Chapter 6
Life Imitating Art: Organized Crime on Screen

Introduction

Organized crime or "The Mafia" as we sometimes call it, has in reality been largely dismantled by law enforcement and is most likely in its twilight. In contrast, American popular culture has breathed life into its image, and the real Cosa Nostra that was being bundled away into the psychic attic of American folklore has emerged as an intriguing and viable consumer product in media and other mass culture venues. The enduring popularity of "the mob" is best illustrated by the scope and depth of organized crime films from *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) to *The Departed* (2006) and *American Gangster* (2007) among many others. Vigorous law enforcement based on RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) statutes has effectively purged the American mafia of its dominance in many vice and other lucrative illegal activities (Jacobs et al. 1999).

The movie mobster today is part of an enduring mystique. Most real mafiosi are dead, imprisoned, or awaiting indictment. The lag in mass cultural representations (which, for instance, celebrated the American cowboy long after he was extinct) is evidenced in the resurrection of the underworld of the Cosa Nostra whose violent, ugly past has served as material for thrilling, if not always realistic, film, and television stories. Similarly, although the American mafia is merely a shadow of its former self, the popular culture creates a different, exciting story. In the twentieth century, gangster films metamorphosed into modern mafia movies, deriving much of their substance from the compelling social narratives that make up the history of the southern Italian immigration occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The aftermath of World War I, the drastic economic depression begun in the 1920s, and the imposition of puritanical Prohibition policies precipitated social and economic crises across America.

In the 1920s, the films of James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and others reflected these grim realities; their movies were gritty, tough, and possessed a roguish charm. The audience appeal was immediate and powerful; the moviegoing public demanded more—especially films with plots that audiences could

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readily identify with, and characters who resembled real-life individuals in terms of their looks and mannerisms. Humphrey Bogart, who was not conventionally handsome, nonetheless emerged as a popular film star. Another ingredient for the popularity of gangster films popular, as arguably popular as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), were scripts containing sentimental family narratives. *The Godfather Trilogy* has many themes interspersed with its larger plots that have to do with personal family matters. Paradoxically, the success of such films—even with their familial themes—is that a psychological/emotional association clings tenaciously to the grim historic links of La Cosa Nostra and Italian-Americans. However, the criminal stereotypes of Italian-Americans promulgated by film is in conflict with the facts that show Italian-Americans as successful and distinguished in business, politics, sports, the arts, and professions. It must be said that films about the Mafia are not necessarily attempts to distort Italian-American cultural identity: films can simply overpower facts and overwhelm audiences. There is another difficulty associated with portrayals of gangsters, primarily Italian-American criminals, having to do with other types of distortions. At the risk of downplaying the Mafia's real-life role in union-busting, extortion rackets in retail businesses, labor racketeering, drug trafficking, and, illegal gambling, one expert says that in some movies:

> …hoodlums are transformed into folk-heroes, loveable patriarchs who want nothing more than a decent life for their families and a steady income for their unspecified business ventures (Parenti 1992, pp. 160–161).

The 1930s defined a genre of mob films that reflected the social pathologies gripping America. The films owed their popularity to the instability of the era, the result of the cataclysmic events of the World War, the subsequent economic depression, and the fearful reaction of Prohibition with its restrictions and punitive public policies of control and constraint (Hark 2007). During the era of Prohibition, the kindred problems that flowed from major events, the institutional failures of honest hard work and corruption in public agencies, became sources of inspiration for film makers. Their products reflected much of the appalling economic disarray and offered sharp social commentary on the nature of crime in a society disillusioned by the collapse of the American Dream (Leitch 2002).

Films such as *Little Caesar* (1930), and *The Public Enemy* (1931) made cinema icons of Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney; and *Scarface* (1932) with Paul Muni presented a dark psychological profile of a barely fictionalized Al Capone. These films chronicled the rise and fall of violent criminals, to be sure, but their popularity was a reaction to the instabilities of the times and the failure of social institutions that catalyzed the gangster scene. Inevitably, the gangsters in these movies faced a violent downfall which, presumably, was designed to remind audiences of the negative consequences of crime. Nevertheless, audiences still could and did identify with, or have sympathy for, the criminals, the anti-heroes—especially the jaunty, tough-talking types (Reith 1996).

Scarface was probably the most violent movie of the 1930s. Released in 1932, *Scarface* can be seen as an example of the American Dream shattered by brutal social realities of systemic corruption in the public and private sectors. This deepened the general gloom which, in turn, spread like a communicable disease

(Baxter 1970). The film had a substantial impact on the public and further, sparked opposition from the regulators of the film industry's Production Code over the incestuous overtones in the relationship between Scarface (Tony Camonte) and his sister. Eventually, film makers shifted their perspective in *G-Men* (1935) and in *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938) where Cagney as a hard-bitten bad guy finally seeks redemption by pretending to be a coward in the face of his execution. This act of humility is prompted by the criminal's priest friend, (played by Pat O'Brien) who wants to discourage a group of boys from the glorification of the criminal life. Clearly, influential crime films had to accommodate the public's moral sense that insisted that criminals be depicted negatively in comparison with law enforcement and justice officers who were shown upholding law and order. Politics in the form of the Production Code joined with art to influence both scripts and characterizations (Christensen 2006).

Along with radio, film across the United States served to disseminate moral and social messages. This was in effect a political agenda that utilized mass culture to insinuate ideological values. For film and radio to survive, however, they were obliged to defer to the political brokers in these mass culture industries who functioned as agents of the status quo—meaning the values of the Temperance League, and those of the fundamentalist Christian movement that maintained a solid grip on the politics of the "Bible Belt" in the United States. Still, many films dealing with current events implied—and none too discreetly—that criminals were the creation of society. And for audiences in the bleak and dissolute 1930s that point of view seemed quite plausible. Indeed, the best, most realistic gangster films were those that mirrored the reality of crime in society. In short, the gangster film was a fairly reliable populist version of crime in the United States (Cogan 2008).

Prohibition

The Prohibition era began in 1920 with the passage of the Volstead Act enabling the enforcement of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Until that point in time, crime in the United States was mostly disorganized and localized. With the turn of the twentieth century, the local gangs that emerged in urban ethnic enclaves preyed upon immigrant populations. The Mafia formed small cliques operating extortion rings and vice activities in cities with Italian immigrant populations. Similarly, Chinese tongs, Irish gangsters, and others operated in their respective communities (Critchely 2008; Dash 2009). Until then, the only semblance of organized criminality was to be found in the gangs of gunfighters mustered by cattle barons to protect their grazing lands from intrusive settlers and plains Indians. While some gangs of former Civil War raiders and guerillas maintained their groups for a time after the Civil War ended, they disappeared as western territories formed and law enforcement emerged to curb violent, dissolute gunmen in the burgeoning settlements. Organized crime in the form of regional syndicates and enterprises that reached beyond local areas had to wait for the opportunities that Prohibition and new waves of immigration afforded.

