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Almost White: Cinematic Representation of Irish Americans

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Introduction

This research project investigates how the cinematic representation of Irish Americans and their relation to another Catholic group, Italian Americans, has defined and continues to define Irish American identity in American society. The thesis is divided in two main parts. The first gives a historical and theoretical background of the development of Irish American identity in the United States. It is first argued that identity can be seen as a cultural construct. The categories that are built by society are artificial and the terms used for defining groups of people are not watertight and they change with time. In the United States, in particular, the cultural background of the individual has to deal with the possibilities given by the myth of the self-made man, the possibility of shaping one's own life and future. The texts taken into consideration for this section are the ones by Chow, Giles et al., Rustin, Sollors and Wiegman.

The historical introduction also entails a brief overview of Irish and Italian immigration in the New World, and the discussion of the repositioning of Irish Americans in the social structure after the arrival of the Italians¹. Another section zeroes in on the stereotypes that were attributed to those groups, and on how their racial identity was constructed. The research on these two topics has relied on specific texts on Irish and Italian immigration (Handlin, Fisher, Ignatiev, Puleo).

The second part of my thesis consists in the analysis of movies in which Irish American identity is defined through the presence of Italian Americans. I drew inspiration for this kind of "comparative" approach from books like McDannell's *Catholics in the Movies*.

¹ Data regarding immigration have also been found in encyclopedias like *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* and web sources.

The movies taken into consideration are mainly contemporary ones, and some of them are very familiar to the larger public. They have been divided into three main categories according to the prominence given to a specific cinematic character and its conflicts: films on the Irish American Cop and his struggle between the loyalty to his background and the loyalty to the State (*State of Grace*, *The Departed*), films on the Irish American Vigilante, who is a criminal and yet better than the Italian mafioso due to his unswerving faith and strong ethical code (*The Boondock Saints* and its sequel, *Kill the Irishman*) and a film on the Irish American mobster(s), in which neither the Italian Americans nor the Irish Americans are depicted positively and the only good character that stands out is the WASP (*Last Man Standing*). I will also analyze a much older movie, *The Man in Blue*, a 1925 mute film by Edward Laemmle which is particularly important as it anticipates many of the themes elaborated in the more recent movies. *The Man in Blue* is a rarity as the only existing copy seems to be preserved at the Cinematheque of Bologna, and not even the family of the director owns a copy of it.

PART 1: Historical and Theoretical Background

1. What is Identity? Race, Ethnicity and Representation

Defining identity implies working with terms that are not watertight. Of the many ways that have been used to define the concept, the most useful for this research is the analysis through difference. Identity is a cultural construct based on the recognition of differences among individuals. Society is a dynamic reality in which individuals act independently – a process called agency (Jiles et al.: chap.2): as they perform as social actors, they shape culture, and this way they create definitions while defining themselves as different and separate from others.

This differentiation is made through the creation of categories, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and social status. These groups are based on the existence of so called marked and unmarked terms: marked terms are terms that carry a meaning that is different from what we consider the norm, whereas unmarked terms are the first features that come to one's mind when we say, for example, "man". Of course those characteristics change according to social circumstance. In Europe, when people talk about a "man", they will probably imagine a white straight man, with no particular disability, Christian and around thirty or forty years old. Marked terms would be if we identified the man as old, gay, or black. The concept of a woman in Africa would probably have black as the unmarked term, whereas the speaker should specify if he/she were talking about a white woman. As Jiles et al. points out in the chapter *Identity and Difference*² (2008):

² Page numbers are not available for this text.

Historical moment, nationality, ethnicity, sex and social circumstances do make a difference, and therefore do determinate the way we see ourselves and the way we think and act. Yet we continue to experience ourselves as individuals with the feelings, beliefs and attitudes that make us autonomous, unique beings, and prefer to believe that we are not simply the products of external forces such as social structures and historical circumstances. [...] identities are relational and contingent rather than permanently fixed. They depend upon what they are defined against, and this may change over time or be understood differently in different places. (Jiles et al: chapter 2)

The main evidence that identity is a cultural product is the historical passage from using the term race to the one of ethnicity. Both concepts must rely on symbolic and abstract representations in order to survive. As Wiegman explains in *Race, Ethnicity and film* (2000), terms are “historically mobile”: “To contemporary race theorists, this mobility demonstrates that race and ethnicity are social constructions linked to the specific discursive spheres within which they are used (Goldberg 1990).” (Wiegman 157). Individuals, as Althusser explains with his concept of interpellation³, are “interpellated” to play social roles and define themselves and others. As race could not find any biological foundation, so ethnicity cannot be generalized without being stereotyped: “Racial differences depend on the definition given to them by the other – that is to say, on the definition of the other – and the most powerful definitions of these kinds are those which are negative” (Rustin:184). Rustin argues in *Psychoanalysis, racism and anti-racism* (2000) that racism is connected to identification and to psychoses, and that this compensates the beaming lack of substance of the concept. Ethnicity and religion are therefore “blank screens” that allow the growth of phantasies and feelings of the unconscious: “The most active process at work in such racism is the

³ See Althusser's *Essays on Ideology* (1970).

projection of negative, repressed, or inaccessible aspects of the individual and the social self.” (Rustin: 189).

In the United States, the question of ethnicity must be integrated into the dualism that has been brilliantly analyzed by W. Sollors in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986): consent and descent. The New World faced the problem of how to take – or not take – into consideration the hierarchies of Europe. The two terms suggested by the author are fundamental categories that help explaining how American society struggled between meritocracy and origins:

Consent and descent are terms which allow me to approach and question the whole maze of American ethnicity and culture. [...] Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of “substance” (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of “law” or “marriage”. Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and “architects of our fates” to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems. (Sollors: 6)

It is clear that minorities in the States had the chance to improve their condition through hard work, but it is also true that some ethnicities had to start from a disadvantaged situation. Italian and Irish Americans had to face a strong discrimination in order to make their way into the New World. Their origin, the countries they came from influenced the kind of jobs and social positions that they could achieve when they reached the United States. From another point of view, they also had the chance to build the image of themselves through means of communication like cinema and literature. The construction of their identity has been constructed since they first arrived and changes according to the evolution of social norms and practices as well as according to the changes in the means of producing and spreading culture.

2. Irish and Italian Immigration in the U.S.

Irish and Italians did not arrive the U.S. in the same period. It was the Irish who were first forced to migrate from their country to the New World. As for most of mass migrations, a tragic event forced families and young people to leave Ireland. Between 1845 and 1852, a fungus affected every potato crop, causing a disease called potato blight, and the consequence was the so called Great Famine. During this period, one million people died from starvation and disease, and one million more emigrated⁴, so the population of Ireland decreased by 20-25%. Of the ones who chose to leave Ireland, a good part chose the U.S. as a possible destination. The exodus started during those years and continued approximately for three decades. Irish immigrants were largely hired in the northern states as unskilled laborers. They worked in the harbors while their women worked as housekeepers. Later, they started aiming at state positions such as policeman, priests, and firefighters. Many of them were so poor that they ended up being killed in the streets during fights and illegal operations. This was one of the factors which induced many U.S. citizens to think that the Irish Americans were to be considered drunks and beasts. As Fisher argues: “ Their poverty, which often led to alcoholism and sometimes to insanity and criminality, convinced some Americans that Irish Catholics were inherently depraved.” (Fisher: 47).

⁴ Since there was no precise record, some researchers tend to set the amount of emigrants to two millions.

Table 1. Irish immigration to the United States, 1820–1975.

Period	Number ^a	Percentage of total arrivals
1820–1830	54,338	35.8
1831–1840	207,381	34.6
1841–1850	780,719	45.6
1851–1860	914,119	35.2
1861–1870	435,778	18.8
1871–1880	436,871	15.5
1881–1890	655,482	12.5
1891–1900	388,416	10.5
1901–1910	339,065	3.9
1911–1920	146,181	2.5
1921–1930	220,591	5.4
1931–1940	13,167	2.5
1941–1950	26,967	2.6
1951–1960	57,332	2.3
1961–1970	37,461	1.1
1971–1975	6,559	—
Total	4,720,427	10.0

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Annual Report, 1975* (Washington, D.C., 1976), pp. 62–64.

a. Figures, especially those for the early decades, are not exact and should be used only as a rough guide.

Figure 1 Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, page 528

Fisher hints at a very significant difference, that not all the Irish who emigrated were Catholics, as there were also the so called Scotch Irish, who were Protestant and therefore somehow had an easier way within American society. Ignatiev explains:

From the time they began emigrating to about 1850, Irish Protestants were known in America simply as Irish. As Wittke notes, “The sharp distinction between Irish and Scotch-Irish developed in the United States in the last half of the nineteenth century for reasons that were primarily American. After the great influx of Irish immigrants and the problems created by this sudden boiling over of the melting pot, the Scotch-Irish insisted upon differentiating [...]” Thus, [...] a racial (but not ethnic) line

invented in Ireland was recreated as an ethnic (but not racial) line in America.

