

## FROM THE GODFATHER TO THE SOPRANOS: ITALIAN-AMERICANS IN THE GANGSTER FILM GENRE

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the ethnic portrayal of Italian-Americans in the gangster film genre. The gangster characters in the American cinema are always presented with their ethnic identification. Those ethnic men use crime to pursue wealth and power, their version of the *American Dream*. The cinematic portrayal of Italian-Americans has been criticized by several Italian-American organizations for perpetuating the stereotypical image of Italian gangsters. This article contrasts the ethnic depictions in *The Godfather Trilogy* and the contemporary TV series *The Sopranos*. The latter combines domestic melodrama with the traditional gangster genre. The films illustrate the process of shaping the Italian-American identity by both the American influences and the ethnic environment.

**Key words:** gangster films, ethnic portrayal, Italian-American stereotypes

### Introduction

In 1492 the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus began the European transformation of the New World. However, when the mass Italian immigration took place at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the United States was an English-speaking country in which the Italian immigrants were nothing more than an ethnic minority differing greatly from the mainstream American culture. In the period between 1880 and 1930 approximately 5 million Italians arrived in the USA. The newcomers from rural Italy, mainly the south and Sicily, entered multicultural, urban America. Unfamiliar with the English language and the American laws, Italian immigrants depended on their agents, known as *padrones*, who arranged jobs and housing. Although the *padrones* were often accused of exploiting the newcomers, some of them became the leaders of Italian-American communities (Warner *et al*, 2012: 212). The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period in which Italian ethnic culture and the American mainstream were transforming and being transformed by each other. In the industrial American cities the Italians met with modern crime and legal forces organized to deal with criminal activities. Americans quickly developed ethnic stereotypes associated with each of the immigrant groups that came to live in the USA. Those stereotypes were largely based on images that developed

in popular culture, especially films, which play a vital role in answering questions about the state of modern racial acculturation. As argued by Cortés (1984: 64):

Many viewers learn about ethnic groups and foreign cultures from these so-called entertainment media. This learning helps to create, reinforce, weaken, or eradicate their knowledge about, perceptions of, misinformation concerning, attitudes toward, and understanding and misunderstanding of different nations. In this manner, the functional media have served as a sort of public textbook on ethnicity and foreignness.

The aim of this paper is to examine the change of the ethnic portrayal of the Italians in the American gangster film genre. The cinematic depictions concern *The Godfather Trilogy* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, 74, 90) and the crime series *The Sopranos* (David Chase, HBO, 1999-2007, 7 seasons, 65 episodes). The films illustrate the process of the shaping of the Italian-American identity by both American influences and the ethnic environment.

### **1. Gangster and the *American Dream***

The word “gangster” has always been associated with the urban villain who works with his band. “The gangster is not the same as an outlaw, he specifically violates a system of rules that a group of people lives under. He is a product of an advanced, urban civilization” (Shadoian, 2003: 3).

Prohibition and the Great Depression in the 1930s provided numerous opportunities for the emergence of the gangster hero as the cultural icon reflecting socio-economic changes in the USA (Gardaphé, 2010: 110-111). “The gangster represented the antithesis of the reality of the Depression by fulfilling the American Dream, even though he did so by disobeying the law” (Gates, 2006: 65).

The gangster characters in the American cinema have always displayed some kind of ethnic identity, e.g. Italian, Jewish, Irish. In essence, this means that the gangster is an immigrant, and at the same time occupies the “other” position to the American WASP mainstream (Larke-Walsh, 2010: 166). The gangster genre dealt with anxieties caused by the acculturation process of immigrants starting to move out of the ethnic ghettos. In these films the Italians, the Irish and the Jewish gangsters still live in ethnic ghettos and struggle to achieve social advancement through means of criminal activities. These movies expressed

xenophobic fears about the ethnic minorities and offered depictions of the gangsters' capacity for violence as ethnically determined and resulting from their own cultural deficiencies (Rubin *et al*, 2007: 24). From this perspective, "the gangster hero's conflict is rooted in his exclusion from whiteness" (Mizejewski, 2008: 28). Those members of the ethnic group who wish to assimilate not only have to hide their penchant for crime, but also foreignness: only then can they be accepted by the American mainstream (Zecker, 2008: 109).

