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Mafia in the Movies

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, January 22nd, 2020

The release of *The Irishman* directed by [Martin Scorsese](#) and of *Il traditore (The Traitor)* directed by [Marco Bellocchio](#) inspires me to reflect on the depiction of the [Sicilian mafia](#) and the [Italian-American mafia](#) in Italian and American movies.

The Godfather (1972) by [Francis Ford Coppola](#), based on the 1969 novel by [Mario Puzo](#), is the most beloved movie of this genre. [Bellocchio](#) says it was the ideal movie for all the real Sicilian mafia bosses, those who killed people; they owned it on videotape, they played it in their homes, they knew every scene by heart. [Marlon Brando](#), playing [Don Vito Corleone](#), utters the famous phrase: “I’m going to make him an offer he can’t refuse.” The price of not casting godson [Johnny](#) in a movie costs the Hollywood producer his prized racehorse, whose severed head he finds in his bed.



The Traitor-Pierfrancesco Favino © Laura Siervi-Sony Classics

[Pierluigi Favino](#), who plays [Tommaso Buscetta](#) in *The Traitor*, says that a Sicilian mafioso will never behave like the Italian-American mafia bosses in *The Godfather*. “They would never show their power, their money, they would never dress that way, with those tailored suits. The rule was that you would never show to other people that you belonged to the Mafia, so you would dress like a peasant, and you would never talk like that. During the maxi trial, [Buscetta](#) said, if I need to scare you or if I want you to be frightened, I would never have to show you that I’m dangerous.” [Buscetta](#)’s favorite movie was *Scarface* (1983) directed by [Brian De Palma](#), where [Al Pacino](#) plays [Tony Montana](#), a Cuban drug lord in 1980s Miami.



Martin Scorsese © Armando Gallo-HFPA

[Martin Scorsese](#) agrees, says that the real power is quiet and dark, that as a child growing up in Little Italy, New York, he saw the fear that local gangsters provoked in his parents, that people would show respect and move away. In *The Irishman*, based on the true story of [Frank Sheeran](#) from the 2004 book by [Charles Brandt](#), *I Heard You Paint Houses* (code for killing people), the Italian mafia boss [Russell Bufalino](#) played by [Joe Pesci](#) is very low-key, he collects his protection money quietly, matter of factly he orders his protege [Sheeran](#) to assassinate union leader [Jimmy Hoffa](#), played by [Al Pacino](#).



The Irishman-Joe Pesci, Robert DeNiro © Niko Tavernise-Netflix

De Niro comments: “There were racial tensions between the Jews, the Irish, the Italians, but they all worked together in that world. Some people did things better, like the Irish killed well, so they were hitmen, the Jews were always thought of as the accountants, who would take care of the finances, Meyer Lansky was smarter at that stuff. But they all overlapped.” He adds that the way Scorsese directed *The Irishman* makes you sympathize with these brutal killers. “In that world, like in the corporate world, there are rules, you have to do the right thing, and if you do the wrong thing, you pay a much harsher price for it. But anybody can relate to the emotional problems, the egos, the anxieties, the complexity, the life decision making, whether you are going to get killed for it or demoted or fired or whatever, people can understand that, it’s just that in the mafia world the penalties are a bit harsher.”



Robert De Niro © Armando Gallo-HFPA

This was also the appeal of the long-running TV series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) with James Gandolfini as an Italian-American mobster who goes to therapy to deal with his problems.

The Untouchables (1987) by Brian DePalma, another Italian-American director, depicts as heroes Eliot Ness (Kevin Costner) and his group of Prohibition agents (Sean Connery, Andy Garcia) who went after Italian-American gangster Al Capone (Robert De Niro) in 1930s Chicago. *Dick Tracy* (1990), directed by Warren Beatty from the 1930s comic strip, is also based on Eliot Ness, with Al Pacino playing Al Capone (Alfonse “Big Boy” Caprice).



Marco Bellocchio, Pierfrancesco Favino, photo Fraye Sadou

Italian movies about the mafia, including *The Traitor*, generally do not portray the criminals as heroes, but glorify those who oppose them, such as Judge Giovanni Falcone, who elicited the revelations of the “pentito” (traitor) Buscetta, which lead to a maxi-trial in 1986 that would result in hundreds of jail sentences for mafia bosses in 1992. Soon after that, this heroic magistrate was brutally murdered by the *Corleonesi*, the Sicilian mafia clan whose last name was used by Coppola for the family in *The Godfather* saga. The breaking of the code of silence (omertà) by Buscetta and other “pentiti,” like Salvatore ‘Totuccio’ Contorno, played by Luigi Lo Cascio in the film, finally revealed the inner working of the mafia and started the public backlash against the mafia mentality that continues in Italy to this day. Favino said: “Before that trial, the existence of the mafia was not proven, there was no evidence that it really existed, because mafia guys never write anything on paper. Judges Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, both from Palermo, understood that, but never before somebody belonging to the mafia had given evidence of the fact that they were right. In our film the mafia bosses are not glamorous, you never want to be one of them because they are cool, like Tony Montana in *Scarface*. If you let a criminal organization like that become so powerful in your country, you’re undermining the possibility of a democracy, where the shared laws apply to everybody.”