(Ignatiev: 46)

While the Irish Americans were still struggling to get a place in the American society, another Catholic group started to arrive massively from Europe: the Italians. Between 1880 and 1900, almost one million people arrived from the Bel Paese, pushed from the need to escape from the poverty of the southern regions of the country (Fisher 73). During the following two decades, the population grew until four millions. The two ethnicities faced two different eras in the history of the U.S. immigration policy. As *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* reports while the era between 1776 and 1881 was called “The Open Door Era”, the following decades were referred to as the “Era of Regulation”, 1882-1916. Indeed, in 1875 all existing state laws regarding immigration were declared unconstitutional, and the power of regulating immigration was given wholly to the federal government. This process ended up in the 1880s and made it possible for the United States to tag some of the immigrants as “undesirable”. From those years on, arrivals were monitored more precisely.

Table 1. Italian immigration to the United States, 1820–1975.

Years	Number of immigrants
1820–1830	439
1831–1840	2,253
1841–1850	1,870
1851–1860	9,231
1861–1870	11,725
1871–1880	55,759
1881–1890	307,309
1891–1900	651,893
1901–1910	2,045,877
1911–1920	1,109,524
1921–1930	455,315
1931–1940	68,028
1941–1950	57,661
1951–1960	185,491
1961–1970	214,111
1971–1975	93,151
Total	5,269,637

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C., 1975), I, 105–106, and U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Annual Reports, 1971–1975*.

Figure 2 Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, page 547

Italians faced a strong discrimination. For instance they were often obliged to attend separate masses, and they had to struggle for the same working positions that the Irish Americans had occupied for decades:

Italian immigrants found themselves competing for jobs with well-established groups like the Irish as well as with such fellow newcomers as Jews and Polish Catholics. [...] The overwhelmingly Catholic Italians were often scorned by Irish and German American priests. (Fisher: 73)

As Anthony V. Riccio reports in his 2006 book *The Italian American Experience in New Haven*, which narrates several stories of Italian Americans,:

And we had an Irish priest here, Father Kelly. [...] If you weren't Irish you couldn't go to the Saint Francis School. He wouldn't take you. And when it came over – Saint Donato – you had to be Italian to come to this church. And if you were getting married you had to marry an Italian or if you were Irish you had to marry an Italian to go there. (Riccio: 390)

As were the Irish, Italian Americans were also divided into “good Italians” and “bad Italians”, but not according to their faith. Instead, they were classified as two separate races according to their region of origin. Southern Italians were considered racially inferior to northern Italians:

The U.S. Bureau of Immigration reinforced these entrenched biases, classifying Italian immigrants as two different races – northern and southern. Southern Italians were viewed as a different race entirely, likely for many reasons: their darker complexions, their inability to speak English, their general illiteracy, and their unusual Catholic religious customs. [...] Northern Italians actually encouraged this separation and distinction from their Southern countrymen. (Puleo: 81-83)

Northern Italians had learned English and they had the means to open small businesses or start professional activities and they were ashamed of the stereotype of the Italian American that was forming on the image of the southern Italian. The Dillingham commission itself declared how Americans had a higher estimation for the “polenta” people than for the “pizza” folk. As the following chart shows, official documents divided the two Italian “races” as if they were coming from different lands. Puleo seems to suggest that the stereotype of the Italian American has been created through the image of the Southern since Northern Italians adapted easily to the New World and did

not draw much attention on them. Therefore, when a document speaks about Italian Americans, it usually refers to Southern ones, without even dealing with the distinction.

Table 2. Immigrants admitted to the United States, 14 years and older, who could neither read nor write, 1899–1910, by race or people.

Race or people	Number admitted	Persons who could neither read nor write	
		Number	Percent
Portuguese	55,930	38,122	68.2
Turkish	12,670	7,536	59.5
Mexican	32,721	18,717	57.2
Italian, South	1,690,376	911,566	53.9
Ruthenian (Rusniak) ^a	140,775	75,165	53.4
Syrian	47,834	25,496	53.3
Lithuanian	161,441	79,001	48.9
East Indian	5,724	2,703	47.2
Bulgarian, Serbian, and Montenegrin	95,596	39,903	41.7
Dalmatian, Bosnian, and Herzegovinian	30,861	12,653	41.0
Russian	77,479	29,777	38.4
Korean	7,259	2,763	38.1
Croatian and Slovenian	320,977	115,785	36.1
Polish	861,303	304,675	35.4
Romanian	80,839	28,266	35.0
Greek	208,608	55,089	26.4
Hebrew	806,786	209,507	26.0
Pacific Islander	336	83	24.7
Japanese	146,172	35,956	24.6
Slovak	342,583	82,216	24.0
Armenian	23,523	5,624	23.9
African (black)	30,177	5,733	19.0
Spanish	46,418	6,724	14.5
Italian, North	339,301	38,897	11.5
Magyar (incl. Hungarian)	307,082	35,004	11.4
Chinese	21,584	1,516	7.0
Cuban	36,431	2,282	6.3
French	97,638	6,145	6.3
Spanish-American	9,008	547	6.1
German	625,793	32,236	5.2
Dutch and Flemish	68,907	3,043	4.4
West Indian (except Cuban)	9,983	320	3.2
Irish	416,640	10,721	2.6
Welsh	17,076	322	1.9
Bohemian and Moravian ^b	79,721	1,322	1.7
Finnish	137,916	1,745	1.3
English	347,458	3,647	1.0
Scots	115,788	767	0.7
Scandinavian	530,634	2,221	0.4
Other peoples	11,209	5,001	44.6
Not specified	67	5	7.5
Total	8,398,624	2,238,801	26.7

Source: U.S. Senate, 61st Congress, 3rd Session, Doc. No. 747, Reports of the Immigration Commission, *Abstracts of Reports of the Immigration Commission* (Washington, D.C., 1911), p. 99.

a. Ruthenians are Carpatho-Rusyns.

b. Bohemians and Moravians are from present-day Czechoslovakia.

Nowadays, while Irish Americans are distributed all over the country, Italian Americans are still mainly populating the north east of the U.S., and this might reinforce heavier stereotypes against them. The tensions, discriminations and stereotypes that equate or distinguish the two groups of immigrants will be analyzed in the following paragraphs.

3. Catholics in the U.S.: The Almost Whites

As Handlin points out (IX), “It is the field where unfamiliar groups meet, discover each other, and join in a hard relationship that results in either acculturation or conflict”. It is in the not-so-neutral field of the United States that two ethnic groups, Irish and Italian Americans, who had rarely confronted in the old continent, had to struggle for a place in a new society. Since the Irish were the first to arrive in the United States, it is reasonable to analyze how the immigration of the Italians changed their social position and the public opinion towards them. In order to do so, it is first necessary to examine the common features and traits of the two groups, and what differentiated them.

The first common trait is the reported “non whiteness” of the two ethnicities. As the Irish arrived in the U.S., they were surprised in learning that they were not considered white. In order to be a real white, one needed to be a WASP.⁵ Although their skin color seemed to perfectly fit the somatic description associated to whiteness, Ignatiev in his book *How the Irish became white* reminds us of two important aspects of Irishness. The first is very much known: most of the Irish who migrated from Ireland during the Famine and afterwards, who arrived in the United States as unskilled

⁵ Wasp: White Anglo-Saxon Puritan. Term that defines North Americans with English Protestant ancestry. The term was first published by Andrew Hacker in 1957, who explained its meaning and added that it was already being used by American sociologists.

laborers, were Catholic, and therefore suspected by the bourgeoisie of being more loyal to the Catholic church and its leader, the Pope, than to the State. For a long time, they were prohibited to hold social roles as for example politics and administration. Irish American priests and religious institutions were often persecuted.

The second aspect defies expectation. A common misconception that Ignatiev subverts in his research is that it is not true that “at least, compared to other minorities, they spoke English”:

As for the language issue, it is easy to see that, as Miller points out, “Anglicized middle-class spokesmen were generally unwilling to admit the existence of linguistic barriers to full acceptance in American society.” And so the myth was born that would later be used to explain why the Irish “made it” more easily than other immigrant groups (a questionable assertion): that they were native English speakers. (Ignatiev: 47)

Indeed, many Irish American people used Irish and not English as primary language. According to Ignatiev’s research, one third of the people leaving Ireland were Irish speakers and had therefore difficulties in understanding English.

Because of these two reasons, Irish Americans could not be considered whites for a long time. Before the Civil War, Irish Americans were considered “niggers turned inside out” (Ignatiev: 49). As Fisher reports:

Michael Walsh, an Irish Protestant immigrant who represented a heavily Catholic New York City district in the U.S. House of Representatives, exclaimed from the floor of the House in 1854 that “the only difference between the negro slave of the South and the white wage slave of the North is that the one has a master without

asking for him, and the other has to beg for the privilege of becoming a slave.”

(Fisher: 54)

The picture below shows how in the late 19th century Irish Americans were often even graphically represented as something between whites and blacks with a prominent mouth and an ape-like physiognomy.