The personalities of organized crime have long fascinated American popular culture. The 1970s was a period of ethnic revival in Hollywood films. The gangster film focused on the ethnic man who uses crime to overcome poverty and achieve wealth and status, but the most immediate association of the gangster protagonists is with Italian-Americans and the Sicilian *mafia* and Neapolitan *camorra* (Gardaphé, 2002: 50). In 2000 Zogby International and the National Italian-American Foundation conducted research in which Jewish and Italian-American characters were rated for stereotypes. The respondents were asked to identify the role a person of a particular ethnic background would be most likely to play in a movie or on television. In spite of the fact that many Italian-Americans have achieved social mobility and prospered in the American society, the Italians were cast by the survey participants as crime bosses, gang members, and restaurant workers (Ruggieri *et al*, 2010: 1266).

## **2. The Godfather Heritage**

The Italian movie gangster has become an icon of popular culture and their enduring presence in the American film genre has been possible due to distinguished filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather Trilogy*, 1972, 74, 90), Martin Scorsese (*Mean Streets*, 1973, *Goodfellas*, 1990, *Casino*, 1995), and Brian De Palma (*Carlito's Way*, 1993). These film artists explore the Italian character of the film gangster, who is lost in the gap between traditional Italian culture and the *American Dream* of economic success.

*The Godfather* has become a landmark in the history of the film depiction of Italian-Americans. Coppola used the *mafia* not only as an icon of popular culture but also as a metaphor for the Italian-American quest for wealth and power, their version of the *American Dream*. Both, Coppola as the film director and Mario Puzo as the novelist-screenwriter, created a portrait of selected aspects of Italian-American society which included criminal involvement. However, they never suggested that these features were typical of all Italian-

Americans. *The Godfather Trilogy* emphasises Italian values: the extended family structure, codes of honour and customs (epitomized by the Corleone wedding in *The Godfather I*). The ethnic codes in the film romanticize the Sicilian way of life.

The film begins with the scene in which a disappointed when the American legal system undertaker, Amerigo Bonasera, comes to the crime boss Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) and asks him for justice. His famous declaration: "I believe in America" is the first words of the film. This scene introduces the ambiguities of the immigrants' life in the USA. When the institutionalized American system of law fails them, they turn to the traditional authority that derives from pre-capitalist rural Sicily (Freedman, 2010: 14). Don Vito is an affluent man who achieved his wealth and power through leadership of a criminal organization. His Italian ethnicity and immigrant status restricted his possibilities of social advancement to promotion only within a Mafia hierarchy and the Italian-American community.

The film compares the values of the first generation Italian immigrant Vito Corleone to his assimilated American son – Michael (Al Pacino) who is the Ivy League graduate and Marine war hero. He breaks the old country's code of silence during his sister's wedding reception when he tells his girlfriend stories about the wedding guests. At first he does not want to be involved in his family's criminal practices but eventually becomes a killer himself. The old country's code of honour demands vengeance for his father's blood. After avenging the assassination attempt of his father, Michael is sent to Sicily to hide out. (Gardaphé, 2003: 61). In Sicily he stops behaving after the American way, and learns to appreciate his Italian heritage.

The episodes set in Sicily show this Italian region as both a place to escape from, and a place to return to. The action that takes place in Sicily from *The Godfather I* is distinct from the film's main action. Sicily serves purely as the location of Michael's exile. *The Godfather II* depicts a Sicily that serves as the antithesis to the United States. It is pre-capitalist, still displaying some post-feudal social structures where peasants cannot challenge the system that controls them, so instead they focus on the family unit. The American system with its emphasis on work ethics does not require the individual to depend on the family unit for survival. It is a difficult task for Michael to keep the family together as he could in Sicily, while living in the USA.

Eventually, Michael chooses the *American Dream* and the life of crime over Italian values. Vito is portrayed as a family man who never loses his temper and always projects dignity. Michael, in contrast, fails to hold together his own marriage, and has his brother-in-law murdered. Moreover, he orders the killing of his own brother, Fredo, at the end of *The Godfather II*. Under his patriarchy both his biological family and the organization he conducts are losing their ethnic heritage. While portraying degeneration and corruption within the Corleone family, *The Godfather Trilogy* offers critical metaphors on U.S. capitalism. The scene of the conference between Vito and other crime bosses from Missouri and California resembles corporate negotiations. The *mafia* leaders, like a board of company directors, sit at the conference table and discuss business (Freedman, 2010: 23).

