

The Gangster Figure in American Film and Literature

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The gangster, as the public knows him today, is a strange mixture of fact and fiction that has emerged in response to the evolution of corporate capitalism in the early-twentieth century. Although criminal gangs had long occupied American cities, the Prohibition Act of 1920 and the desperate poverty brought on by the Great Depression in the 1930s, provided opportunities for individual crime leaders to emerge and thrive.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the exploits of gangsters such as Al Capone, John Dillinger, "Baby Face" Nelson, and "Pretty Boy" Floyd became national news, fueled fictional accounts, and captured the popular imagination. These real-life gangsters rose above ordinary criminals by committing their crimes with bravado; they were all blatant transgressors of the boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong, and rich and poor. As corporate capitalism promoted consumerism and widened the gap between rich and poor, Americans became infatuated with the gangster, a man of humble origins, who affects stylish dress and fancy cars, defying the boundaries separating social classes.

Al Capone's rise to iconic status came during America's "Roaring Twenties," a time of excess and changing morality stimulated by a booming economy. At the same time, reactionary religious and social activist forces then exerted enough pressure to lead Congress to pass the Volstead Act, legally prohibiting the production and sale of alcoholic beverages. This created a ripe opportunity for smart street thugs to thrive in the resulting black market. A legend in his own time, Capone became a symbol of contemporary power; right or wrong, Capone's actions told Americans that crime didn't just pay, it paid handsomely. His legend became the basis for many of the gangster films of the 1930s.

Fictional versions of the fascinating characters began to appear in American films during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Early films often

portrayed gangsters as degenerate and overly feminized men losing their independence in the new capitalist society, but later films recast them as men who wielded power through sexuality and guns. Films such as Mervyn Leroy's *Little Caesar* (1930) and Howard Hawks' *Scarface* (1932) established a lasting association in popular culture between the gangster and particular ethnic groups: Jewish, Irish-American, African-American, Asian-American, and—especially—Italian-American.

More than an urban evolution of the western outlaw, the gangster came into American culture at a time when great change was occurring in American society, and he has remained there in one form or another ever since. Critic Richard Gambino noted in 1975 that “the mafioso rivals the cowboy as the chief figure in American folklore, and the Mafia rivals the old American frontier as a resource for popular entertainment” (277). Robert Warshow also saw this connection, but in a more fragile vein:

The Western film, though it seems never to diminish in popularity, is for the most of us no more than the folklore of the past, familiar and understandable only because it has been repeated so often. The gangster film comes much closer. In ways that we do not easily or willingly define, the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche, which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects ‘Americanism’ itself. (100)

Warshow goes on to say, “What matters is that the experience of the gangsters as an experience of art is universal to Americans” (100).

The cinematic images of masculinity associated with these ethnicities stereotyped and marginalized these groups. This marginalization was amplified in the 1960s and 1970s when, amid growing feminist criticism of conventional understandings of manhood, the ethnic gangster embodied the masculine qualities under attack. Through books such as Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969), Gay Talese's *Honor Thy Father* (1971), and William Kennedy's *Legs* (1975), and especially through the films of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Brian DePalma, the American ethnic gangster of fiction eventually became more rounded, more thoughtful, and less inclined to act violently. These more recent depictions represent the efforts of ethnic groups to take control of their own stories, and they also reflect advances in cultural analysis made by feminist critiques of masculinity.

The gangster's actions also reflected changing notions of manhood. Historians, such as David Ruth, have suggested that the gangster figure helped shift ideal masculinity away from traditional qualities, such as honor, to traits such as violence, independence, and the ability to exploit the social system (3). These aspects of the gangster have captured the public imagination from the 1930s to today. Whether a distilled version of the Italian stereotype, an imitative performer of gangsta rap, or a newly sensitized Mafia man à la Tony Soprano, the gangster continues to reflect cultural perceptions of what society considers to be true manhood.