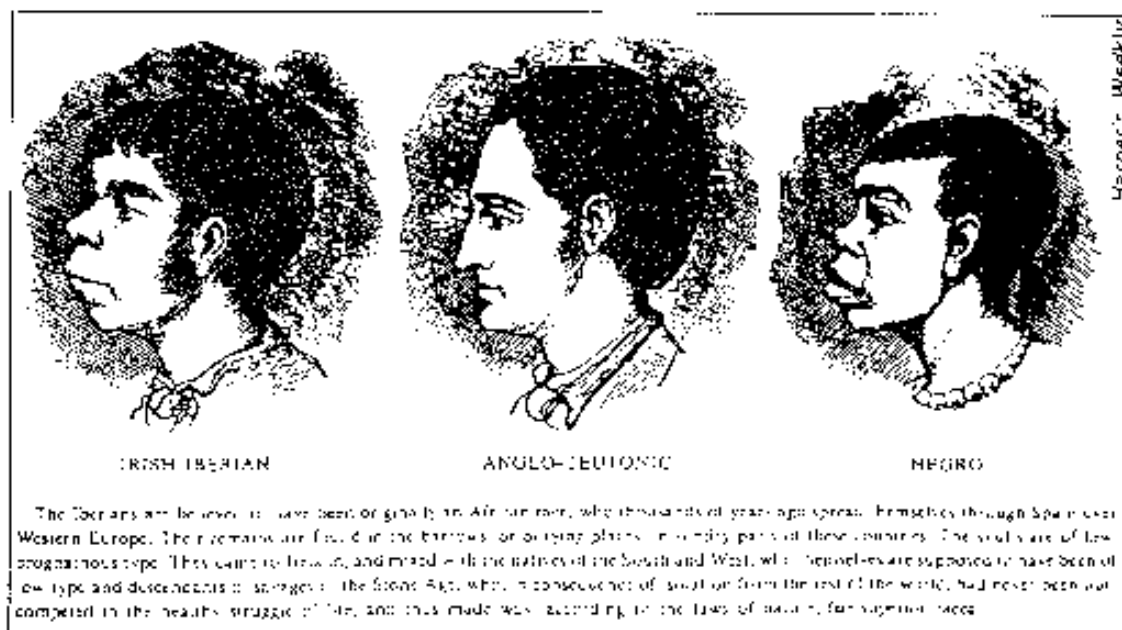


Figure 4 An Irish American, an Anglo-Teutonic and a Negro are represented in *Harper's Weekly*. The Irish American's face is different from the one describing other northern Europeans.

Another picture of the *Harper's Weekly*⁶ shows how both Irish and African Americans were seen as a problem respectively for the North and the South. Two men, an Irish American and a Negro are put on a balance and their weight is almost equal. This points to the idea that the two ethnic groups are heavy on the shoulders of American society.

⁶ The *Harper's Weekly – A Journal of Civilization* was an American political magazine from NY. It was first print in 1857 and lasted until 1916.



Figure 5: Negroes and Irish Americans are shown as two equivalent problems, respectively for the South and the North. *Harper's Weekly*

For Italian Americans, these two aspects were exacerbated. As pointed out in the previous section, Southern Italians were believed not to be able to speak English and they were also considered almost as African Americans. Furthermore, they were perpetrators of a kind of Catholicism that was considered bizarre and suspicious not only by the Protestants, but also by the other Catholics themselves. As Fisher points out referring to Southern Italians:

Italian Americans cultivated a style of Catholicism that reflected both their European origins and their immigrant experience. Where the Irish invested great spiritual authority in the priesthood, Italian-American spirituality was oriented toward a

devotion to family rooted in the peasant villages of the homeland. [...] The most distinctive feature of Italian-American Catholicism was the *festa*, a devotional celebration [...]. (Fisher: 74)

Because of the fact that Protestants were so suspicious of Catholic groups, together with the general illiteracy that often characterizes the two groups, Irish and Italian Americans, the only possibility for the immigrants was to get humble jobs. Of course, the struggle for finding a job and the sense of protection that both Irish and Italian Americans had towards their countrymen led to violence and tensions. The book that best gives account of many episodes in which Irish and Italian Americans had a difficult coexistence is again Anthony V. Riccio's *The Italian American Experience in New Haven*. The author reports the comment of an Italian American regarding the relationship to Irish Americans:

“GARLIC”: You had that tremendous animosity among the Irish. To the degree that the vehemence of it had a largely economic measure to it. You'd find it among the working class of the poor Irish to a far greater degree than those who had become affirmed so called “lace curtained”. It was attenuated there so that its expression would not be quite as immediate or quite as vulgar. But it was still there; it was certainly there among the WASPs. (Ricci: 25)

Ricci reports, together with the difficulties that Italian Americans had to face while approaching the Irish Americans, some fights that happened in the area of New Haven. He quotes Eugene Clini, president of the Marchegiano Club while he narrates about the fights:

The Irish were further up on Howard Avenue. Down below, on Columbus Avenue, Cedar Street where most of the Marchegianos lived. We got along fine – we used to fight all the time. We used to have some real bad fights with the Irish. It was bad; it was no fun. They used call us guinea bastards and everything else. [...] They used to have gang fights between the Italians and the Irish years back, oh yeah. (Ricci: 357)

Ricci gives an almost romanticized view of what was happening in those years. Crime news shows how the events sometimes reached proportions of national interest.



Figura 6. A Chicago Daily News article about a fight between Irish and Italian Americans

A fact that many remember is the so called Saint Valentine's Day Massacre. The Italian American boss Al Capone and the Irish American George "Bugs" Moran were competing for the monopoly of the alcohol black market in Chicago. On the 14th February 1929, the Italian American side won: while Al Capone was in another State,

his men, dressed as policemen, arrested and then brutally executed Moran's mobsters, leaving the city to the sole power of the Italian American gangster. This massacre became a movie by Roger Corman⁷, which is inspired but not particularly loyal to the real facts.

The Valentine's Day Massacre is not the only fact that was reported in the newspapers and that testifies the tensions between the Irish and the Italian Americans. Some years before, before prohibition, New York's harbor was the theater of a series of fights between the two groups: the Morello crime family encroached the Waterfront⁸ and started competing against a group of Irish American gangs that had united in the White Hand Gang to contrast the threat. That was a period of cruel murders and ended up with the Italian American conquest of the area. The harbor in New York has been the setting of another movie, *On the Waterfront (1954)*, which focuses on the unions that were controlling the area at the time and on the crimes that happened there.

The State of New York had already been shaken in the previous years by other conflicts such as the 1894 Buffalo Riot, in which many Italian Americans were injured and arrested after a bar fight against the Irish⁹. As the article reports, some Irish Americans went to a saloon in an Italian neighborhood, and after drinking they refused to pay. The Italian Americans had weapons, and they massacred the Irish Americans in a fight that lasted one and a half hour before the police arrived. Interestingly, the article after explaining the fight uses the term "war", which indicates that such episodes were not rare in crime news.

⁷ *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre (1967)*

⁸ This is the name of the harbor in New York. For further details about the history of this area, see Fisher's *On the Irish Waterfront: The Crusader, the Movie, and the Soul of the Port of New York (2009)*

⁹ Race Riot In Buffalo.; Italians and Irish Fight for an Hour and a Half in the Street. New York Times. 19 Mar. 1894

RACE RIOT IN BUFFALO.

Italians and Irish Fight for an Hour and a Half in the Street.

BUFFALO, March 18.—Four young "toughs" went into a saloon in the Italian quarter this afternoon and ordered a round of drinks, for which they refused to pay. The proprietor and several friends followed them into the street. The Italians were armed with knives and revolvers, and the others picked up bricks from a pile on the sidewalk. With the firing of the first shot a crowd began to collect, till the men on each side numbered fully 200. At least fifty shots were fired, and any number of bricks thrown. Several men went to the top of a brick block on Court Street, tore down a chimney, and dropped the bricks on the crowd in the street.

The fight lasted an hour and a half before the police came and dispersed the warring factions. As a result five Italians are locked up, two of their opponents are in bed with serious wounds from knives on their bodies, and half a dozen others have broken heads.

It was a war between the Italians and the Irish, and the Italians won.

The New York Times

Published: March 19, 1894

Figure 7. A page from the New York Times narrating a fight between Italian and Irish Americans

4. Stereotypes and Tensions

Because of the spreading violence in Italian and Irish neighborhoods and the alcoholism and illegal activities that derived from the poverty of the two groups, many stereotypes emerged. First of all, both the groups were compared to primates. This was done in order to underline their inferior nature, and there are many examples regarding

groups that were considered enemies or threats to American society. This tendency has lasted all throughout the twentieth century and the present day. As the pictures below show, the enemies of the U.S. during the WWII, like Japanese or Germans, or even nowadays African Americans are represented – or compared to – apes. Also the typical caricature of Irish and Italian Americans is often a rude ape.



Figure 8 During WWII, American Propaganda shows Japanese soldiers as ape-like soldiers, ready to kill American children and women.



Figure 9 A comparison between a historical 1917 propaganda poster by J. M. Flagg and the April 2008 Vogue cover. In the poster, German soldiers are compared to apes. In the magazine's cover, an African American basket star is posing in the same attitude and is therefore compared to an ape too.