Many Italian-Americans reacted negatively to the film which, they claimed, reinforced the *mafia* stereotypes. As a result of their protests, the film was shown on NBC with the disclaimer: "The Godfather is a fictional account of a small group of ruthless criminals. It would be erroneous and unfair to suggest that they are representative of any particular ethnic group" (Cortés, 1984: 69). *The Godfather* disclaimer has become a landmark in the history of film depictions concerning ethnic groups. The disclaimer demonstrated a recognition that the media have the power to influence the thinking of the audience.

### **3. Modern Gangsters in *The Sopranos***

The screen treatment of Italian-Americans reflects their changing concerns: from the problems of working class immigrants living in ethnic ghettos to middle-class Italian-Americans from the suburbs. One of the most recent movies based upon the Italian-American crime family is the TV series *The Sopranos*. Like *The Godfather*, this series has also been criticized by several Italian-American organizations for perpetuating the stereotypical image of Italian gangsters, and the American Italian Defence Association even filed a lawsuit against HBO (Wynn, 2004: 130). However, the show has been critically acclaimed and remained popular with the American viewers (Beck, 2000: 26). *The Sopranos* has been also criticised for racism against Afro-Americans and Latinos, who are portrayed as drug dealers in most parts of the series (Ferrari, 2010: 101).

*The Sopranos* features organised crime in a fictional New Jersey mob family. The mob boss, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), appears in both a domestic and mob setting. The

show's innovation is combining the domestic melodrama with the traditional gangster genre (Jacobs, 2005: 143). The New Jersey setting allows for a realistic commentary on the contemporary world. "The characters inhabit their ethnicity authentically, just as they authentically inhabit the New Jersey landscape" (Pinkus, 2002: 289).

A powerful element of the show's appeal is the *American Dream*. In the opening sequence of each episode Tony is driving west away from New York City to his suburban mansion in New Jersey. The title sequence offers a visual metaphor for the immigrants' journey west in search of the *American Dream*. The series advances the classic gangster film which defined the *American Dream*. The gangster is no longer a city-dwelling criminal but has become a suburban-living, rich American. "*The Sopranos* upgrades the genre with its poetic resonance of psychological, social, and political meaning" (Yacowar, 2005: 387).

The traditional American gangsters represented patriarchal sense of manhood but this representation is transformed in *The Sopranos*. Tony suffers from depression and panic attacks which make him decide on therapy sessions. He chooses a female psychiatrist with the Italian name – Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco). When Tony starts his therapy he begins to lose a traditional sense of manhood because "talking" is feminine in Italian culture (Gardaphé, 2002: 65). The show is not a mob saga in the tradition of *The Godfather*. It is difficult to imagine Vito Corleone from *The Godfather* visiting a psychiatrist. Besides, when Tony talks to her he breaks the "omerta" code which is dangerous in *The Sopranos* world. His therapy is undermining the traditional gangsterism.

In the pilot episode of series Tony starts his therapy and talks about a day he got sick. He begins by describing the arrival of two wild ducks to his pool. Tony feeds them, talks to them and reads about them. The ducks mate and ducklings hatch. One day the ducks fly off forever and Tony watching it collapses with his first panic attack. He starts suffering from depression and asks Dr Melfi, "What happened to Gary Cooper? The strong silent type. That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do!" When Melfi asks, "Do you feel depressed?" Tony answers, "Since the ducks left, I guess." In another session Melfi explains, "Once those ducks had their babies, they became a family." Then Tony realizes, "You're right – that's what I'm full of dread about, that I'm going to lose my family. Just like I lost the ducks. It's always with me." Melfi helps Tony realise that the ducks symbolise his family but her interpretation misses Gary Cooper. He was a hero of the western and

epitomised American masculinity. The arrival of the wild ducks into Tony's suburban mansion mark "the promise of economic security and freedom from authority for white males that has long been identified with the West" (Gabrielson, 2009). Although the ducks have chosen Tony's suburban pool, they remain creatures of the wild. With their arrival, the dividing line between wilderness and civilization is transgressed suggesting the change of established gender roles as well.