Through filmmakers Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Brian DePalma, and writers Mario Puzo, Gay Talese, Frank Lentricchia, Don DeLillo, Louisa Ermelino and Anthony Valerio, most of us have come to know the American gangster as a more rounded figure, a man who thinks before he acts, one who rarely pulls the trigger of a gun. From Puzo's *The Godfather* to Frank Lentricchia's *The Music of the Inferno*, Italian American culture has taken hold of the figure of the gangster and elevated it from a common criminal to a god of sorts, that can help us understand much about ourselves and our societies. It is my contention that the gangster, in the hands of Italian American artists, becomes a telling figure in the tale of American race, gender, and ethnicity, a figure that reflects the autobiography of an immigrant group, just as it reflects the fantasy of a native population.

For the sake of discussion, I propose three stages of development of the Italian American gangster figure within American popular culture, and each stage reflects a different function for the gangster and a new direction pursued by its creators. The first is the early use of the gangster as minstrelsy, a way of performing Italian culture in an effort to control the perceived threat to mainstream American culture posed by differences introduced by a wave of Italian immigration. This stage began with films based on Al Capone and faded with the Vietnam War, but revives whenever a non-Italian puts on the "Mafioso" mask to perform the gangster. A second stage began when Italian Americans started to use the figure of the gangster as a vehicle for telling their own stories of being Italians in the United States. The third stage started when Italian Americans began to parody, and in doing so renounce, the gangster figure as representative of their culture, as a means of gaining control of the story.

During the first stage of representation, the gangster figure emerged when the nation was shifting from an agrarian to an industrial based

economy; this was also a time when immigration to the United States was at its highest, and xenophobia was rampant. Italian immigrants encountered a great deal of discrimination from established Americans, leading to the development of negative stereotypes. Recent work on blackface minstrelsy can be applied to the study of the gangster, to help explain the rise of the figure in American entertainment in its first stage of development, for it is not long after the waning of the blackface minstrel show in the late nineteenth century that the Italian replaced the African as a subject of imitation in popular culture. Eric Lott, in his study *Love and Theft*, writes: "The black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other, while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them" (25). This is precisely what happened to Italians in the gangster films of the 1930s. Another dimension that the gangster figure shares with the black-face figure is overt sexuality. Lott notes: "Bold swagger, irrepressible desire, sheer bodily display: in a real sense the minstrel man *was* the penis, that organ returning in a variety of contexts, at times ludicrous, at others rather less so" (25-26). Again, Lott provides a key perspective: "What appears to have been appropriated were certain kinds of masculinity. To put on the cultural forms of 'blackness' was to engage in a complex affair of manly mimicry" (52). It is this mimicry of masculinity that is the greatest function of the gangster figure.

Early gangster representations, enacted by Jewish actors such as Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar* and Paul Muni in *Scarface*, also convey a sense of projected fantasy: "Minstrel characters were simply trash-bin projections of white fantasy, vague fleshly signifiers that allowed whites to indulge at a distance all that they found repulsive and fearsome" (149). This minstrelsy stage, as it applies to Italian Americans, is notable for its distortion, if not disfigurement, of Italian culture, ostensibly for plot purposes, but actually as a means of maintaining power over the attraction of the foreign, including the repression of women in Italian culture and the replacement of the mother-son paradigm with the father-son paradigm. This aspect is actually picked up and utilized in the second stage by Italian-American artists. This first stage also distorts the communal aspect of Italian culture, replacing it with the American stress on individuality.

The gangster figure also functions as the scapegoat for the obsessive desire for self-advancement, and unresolved class conflicts are played out

in the films. He also serves as a guide to the underworld, taking audiences to places that they might never go on their own. Other themes surrounding the early depictions of the gangster include the disintegration and destruction of the family, the substitution of a “false family” – the gang – for the real family, and a son of the New World rebelling against a father from the Old World. In the wake of the success of these early gangster films, however, came stricter Hollywood censorship and World War II, both of which contributed to decreased interest in gangster storylines. When the gangster returned to popularity in the second stage of development, he would have his greatest impact through the work of Italian-American artists.

The second stage of the gangster’s development begins with Mario Puzo’s novel, *The Godfather*, and the three films based on it. At this stage, the Italian-American artist uses an accepted and profitable public vehicle, (the gangster film), to tell a story that is personal. The mother-son paradigm employed by Puzo in his novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964) is exchanged for the father-son paradigm in *The Godfather* (1969). Puzo added a preface to the last reprinting of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* in which he admitted that he had modeled Don Vito Corleone after his mother. This is repeated in most of the films that derive from the Puzo/Coppola oeuvre, and also in the work of Martin Scorsese.