Figure 10 "The usual Irish way of doing things" - a 1871 Thomas Nast's caricature published in *The Harper's Weekly*

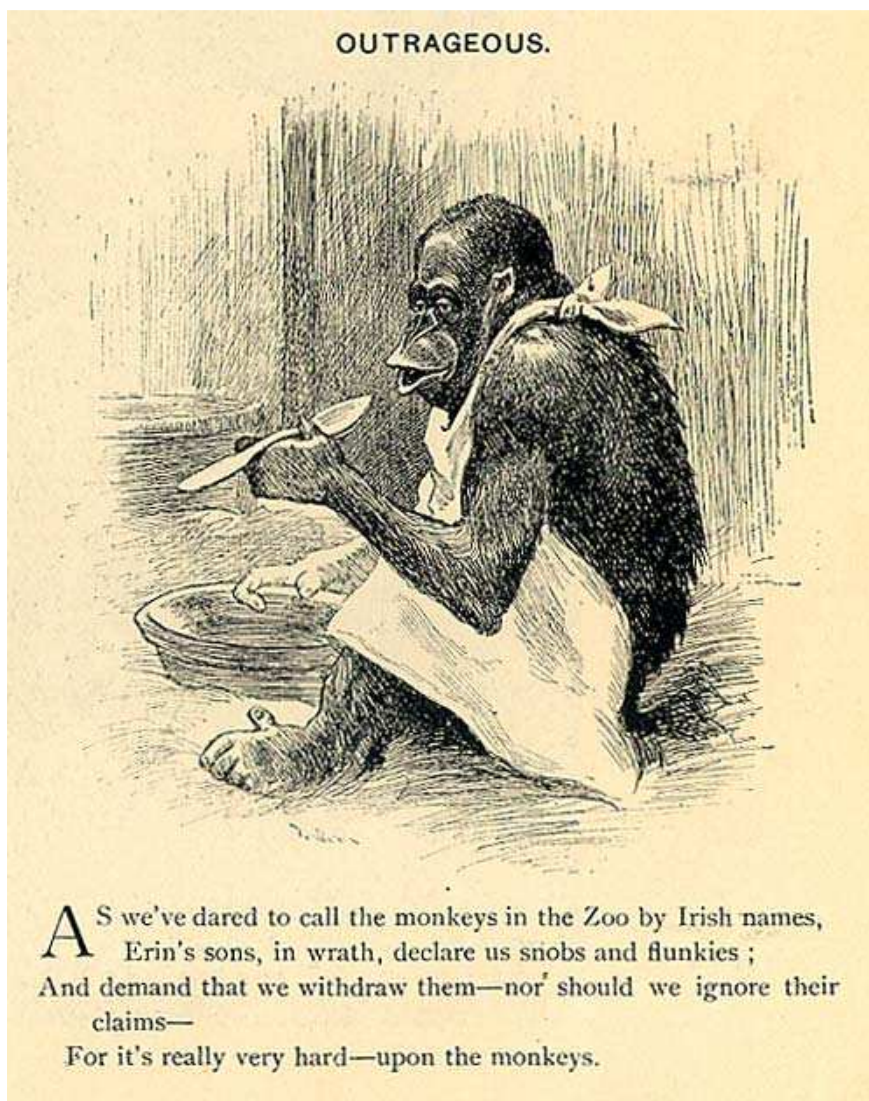


Figure 11 A poem published in 1893 in the *Life Magazine*. The poem implies that not even monkeys want to be compared to Irish.

In the nineteenth century such stereotypes also appeared in advertisements. In his book *The Boston Italians* Puleo reports some anti-Italian print, this is an example: “Uncle Ben’s Pasta Bowl print ad-: “If you eat an Uncle Ben’s pasta bowl,” the copy reads, “don’t be surprised ifa youa starta talking likea this afterwards.” (Puleo: 261-262).

Together with the stereotype of being inferior groups, both Irish and Italian Americans were intimately connected to violence. Not only riots in the streets were caused by drunk Irish Americans, and many of those groups were implied in illegal

activities, but soon a common passion of Irish and Italian Americans was revealed: fighting. As Fisher points out:

Sports were among the primary vehicles of Catholic aspiration in America. John L. Sullivan, an Irish American prize-fighter, became a national hero in the 1880s, when he reigned as heavyweight champion. (Fisher: 85)

Also Puleo reports how the sociologist Whyte explains the nature of the struggle between Irish and Italian Americans;

It was between these groups that the sharpest struggle took place, and many fiercely contested battles were fought on North End¹⁰ street corners. Whyte noted that battles took place away from the street corners too- most symbolically, in the boxing rings. In the early years of Italian settlement of the North End, and even into the early twenties, boxing was controlled by Irish promoters and largely patronized by Irish fight fans. (Puleo: 14-15)

Puleo gives one of the rare analyses of the historical struggle between Irish and Italian Americans. He claims that it was the Irish Americans, who had themselves been victims of persecution, more than any other ethnicity, who discriminated Italian Americans. He describes how the two groups were struggling for the same jobs and the fact that, in the meantime, Irish American had determined their social preponderance and learned English, so they scorned the illiterate Italians. As Riccio explains:

“PAINTING CHURCH CEILING MURALS”: (Joe Simone spoke in a meeting room in Sterling Library on July 19, 1999. My father found out he couldn’t get work because he was an Italian and he decided to change his name in the ‘20s from

¹⁰ North End refers to an area of the city of Boston.

Simoni to Simone so it sounded like it was French. Here in New Haven you couldn't get work unless you were Irish or your name didn't end in a vowel. It was sad. [...] New Haven was a very Irish town. It was ridiculous, really. We all lived together but we couldn't work together. (Ricci: 254)

Table 4. Major sources of immigrants from Europe and Western Hemisphere, by country, 1821–1970 (thousands per decade).^a

Period	Great Britain	Ireland	Denmark, Norway, Sweden	Germany	Austria-Hungary	Russia	Italy	Canada	Mexico	West Indies
1821–1830	25	51	—	7	—	—	—	—	—	—
1831–1840	76	207	2	152	—	—	—	—	—	—
1841–1850	267	781	14	435	—	—	2	—	—	—
1851–1860	424	914	25	952	—	—	2	—	—	—
1861–1870	607	436	126	787	8	3	9	—	—	—
1871–1880	548	437	243	718	73	39	56	—	—	—
1881–1890	807	655	656	1,453	354	213	307	—	—	—
1891–1900	272	388	372	505	593	505	652	—	—	—
1901–1910	526	339	505	341	2,145	1,597	2,046	179	50	108
1911–1920	341	146	203	144	896	921	1,110	742	219	123
1921–1930	330	221	198	412	64	62	455	925	459	75
1931–1940	29	13	11	114	11	1	68	109	22	16
1941–1950	132	27	26	226	28	1	57	172	61	50
1951–1960	192	57	57	478	—	6	185	378	300	123
1961–1970	206	40	43	191	—	8	214	413	454	470
Total	4,782	4,712	2,481	6,915	4,172	3,356	5,175	2,918	1,565	965

Source: Conrad Taeuber and Irene Taeuber, *The Changing Population of the United States* (New York, 1958), p. 56, table 13; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C., 1975), pp. 105–109.
^a Figures for 1821–1867 represent alien passengers arriving in steerage; 1868–1891 and 1895–1897, immigrant aliens arriving; 1892–1894 and 1898–1970, immigrant aliens admitted; 1819–1868 by nationality; 1869–1898, by country of origin or nationality; 1899–1970, by country of last permanent residence.

Figure 12 Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, page 480

Furthermore, he also underlines the different kind of Catholicism practiced by the two groups adding that Italian Americans were accused of being anti-clericalists. Puleo gives another very interesting view of the situation:

Then there was the belief by the Irish, largely accurate in the early days of Italian immigration, that Italians were “birds of passage” who traveled back and forth between Italy and the United States for seasonal work and had no interest in settling in America permanently. Many Italians were apathetic about obtaining citizenship, which also stoked Irish fears that Italians had no desire to make a commitment to the community. (Puleo: 14)

Puleo also reports the explanation of Whyte, who wrote that Irish Americans considered Italian Americans as an inferior people. What appears from cultural

documents and is clearly portrayed in the cinematic representations of the Irish Americans is that this group that started as an outsider, poor and unreliable, has won the sympathy of the public opinion when a new group, Italians, arrived in the U.S., challenging social rules.

Another interesting aspect is the question of how Catholicism and violence were historically seen as intimately connected. The *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* gives a short but illuminating explanation:

Soaring arrest rates, usually for disorderly conduct, gave the Irish a reputation for drunkenness and violence. At the same time, by becoming the most numerous national group in the Roman Catholic Church the Irish came to be permanently identified with it, intensifying the already strong anti-Catholicism in the host society. (533)

Indeed, Irish Americans built a parastate, a state in the state. This tendency had its roots in the structure of the society in Ireland. The Irish tribes recognized their clan leader as morally and politically more important than the central state, so not even the British could ever totally rule Ireland¹¹. Therefore when Irish arrived in the U.S., they kept their social rules and refused to give them up to the existing structure. When decades later Italians arrived, they joined the parastate rather than adapting to a society that was more even more different from the one they came from.