With the exception of Dr Melfi, the characters of the show can be divided between members of Tony's biological family on one side and his crime family on the other. One of the advertising slogans was: "Meet Tony Soprano. If one family doesn't kill him ... the other family will." Tony's biological family includes his wife Carmela (Edie Falco), his daughter Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler), his son A.J. (Robert Iler), his sister Janice (Aida Turturro) and his mother Livia (Nancy Marchand). Tony's mob family comprises soldiers who help him run his illegal enterprises. His mob family issues concern gang rivalry and the FBI. Tony conducts many of his transactions in a strip club: the Bada Bing. He has unlimited powers in his "work" life, yet he is often powerless as a parent and spouse. However, he continually struggles to maintain an impression of controlling both spheres of his life. Tony's Italian-American identity is split between his biological family and his mob. His real family betrays itself by its assimilation to American culture, while his mob prospers by interpreting the *American Dream* through organized crime. In the two-family myth of Italian-American identity in the gangster *genre* the contrast is established between assimilation and poverty on the one hand, and ethnic difference and criminal financial success on the other. In *The Sopranos*, Tony's assimilated status is opposed to his criminal activities (Kocela 2005).

The treatment of women in the gangster film genre reflects the cultural transformations. In *The Godfather* the traditional mothers provide passive support for their men but women representing the younger generation behave like spoiled children, e.g. Michael Corleone's sister, Constanza (Cortés, 1987: 117). The change of gender roles is one of the central concerns of *The Sopranos*. The series depicts powerful Italian-American women proving that the patriarchal family model of the Italians in America is weakening and the matriarchal model becomes discernible. The vital female characters include: Carmela, Meadow, Janice and Livia. Carmela does not behave as a typical mobster's wife and in the fourth series she even decides to leave him. She has moral dilemmas concerning her choice to ignore her husband's criminal

activities while enjoying the material benefits of them. Meadow often challenges her parents' authority. Janice murders her own lover. Finally, Livia contrives to take a "contract" out on her own son (Wynn, 2004: 131).

In the traditional gangster genre, the protagonists were able to separate their work and family lives. One generation earlier, wives and children from the Italian immigrant working class did not question their husbands' and fathers' work lives. Tony Soprano with his upper-class suburban existence feels constant pressure in the domestic sphere, especially from his Internet-literate children who question his parental authority. Tony struggles to keep his family away from the business of the mob, but at same time feels financial pressure to maintain his high standard of living. Tony must all the time pretend and deceive. As the mob boss he projects the image of a powerful leader, in his suburban neighbourhood he maintains the impression of an ordinary neighbour and hides his illegal activities, at home he deceives his wife. Even his mother Livia and Uncle Junior (Dominic Chianese) question his role as the crime family leader (Barretta, 2000: 213-215). As the head of the family and the mob boss, Tony is aware that the old codes are threatened by changing times and declares that it may be the 1990s but in his home "it's 1954" (S1E11).

The show features Italian-Americans from every profession from mobsters to a psychiatrist assimilated into the American mainstream. Tony is a second generation immigrant who wants upward mobility but at the same time he disapproves of other Italian-Americans who assimilated to the American mainstream. The two most contrary characters in the show are: Tony Soprano and Richard LaPenna, Jennifer Melfi's ex-husband. The first one is a mobster, who officially describes his job as "waste management consultant," the second belongs to the upper-class. Tony believes that resorting to a life of crime is the only way for Italian Americans to move up the ranks in the society. He calls his work "putting food on my family's table" and exhibits no guilt about his crimes. His character is portrayed as the typical American neighbour and as an ethnic 'other.' "He fights Italian American stereotypes, yet confirms them all" (Ferrari, 2010: 104).

#### 4. Italian Heritage vs. American Mainstream

The two trends can be observed while examining the ethnic identity of immigrant communities in the United States. The first concerns acculturation to the American culture, the second deals with rejecting mainstream hegemonic cultural practices in favour of those of an ancestral nature. *The Sopranos* does not try to promote the idea of Italian-American assimilation with the mainstream American culture. Instead, the series shows Italian-Americans trying to preserve their ethnic ties. There are two main images of Italian ethnicity in American culture: one is concerned with domestic space, rituals and food, the other refers to the *mafia*. The Italian origins of the main protagonists of *The Sopranos* are presented in many episodes, including a visit to their home town, Avellino. The survival of ethnic heritage is emphasised in the use of dialect and the centrality of Italian food consumed in particular episodes. The protagonists are shown eating Italian meals at home or meeting with the other “family” members in the restaurant of Artie Bucco.