In subsequent decades as World War I enveloped the world, Hollywood functioned as a psychological/sociological barometer in the United States, reflecting the phenomenon of rural banditry and local criminals who robbed banks sometimes in the role of small town "Robin Hoods" in regions depressed by drought and mortgage foreclosures on farmsteads. The rootlessness and its bitter aftermath that affected millions of people in the midwest and southwest created conditions of near anarchy with widespread crime in places with limited law enforcement personnel who were also hampered by statutes that constrained their pursuit of criminals (Hall 1980; Meyer 1980). Films were made and re-made of the gangster, Dillinger, who was dubbed "Public Enemy #1 and others such as" Baby Face Nelson," "Pretty Boy Floyd." These were gunmen and bank robbers who were mercilessly hunted down and destroyed in the streets and on the roads of American towns and cities (White 1981).

These persons would become successful as characters in films because of their value as news subjects; their exploits as free-wheeling thugs thrilled a nation weary with inert government, alienated by economic depression, and traumatized by the moral apathy generated by the Temperance Movement and its ally, the Anti-Saloon League. The postures of self-righteousness among such religiously radical groups for a time terrorized political and legal agencies in the United States (Okrent 2010). However, as the fledgling FBI increased its policing powers, along with state-wide law enforcement departments who modernized their equipment and upgraded the quality of personnel, criminal justice activities gained legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and popular opinion began to shift to the "good guys." With the slow swing to law and order, crime films did not disappear: they evolved into what many would see as a more balanced approach to crime.

However, the moral/ethical messages in mob movies became mixed: crime was wrong and unacceptable but also understandable. Al Capone and John Dillinger were condemned but were somewhat sympathetic individuals caught up in the economic/social maelstrom which they did not cause but did exploit. Gangster movies became more realistic, more mature, and comprehensive in their plots and character presentations—not everyone was just an unwitting victim of a massive economic dislocation; some criminals were clearly mentally disturbed and with other criminal psychopaths could find a place in an underworld driven by greed and violence. In the post World War I period, enriched by sophisticated technologies in production and market distribution, popular films dealing with organized crime were interesting character studies of the criminal mind and lifestyle and, occasionally functioned as film versions of socio-psychological essays that offered audiences not only escape into the fantasies conjured by Hollywood but in some instances, insight into a major social problem.

World War II and its Aftermath

By the 1960s, the social equilibrium of government and business was disturbed by revelations of a nationwide conspiracy that became known as La Cosa Nostra—"Our Thing." (President's Commission 1967). Prior to Joe Valachi's sensational

remarks before the McClelland Senate Investigative Committee about the organization of the mafia in the United States, most films could only hint at a nation-wide crime syndicate, and virtually none suggested or implied the existence of a mafia conspiracy that operated across the United States. Movies such as *White Heat* (1949), *Al Capone* (1959), and *On the Waterfront* (1954) made vague allusions to sinister, sophisticated criminal organizations, but none dared go beyond intimations and suspicions of a full-blown national crime syndicate that overshadowed local gangsters. However, it was not long before the stakes were ratcheted up with officials, law enforcement, and media sources interpreting government reports in terms that heightened fear by suggesting that the mafia lurked everywhere, that it intimidated local criminal groups in its unbridled quest for power; that it was an alien conspiracy of Sicilians and Italians formed into a secret, exclusive criminal brotherhood that threatened the integrity of local and national government through threats of credible violence and corruption. Such declarations and assertions re-enforced earlier governmental reports—the Kefauver Commission, in particular—which in 1950–1951, was the first national investigative body to shine light on the Mafia's alleged control of organized crime in the United States (Kefauver 1951). And beyond other claims from multifarious sources which could not meet legal verification processes, no substantive evidence, no courtroom-caliber material was produced to support contentions of a centralized Sicilian/Italian organization that dominated organized crime in the United States (Kelly 1994; Rogovin and Martens 1994).

Before the 1950s, evidence to support the idea that organized crime was predominantly Italian was unreliable. Films of that period which could be taken as a fairly dependable indicator of general opinion, would feature Irish, Jewish, and primarily WASP criminals in key roles. Actors such as Alan Ladd, James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Humphrey Bogart played the major roles in big gangster films.

By the 1970s, thanks to journalists, law enforcement pundits, and fiction writers such as Mario Puzo in his novel, *The Godfather* (1969), the many conspiracies that actually constituted organized crime were conveniently collapsed into one—La Cosa Nostra. It is true that Italian-American gangsters have played prominent roles in organized crime since Prohibition. It is also true that some of these individuals reached positions of stature in various legitimate occupations and businesses including the Teamsters Union, construction industries, waterfront enterprises, and so on; and it is the case that mafiosi played roles in national and local electoral politics as well as involvement in foreign policy initiatives affecting the Cuban government. While all of this is undeniable, many of the incidents have been distorted and exaggerated for other purposes (Schlesinger 1979; Neff 1989; Albini 1971; Smith 1975). A consequence of all of these half-truths, specious claims, and questionable sources of information constantly repeated in the media resulted in an explosion of blockbuster films and TV series. The outcome has been that many people, not just in America, believe that something called the Mafia or La Cosa Nostra has dominated organized crime. Most will continue to do so as a result of the brilliant media depictions of events and personalities allegedly affiliated with the LCN as evidenced by, *The Sopranos* cable series (1999–2007) that mesmerized TV audiences in recent years and will be seen in syndication repeats for years to come.

It's Only a Movie

In a sociological study of a master fence (a person who handles stolen goods) the key informant, "Vincent Swaggi," believed that film characters strongly influenced the style if not the techniques of actual criminals. According to Swaggi, the notorious Joe (Crazy Joe) Gallo modeled himself on the actors George Raft who studied the behavioral styles of real racketeers such as Benjamin (Bugsy) Siegel. As a member of the Profaci crime family, Gallo also embraced the screen images of the actor Richard Widmark—who played a psychopathic killer in a mob movie. The eccentricity of Widmark's portrayal influenced Gallo's mode of dress, behavioral traits, and demeanor.

In testimony before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Robert Delaney, an undercover investigator for the New Jersey State Police, testified that:

> The movies Godfather I and II have had an impact on these crime families. Some of the members and associates would inquire…..if I had seen the movie. I said yes. They would reply that they had seen them three or four times. At dinner….in a restaurant I was with a officer and Joseph Doto, who is the son of Joe Adonis; he gave a waiter a plateful of quarters and told him to play the juke box continuously and to play the same song, the theme from *The Godfather*. Senator Nunn (asking a question): In other words you are saying [that] they sometimes go to the movies to see how they themselves are supposed to behave, is that right? Mr. Delaney: That is true. They had a lot of things taught to them through the movies. They try to live up to it. The movie was telling them how. (Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, 372).

In another instance, when Big John Ormento, a capo regime (a boss) in the Genovese Crime Family was arrested for drug trafficking, federal agents found in his home a copy of Frederic Sondern's book, *The Brotherhood of Evil* (1959). Philip Testa, a capo in the Bruno/Scarfo Philadelphia Crime Family was killed in a bomb blast in his home where investigators discovered videos of the Godfather movies, as well as a copy of Demaris's *The Last Mafioso* (1981) in which Testa had apparently made marginal notes and comments (Abadinsky 1997, p. 503).

Hollywood and Television: The Impact on the Underworld

Whatever the reading habits of gangsters, more of them saw movies featuring organized crime themes and characters. Sammy "The Bull" Gravano, the powerful Underboss of John Gotti's Gambino Crime Family in New York recalled his vivid recollections of *The Godfather* films:

> I left the movie stunned…. I mean, I floated out of the theatre. Maybe it was fiction, but for me, then, that was our life. It was incredible. I remember talking to many guys, 'made guys' [initiated mafiosi] who felt exactly the same way (Maas 1997, p. 93).