In conclusion, Irish and Italian Americans were struggling for a comfortable place in American society and, due to their similarities, they found themselves fighting against each other. This competition finds few space in history books or literature, but it has been a very prosperous topic for visual arts and cinema. As will be explained in the

¹¹ See the Cromwell laws where he tried, for example, to impose the study of English in the schools, and the Irish campaign (1649-1650).

next sections, the Irish American identity is a cultural construct that has been often defined in relation to another cultural construct, Italian American identity, since Irish Americans started becoming “whiter” as soon as Italians arrived in the U.S.

5. Catholic Cinema

Collen McDannell in his book *Catholics in the Movies* has tried to put together all the different ways that directors have found to cinematically represent Catholicism in the U.S.. It is very complicated to find a line to follow within all the different artistic expressions and meanings that have been associated to Catholicism in the American society. As he brilliantly points out: “Movie seeing, just like moviemaking, is an intricate and creative process of making and remaking reality”(7). It is true that movies conveys a meaning, but the ideas and contributions that the public brings are equally important in terms of cultural analysis.

McDannell analyses the reasons for the centrality of Catholicism in the movies. Historically, the first decades of the twentieth century saw Catholics, in particular the Irish and later the Italian Americans, as the “ immigrant other” who inhabited the industrial cities as opposed to the Protestant who lived in the rural areas: “Catholicism marked these immigrant characters as somewhat foreign and alien but also as profoundly local and American” (14). The author also explains that movie directors chose Catholic characters when they “wanted to explore the themes of the loyalty of friends, the power of the family, and the charm of ethnic traditions”(ibid.).

Of course during the twentieth century the idea of the Irish American, the Italian American and the Catholic in general changed. McDannell underlines how during the era of silent movies and the golden era, these two groups were actually the “lords of

criminality”, but at least Irish Americans were already making movies and could somehow mitigate reality whereas Italian Americans could not. During the 30s, Catholics were in charge of judging the morality of the movies, whereas before such a task was purely in the power of Protestants. As the author explains, the representation of “Crime and punishment, class and ethnicity, family and romance” (McDannell: 18) passed from the hands of white Protestants to the hands of Catholic directors, especially Irish American ones:

Many middle-class Catholics, who once were cultural outsiders, took up the responsibility of promoting “respectability”. Irish American Catholics, especially middle-class women and priests, claimed the moral high ground vacated by Protestants. In doing so, they hoped to demonstrate their superiority over other urban dwellers that included African Americans, Jews, socialists, as well as fellow Catholic Italians and Poles whose devotional life felt alien to the Irish. By claiming to be the final arbiters and enforcers of morality in filmmaking, Irish American Catholics assumed a powerful place in defining how Americans would see themselves. (McDannell: 19)

This passage underlines how in those years Irish Americans were working on building an image of themselves different and almost opposed to the one of other ethnicities. It is therefore no surprise that even nowadays movies represent Irish Americans in relation to other minorities.

Some years later, in the 50s, Catholics were better integrated into American society. The number of Catholic directors of the period is outstanding: Hitchcock¹² and Capra are only a couple examples of the levels of importance of Catholic presence in the movies. During the cold war, these films mainly represented masculine priests and

¹² His American period, from the 40s until the 60s, when he directed many of his most famous pieces.

devoted nuns, and portraying the Church became a central focus to Catholic filmmaking, but the period of general anxiety for the future that the end of the WWII brought by began to be reflected in the way characters were represented. As fears from the Old World came back, doubts and uncertainty affected the image of the people who had been coming from those countries in the past decades. This rapidly lead to a comeback of repressed cathophobia, that surfaced in movies like *The Exorcist* (1973), or into gangster films like *True Confessions* (1981). As T. J. Meagher points out¹³ during this period, it is also detectable a revision/redefinition of the popular image of the Irish American Catholic and of the self-image that those immigrants had of themselves:

Depicted for thirty or forty years as pictures of innocence, guardians of morality, and/or exemplars of patriotism in movies like *Going My Way*, Irish American Catholics were now showing up largely as cynical cops, corrupt politicians, nationalist zealots, or hypocritical priests. Yet the turmoil of the 1960s did mor than transform how most Americans saw Irish American Catholics. The revolutions of the 1960s provoked a crisis in how Irish Americans saw themselves. (Meagher: 229).

This newly-sprung “corrupted” image emphasized the stereotypes that had always been there when it came on Irish Americans. Even if movies represented them as saints, the negative image of the poor immigrant had always been implied even in the representation of the good Irish American character. Meagher underlines that “negative stereotypes of Irish Catholics had been the norm in the Anglo American world, making the Irish the first and longest lasting “other”. The stereotypes mentioned by the author are associated with bad behaviors such as drunkenness, laziness, violence and emotionalism (230). The author suggests that Irish American identity has been

¹³ In the chapter “Cops, Priests, and the Decline of Irish America” of the book *Catholics in the Movies*.

demolished, and that new “anchors” were needed to redefine it, like for example Irish folk culture, history, and literature. So after a period of sympathetic representation of this ethnicity, the 70s and 80s marked a turn in how they were described in the movies. They left the cinematic pedestal and gave up to another ethnic group, Italian Americans:

During the 1970s Italian Americans became Hollywood’s favorite ethnic group and remained so for decades. [they] became the ethnics of ethnic revival. [...] As Italian American Catholics became a pervasive, powerful presence in American film, the Irish American Catholic image shattered. This trend began with *Joe* (1970). [...] A stream of movies and television shows then followed that depicted Irish Catholic men as racist, repressive, and corrupt. (Meagher: 232)

The 90s and the beginning of the new millennium have seen an appearance of well nuanced characters on the side of the Irish American, whereas Italian Americans have kept their negative traits and have even been seen as corrupting the good Irish American. The following analyses show how in the movies later considered Irish Americans are still anchored to the new picture of themselves based on their Old World history and traditions, and how their relation to Italian Americans is still seen as problematic.

The movies that this research project takes into consideration limit their focus on the male members of Irish American population. Women do not seem to have been of sufficient interest when it came to Irish American movies. They have been represented as nuns, but they found no or little space in gangster movies. This might also be connected to the fact that when the stereotypes against Catholics took shape, Irish and Italians in the U.S. were mainly men. Immigrants were mostly unmarried young men or

men who left their family behind. Also, for example, Irish women rarely had public roles as their fellow men: they usually worked as servants, housekeepers and nannies. Rarely they worked for the police too: “The police womans, they thought like we were crooks or what. Madonna! Terrible, those Irish police womans. They used to holler.” (Ricci: 33). As *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* reports:

Irish-born women, overwhelmingly employed in urban areas, concentrated in an even narrower range of occupations than the men. In 1850 about 75 percent of employed women immigrants in New York worked as domestic servants, the remainder in mills and factories. (Harvard Encyclopedia: 530)

So Irish American identity – and Catholic identity through it – was mainly formed by men and masculine stereotypes, rather than on the entire Irish American community. The cinematic representation reflects this distinction, a public and social presence for Irish American men opposed to a private and reserved status of the women. Men are therefore the ones that are worth representing when it comes to defining social groups. They are most likely the ones that will attract the attention of the public and obviously make the movies successful.



Figure 13. Irish American women were also represented ape-like. May 9, 1883, by Frederick Oppen.

The movies that are going to be analyzed focus on three main figures that have been attributed to the Irish American man. Some of them have an Irish American policeman as the main protagonist, others deal with Irish American vigilantes and another represents gang wars between Irish Americans and Italian Americans. The movies show how Irish American identity is defined through the roles that Irish Americans play in society as well as through the presence of Italians.

PART 2: Film analysis

1. Irish American Cops

The stereotype of the Irish American Cop largely relies on the fact that historically street police were for a relevant part made up of people of Irish descent. Indeed, in 1850 Irish Americans made up 11 percent of America's policemen and longshoreman¹⁴. This was due to the fact that Irish Americans did not have the financial resources to invest in new business, so they were obliged to opt for public positions, such as policemen, firefighters or priests. Since Catholicism and Irishness were considered inherently connected to violence, the fact of being on the good side and owning a gun to protect and not offend the community was seen as a good solution for people without means.

The image of the Irish American cop and its cinematic representation – especially when opposed or compared to Italian Americans - changed over time, as the analysis of the following films shows. At first, policemen were represented as completely positive characters. In the sixties, the figure of the Irish American cop changed and the characters became more nuanced and this led to a new figure, i.e. the corrupted policeman, often opposed to a loyal one. *The Man in Blue*(1925) portrays the Irish American as the best policeman in town while two more recent movies, *The Departed*(2006) and *State of Grace*(1990) show – with different strategies – both the corrupted and the loyal Irish American.

¹⁴ The *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, page 531.

1.1 The Man in Blue (1925)

The Movie *The Man in Blue* (1925), directed by Edward Laemmle, is in danger of getting lost forever. There seems to be only one copy of it at the Cineteca di Bologna, where the employees are allowed to make a DVD of it only for research proposals. Not even the Laemmle family has the original film or a DVD of the movie since almost all of the productions of the time were printed on a flammable film: when they did not burn spontaneously, they got destroyed in order to avoid the risk of fires.

