of equality remained an abstract subject in the 'white' Italy of the time. Italians were unprepared for a serious consideration of African immigration into Italy, a phenomenon that was just beginning to happen²⁹. In Italy, the word *negro* – the same in Italian and English – was still commonly employed (to describe black people) without causing controversy, even in the press. Several Italian reviews of *The Blues Brothers* used the word «negro»³⁰, although some synonyms already existed, such as the more neutral word *nero*³¹ (black). Italian reviewers did not ask themselves if *The Blues Brothers* might be potentially racist.

Moreover, Italy was experiencing the actions of far-left armed groups like the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*), and a wave of terrorism committed by far-right militants³². For instance, it was precisely in 1980 that the explosion of a bomb placed by neo-Fascists at the Bologna central railway station killed eighty-five people (August 2, 1980)³³. Because of this wave of armed violence and fear, the issue of race could not be part of the country's political and social agenda, also due to the demographic reasons already explained. The wave of political violence amplified the left/right divide, as well as the political interpretation of movies³⁴.

di Moro all'Italia di oggi, Donzelli, Rome 2013, pp. 78-79. For the year 1979 in Italy, cfr. P. MORANDO, *Dancing Days. 1978-1979, i due anni che hanno cambiato l'Italia*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2009.

²⁹ Cfr. L. CASALINO, C. SIMONCINI, *La società italiana e l'immigrazione: storia, leggi e rappresentazioni*, Chemins de tr@verse, Paris 2020; M. COLUCCI, *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia. Dal 1945 ai nostri giorni*, Carocci, Rome 2018; D. DI SANZO, *Braccia e persone. Storia dell'immigrazione in Italia ai tempi di Jerry Masslo (1980-1990)*, Claudiana, Turin 2020.

³⁰ Cfr. FALVO, *Fracassone e divertente*, cit.; GRIECO, *Due uragani a tempo di rock*, cit.; SILVESTRI, *The Blues Brothers*, cit.; R. TENCA, *The Blues Brothers*, in «Letture», n. 374, 1981, pp. 149-150.

³¹ Silvestri employs this word in his review, for example.

³² Cfr. the chapter focusing on the year 1980 in CRAINZ, *Il paese reale. Dall'assassinio di Moro all'Italia di oggi*, cit., pp. 43-47. For the year 1980 in Italy, cfr. also P. GINSBORG, *L'Italia del tempo presente. Famiglia, società civile, Stato. 1980-1996*, Einaudi, Torino 1998.

³³ Cfr. the chapter devoted to the Bologna massacre by M. GOTOR, *L'Italia nel Novecento*, Einaudi, Torino 2019, pp. 415-420.

³⁴ Cfr. I. MOLITERNI, *Spazi e ruoli della critica cinematografica italiana nel decennio della grande occasione*, in «Bianco e Nero», n. 585, 2016, p. 110.

From contexts to film reception

In the late Seventies and early Eighties, in the post-civil rights movement United States undergoing a 'comeback' of white supremacist organizations such as the KKK and smaller groups like the NSPA, there was growing concern about discrimination against black Americans.

For example, according to David Denby – a film critic born in 1943³⁵ –, «Belushi and Aykroyd doubtless intended to pay homage to the great black performers who have inspired them, but the homage often comes close to insult»³⁶. The tribute was condescending because *The Blues Brothers* «consigns the authentic greats to backup roles»³⁷. These famous black music stars were not treated as protagonists, and they also appeared «too rarely»³⁸ – as Richard Corliss, «Time» magazine's film reviewer for many years, put it.

Neither Denby³⁹ nor Douglas Eisenstark appreciated Cab Calloway's musical number, for the same reason. «His song comes as a filler for the tardy Jake and Elwood, who are late getting to the plush ballroom. In real life, Cab Calloway can fill any concert hall in the world, yet here he is shown only as a diversion for the restless crowd»⁴⁰.

Hollywood cinema is not the only art form which ideologically mirrors the marginalization imposed on black Americans. US critics in 1980 built their thesis of *The Blues Brothers*' ideological ambiguity on their knowledge of American film history, as well as American popular music history, and this knowledge was naturally more extensive than that possessed by Italian critics. For instance, Eisenstark mentioned how Benny Goodman was the most well-paid *jazz* musician of the Thirties, instead of his black contemporaries Count Basie and Duke Ellington⁴¹. After implicitly comparing such historical examples to what

³⁵ Cfr. P. LOPATE, *American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents Until Now*, Library of America, New York 2008, p. 579.

³⁶ DENBY, *Two-Faced Blues*, cit., p. 52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ CORLISS, *A Great Rock-'n'-Roll Caravan*, cit.