The film captured the way of life of the mafia as Gravano envisioned it, where honor, respect, brotherhood, and loyalty prevailed. In jail in 1993, awaiting trial on charges that if convicted would ensure a life behind bars, the dream utterly collapsed as a fraud. Soon thereafter, Gravano became a very effective government witness.

Joseph Pistone (aka Donnie Brasco) an FBI undercover agent who spent nearly 6 perilous years associating with members of the Bonanno Crime Family claimed that:

> "Wiseguys (mob members) love movies about wiseguys. They love being depicted on the big screen…. The Godfather? That movie makes wiseguys look like philosophers and noble warriors. Wiseguys know that movie (The Godfather) better than most film students" (Pistone 2004, p. 147).

Gangster films and the popular TV series *The Sopranos*, appealed to the vanity of pesky mobsters. Even when films depicted them as cruel and coarse, the classy technical aura of *The Godfather* and the heroic romanticism of the script valorized images of mafiosi as some sort of embattled but dignified individuals (Camon 2000). It is not Hollywood alone that explores the criminal world for script materials. According to Saviano, modern cinematic images of organized gangsters are influential among real-world hoodlums in Italy where new generations of Neapolitan Camorra bosses do not follow exclusively criminal pathways: they no longer spend most of their time on the streets with local thugs, nor do they carry guns as their predecessors did; they watch TV, often go to college, and frequently take legitimate jobs (Saviano 2007). Few in either the Sicilian Mafia or Neapolitan Camorra use the term, "Padrino" to describe a Boss. When *The Godfather* (Part II) was released, ethnic Italian crime groups started using the term "Godfather" to describe the Boss (Raab 2005). And many young American hoodlums adopted as part of their criminal costume dark glasses, solemn speech (that was still inarticulate), jump suits and fancy, customized tailored clothes after the brash, loud styles John Gotti displayed. As the boisterous head of the Gambino Crime Family, he struck a pose affecting an Al Capone image as the quintessential gangster. The need to be fashionable affected Italian mafiosi as well: Luciano Leggio, a Sicilian boss, wore dark glasses and jutted his chin when he strudded and posed for photos much like Marlon Brando's Don Vito Coreleone (Capeci and Mustain 1996). Some cammoristi, the Neapolitan equivalent of the Sicilian Mafia and American La Cosa Nostra, claim that they set the fashion and style for Hollywood representations of organized criminals. But this connection has always worked both ways. According to one of his major biographers, Al Capone was conscious of the fact that he had become through his massive notoriety, a fashion template for film gang bosses (Bergreen 1994). Howard Hawkes used Capone's career and public posturing as inspiration for his 1932 film, *Scarface*. Capone was sensitive about a scar that ran down his left cheek—a result of a barroom brawl in Brooklyn, New York when he worked as a bouncer for his relative and mentor Johnny Torrio who would later launch Capone's career in Chicago during the Prohibition Era. In Brian DaPalma's successful remake of *Scarface* in 1983, Al Pacino played the role of Tony Montana, a rising crime star in the refugee Cuban underworld of Miami. The drug kingpin meets a calamitous end in a spectacular shootout with Bolivian cocaine traffickers.

In Italy, cinematic images of gangsters are very influential among real-world hoodlums, as they are in the United States. As noted above, Sammy "The Bull" Gravano acknowledged the psychological impact that *The Godfather* had on him and other members of the Cosa Nostra crime families in New York. For Gravano

and others, the films romanticized the mafia way of life and provided a cultural context for otherwise strange, outlandish folkways and blood oaths. Vito Coreleone was the perfect archetype of a mafia boss: resolute, shrewd, intelligent, and determined to live realistically on his own terms rather than succumb to the misery of menial labor, the constant threat of poverty, and degrading prejudice. Film makers and the movie-going public seem utterly enthralled by the mystery and danger of Mafia criminality and avidly watch films and TV series on the mafia underworld.

The Godfather films influenced the way mafia members talked, handled weapons, dressed, and presented themselves in everyday life. Other films such as *Donnie Brasco* (1997), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Casino* (1995), also made an impact on the thinking of gangsters and the public. Even the music of *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and *Casino* would be heard at weddings, on cell phones, and in TV commercials to such a degree that mafia imagery has become iconic. However, not all the encomiums could blank out the captious views of some journalists. For Capeci, mafia movies were not valid guides to the mafia psyche; fabulous illicit profits and the artistic merits of film productions not withstanding, observers with unwavering eyes had serious misgivings about the adulation organized crime films evoked:

> "The daily routine involves grit, grime, self-interest, lying, cheating, backstabbing, pettiness, spontaneous violence, betrayal, and many other acts that conjure up the idea of killers without honor who will do almost anything to make a buck…. The Godfather ….has nothing to do with reality" (Capeci 2002, p. 209).

The Godfather Trilogy and the Sopranos Series: Panoramas of the American Mafia

The Godfather, III (1990) was reputedly based on a major financial scandal in the 1980s involving Sicilian and American mafiosi, Italy's largest bank, and the Vatican itself (DeStefano 2006). The last of the Godfather films focused on the globalization of organized crime, and its criminal activities in high-level finance conducted by persons operating in plush business suites rather than in slum ridden streets. Godfather III was not a success with the public even with an updated script. Perhaps, the ideas ran out of steam and a dutiful, interested public attended screenings but could not muster enthusiasm; unquestionably, the three Godfather films represent an addition to American cinematic folklore; Part III, the final film by Puzo and Copolla, ended an era of gangster movies and did so brilliantly in terms of cinematography, scripts, and performances by actors that have energized these movies in general.

The Godfather Trilogy offers a vivid look into a mafia dynasty—the Coreleone family. Following the Godfather films, *Goodfellas* (2005) showed that mafia crime films were not artistically exhausted. Since the 1970s, the mafia mystique had saturated segments of the entertainment media, spawning spin-offs such as the short

TV series *Honor Thy Father* (1990) based on autobiography of Joseph Bonanno (Bonanno and Lali 1983). But none has succeeded as the Sopranos which won Emmy awards in an unprecedented fashion. *The Sopranos* TV cable series represented a more sophisticated approach to narrative continuity and character development which contributed to a sober look into the contemporary realities of everyday life in some criminal milieu. Though the world of the Sopranos was not like the habitat or historical context of the Coreleones, and though it lacks the sweep and grandeur of the Godfather trilogy, *The Sopranos* was cutting edge. The series about relatively low-level New Jersey mobsters living in the shadow of the infamous "five families" of New York focused on Tony Soprano's trials and tribulations as an up and coming crime boss who was also working through a middle-life crisis involving issues concerning his marriage and teenage children who were beginning to ask sensitive questions about their father's occupation and reputation. The series was a dynastic-type contemporary soap opera, that worked. For six seasons, the show had legs with consistently good plots and character development. By the time it ended after 76 episodes, we had seen many Tonys—some calculating, others painfully sentimental, lecherous, paternal, paranoid, anxiety-ridden, psychopathic, and above all, greedy. His psyche was compartmentalized and often wounded in the fray of the hypocrisy that swirled around him. As with Vito and Michael Coreleone, Tony Soprano crosscut mob business with his personal family life and, not surprisingly, the outcomes were scarcely satisfactory.