The movie narrates the love story between Officer Tom Conlin (Herbert Rawlinson), an Irish American policeman, and the beautiful Tita Teresa Sartori (Madge Bellamy), daughter of an Italian American florist. The two are clearly in love with each other and they start dating. The local mafia boss, Gregorio Vitti (Nick De Ruiz) wants to marry Tita, so he secretly kills her father and promises to take care of her, while announcing – without her knowing – that she is going to get married. When she understands what is happening, she runs away, looking for “Signor Cop”, and a police officer tells her that he has his day off and he is spending it with his kids. Tita does not know that the children are the orphans of Tom’s sister and, thinking that he is already married, she goes back to Vitti, resigned to marry him. They are about to get married when a riot starts. Tom arrives and saves Tita while in the meantime catching a most-wanted Mafioso. The Irish policeman is awarded five thousand dollars for the capture and thus he finally has the money to marry Tita.

The Man in Blue is one of the first cinematic examples of Irish Americans depicted in contrast to Italian Americans. In the movie, the goodness of the Irish American is underlined by the mercilessness and brutality of the Italian Americans.



Figure 14 Tom Conlin takes care of the daughter of his beloved sister. Minute 11.

Tom is presented as a smiling policeman, who does his job with dedication, passion and honesty. He is loyal and sincere, and he is devoted to his nephews. He takes care of them to the point that even though he does not have the possibility to stay at home with them or the financial means to support them. He does not want to give them up to a local Catholic Institution (St. Mary's Home). Furthermore, he loves Tita sincerely and he is ready to risk his own life in order to protect her. Everything in his gestures and facial expressions suggests tenderness, goodness and respectability. He is capable of imposing his authority in dangerous neighborhood like the Italian.

With the exception of Tita, Italian Americans are all depicted as involved with the mafia and helping outlaws escape the police. They are killers, and they treat women as objects, regardless of their feelings. The worse among the Italian Americans is Vitti, who has no problem murdering people and making fun of his own friends. He says to a boy who is also in love with the girl that he – Vitti - is going to pay for the marriage between Tita and the young man, and makes fun of him by not saying that he is instead going to marry Tita himself.

Italian Americans are also explicitly likened to apes at the beginning of the film, when an ape is imitating the facial expressions of Tita's father while he is protesting about the fact that Tita likes the policeman and not Mr. Vitti. Considering ethnic groups as inferior, as primates, in order to point to a better group (whites or Irish Americans on behalf of whites) was not just a joke of the director, but an ethnocentric bias that characterized the whole twentieth century and still persists today in various manifestations of visual culture, as explained in the previous sections. The white policeman instead has always preserved his respectability.



Figure 15 Tita's father is mad at Tita. Minute 2



Figura 16 Tita's father is explicitly compared to an ape, who is actually imitating the man's expressions. Minute 2

Tita's father is also involved in the mafia, and he does not care about what the daughter feels. He only wants the best marriage for her according to his standards. He is the movie's ironic core because of his facial expressions compared to the ones of the ape and because of his grumpy attitude.

There are very few aspects that are common to the two ethnic groups. One feature that Italian and Irish Americans share in the movie is their strong accent. In a mute film, it is given by the misspelling of the words in the dialogues, typically lots of "a"s at the end of the words for the Italian Americans and "me" instead of "my" for Mr. Conlin. Here are two examples of how the two groups "speak";

Conlin: "'Tis meself as should run ye in for disturbin' the peace!"

Tita's father: "Papa – de stem, she is broke! You t'ink Signor Cop lika da flower?"¹⁵

The other common aspect is violence – even if it is for two different reasons, trapping or saving Tita, violence is seen as inevitable, especially when the two ethnicities face one another. Indeed, the movie ends with a huge fight of course won by the good Irish American. The comment that Conlin makes about the fight underlines how violence is in the blood of the Irish folk: he says that that was the greatest fight since he left Ireland.

In the movie, the stereotype of the Irish American remains in the background because of the stronger characterization of Italian Americans. Besides, as illustrated in the previous chapters, the twenties were a historical period in which Irish Americans started producing their own movies, therefore changing their image in the public opinion. "Signor Cop" is seen as a representation of white society and of the law, against the Italian American mafia, and he stands for justice and honesty. The film is very successful in representing ethnic tensions. It shows how life is different in Italian neighborhoods and how violence is present in the life of Irish Americans and Italian Americans and therefore in the habits of Catholic groups.

1.2 State of Grace (1990)

State of Grace by Phil Joanou is one of the most famous movies when it comes to the fights between the Irish and the Italian American mafia. After the sixties – when the image of the Irish American radically changed and policemen start being represented as corrupt, - and the seventies – a period in which Italian Americans were at the center of

¹⁵ The dialogues, where not specified, have been copied out while listening to the movie. This one refers to minute 1.

Hollywood's attention, - we experience a tendency to avoid a "black or white" representation of the two ethnic groups. Characters are way more nuanced even though, as the analysis of this movie will show, there is few if no space left for an Italian redemption in spite of the open possibility for the Irish Americans. The movie is defined as a neo-noir crime film, that boasts the presence of actors like Sean Penn, Gary Oldman and Ed Harris. The director Phil Joanou started directing movies in 1984 (*Last Chance Dance*) and he is also famous for his collaboration – documentaries and music videos - with the Irish rock band U2. The script of *State of Grace* was written by Dennis McIntyre and the executive producers are Ned Dowd, Randy Ostrow and Ron Rotholz.

The movie is located in New York City. Terry Noonan (Sean Penn) comes back to the city's quarter named Hell's Kitchen after ten years. He is now an undercover cop in charge of helping the police department to break a group of Irish American mobsters, many of whose are his childhood friends. Terry is torn between the duty he has towards the State and his affection for his friends. He witnesses the death of two friends, one of whom is Jackie (Gary Oldman), the younger brother of the Irish American boss, Frankie (Ed Harris). Terry finds out that it is the boss himself who is behind the murders and reveals his true identity to the boss, daring him to kill him too. The movie ends during Saint Patrick's day parade: Terry goes into a bar and shoots and kills Frankie and his men. He gets hurt too, and whether he will survive or not is not revealed.

In the movie, Italian Americans play a role that is more central than what it seems. Their main function is to corrupt the Irish sense of family and brotherly affection. Their presence forces Irish American characters to be more nuanced in their feelings and actions. For example, the Irish American boss is first forced to kill one of his gang and then even his own brother Jackie. These two episodes lead the whole gang to mistrust each other and provokes the final escalation of violence. Both Irish and Italian

Americans are depicted as violent groups, who enjoy violence and bloody fights. They try to divide the city into areas of domain, but their nature makes a collaboration impossible.

State of Grace reflects every possible stereotype about the Irish Americans, underlining them strongly in many scenes. In the beginning of the movie, Terry goes back to the Irish pub where he used to meet his friends. For the first time, the viewers see that he is wearing a cross around his neck, and his Irish American identity is thus made explicit. When he opens the door, there is a picture of Ireland on the door and a Guinness poster immediately next to it. His friends sit around a table, drinking beer. Even though his friend Jackie recognizes him, he pretends to be mad at him and they fake a fight. The bond between religion (the cross), alcohol (the posters and the beers) and violence (the fight) will follow the entire development of the movie. Violence causes the need for a detachment from the reality in which Hell's Kitchen lives, and this happens through two paths: the (Catholic) Church and getting drunk. As Terry explains as he tells his girlfriend that he is an undercover cop, trying to escape reality does not work:

[...] it was only an idea. Nothing to do with the truth. It was just a fuckin' idea like... You believe in the angels or the saints or there's such a thing as a state of grace. And you believe it, but it's got nothing to do with reality. It just an idea. I mean you got your ideas and you got reality, and they're all... they're all fucked up.¹⁶

When Stevie is killed, Jackie does not know how to cope with the death of his friend, and Terry and his girlfriend find him completely drunk in the Church. The long shot is symmetrical except for the presence of the bottles, thus making them more relevant in the picture. The fall of the Irish folk is here represented through the

¹⁶ Taken from IMBD Quotes.

disrespect – almost heresy - they have for a sacred place: they smoke, drink and Jackie even breaks the statue of Saint Anthony – a Saint who was indeed in charge of fighting heresies.



Figure 17 Terry, his girlfriend and Jackie in the church after Jackie's friend died. Minute 58

Another meaningful scene is when Jackie's time comes. He is also killed by his brother Frankie. During the funeral, Terry places a bottle of liquor in his coffin, reuniting the trinity of violence, alcohol and Catholicism.

The sorrow in this scene foreshadows the final scene of the movie, during Saint Patrick's day Parade. Terry decides to give up his undercover identity and is determined to get revenge on Frankie. During the parade, he walks in the pub and kills the Irish American mobster and his men. In a day dedicated to the patron Saint of Ireland, a massacre is happening, of course in a bar.

The movie plays with all the typical Irish American stereotypes, and none of the characters, not even the protagonists are able to overcome them. Terry is indeed torn between being loyal to his friends or to the state police and this makes him unreliable

for both groups. His behavior seems to suggest that an Irish American policeman will never be completely devoted to the state, especially when he has to betray his friends. This is an enormous change in the representation of the Irish American, who since the sixties began to be seen as corrupted. Terry, compared to the policeman in *The Man in Blue*, is not only more nuanced, but also represented as a damned soul who cannot find his identity. His nature is not even clear to him. Indeed he declares not to be able to understand what is capable – or not – of doing.

