Room Four:  The Approach of World War II

Film Industry

From film's infancy in Hollywood, Italians have had a major role in the development of that industry. Italians have been some of the most famous directors, actors and actresses, screenwriters, as well as technicians. Italian-American characters have also been a big part of American film. Yet while Italian immigrants have been portrayed in movies made in California, the stories themselves were rarely ever about Italians in California. Instead, illiterate immigrants to New York were depicted in early films, which was a stereotype eventually replaced by that of the gangster. This had firmly entrenched itself in film before the beginning of the speaking film.

The most successful Italian-American director was Frank Capra. His movies were much less about Italian-American characters and stories, but of all-American stories of everyday struggles and wild successes that resonated with a much larger audience. During the war, Capra directed war documentaries including the Why We Fight series that is generally considered second only to Leni Reifenstahl's Triumph of the Will as a propaganda tool of its government. Capra's films' goals were as diverse as convincing an isolationist country to join a world war, allying the United States with Russia, and desegregating the military.