Was Tony Soprano, as seen in a medley of characterizations, a modern archetype of a Mafia mob boss? Given his social and political outlooks on things, his personality is not especially puzzling or elusive, even though he sees a psychiatrist. Comparisons between *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* could not be more revealing in terms of movie-making, television-production technologies, and plot structures. This aside, the ways in which the characters are presented goes beyond the need to fit them into the correct sociological roles and statuses appropriate to time, place, and cultural dynamics. For example, Tony Soprano is overweight, a slave to food, sex, and violence; he lacks the gravamen and the self-possession of Vito and Michael Coreleone. The screen images reflect the different natures of the characters. The Coreleones were grandees of the underworld surrounded by serious criminal colleagues such as the lawyer Tom Hagen, Vito Coreleone's consigliere (who is not Italian). In comparison, Tony Soprano's consigliere is farcical: Silvio Dante is a scowling pimp who runs the Bada-bing strip club/go–go bar, and does bad Al Pacino impressions. It goes on: Tony's wife, Carmela, is no Kay Adams(Michael Coreleone's wife), a whiny WASP outsider who is shocked by Michael's dubious business affairs. Carmela, on the other hand, is a nice Italian girl from the neighborhood who knows exactly who her husband Tony is, and what he does. And on occasion, she too is pugnacious and acts tough. Tony's children rarely show him respect—except when they're fearful of their father. His son "AJ" and daughter "Meadow" do not usually defer respectfully to Tony as Vito Coreleone's children did. The Coreleone children saw their father as a patriarch, as the Don who remained emotionally aloof, whereas Tony is the butt of his children's jokes. They call him "Mr. Mob Boss," to his face (Kelly 2007a, b).

The main producer of *The Sopranos* claims that the series is about the decline of the Mafia. By being set in the suburbs, the Sopranos characters are closer in lifestyle to middle-class Americans—as is the cable TV audience. Tony sees a psychiatrist. And the principal concerns of Tony's real family (as distinct from his crime family) are both familiar and ordinary: kids, school, health, illness, income, etc.

The huge success of *The Sopranos* appears to be based on factors unlike those which made *The Godfather* films, Part I and Part II, such smashing hits. The show's format is a serial drama/comedy with each weekly episode running approximately 1 h uninterrupted by commercials which means that viewers have more time with characters and plots than a 2 h film. As a result, viewers get to know more about Tony and the characters that make up his world than was possible with the Coreleones.

Interesting aspect of the series are the psychotherapy sessions with Tony's female psychiatrist. Not many episodes include scenes of Tony in a session with Dr. Melfi, but they are central components of the shows. Given Tony's chaotic character structure, therapy is a plausible activity; whereas it would be unimaginable to see Vito Coreleone or Michael participating in psychiatric consultations.

The sessions themselves are filled with surprises and letdowns and are often quite stormy with Tony grumbling, cursing, and slamming the door as he barges out; or, he is flirting and making passes at the doctor. Sometimes, there is genuine empathy between the doctor and the patient over a familial issue that makes the scene poignant. It is a remarkable achievement to have a mob boss regularly visiting a psychiatrist, a female psychiatrist, and make it plausible while not undermining the historical-sociological descriptions of the intrinsic misogyny that has defined organized crime gangsters. Tony seems less remote and reclusive, emotionally richer than some of the criminal types among the Coreleones. However, in therapy sessions Tony skirts the "omerta" business and deftly manages to avoid disclosures about his life that are explicitly criminal.

No matter how convivial Tony's relationships appear, the show does not let us forget that he and his criminal cronies are out there scheming, and intimidating people to make money. When people are killed, it is emotionally jolting.

Mafia movies, more so than the average crime film, are more likely to examine ordinary family life and the anxieties it generates in the life of the criminal. For example, Michael Coreleone felt the pressure from his wife to become a legitimate businessman with no shadowy, illicit enterprises on the side. And his failure to live up to his promises led to the breakup of his marriage. Tony Soprano is man who inherits his mafia way of life and often pridefully invokes the mafia traditions of his uncle Junior and late father, Johnny Soprano, a mob capo but he realistically sees himself as doomed as the sacred traditions of the Mafia disintegrate. Tony lives in the twilight of the idols; these feelings are repressed but ultimately expressed in sessions with his therapist who helps him surface deeply embedded feelings that are painful, angry, and recurrent. Michael Coreleone at least has the consolations and advice of his father and mother when he is faced with doubts about his life and fate. Also, Michael has his thoughtful consigliere Tom Hagen, his sympathetic wife Kay, and loyal capos and soldiers, who enabled him to cope with his fears and doubts. On the other hand, Tony Soprano has Paulie Walnuts,

a headstrong wiseguy, his drug-addled cousin, Christopher, his yuppie wife, and a therapist whose doubts about the legitimacy of her therapeutic role exacerbate Tony's tense feelings which result in bouts of recurrent depression that produce fainting spells and erratic behavior.

The Sopranos episodes play with violence in seductive ways. Some scenes have no depth: the violence is parodied, like burlesque in slow motion. In the scripts, the dialogs beautifully replicate the prose rhythms of the characters. In the midst of this mayhem and gratuitous violence, there are bright spots of ebullient wit and comedy which is a defining feature of the Sopranos series. At the same time, we are reminded of the moral conflicts that form the basis of these dramas: the incipient horror that accompanies the realization that life is rather easily corrupted and confounded by constraints that each of us is capable of losing, meaning that each of us is vulnerable to the loss of our capacity for moral choice.

Michael Coreleone in *The Godfather, Part II* seems tormented by his murder of his brother Fredo—a hopeless, pathetic fool, caught up in a bizarre quest for personal power which ends ignominiously in the betrayal of his family. It is a dreadful act, with many implications clearly presented in the film. Michael murders his deceiving brother even though Fredo is older and deserving consideration. Similarly, Tony murders a young man connected romantically with his daughter, who deserved severe punishment by ancient mafia norms but whose life may have been spared; yet Tony acted impetuously and resolutely—at least he thinks so—in the name of some obscure mafia customs that now seem even to him anachronistic and irrelevant. Tony and Michael appear at times morose and self-loathing, resenting, it seems, rather than regretting, their criminogenic ways. Such a situation creates some conundrums of power: men with the control over life and death sense that they are trapped and constrained by the very rules and resources that give them overwhelming informal authority to forcibly intimidate others; and in a terrifying act of self-discovery, Tony and Michael come to understand that those who crave power find themselves paralyzed by it.