In one of the episodes (S1E2) a member of Tony’s crew visits a coffeehouse and says:

Cappuccino! We invented this shit, and all these other cocksuckers are gettin’ rich off of it. ... And it’s not just the money. It’s a pride thing. All our food, pizza, calzone, buffalo mozzarella, olive oil. These fucks have nothing. They ate ‘pootsie’ before we gave them the gift of our cuisine.

The characters often protect their ethnic culture and reject the homogenizing effects of Americanization.

Another example (S4E3) showing Italian-American pride in their heritage concerns Tony’s frustration when his children learn from the Internet that if Christopher Columbus lived now, he would face trial for crimes against humanity. He tells them that in their house Columbus is a hero. When Native Americans protest against the Columbus Day parade, Tony’s crew member Silvio considers the whole event to be anti-Italian discrimination and says “Columbus Day is a day of Italian pride, and they want to take it away” (Vanacker, 2012: 39).

In the episode titled “A Hit is a Hit” (S1E10) Carmela asks Tony to befriend their next-door Italian-American neighbour, Dr. Bruce Cusamano, who invites Tony to the suburban golf club. There Cusamano and his WASP friends treat Tony as a minor celebrity and show curiosity about his connections to organized crime asking him questions about Al Capone, John Gotti and restaurants in *Little Italy*. Later at his therapy meeting Tony calls all WASPs a “bunch of

bores” and says that Cusamano is “Italian but a *midigon*” (meaning “American” in an Italian dialect). When Dr. Melfi asks him about his objections to befriending his neighbour, Tony answers, “The guys... what would they think if I started hanging out with the *midigons*?” (Barretta, 2000: 218).

The lexicon of *The Sopranos* is based on Italian words and contains some authentic *mafia* slang. Tony and his gang use the language that identifies them not only geographically, but also ethnically and socially. Tony’s children, who represent the younger generation, speak with no jargon or Italian accent. Livia Soprano and Uncle Junior speak with a strong Neapolitan accent. The use of Italian dialects and accents categorises the characters according to the generation to which they belong (Ferrari, 2010: 109).

The clash in the series concerns the mafia’s “honour culture” and contemporary “narcissistic culture”. Contemporary reality is represented by the multiple forces with which Tony struggles: his son’s possible attention-deficit disorder, his sister’s Buddhism. Tony’s dilemma concerns the problem in living up to or maintaining the mafia’s codes. The show’s dialogue presents Italian-American values together with the *mafia* mythology. The gangsters from New Jersey quote *The Godfather* films, debate their favourite elements and often try, unsuccessfully, to model themselves on cultural icons (Wynn, 2004: 130).

## Conclusion

The cinematic portrayal of the Italian-American gangster differs from the general idea of the *mafiosi* in Italy. While people in Italy associate mobsters with rural and peasant dimension, the American crime film depicts them as urban criminals living in the American middle-class suburbs. The film gangsters are icons of popular culture and serve as a metaphor for the Italian-American quest for the wealth and power. The *American Dream* remains a popular motif of the contemporary gangster genre.

The films belonging to the traditional gangster genre, like *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and *Casino*, offer portrayals of the mob that seem foreign to the average American viewer, but the world of *The Sopranos* is understandable and familiar. This effect is achieved through the elements of domestic melodrama that are combined with the features of the traditional gangster genre. To some degree the viewers’ understanding of *The Sopranos* depends on their knowledge of traditional gangster background.

The traditional Italian-American gangsters depicted in *The Godfather* represent a patriarchal sense of manhood. This family model is weakened in the contemporary crime film which emphasises the change of gender roles. The matriarchal family structure becomes more visible as film women are no longer passive; become more powerful, less ethnic and more American. The therapy sessions of Tony Soprano undermine his gangsterism and he begins to lose a traditional sense of manhood. The cinematic gangster portrayal stresses the split of Italian-American identity. Tony wants upward mobility but at the same time he disapproves of assimilation. He feels constant pressure on both of his life spheres: his ethnic mob and his Americanised family. The gangster begins to realize that gang career is no longer the only means of social advancement for the Italian-Americans as there are other opportunities to succeed.

The gangster genre is a type of art that enables the recovery of Italian heritage before it melts into the American mainstream. The films romanticize Italy and construct a sense of nostalgia for the old country's values. The popularity of the gangster genre featuring Italian-Americans as the main protagonists reflects America's fascination with ethnic culture. In a period of intense globalization, many Americans need to distinguish themselves by establishing some ethnic identification, and sometimes they feel a little Italian.

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