³⁹ Cfr. DENBY, *Two-Faced Blues*, cit., p. 52.

⁴⁰ EISENSTARK, *The Blues Brothers*, cit., p. 1.

⁴¹ Cfr. *Ibid.*

the Blues Brothers – both as a movie and as a real musical duo – were doing to the ‘blues’, Eve Zibart noted her fear that «two white imitators are making all the money out of this salute to an integrally black idiom. Again.»⁴².

US film critics expressed their sense that whereas *The Blues Brothers* was set in the present day, it seemed to convey a state of mind from before the civil rights movement of the Fifties and Sixties. Some American reviewers explicitly compared the movie to pre-Fifties films. For instance, Denby defined Landis’ blockbuster as a

\$30-million expansion of a ramshackle old Hollywood musical revue (like *The Big Broadcast of 1938*) [...]. Those vaudeville musicals, their unrelated musical numbers stitched together with comedy routines, often featured [...] black singers and dancers who would never get the chance to star in a movie of their own. Racism was built into the form. Well, things haven’t changed all that much in forty-five years⁴³.

Some weeks after Denby’s critique, a text by Stephen Harvey was published in the specialist bimonthly «Film Comment»:

The authentic practitioners of [blues] music are relegated to the status of vivid window dressing, while their imitators hog the spotlight and garner two (count ‘em) onscreen standing ovations. In 1947, a movie called *New Orleans* cast Billie Holiday as Dorothy Patrick’s maid who sings on the side; in 1980, Aretha Franklin gets to be Dan Aykroyd’s waitress. The difference is that, back in the Forties, nobody was deluded into pretending that this was a hip, heartfelt tribute to the lady’s talents⁴⁴.

As a matter of fact, Franklin’s character is not only a waitress (we can see her taking customers’ food orders), but also the proprietor of the small restaurant where her musical number is set. During that scene, she clearly says in a line: «this is my restaurant».

⁴² ZIBART, *Belushi & Aykroyd Turn Their Blues into Blabs*, cit.

⁴³ DENBY, *Two-Faced Blues*, cit., p. 52.

⁴⁴ S. HARVEY, *Can’t Stop the Remakes*, in «Film Comment», n. 5, 1980, p. 51.

Historical context can influence the reception of a film in any review, and this is also what happened for the Italian reviews of *The Blues Brothers*. Writing in the daily «La Repubblica», Renzo Fegatelli described how the two protagonists got the idea «of reuniting the band»⁴⁵: «the director doesn't reveal right away whether the band is an armed group or a musical band»⁴⁶. Three days before the printing of Fegatelli's review, on November 12, 1980, the Red Brigades' latest action – the killing of industrial manager Renato Briano in Milan – had been on the front pages of Italian newspapers, and Fegatelli was certainly aware of it.

Social debates can also determine aesthetic evaluation. In the United States in 1980, where a rising tide of discrimination, racism, and white supremacy was a frequent topic of public debate, most reviews of *The Blues Brothers* argued not only that it contained a negative representation of its black characters – or at least a white/black opposition – but also that it was a bad movie aesthetically. The interpretation of Landis' film as paternalistic, discriminatory, or truly racist (towards its black characters) informed the evaluation of the film's formal elements. This is why Denby wrote that «visually, the movie is cluttered and graceless»⁴⁷, for example.

One of the first American reviews of *The Blues Brothers*, published in «Variety» on June 18, 1980⁴⁸, set the tone. The review asserted that the movie was a «tribute by white boys to black musical culture», and it concluded that the «film offers modest pleasures»⁴⁹.

A similar transfer of judgment from content to form can be seen in Eisenstark's text written for «Jump Cut», a film journal which openly staked a claim to a radical Marxist position and a defense of minorities; for this reason, Eisenstark – a white critic born in Kansas – pushed the ideological interpretation of Landis' movie to the extreme:

⁴⁵ FEGATELLI, *Siamo una jazz-band e questa è una rapina*, cit. (my translation).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* (my translation).

⁴⁷ DENBY, *Two-Faced Blues*, cit., p. 52.

⁴⁸ The magazine's columnist had attended a press screening a few days before the national theatrical release.

⁴⁹ MCCARTHY, *The Blues Brothers*, cit.

It may be simplistic but necessary to state that blacks have been denied artistic control, through exclusion, from the film's major roles: [executive] producer (Bernie Brillstein), director (John Landis), writers (John Landis and Dan Aykroyd) and main actors (John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd). This means that the film will, as a matter of course, be a reflection of the filters, distortions and censures that bourgeois ideology and bourgeois demands place on blacks⁵⁰.