How do mafiosi and career criminals, in general, understand their acts of depravity against members of society? Mob movies do offer scenes which are actually explanations of some types of bad guy behavior. In the typical dynamics of criminal and noncriminal, many of the interactions involve partnerships which demand mutual trust; Vito Coreleone's relationships with high-level criminal justice officials and politicians is never explicit. In *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*, both crime bosses have relationships with those in the upper world of straight, legitimate society and do not see themselves as intractable enemies of the social world in which they operate and often mercilessly exploit. After all, there is some truth in the wise guy worldview that legitimate society is a pool of hypocrisy with infinite variations in its levels of honesty and corruption. In the criminal picture of things, it is the mafia, the underworld, that seems more dependable by comparison. As the films show, many legitimate associates of the gangsters are indeed repulsive and contemptible. Another dimension that must ease the anxiety mobsters experience seems to occur when they dehumanize and demonize their victims—especially when their victim is doomed to death. Terms like "prick," "cocksucker," "rat," "scumbag," and so on precede an act of murder. Somehow, by humiliating

their victims, through acts of psychological degradation and emnification, the conscience of the perpetrator may be eased. The psychological trick of making the victim less than human is nothing new.

Tony's cynical bravado makes him seem rather normal; unlike Tony, however, Michael Coreleone does not snarl; his brother Sonny is explosive like Tony from time to time which makes Sonny and Tony seem more human. When "work"(murder) needs to be done, Tony exhibits a tight emotional control: his clipped sentences, his bursts of anger, and blazing eyes reveal the depths of his emotions. Though not physically brash, he does seem like a farouche version of James Cagney in *White Heat*. One might feel some sympathy for the mobsters; the in-depth explorations of mobster psychology could give rise to some pity for the bad guys and their rebarbative world-views. But are they really fuck-ups, with a sick view of society? Their attitudes suggest that gangsters see no great moral difference between us and them, and like the rest of us, there is a great deal of variation in thinking, knowledge, and feelings among the bad guys. Have Copolla and Scorcese in their films presented us with thorny issues that raise daunting questions? For example, however deformed the self-righteous perspective of the mafiosi that, in effect, everyone has a price, no matter what, why should not we do as we please? And do not the most brazen, the most arrogant, those with the requisite resources do as they please? Corrupting the system with little concern for others is a widespread belief. Scorcese's opening monolog with Henry Hill (the gangster who is central to the plot) in *Goodfellas* is a parlous claim: "everything's rotten; why shouldn't we (the mobsters) do as we please; everyone is on the take; only fools work for a living…". Hill refers to average, working persons as the "walking dead." Is straight society a collection of dupes, losers, and victims as gangsters allege?

In *Godfather II*, Michael Coreleone, who is negotiating for casino gambling licenses in the Las Vegas hotels, wistfully remarks to a U.S. senator attempting to shake him down that "…we're all part of the same hyprocisy." Scenes like this remove many of the obstacles to a sympathetic identification with the bad guys. A fundamental problem with gangster films is that they may condition us in subtle ways to accept violence as a sensual pleasure. Filmmakers usually claim that they are showing us the real face of organized crime and how ugly it is in order to sensitize us to its horrors. In *Scarface* (1983), a leading premise is that everyone is on the make and the ordinary people, given the opportunity, are as immoral and dishonest as the villains.

Changing Times and Changing Crimes: The Gangster and the New Underworld

The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond (1960) is an important benchmark in the thematic evolution of crime films. Legs Diamond (1897–1931) was a minor bootlegger and gambler who had a connection with Arnold Rothstein and other major New York mob figures. Legs had the rugged looks, panache, and dash to match

Hollywood cowboys and movie bad guys (Kehr 2011). When Legs confronts some of the new power brokers in the underworld, namely, La Cosa Nostra crime figures, he faces a group with more apparent power than the police and few inhibiting scruples to brake its greed and ambitions. At this point, in the mid-1930s, the LCN is in its fledgling stages of maturation. Legs was informed that he no longer could operate freelance. Confounded by a boardroom embodiment of banality, little gray men sitting in judgment, he was perturbed by the idea of crime without personality. Crime stripped of style had become a business rather than an adventure that Legs failed to understand. The theme of crime films before the 1960s was that crime does not pay when in fact it actually does pay more than we care to acknowledge. When the idea was that criminals always get caught, killed, or imprisoned, a cheerful, bland, official optimism prevailed; the bad guys were destroyed at the end of the movie and moral norms were reinforced.

Since the Vietnam War, the mood of the country darkened and a variation on public attitudes toward criminal behavior became more apparent beginning in the mid-1950s where Terry Malloy, the erstwhile bad boy on the docks, is transformed into a heroic stevedore contending with waterfront racketeers in the film, *On the Waterfront* (1954). But the film does not make it clear that Malloy (Marlon Brando) will succeed in cleaning up the docks. In the Godfather trilogy, the "family business" goes on, despite changes in personnel. Beneath the melodramatic styles of such popular films there is an expression of a tragic realism that consistently defies our fantasies about lawbreaking. In the cowboy movies with notable exceptions, the outlaws are always defeated, and the good guys prevail. The "bad-guys" in contemporary films are depicted more realistically (as became evident in publicly televised government hearings); they are not as independently minded as say, Legs Diamond, or even Vito Coreleone in his younger days. Mobsters tend to be more like everybody else but reveal a willingness to kill, to steal, and to bully. They live by taking orders. They tend to be neither disobedient nor deficient in task performance, and in general they are submissive. And with murder everywhere in real life and film—as was the case in the pre-World War II years, viewers became immune to bloodshed. Indeed, killing was an integral part of criminal enterprises on screen and off—except, of course, when it touched someone personally. Or so it seemed. Organized crime leaders understood that spilling blood, however, justified in their own minds, was bad for business and had to be discouraged. *The Godfather Trilogy* explores that very theme—what is good for business must be the prevailing sentiment. For Don Vito Coreleone, certainly not drugs. The struggle over the issue of huge profits accompanied by high risks from law enforcement, the public, and other criminal organizations present some of the main issues behind the epic film.

The time span of *The Godfather* covers the end of World War II (1945) through the mid-1950s. The Corleone family moves itself and its operations to Reno, Nevada and Las Vegas where the casinos and gambling houses can be used to safely wash its narcotics money. *The Godfather, Part II* (1974) expands its exploration of the characters and focuses on the biographical background of Vito Coreleone and the origins of the mafia crime family that bears his name.

The crime boss is not portrayed as a brazen, loudmouth psychopath chomping on a cigar. The Don is a primitive sacred monster, not a strapping brute; nor is he one of those shrinking, wizened geezers consumed by grudges and vendettas. In Marlon Brando's hands, the Don is self-possessed, full of courtly reserve—a person capable of fury, warm gentility, and charm.

By any estimation, *The Godfather, Part II* was the perfect sequel. In the first film, Michael engaged in murder for the sake of the family. In Part II, Michael tasted power, relished it, and clung to it through predatory and vicious murders that included his weakling brother Fredo, and his sister Connie's treacherous husband. The new Godfather put himself beyond redemption and in the end he loses his wife. In *Godfather, Part III* (1990), Michael becomes remorseful. Twenty years later, he is trying to mend fences, and hopes to leave his family a good name as charitable philanthropic people. To accomplish this, he moved his family and wealth out of gambling in Las Vegas and into banking and financial investments, while still retaining secret roles in huge, legitimate casino operations. Other mafia associates with whom he had formed lucrative arrangements resent his climb toward respectability. Ironically, the higher Michael moves into international banking circles, the more he is victimized by otherwise legitimate business people. The Godfather, in seeking to establish and identify his personal family as morally and ethically irreproachable, enters into negotiations with the Vatican when it is enveloped in a crisis of its own: the Pope is at the edge of death and all business deals are in limbo. Compared to the grandees who routinely deal with the Vatican, Michael is a boy scout. He fails to protect the new Pope, but manages to thwart the higher-level mafiosi from poisoning the Church with open corruption. *Godfather, III* ends with a bloody finish (which we have seen before), but this time naked horror is replaced by grandiosity.