The highly romanticized depiction of the gangster in *The Godfather*, both Puzo’s novel version and Francis Ford Coppola’s three films, has much to say about how Italian-American culture fares. As a culture hero, Puzo’s gangster is a romantic type. *The Godfather*, as many critics have pointed out, tries to explain many things: American capitalism, American imperialism, Italian traditions, and more. But along with those themes, *The Godfather* looks at the changing notion of American masculinity as it has been affected by changes of the 1960s, the rise of feminism, and the fall of the traditional American He-Man. For it was after this period that Americans learned that the strength of a man was more than muscles, that the Marlboro man could die of cancer, and that fathers didn’t always know best. Against this tempest of change stand the Corleone dons, tragic and violent versions of Peter Pan, upholding all that was traditionally manly for men who were afraid of becoming feminized.

The films of Martin Scorsese counter the romantic view of the gangster in Coppola’s *Godfather* films through Scorsese’s use of techniques derived from the French New Wave, Italian neorealism, and cinema vérité. Scorsese

grew up on Mulberry Street in Manhattan's Little Italy. His own experiences, combined with journalistic accounts, helped him create the composite characters of the gangsters in his films. Scorsese's gangsters grow up in the streets, away from the watchful eyes of fathers who work, and mothers who, if they don't work, stay home and remain nearly invisible. These gangsters start off as rough boys who continually try to prove their manhood. *Mean Streets* (1973), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Casino* (1995) together established Scorsese as the maker of gangster films par excellence. In each film, Scorsese achieves a striking sense of realism which comes from the sources of his stories: *Mean Streets* was based on his own life experience, and *Goodfellas* and *Casino* on nonfiction books by Nicholas Pileggi. Scorsese's films all move chronologically, following the rise and fall of the gangster. In this way, they reflect the reality of the documentary rather than the romanticism of fictional drama. Scorsese's gangsters are shown as men trapped forever in an immature stage—physically adult, but behaving like boys. Because Scorsese has chosen this simple realization of the gangster figure, he has not presented a way for us to imagine a gangster-free masculinity. This absence of an alternative presentation of masculinity persists in his films, even to *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *The Departed* (2006). The films of Scorsese serves as models for many subsequent gangster films: Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985) and *The Sicilian* (1987), Abel Ferrara's *The Funeral* (1990), Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1993), and Michael Corrente's *Federal Hill* (1994).

The third stage brings the parody or renunciation of the earlier figures by Italian Americans and reinvents the figure of the gangster as a figure through which American culture is criticized. In terms of film and video, this stage begins with David Chase's television series, *The Sopranos*, which became to America of the new millennium what *Dallas* was to the 1980s. This hit series signals a major change, both in what the gangster represents and in what is happening to the American way of life. The original American gangsters represented a traditional, patriarchal sense of manhood that came from an old European model. Violence was used to acquire and sustain honor, and for this type of gangster, the swarthy, "European-looking" Italian offered instant identity with the type; after all, America has regularly compared itself to Europe to determine its difference.

Chase's *The Sopranos* joins the fiction of Italian Americans such as Giose Rimaneli's *Benedetta in Guysterland*, Anthony Valerio's *Lefty and the Button Men*, Frank Lentricchia's *The Music of the Inferno*, Louisa Ermelino's *Joey Dee Gets Wise*, and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, in creating a different future for the gangster figure in American culture. Chase, the creator and executive producer of the hit series *The Sopranos*, conceived the program in the tradition and spirit of the traditional U.S. gangster film, but he executed it as a commentary on both the genre and contemporary life in the United States. He gives new life to the gangster figure by setting him back down in the suburbs, where today over 60 percent of Americans live in the United States. Hardly an episode of *The Sopranos* passes without some nod to, or comment on, an earlier classic depiction of the gangster. In the first episode, there are cutaways to Al Capone and head shots of famous actors playing gangsters (Humphrey Bogart, Dean Martin, and Edward G. Robinson), as the character of Christopher Moltisanti shoots a rival. Over time, the gangster has become a marker of ethnicity and manliness in contemporary American life, and Chase uses the gangster figure as a vehicle for his own commentaries on both ethnicity and manliness.