Eisenstark considered *The Blues Brothers*' treatment of black people to be problematic, and this led him to notice flaws or mistakes in some formal elements of the movie: «none of the musical sequences were [...] edited particularly well»; for instance, in the first musical number, set in a church and featuring James Brown, «the music is badly dubbed and the congregation is edited out of sync with it»⁵¹.

Eisenstark concluded his analysis of this musical number by criticizing the sequence for having «no meaning»⁵², while Italian critics of the same time admired precisely this absence of meaning, and interpreted it as a comic strategy. In his polemic comment on the ending of the movie, Eisenstark emphasized (also by adding italics) that, «although by means of the concert they are able to raise the money in time to save the orphanage, the *entire* band ends up in prison»⁵³. The incarceration of the whole Blues Brothers Band appeared impossible to Eisenstark, since only the two protagonists are responsible for the traffic violations and the consequent destruction of police cars.

According to Italian reviewers, such as «Corriere della Sera»'s Giovanna Grassi, the ending was a comic⁵⁴ moment, and thus another example of nonsense humor. On the contrary, for Eisenstark and for most American critics, the ending and other sequences of the movie seemed too unrealistic, and were judged negatively. This happened because those US critics chose realism as the key to

⁵⁰ EISENSTARK, *The Blues Brothers*, cit., p. 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Cfr. FALVO, *Fracassone e divertente*, cit.; G. GRASSI, *Fra la farsa e il concerto*, in «Corriere della Sera» Rome, 14 November 1980, p. 21.

interpreting *The Blues Brothers*, perhaps guided by the original poster: a photograph of the two protagonists looking seriously towards the camera, and behind them a featureless, industrial, and gray landscape – this poster was probably meant to stress the deadpan humor of the two.

The realist interpretation led American film critics to harshly judge the way *The Blues Brothers* treats and represents black musicians: «in their own way director John Landis, Belushi, and Aykroyd recolonize the black performers»⁵⁵. This statement speaks to a point in Pauline Kael's review. If Kael, the famous film critic, usually looked for subversion in movies⁵⁶, she did not find it at all in *The Blues Brothers*; on the contrary, she even saw some reactionary elements, such as the «patronizing casting of the black performers»⁵⁷. As for Eisenstark, he concluded that *The Blues Brothers* «has a “well-intentioned” and patronizingly racist relation to blacks»⁵⁸.

While American reviewers saw a reactionary attitude, Italian critics saw subversion. One of the car chases between the police and the Blues Brothers takes place inside a shopping mall, damaging many stores. In his review for «L'Espresso», Alberto Moravia proposed to «interpret these disembowelments of stores as an indictment of the American way of life»⁵⁹ and its cult of supermarkets and shopping malls.

Moreover, most Italian reviewers⁶⁰ were fascinated by the enormous destruction of police cars. These reviewers were probably inspired by the Italian printed advertisement: a collage featuring the brothers dancing on an overturned police car – such an image is not a frame of the movie but a collage of two different frames (the protagonists dancing during a musical number, and a crashed police car). For Italians, this image could easily evoke the mix of dance, destruction and subversion that had been popularized by the Italian press in its

⁵⁵ DENBY, *Two-Faced Blues*, cit., p. 52.

⁵⁶ ID., *My Life as a Paulette*, in «New Yorker», 20 October 2003, p. 170.

⁵⁷ KAEI, *Muckrakers and Saints*, cit., p. 97.

⁵⁸ EISENSTARK, *The Blues Brothers*, cit., p. 31.

⁵⁹ A. MORAVIA, *L'allegria ha la faccia blu*, in «L'Espresso», 7 December 1980, p. 196 (my translation).

⁶⁰ Among others, cfr. BOARINI, *Due fratelli un orfanotrofio e tanti guai*, cit.; GRIECO, *Due uragani a tempo di rock*, cit.; SILVESTRI, *The Blues Brothers*, cit.

account of the leftist insurrectional Movement of 1977⁶¹.

An Italian reviewer even declared that *The Blues Brothers* had an «anti-police taste»⁶². In the movie, the main antagonists are the police and the neo-Nazis, as noticed explicitly by some Italian critics⁶³. The peninsula was still experiencing massive leftist protests that were often repressed by the police and whose activists were sometimes attacked by neo-Fascists. Italian film reviewers, who were almost entirely on the left side of the political spectrum⁶⁴, interpreted *The Blues Brothers* politically and praised it as antifascist. Progressive film critic Emanuela Martini, born in 1948, claimed in the specialist monthly «Cineforum» that, after all, «dance, music, and laughter are elements of dissent»⁶⁵.