In *Part III*, two characters stand out: Connie Coreleone and Vincent—Sonny Coreleone's illegitimate son. Vincent is a hot-tempered aspiring gangster and is ready to take the reins of power from his exhausted uncle Michael. Connie Coreleone comes across as a woman of animal strength and nerves of steel—a mob version of Lady Macbeth or Lucrezia Borgia. She is the quintessential mob witch who maneuvers Vincent into the leadership of the Coreleone Family which has gone transnational and is globalizing its operations.

The vibrant, compelling characters in the Godfather films also include the somewhat comical, fat Peter Clemenza and the scheming Tessio who are secondary chiefs, capos, and run their own fiefdoms, but whose fidelity to Don Coreleone goes back to the early immigrant days in the squalid slums of the lower eastside tenements of New York City. These relationships remained steadfast over the years. Tom Hagen, the Coreleone attorney who really serves as a Consigliere (counselor) in the operations of the crime family, is an ethnic fluke: abandoned in the streets, orphaned as a youth, and taken in by Sonny Coreleone, Hagen grew up in the Coreleone household where the Godfather insisted that he retain his surname and his Irish-German heritage. On this, the Godfather was adamant; he would not countenance the absurdity of adopted ancestries. After the war years, Michael Coreleone reluctantly settles into mob life following the sensational

murders of a New York City police captain associated with the notorious drug dealer, Sollozo. Michael chooses a waspy, ingénue type wife from New England whose ignorance about the activities and reputation of the family offers comic relief. Later, her ignorance having faded after some frightening, dangerous events, Kay's life becomes a nightmare.

No doubt the films' visual verisimilitude with New York in the late 1940s and 1950s along with plausible plots, and excellent acting contributed to their appeal artistically as well as box office success. More than this, perhaps, the story lines of the films are not just about individuals but persons in specific historical settings. One might describe *The Godfather Trilogy* as an intimate epic. For many viewers, *The Godfather* is about the dramatic American Dream from its dispiriting beginnings through many traumatizing struggles to material success and ultimately some disillusionment. The journey of the Coreleones involves the bonds of family linked to licit and illicit business, to crime and murder. And in Part II, there is a fuller expression of America as a land filling up with immigrants who are seeking safety, and escape from hunger and fear. Finally in Part III, Michael Coreleone goes global and seeks admission to an elite group of prominent philanthropic Catholics who will facilitate his charities around the world and help with aid to relieve poverty in Sicily. Or so he believes in his naiveté about religious faith which is in conflict with the Godfather's dictum of power: worth is determined by wealth. What he vainly attempts is to mix one world of sordid business and violence with another that is presumably legitimate. Michael Coreleone quickly becomes disillusioned.

From Global Crime to the American Suburbs: TV Wiseguys

In many of its scenes, clues are everywhere concerning the subcultural heritage of the mobsters in *The Sopranos* series. In the "Bada-Bing!"(its very name a historical glyph to *Godfather, Part II*), Tony Soprano holds court as he sometimes does in a pork store which is another locale that serves as an office for "sitdowns"(meetings) that are convened for mob business purposes. The Sopranos series, perhaps because of its length—76 episodes in 6 years—is more than a show. It examines with psychological depth the various workings of scams, the fortuitous circumstances of hits and spontaneous murders, political connections and their links with bid-rigging contracts and major construction projects, techniques of intimidation, the intricate internecine maneuverings of competing gangsters, and methods of coping with the ever-present FBI. In this way, the series producer and his production associates have suffused the mafia into the social tissues of middle-class suburbia in northern New Jersey. No longer the semi-reclusive Vito Coreleone, the ultimate outsider reposing in a fortress-like compound surrounded by armed men, Tony Soprano lives next door, across the fence; he sits comfortably at the next table in the restaurant. And while no one believes he is a "waste management consultant," the collective capacities for self-deception go only so far at the local FBI offices. Tony and his

family are thoroughly domesticated and culturally assimilated into the social membranes that envelop his community. He is not in the Hollywood style, an outsider/outlaw that does not fit in. Tony and his associates such as Paulie Walnuts, grew up on *Archie Bunker* and *The Honeymooners*—popular TV sitcoms dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. The one exception to a straight-looking bunch of hoodlums is the presence of a gay wiseguy which is a mortal sin for the mafia; although, Tony is reluctant to kill him because he is a very good earner and "earning" (kicking up profits from any enterprise to the boss) is the bottom line for Tony. As a movie buff, Tony loves history, World War II documentaries, the films of Cagney, Bogart and, of course, *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*.

The Sopranos was launched with expectations that its audience at least tolerated the idea of the Mafia as a presence, if scarcely an invisible presence. We discover what Tony and members of his crew watch on TV and what forms their imaginations about crime, politics, war, discrimination against Italians, and so on. There is the romance of La Cosa Nostra fed incessantly by movies from the early classics, with Paul Muni, or the psychotic ravings and projections of Bogart, or the sentimental bravura of Cagney, or the thoughtful tough guy, Edward G. Robinson. *The Godfather Trilogy* and *Goodfellas* are pedagogical texts for them as they often cite passages of dialog or describe scenes that serve as instructive behavioral models. This is not at all unusual. Most of the major, defining events in the American underworld which have been presented in films with more or less fidelity to the actual facts are grist for Tony's crew. The early days of Anastasia's waterfront brutalities, his execution in a midtown Manhattan barbershop; the shooting of Joe Colombo in the middle of a mass meeting of the Italian-American Civil Rights Association in Columbus circle in Manhattan; "Crazy Joe Gallo's murder in a Little Italy clam house in front of members of his family—all these ruthless savage acts feed the little Mafiosi's fantasies and viewers can only guess at the impact of such events on Tony's fragile psyche."

Because *The Sopranos* is not a conventional film, it can offer broader, more discursive plots where, over several weeks of broadcasting, the scripts may digress across a range of topics. This technological capacity doubtlessly attracts and stimulates audiences where the sheer topicality of events lend themselves to mob gossip. Tony, his wife, mother, sister, kids, and close associates are seen from all angles including their inner lives. All of these people, including Dr. Melfi the psychiatrist, are prominently featured in many episodes (Rucker 2003). Tony is being treated for depression and panic attacks, and more than his intense struggles with other gangsters, corrupt politicians and businessmen, the turmoil in his home with his wife, kids, uncle, aging mother, and sister easily matched the emotional pressures he experiences in his role as a mob boss. Ordinarily, gangster movies and shows assign women to trophy roles; they are mere distractions in terms of the plots. In Tony's case, strong-minded women were in varying degrees, aggressive and at times threatened to turn *The Sopranos* into just another soap opera. Instead, these domestic battles became a mischievous, genuinely comedic element in the show. However, the is the dark, evil side of grisly events: the series ends

by stripping the audience of its illusions concerning the moral status of its principal characters. Tony murders his cousin because of mob pressures for revenge. With this, the audience must acknowledge that some lifestyles merely mimic what seems normal.