To Tony Soprano the history of organized crime is poetry, an art that comforts him, as it gives him a sense of being connected with a past. He has mythologized the actions of past gangsters, as though his father belonged to some type of gangster-hood golden age. Tony becomes philosophical whenever he contemplates these myths, but the more he thinks about them, the more he sees that they are only constructions that shatter easily. By utilizing the strong mother-son dynamics of Italian culture through his creation of strong women characters who influence Tony's actions, Chase moves the gangster figure toward a higher level of maturity than previous artists.

The movie *A Bronx Tale* (1993), Robert DeNiro's directorial debut, was adapted from a one-man show written and performed by Chazz Palminteri. On the surface, the film might seem stereotypical in its portrayals, but Palminteri's gangster, based on a real man he knew in his youth, is a more rounded character than most previous gangster figures. The film thus is more a father-son story than the portrait of a gangster. The story involves two periods of young Calogero Anello's life, at the ages of nine and seventeen. Calogero is growing up in the Bronx under the influence of his father and a local gangster, who both try to shape his sense of masculinity.

More often than not, the gangsters created by playwright Richard Vetere appear in a humorous light, revealing the absurdity of gangster behavior as a model for contemporary masculine behavior. *Gangster Apparel* is Vetere's first and only play dealing directly and exclusively with the gangster figure. The two-act comedy features two characters, Louie Falco and Joey Pugg, small-time hoods who get a chance to kill somebody for the mob. Louie is a slick, fancy dresser who, as the writer's note says, "believes that style is more important than substance." Joey, his partner, is a slob who thinks nothing of how he dresses. The play deals with how the two of them confront the surfaces and depths of the gangster life. Vetere parodies the many gangster characters who have come before his, but unlike more obvious gangster parodies and comedies—*The Freshman* (1990), *My Blue Heaven* (1990), *Jane Austen's Mafia* (1998), *Analyze This* (1999), and *Analyze That* (2002), none of which were created by Italian Americans—his play attempts to say something serious about the gangster, and therefore it offers a fresh way of looking at the plight of the gangster figure. At the end of the play, while Louie is admirable for his prowess and his ability to see trouble coming and deal with it, it is Joey who proves that a wise guy becomes a wise man, when he begins to use his intellect to move beyond the limitations of a life lived only on the surface. For Vetere, a wise man is one who can change when he needs to. Vetere continued to use the gangster figure in a number of other plays, most obviously in *The Classic* (1998) and the book he wrote for the musical *A Hundred Years into the Heart* (2004).

The American artists of Italian descent whose works have been discussed in this essay have used the gangster figure to reflect various notions of what it means to be a man in American society. Those notions have shifted from the very narrow, tough, macho version of masculinity seen in Puzo's novel and Coppola's film *The Godfather*, to the more varied and fluid versions presented by Frank Lentricchia, Louisa Ermelino, and many contemporary dramatists, poets, and novelists. Mario Puzo's version in *The Godfather* humanized the gangster figure. However, Vito and Michael Corleone remained staunchly macho, even in the face of increasing rights for women. Scorsese's gangsters reinforced this notion and firmly established the Italian-American gangster as the prototype for a post-feminist masculinity that remained untouched by social and political developments stemming from the Women's Rights Movement of the 1970s. Both the romanticization and the realization of the gangster in

American popular culture set up the Italian-American male as one of the last survivors of old-fashioned macho masculinity. However, the strong, silent type of man who settled scores with his fists instead of diplomacy became politically incorrect. When Tony Soprano asks his psychiatrist, "What ever happened to the strong silent type played by Gary Cooper?" in the first episode of *The Sopranos*, he is asking a question that his very presence in the media answers. It is through the reinvention of the gangsters created by David Chase, Giose Rimanelli, Frank Lentricchia, Louisa Ermelino, Anthony Valerio, Richard Vetere, Chazz Palminteri, and many others, that new possibilities are available for the old stock characters. Ultimately, the power of the gangster figure shifts from reinforcing macho masculinity to freeing the power of the writer, the creator, the artist to question the status quo.

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