1.3 The Departed (2006)

The Departed is a four-Oscar-winner (Best Director, Best Picture, Best Film Editing and Best Adapted Screenplay) by the famous Italian American director Martin Scorsese, who uses guilt, religion and sin as the main cores of his movies. He is part of the cinematic period called “New Hollywood”, in which American directors became authors as it already had been in Europe. They had more power and were in control on their films. Other important directors of this period that spread from the sixties until the eighties were Coppola, Spielberg and De Palma. *The Departed* is a remake of the movie *Internal Affairs*(2002). It stars actors like Leonardo Di Caprio, who has been the protagonist of many of the most recent movies by Scorsese¹⁷, Matt Damon and Jack Nicholson. Interestingly, the movie also contains homages to classical movies like *Scarface* (1932), a film that was also about Italians and Irish Americans. There are explicit references in the shots used during some of the murders, that avoid the explicit scene and show the death through showing details, like windows or fruit falling on the floor. Indeed when *Scarface* was made, censorship forbid explicit murder scenes and the director had to invent something to convey the happening of the murder.

¹⁷ See also *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Aviator* (2004) and *Shutter Island* (2010).

The Departed smartly plays with the theme of the double – portraying what Terry in *State of Grace* represented with his inner struggle. The conflict is expressed in the figure of two policemen: Colin (Matt Damon) and Billy (Leonardo Di Caprio). The movie begins with the two protagonists ending the Massachusetts State Police Academy. Billy comes from an Irish American family with a troubled past, but he is devoted to the state and to the state police. His superiors doubt about his fidelity – they are prejudiced and compare his family to leeches. They decide to test him by giving him an undercover identity in order to infiltrate him into the Irish American mob of his neighborhood. Billy therefore goes to jail and when he comes out he gets in contact with the men of Costello (Frank Nicholson), the local boss, gradually gaining his trust. In the meantime, Colin immediately gains respectability and becomes a special investigator. He is also of Irish descent, and he is an infiltrate for Costello, but his past is clean so nobody raises any suspect on him. The two men are consumed by their double identity and they don't know each other's double game. They both struggle to find “the rat” in the other team. Their symmetry is also enhanced by the fact that they fall in love with the same woman. The movie inevitably ends with a bloodbath, in which Costello, Colin and Billy die.

Here, as in *State of Grace*, the Irish American policeman is asked to betray his background, his friends, in order to become acceptable and useful for the State. Billy, as Terry, needs to prove his loyalty and to give up his Irish American identity. Of course, the name Costello, even though he is part of the Irish American mob, reminds one of the Italian American mafia: historically Frank Costello was a real Italian American Mafioso, whose original name was Francesco Castiglia, born in Italy and then naturalized as an American citizen in New York. Italian American Mafia is only present in some scenes, where some mobsters ask for money in a local shop. Billy starts

a fight in order to defend the owner and also because the two Italian Americans criticize the Irish neighborhood and basically say that nobody can have a good business there, where they “only have potatoes”. Soon after the fight, Billy is offered protection from Costello, who often has to deal with Italian Americans within his business. At the very beginning of the movie, he tells the young Colin how he killed two Italian Americans who “told him what to do”. Costello is the one controlling everything – enigmatic and mysterious. He is the source of violence and criminality, and even Italian Americans are afraid of him. The movie seems to be centered on him. Indeed the story begins with a very impressive sentence that is meaningful in the context of immigration and minorities in the U.S.:

COSTELLO: I don't want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product...of me.¹⁸

Costello subverts morality and corrupts people when they are still young to gain their trust. He blurs the line between good and bad, between justice and crime, criticizing the Church and general morality:

COSTELLO: You decide to be something, you can be it. That's what they don't tell you, the Church. When I was your age, they would say, we become cops or criminals. Today, what I'm saying to you is this: When you are facing a loaded gun...[very close on Costello, holding Colin's shoulder] What's the difference?

The beginning of the movie is also interesting from a historical point of view. Costello criticized black people for being victims of history, while the Irish Americans, who were in the same or even worse situation during the Civil War, fought for their

¹⁸ All the dialogues of *The Departed* in this section have been taken from the Screenplay (see bibliography)

rights. According to Costello, nobody makes gifts to anybody, everyone has to earn and take what they want. This is what the Irish Americans did, earning positions in the police or in the Church in order to become part of the ruling class.

There are many elements in the movie that underline the duality between Irishness, that is sometimes also identified with Catholicism, and Police/Justice. Some of them are very explicit, like Costello's above sentence, others are more subtle. The game between Costello's Rat and the one of the police also plays with literary quotations: when Colin and Costello quote Joyce,

YOUNG COSTELLO: I don't know what to do for you. A man makes his own way.

No one gives it to you. You have to take it. Non serviam.

YOUNG COLIN: James Joyce.

Billy, who is devoted to the State, quotes instead one of the greatest and most representative American authors, Hawthorne,

BILLY Well. Families are always rising or falling in America. Am I right?

QUEENAN Who said that?

BILLY Hawthorne.

The symmetry is also well portrayed when Billy is sent to jail. Images of the prison and of Colin's new house flow from left to right as if they were representing the same place while the soundtrack – an Irish American song – introduces the title of the movie. As the Dropkick Murphy's song "Shipping up to Boston" sings:

"I'm a sailor peg

And I lost my leg

Climbing up the top sails

I lost my leg”¹⁹

It becomes clear that if somebody aims for a place in society that is too high (the top sails), they can lose everything.

In *The Departed* Irish Americans are depicted as having lost their religious identity. They do not care anymore about Church and religion, or better they use it for their own practical purposes. Costello comments:

Church wants you in your place.

What sort of man wants to be kept in his place? Do this don't do that, kneel, stand, kneel, stand...I mean if you go for that sort of thing...

Frank Costello also explicitly blackmails some priests at a restaurant, and underlines that he had a love story with one of the nuns. He turns the stereotype of the pedophile priest against them, showing once again his anticlerical view. A visual example of the refusal of the dogmas of the church is when Billy attacks a man using a picture of Christ, interestingly enough the same picture that stays hanged on the wall in the hall of the superior of Billy. The man is asleep while a black and white Catholic movie is shown on television.

¹⁹ The song is part of the Soundtrack of *The Departed*, see discography



Figura 18 The picture of Christ appears in two different scenes. 1:10h - 1:18h

In general, it is very hard to understand the mind of the various characters and their perception of justice. Costello himself turns out to be an informer of the FBI, and towards the end of the movie every line blurs: Billy was not the only policeman in Costello's group and Colin was not the only infiltrated. This had been foreshadowed in a dialogue that Colin had with the psychiatrist Madolyn, whom he is dating. The mind of the Irish is impenetrable, so the viewers cannot really have a deep insight of the characters, and can only see what they let them see.

MADOLYN: You know what Freud said about the Irish?

[...]

COLIN: What Freud said about the Irish is we're the only people impervious to psychoanalysis. Tough luck for you with a client list of Mick cops, isn't it. "Opening up"? Good luck to you.²⁰

²⁰ Apparently, this is a sentence which was attributed to Freud but there is no reliable source. For more information, see <http://irishamerica.com/2007/06/the-last-word-freud-the-irish-the-departed/>



Figure 19 Final scene, a rat passes on Sullivan's balcony. The Government's palace is in the background.

The movie gives a decadent representation of Irish American culture. There is no respect for institutions, religious or public ones, even the “good” characters cross the line of ethics and are not portrayed as positively as they were in the past. It even disrespectfully quotes previous movies about Irish American identity, like *Going my Way*²¹, underlining how the time for a-hundred-percent-positive cinematic representation of the Irish American has passed. We can also find many similarities with *Angels with dirty Faces*, as O’Brien points out in his article:

Both *The Departed* and its gangster-genre predecessor *Angels with Dirty Faces* refrain from presenting a Manichean view of Irish Americans. The police force *and* criminal fraternity of both films are filled with Costellos, Sullivans, Queenans and Buckleys. This equivocal moral positioning is further confused by the collusion between members of the Irish Diaspora on both sides of the law. This is evident in Colin Sullivan’s role as a mole in *The Departed* and by gang-boss Mac

²¹ ELLERBY: “Costello uses three key guys. There's Fitzy...off the boat psycho...lives in Brockton with his mother who looks like she's straight out of "Going My Way"...There's Delahunt, muscle, and here's French...the number one. But of course the rock star is...[you know who]”

Keefer's close relationship with Police Chief Buckley in *Angels with Dirty Faces*:
'Sure you'd like rough stuff... but why bother when you can do it nice and legal'.

And again:

Irish-American identity is defined by its own conflicted nature. Both films focus on the importance of this identity, however, *Angels* explores the significance of this in relation to the physical position of the Irish in America (socially, morally and economically), while *The Departed* focuses on the psychological position of identity, that thin tight-rope between neighbourhood and nation.