One of the features of the series is the role that Dr. Melfi, the psychiatrist, plays in terms of recovery possibilities for Tony and his personal family. Tony does not seem to respond in ways that Dr. Melfi would consider healthy; rather, he turns her life-enhancing advice and therapy into a theatrical platform where he can act out with another woman. Dr. Melfi reviews Tony's clinical data, consults with a colleague, and decides to end his treatment. Tony the untreatable patient?! The decisive factor behind Melfi's decision to declare Tony untreatable appears to be the information she obtains that psychopaths merely sharpen their manipulative skills in therapy and gain little, if anything, that is likely to restore emotional well-being. What began as a potentially healing regimen inexorably degenerated into a series of ugly recriminations between an emotionally conflicted therapist incapable of treating her ill, and wily, patient.

The Gangster Genre in Film and Television

The Sopranos exhibits high production values which reach the level of cinematic artistry that *The Godfather Trilogy* displayed. The color schemes in film prints, costume authenticity, open-air photography—all distinguished *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* as special (Nochimson 2006). In the Sopranos, the content of the episodes contains allusions to American cinematic gangster figures and to *The Godfather Trilogy*. For example, Tony Soprano, the emotionally troubled mob boss, intently watches scenes of the gangster, Tommy Powers (James Cagney) with his mother in the film *The Public Enemy* (1932).

Tony is frustrated by his mother's obstinate refusal to placement in a residence for those who need assistance. The panic attacks this incident precipitates lead to an auto accident and subsequent embarrassing fainting spells. In other scenes reminiscent of Hollywood gangster movies the FBI surveillance of Tony and his crew resemble scenes from White Heat (1949). Oddly, Tony and Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) both suffer debilitating migraines; both men are in problematic relationships with their mothers.

Many of the perspectives in *The Sopranos* including the moral phenomenology of the gangster, and the presentation of female crises among those affiliated with career criminals undergoes interesting permutations in the hands of the series' executive producer, David Chase, and his collaborators. There is nothing oblique in the realism of the gangster underclasses, official corruption, and middle-class pathologies. Characters and subplots are often hardboiled and occasionally savage—none more so than the treatment of women.

Molls, Mamas, and "Goomadas"

In this respect, Tony's emotional afflictions are not unusual: his marriage to his wife Carmela is often tumultuous; she, likewise, is tuned-into women's rights, her church, kids, and friends. And even with a bevy of girlfriends, Tony is beleaguered by fears that he is unloved and unappreciated—although he seems fearless and relaxed with his prozac. *The Sopranos* episodes are bundles of action, crisp, sharp dialog, and images the audience easily identifies with. Orbiting around the boss is the core group of his immediate family, his crew, and the associates who form secondary and tertiary rings of characters with varying screen life spans; some of these characters threaten to seize the reins of power and leadership, such as the suave psychopath Richie Aprile, whom Tony's hippie sister Janice falls for. Then, there is the degenerate gambler owing everyone, including Tony; and tragically, the beautiful manic-depressive Gloria Trillo, a car dealer and patient of Dr. Melfi who commits suicide when Tony fails to fulfill his romantic commitments to her. Others surfaced in the series if only to last as long as it took them to get beaten to death, for some indiscretion, mistake, and betrayal that threatened the crime family or Tony personally.

That was the idea: a portrait of a Mafia boss as a midlife family guy harried by adolescent kids, a status-conscious wife, an impossible mother on the brink of senility, and an obstreperous uncle who is also a lifelong gangster. These components alone would seem to be a solid basis for a good sitcom that would include the darker, surreptitious elements of organized crime sufficiently satirized so that it would resemble a popular dynastic soap opera like Dallas. As it unfolded week by week it became rich in text, and in scenes beautifully unfinished, and as the last episode of the series revealed, unfinishable.

It was *The Godfather* that offered the cinematic moment when mafia-affiliated women asserted themselves. Against the stoical, taciturn posture of Mama Coreleone who endured it all—the endless violence, the police, prison terms of the men; the humiliations of gomadas (girlfriends of their husbands)–stand other women such as Kaye, Michael's wife, Connie, Michael's sister, and Carmela, Tony's wife, who symbolize a rebellious female chorus that challenges the Mafia way of life. Kay and Connie Coreleone protest against their lives and act out in self-destructive ways; but 30 years later, Carmela Soprano her sister-in-law, Janice Soprano, as well as Tony's psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, struggle for living space where they can assert themselves, and liberate themselves from overwhelming male power lest they become complicit with it.

Because of the material rewards that crime and violence produce, women feel trapped in the provenance of mafia resources. Can they resist the lure of affluence? Some do. Others manage to resist male power directly through complex, wily ways in the intra-psychic and domestic realms. The women in Tony's life all have issues: Carmela must cope somehow with Tony's numerous infidelities; nor is she ignorant of his status as boss and all that it implies—especially as it runs counter to her religious convictions about the sanctity of human life; yet she enjoys, as do her children and relatives the lifestyle that his wealth affords. Her conflicts are

deep, soul-rendering struggles that not even her church or priest can help her with. Carmela wants more than financial security in her life. She is hardly unique being married to a man who regularly betrays and abuses her but provides very well for her family—at least at the material level. These painful truths of everyday married life for Carmela Soprano and the other women in Tony's familial orbit serve as a reminder for so many women in all class and status groups that there is much truth in the feminist claim that far too many women collude consciously in their own oppression which infects their homes, work, and social life.

Other women connected to the underworld are less fortunate in terms of material resources as the wives and daughters of mobsters. Wise guys often brutalize women: in *The Sopranos*, Christopher, Tony's cousin and close associate, batters Adriana, his girlfriend who is murdered after confessing to Christopher about her coercion by the FBI to become and act as an informant; a woman loanshark is shot dead in a public place when she defiantly refuses to supply more money to Tony and his crew; a stripper in the Bada-Bing nightclub is viciously beaten to death in a parking lot when she refuses to engage in sex with one of Tony's lieutenants. Tony's rage with his girlfriend is so humiliating for a woman with severe depression that she commits suicide when he spurns her one time too many. And finally, Connie Coreleone is regularly beaten by her husband Carlo but tries to keep it quiet fearing that her hot-tempered brother Sonny might kill her cheating husband. Sonny himself maintains a relationship with a girlfriend whose illegitimate son Vincent emerges as Michael's heir as Boss in *Godfather III*. In the Sopranos series, many episodes deal in a daring manner with issues of misogyny and homophobia (Donatelli and Alward 2006). However, there are other matters that have been and remain controversial in some segments of the Italian-American community and among media critics. Do the Godfather films and others promote ethnic prejudice? Are Mafia films and TV productions the last word on Italians? Does *The Sopranos* defame the cultural character of Italian Americans. Further, are the reputations and histories of those of Italian descent severely damaged by popular TV shows and films like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*? The argument of some Italian-American advocate organizations is in essence that these films, TV series, and other entertainments where Italians play gangster roles demean the image of Italians.

The producers, writers, and actors of *The Sopranos* believe that they are telling particular ethnic stories and are making or rendering a sociological map of complex things that go into making a gangster or criminal subculture (Willis 2001). They do not endorse prejudicial stereotypes. On the contrary, the Soprano episodes seek to clarify the conditions that generate the modern Mafia milieu.