Roberto Silvestri, a participant in the 1968 and 1977 protests, signed a favorable review of *The Blues Brothers* published in daily newspaper «il Manifesto». Silvestri chose a leftist political interpretation and asserted that Landis «introduces, and then ridicules, all the evil, stupid bad boys of WASP immobilism (from the Illinois Nazi Party to the soldiers)»⁶⁶. Here, too, sociopolitical critique affected aesthetic evaluation: Silvestri loved Landis' filmmaking, and extolled his picture as «vibrant, fast, euphoric»⁶⁷.

Similarly, David Grieco's review printed in the daily «l'Unità», combined a political interpretation of *The Blues Brothers* with white fascination for black culture. Born in 1951, Grieco stated that Landis' movie contained «the combative nostalgia of at least a couple of generations who grew up with music in their veins, and who are obsessed with the “desire for having a black skin”, as Nino Ferrer sang, if you recall. Those same generations that exclaimed “All power to the imagination!”»⁶⁸, a slogan from the 1968 protests. The two (Italian)

⁶¹ For a history of this Italian movement, cfr. L. FALCIOLA, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*, Carocci, Rome 2015.

⁶² SILVESTRI, *The Blues Brothers*, cit. (my translation).

⁶³ For instance, cfr. GRIECO, *Due uragani a tempo di rock*, cit.

⁶⁴ Cfr. A. PEZZOTTA, *La critica cinematografica*, Carocci, Rome 2007, p. 31.

⁶⁵ MARTINI, *L'irridente dissidenza del catacomico*, cit., p. 18 (my translation).

⁶⁶ SILVESTRI, *The Blues Brothers*, cit. (my translation).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* (my translation).

⁶⁸ GRIECO, *Due uragani a tempo di rock*, cit. (my translation).

generations are Grieco's one and the previous one, who lived through the movement of 1968 in their youth. Grieco saw *The Blues Brothers* as progressive because – in his opinion – it showed black music in all its might; and because white leftist Italian reviewers interested in black culture could identify with the two white protagonists who feel nostalgic for the old (black) blues.

This positive interpretation led to a very favorable formal evaluation of the film: Grieco wrote that *The Blues Brothers* «supports the musical numbers as rarely seen before, thanks to ecstatic editing, possessed by feeling»⁶⁹. This was, of course, the same fast, highly rhythmic editing that was despised by American reviewers.

Conclusion

In the process of judging *The Blues Brothers*' quality, Italian film critics positively assessed the same aesthetic and formal elements that were considered negatively by American critics. For example, according to the US reviewers of 1980, there were too many changes of camera angles. On the other hand, for the Italian reviewers of the time, this editing style contributed to the vitality of Landis' movie.

Those assessments, and in broader terms the evaluation choices made by film critics, can be explained by the reviews' historical context: the fact that a movie (or an element of a movie) obtains a positive reception in one country and a negative reception in another country depends on available discourses and interpretive strategies – available in a given place and at a given point in history.

In the United States of the late Seventies and early Eighties, the most common film interpretive strategy was rooted in the ongoing national discussion of race, because the country was in the post-civil rights era, and because there was fear of an ample expansion of white supremacy (especially in the forms of the American neo-Nazi groups and of the KKK)⁷⁰. US reviewers thus considered *The Blues Brothers*' representation and treatment of black characters problematic at best and racist at worst. American critics saw the movie as a realist

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* (my translation).

⁷⁰ The spread of British cultural studies in the United States, with its stress on the visual representation of minorities, may also have influenced some of the critics.

depiction of contemporary society, while Italian ones saw it as a nonsense comedy.

In Italy, the most widespread interpretive strategy at the time was political, because the country was still experiencing a highly politicized period, with leftist mass protests – like the Movement of 1977 – as well as violent actions committed by neo-Fascist terrorists and far-left armed groups. After linking the Blues Brothers' dancing (and music) and destruction to the political concepts of subversion and dissent, Italian reviewers analyzed Landis' movie politically. They were amazed by the gargantuan wreckage of police cars, as well as by the protagonists' victory over the far-right antagonists. They did not consider *The Blues Brothers*' representation of black characters to be problematic because questions of race had not yet been widely raised in Italy. Most reviewers empathized with the two white protagonists, who admire black musicians as much as they abhor far-right militants. Consequently, *The Blues Brothers* was considered an antifascist or a progressive production.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the interpretation given to the movie influenced the film's evaluation. In the United States, the interpretation was so negative that even some formal elements were criticized, and Landis' movie was torn apart as a failure. In Italy, the interpretation was so positive that the movie was considered almost a masterpiece, even though Italian reviewers of the time did not use this word – some Italian journalists later defined *The Blues Brothers* as such.