As a first generation Italian-American, naturally I resent the association of my ethnicity with organized crime. NIAF, the National Italian American Foundation, in 2017 [honored the memory of Judge Giovanni Falcone](#) and his wife Francesca on the 25th anniversary of their murder, May 23, 1992. NIAF hosted screenings of *The Traitor* in New York and Los Angeles.

Clearly organized crime in America is not limited to Italian immigrants and to New York. See a partial list of American movies about the Italian, Irish, Jewish and African American mobsters in New York, Boston, Chicago, Las Vegas, Miami.



Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, the above mentioned *The Godfather* (1972), and sequels *The Godfather: Part II* (1974) with Robert De Niro as young Vito Corleone, *The Godfather: Part III* (1990) with Al Pacino as Michael Corleone.

More movies directed by Martin Scorsese, *Mean Streets* (1973) with Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel, *Goodfellas* (1990), from the 1985 book by Nicholas Pileggi Wiseguys, with Robert DeNiro, Joe Pesci and Ray Liotta, *Casino* (1995), from the 1995 book by Nicholas Pileggi *Casino: Love and Honor in Las Vegas*, with Robert De Niro, Joe Pesci and Sharon Stone, *Gangs of New York* (2002) with Daniel Day-Lewis as Bill the Butcher, a Nativist Protestant gang leader, engaged in a power struggle with an Irish gangster group, *The Departed* (2006) about Irish Mob Boss Francis “Frank” Costello (Jack Nicholson) in Boston.

Miller’s Crossing (1990) by the Coen Bros about Irish and Italian mobsters during prohibition.

Bugsy (1991) by Barry Levinson about Jewish mobsters Benjamin Bugsy Siegel (Warren Beatty) who founded Las Vegas.

Donnie Brasco (1997) by Mike Newall from the true story of the friendship between an undercover FBI agent (Johnny Depp) and a New York Mafia hitman (Al Pacino).

Road to Perdition (2002) by Sam Mendes about an enforcer (Tom Hanks) for the Irish Mob bent on revenge in Chicago during Prohibition.

American Gangster (2007) by Ridley Scott, the true story of Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington), the right-hand man of Harlem gangster Ellsworth “Bumpy” Johnson, and the FBI detective Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe) in his pursuit.

Black Mass (2015) by Scott Cooper about Irish mobster James “Whitey” Bulger (Johnny Depp) in Boston.

Two recent movies portray wives who take over for their gangster husbands, *Widows* (2018) by Steven McQueen, *The Kitchen* (2019) by Andrea Berlof. The TV series *Godfather of Harlem* (2019) is about mob boss Bumpy Johnson (Forest Whitaker).



Here’s a partial list of Italian movies dealing with the mafia in Italy: Cosa Nostra in Sicily, Camorra in Campania, ’Ndragheta in Calabria.

Lucky Luciano (1973) by Francesco Rosi with Gian Maria Volonté, *I cento passi* (2000) by Marco Tullio Giordana, *Alla luce del sole* (2005) by Roberto Faenza, *La Siciliana ribelle* (2008) by Marco Amenta, *Gomorra* (2008) directed by Matteo Garrone from the book by Roberto Saviano, *La terra dei santi* (2015) by Fernando Muraca, the TV movie *Prima che la notte* (2018) and the satirical documentary *La mafia non è più quella di una volta* (2019).

And an Italian movie about Jewish mobsters in New York, *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) by Sergio Leone, with Robert De Niro as David “Noodles” Aaronson (Herschel Goldberg). Quentin Tarantino pays homage to the Italian master with the title of his movie, *Once Upon a Time In...Hollywood*.



Little Caesar-Edward G. Robinson

The glorification of gangsters as a cool guys in American cinema goes back to classic Hollywood movies of the pre-code era. As [Mark Vieira](#), author of *Forbidden Hollywood*, explains, “In 1931 the studios had a boom with a cycle of gangster movies that did very well. *Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar* in particular made stars of James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson for a lifetime. Children were imitating these gangsters in the playgrounds, talking about them at home and in the classroom, so parents got worried. These movies were supposed to be about the downfall of the evil man, but the person who’s playing this man is so charismatic, that, of course, children idolize him.”

The Irishman was released in selected theaters on November 1, 2019 and on Netflix on November 27, 2019, *The Traitor* will start playing in theaters on January 31, 2020. In Los Angeles at the Landmark.

For more info read my article about [Cinema Italian Style](#), and my [interview with Marco Bellocchio](#) (in Italian) on the Golden Globes website

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