Plot Structures and Dramatic Themes

The high production values of *The Sopranos* was employed so effectively that rarely is there a boring moment. The sound design, as with *The Godfather Trilogy*, in the opening title montage nicely captures Tony Soprano's zeitgeist: his driving

energy, his angst, violent tirades, sentimental memories, and his comical crudity with his companion from the early days, his "Sancho Panza," Mafia associate Paulie Walnuts. The main pictorial compositions are highlighted by fleeting images of the industrial New Jersey/New York corridor hugging the Hudson River estuary. Drab working-class housing stretches like necklaces around the petrochemical plants that dominate the landscape. Driving through this, Tony arrives in his new SUV Cadillac at his spacious home with its well-manicured lawns. The comparative opulence of his home attests to his social arrival at a level of affluence that sets him apart from those he exploits. *The Sopranos* utilized TV technical capabilities very effectively in the stream of narrative plots to make it the dominant series over the past decade. Serial structure in film and TV is nothing new—even in crime dramas (The Untouchables, *Wiseguy*) that morphed out of conventional police shows. The narratives in the Sopranos scripts are greatly enhanced by editing formulae and technical abilities that enrich story lines. The economic production contexts and demands of production schedules actually encourage serialization. Single shows or big time films of length (*Gone With the Wind*, *Dr. Zhivago*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Godfather*) cannot generate the income or dependable financing for a TV station or network that is possible for regularly scheduled, securely financed productions. The reverse situation—turning a successful TV series into a film—is rare and usually not practicable. Imagine the hugely successful TV series, *All in the Family* as a movie.

In terms of audience needs, TV series are similar to serialized movie shorts that were popular decades ago when the tradition of Saturday night movie theater-going was popular. The movie theater functioned as a large living room with an immense TV screen in a public rather than a private setting denuded of all of the latter's amenities. Many successful TV series differentiate themselves from successful films in several ways. For example, the TV series, *Golden Girls* (three women living in a retirement community), and *Everybody Loves Raymond* (domestic scenes with family members and friends interacting in comical ways with everyday family issues) and the animated series, *A Family Guy*, a raw look at family dynamics and life, have scripts that consists of little more than one-line jokes; yet these are award-winning projects.

Unlike the film narrative, the continuing TV story cannot be totally laid out in advance. The numerous aleatory elements that form the constitutive contexts of production play a more prominent role in TV series and seem more susceptible and vulnerable to the unpredictability of creative processes, and the strains of production schedules and costs than occur in ordinary movie production. In *The Sopranos*, time and normal flow of life events (the kids actually age on camera) contributes to the appealing quality of verisimilitude and timeliness that series effectively creates.

A recent HBO series by Martin Scorcese, *Boardwalk Empire* focuses on the career of Enoch "Nucky" Thompson, an Atlantic City political boss and bootlegger during Prohibition. Its charm has to do with Scorcese's finely honed sense of time and place in which the production is situated—the 1920s and the Prohibition era. As with the Sopranos, the thread of Nucky's relationships involving women,

political leaders, gangsters at all levels, and the community at large where he exercises subtle, clever influence among, for example, the Women's Temperance movement leaders makes up the background for the drama. Thompson imports and distributes large quantities of smuggled alcohol which is what the series is also about. And like *The Sopranos*, *Boardwalk Empire* features a cast of characters that absorb the narrative flow with their own fascinating stories.

Gangster movies of the past presented slender subplots; with TV series, however, narrative techniques have become more complex much like the plot structures of novels. Thus, we see Tony Soprano from a variety of perspectives which was not always practical in the great classic crime films. Nor are their ethical and moral blockages suspectable to thematic exploration as was the case in Hollywood in the 1950s where a formal production code stipulated that a film must never permit an audience to sympathizes with, or admire, a character with questionable morals or a blemished legal history. It was believed that the power of film to influence otherwise oblivious or complacent audiences precluded all sorts of freedoms and nuances in the development of character on screen. Though the historic gangster masterpieces covertly circumvented and subverted those guidelines, the film industry in the United States was generally impeded in its portrayals of criminals in all their complexity. Al Capone, like his modern day fictional Other, Tony Soprano, was a family man as well as a ruthless crime lord. Unfortunately, *The Godfather Trilogy* did not explore deeply enough into the full range of personality in the enigmatic figure of the Godfather. However, *The Sopranos* producers did delve into the provocative personality of Tony Soprano and other characters. Notwithstanding many differences in life experience, what Michael Coreleone and Tony Soprano do share is introspective activities about the ethical incongruities of family men who also happen to be leading figures in crime organizations. Those expecting unequivocal condemnation of "bad men" will be disappointed, while, conversely, those looking for realistic character types such as those developed for the "film noir" scripts of the 1930s and 1940s should be enthusiastic about current trends. In this connection, not all criminally inspired conflicts arc towards an explosive, decisive climax. Many film makers today do not see their products as merely propagandistic tools in the struggle against organized crime, or as simplistic moral roadmaps about good guys and bad guys. As a result, not all criminal conflicts trend toward explosive climaxes. While most criminal events in the series are finite and conclusive—someone lives, someone dies—many criminal activities fail, and even some murder contracts are rescinded. And also true to life, much time is spent in negotiations, including mob "sit downs" where no progress is made. "Sit downs" are designed to resolve disputes peaceably; this was an outcome of the underworld's "managerial revolution" in 1933. Such reality checks subvert traditional images of the gang lord/gangster as a dark gutter deity whose word is final.

Gangsters, however, are not completely domesticated in the movies or on TV. A film version of the life of Salvatore Bonanno (Joseph Bonanno's son) illustrates some of the changes and transitions in criminal images which reflect changes in the Cosa Nostra crime families. Bonanno's men are typically ordinary bumbling mortals with unclear ideas and not very good problem-solving skills (Talese 1971).

The Godfather and *The Sopranos* series stimulated a change in traditional Hollywood style formulaic films about the underworld. The new styles of movie-making owed much to the innovations that came out of TV production: more realistic images of organized criminality seen through the prisms developed in TV. However, not all of it reached standards of professionalism. A recent example of reality TV is Mob Wives a popular panel of scenes involving women whose husbands, boyfriends, and male relatives are incarcerated as "OC" criminals. Its success has insured another season of telecasts. The show's producer Rene Graziano has a husband and father incarcerated. She claims that the show is popular as a form of Reality TV mainly because it reflects the lives of women who must cope with the pressures of their men being imprisoned. This is another example of the sheer popularity of mob movies and TV productions that also suggests that we sometimes permit ourselves to love monsters. The films and TV images are constructed social dreams with whom audiences identified and invariably clamor for more; the irony is that the characters are hardly exemplary moral persons and are unusually devoid of scruples. These media images suggest the questions as to how and why do vicious and psychopathic characters in mob movies become the objects of adoration in a public too frequently harassed by crime and criminals of this sort? Do the films and TV shows offer release from the worries and anxieties of everyday life that the movies provide? That seems too patas an explanation. Yet, the deviance of the underworld is attractive in that it is in part an expression of defiance against those aspects of our lives that cause alienation and chronic unhappiness. Vito Coreleone and Tony Soprano are cinematic symbols who seem merely prankish when compared with the antics of al-Qaeda or with the larcenous behavior of Wall Street moguls.

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