The movie ties Irishness and Catholicism to violence, corruption and inner struggles. The rat we see in the very last scene of the movie is not only the symbol of infidelity and corruption, but also a means of delivering a message: Irish Americans come from poverty and they will never get rid of their role even if they join the sumptuous palaces of the State.

2. The Irish American Vigilante(s)

What Costello says in *The Departed*, “We can become cops or criminals”, is meaningful. Irish Americans are, indeed, often portrayed either as cops or as criminals. This is intimately connected to the link between Irishness and violence. Irish American criminals are in most cases depicted as modern Robin Hoods, as heroes who fight other criminals, although in an illegal way. Their representation is therefore not totally negative. Their illegal path is somehow justified by a shift in the ethic code. As long as they fight against bad people, they are seen as heroes, even though they act outside the rules. The movies underline their good actions and push towards a strong identification with them. While *The Boondock Saints* almost gets into the supernatural and suggests a divine mission, *Kill the Irishman* creates a historical portrait of the seventies in the north of the U.S..

2.1 The Boondock Saints (1999)

The Boondock Saints, written and directed by Troy Duffy, is one of the most well-known of the so called “Saint Patrick’s Day” movies. It stars actors like Sean Patrick Flanery, Norman Reedus and Eillem Dafoe. The director had never written a screenplay before and reported that he drew inspiration of the movie by an experience he had in his real life. He saw a drug dealer stealing money from a corpse near his house. The script got the interest of several production companies and in the end it was edited by Franchise Pictures. It was produced by Chris Brinker, Robert Fried and Mark McGarry.

The story is about two Irish American brothers called Murphy and Connor McManus (Sean Patrick Flanery and Norman Reedus), who become vigilantes after killing some members of the Russian mafia in self defense. Together with the Italian American Rocco, they start murdering everyone who is involved in the Italian American mafia, and they soon become heroes - Saints. They end up killing the Boston mafia boss Yakavetta in the middle of a court room during the process against him, and soon after they disappear thanks to the help of an FBI agent, Smecker (Willem Dafoe). The movie is impressive in its analysis of the questions of Irishness and Catholicism, and in the depiction of the relationship between Italian and Irish Americans in Boston. It plays with stereotypes in an unconventional way, and it gives an interesting supernatural epiphany that is the natural consequence of the bond of the two brothers.



Figure 20 First scene. The two brothers pray in a church on Saint Patrick's Day.

The movie underlines the brother's Irish American identity from the very beginning. Indeed, it is Saint Patrick's Day, and after going to the mass where the priest tells the story of a girl, murdered in front of everyone without anybody intervening, they

work hard for the rest of the day and finally meet with their friends in the local Irish pub. They are represented as two good men, who work hard and take life with a smile. They are faithful but in the meantime they enjoy drinking and spending their time with friends. These two sides of their life are shown as not in contrast, but instead concurring in forming the same – Irish American – identity. Also, the stereotype of the ignorant and illiterate is overcome when the two brothers show that they can fluently speak many languages. Instead, the Irish American policemen are shown as not very intelligent, they therefore stand there to represent the old conception of the Irish American (Smecker pulls their leg during each crime scene analysis). The brothers are open to other cultures and ethnicities while Italian Americans tell racist jokes and – with the sole exception of Rocco, they only stay among themselves.

Their mission starts with an epiphany that reminds of the ones in *Dubliners*. While they are in jail, some water falls on their head – as a baptism – while a part of the mass shown at the beginning of the movie echoes again. The scene is described very closely in the script:

INT. MACMANUS' CELL NIGHT: A water leak starts on the ceiling. It drips faster and faster. The water begins to follow a water damaged crack along the ceiling. It slowly spreads in two directions. The brothers struggle for air in their sleep. Then slowly, and at the same time, they each reach up one arm apiece and simultaneously curl their hands as if grabbing something. Their straining faces are brought from darkness to light as they sit up quickly, face to the ceiling. Their eyes open wide and they each draw their first breath as drops of the creeping water land on their foreheads. They look at each other across the room in shock as the drips of water still fall between them.

CONNOR: Destroy all that which is evil...

MURPHY: ...so that which is good may flourish²²

The music suggests that there is something supernatural happening, while the camera gives power to the figures of the two brothers. Their naked torsos show their religious tattoos, another bridge between their faith and their “working outside the rules”. Good people are usually shown without tattoos, while they can afford having them, since they are of religious inspiration.

Violence is, here as well, connected to Irishness. It is particularly evident when the two brothers go to a secret warehouse where they purchase weapons. A huge weapon stays in the middle of the room. Behind it, an Irish flag is painted on the wall. The writing on top of the flag (“When the wicked stand confounded / call me with the saints surrounded”) also suggests a communion between religion and violence. The sentence comes from the *Dies Irae*²³, which is a suffrage prayer, an accompaniment to the death of the “wicked”, the bad ones. This means that violence is justified by the mission the brothers have. The movie suggests that Irish Americans put their faith and ethical reasons before the state and legality. Since for their morality the killings are natural and inevitable, the only thing they can do is pray for the lost souls of the ones they are going to kill. Being Ireland mainly a rural country. The Irish folk is deeply bound to propitiatory bucolic hymns and rituals, and this tradition has been syncretized with the practice of Catholicism. Therefore inducing the use of hymns to support masses and religious ceremonies. In the movie this is conveyed not only through the sentence on the wall, but also on the prayer the brothers deliver before killing someone.

Also, when Smecker finds out that the Saints are involved in the murdering, he gets drunk and goes into a Catholic Church in South Boston. There, Rocco threatens the

²² All the dialogues are taken from the Screenplay written by Troy Duffy. See Web Sources

²³ This is not the original version, but one written in the nineteenth century.

priest with a weapon, so that Smecker does not realize that he is listening too. Connor sees what is happening and does the same against Rocco, protecting the priest while listening as well. Smecker does not know what to do, since he understands the nature of the mission of the brothers, but is supposed to arrest them. A Protestant, homosexual FBI agent finds himself asking for advice from a Catholic priest. In this scene, Catholicism and violence are deeply connected by the use of guns in the church. Smecker goes away with a clear idea. He will help the brothers in their holy mission.



Figura 21 A huge weapon and an Irish flag in the background. The two brothers purchase the weapons they will need for their mission. Minute 31

In the movie Italian Americans are all involved with the mafia. They are unscrupulous and – as said before, racist -, with the exception of Rocco. This seems to suggest that the only way for an Italian American to be a positive character is to be friends with the Irish American. He betrays his group and helps the two brothers finding and killing the Mafiosos. The movie plays with the image of trinity – Rocco completes the trio, and just before he dies, when his face is covered with blood and his hair is on

his forehead and cheeks. He looks like Christ on the cross, and the two brothers like the two men who were crucified with Him. Immediately after he dies, the brother's father arrives, replacing him and forming a different kind of trinity, the Holy Trinity.



Figure 22 Rocco is about to be killed by Yakavetta. 1:15h

The trinity is also represented in the final scene, when the three interrupt the trial against Yakavetta and kill him. The final prayer is ended by the Latin sentence “In nomine Patris, et Filiis, et Spiritus Sancti”, and each one of them nominates one of the three units that compose the Holy Trinity. The scene is very interesting because of its symbolical visual meaning. When they enter the room, their intention is to kill Yakavetta in front of everyone, using their prayer, so that he would become an example for everyone. They call everyone who is in the room to be a witness of what they are doing, and tell the rest of the world that they are ready to punish every sinner who crosses the line. The father realizes that a woman is not watching, so he goes to her and gently asks her to witness the scene. In the script, the woman is described as a “virginal-looking woman”, but the actual cinematic representation is way more meaningful. The

woman is the image of America itself, since she has the colors of the flag on her: her eyes are blue, her face white and the hair is red. Besides, she wears a red and white striped shawl. America is asked to witness not only the existence of the Irish American, but also their actions, their active involvement in the shaping of American society, the self regulation of social dynamics and practices. When the woman runs out of the room after the execution of Yakavetta, she declares to the press that she was there. The script contains a part that has been cut in the movie, where she replies to the question of how she feels about what just happened:

REPORTER 2 (V.O.): Were you in the courtroom miss? Did you see?

WOMAN (FRAIL): Yes. I was there.

REPORTER (V.O.): How do you feel about what they did?

(Slo-mo) She sees at the grande hall's end Smecker leading the three out, bags still over their heads. She sees Dad's butterfly tattoo. She knows.

WOMAN: I guess we all know what is right and wrong. We all know. Nobody needs to be convinced of what he was... I'm going home now to have my first real full night's sleep.



Figure 23 The father gently forces a woman to witness the execution of Yakavetta. 1:25h

In the movie, the scene is cut right after she says that she was there, and the film concludes instead with several interviews in which pedestrians are asked what they think about the Saints. The responses are equally distributed. Some people justify them, others are afraid of the power they gained. Some accuse the media of giving them importance and therefore a reason to continue their bloodbath.

The film is very rich in meaning and symbolism, stereotypes are present, but they are somehow overcome, united together in order to create a positive Irish American identity. The sequel of the movie, *The Boondock Saints – All Saints Day* is not so successful, it might be even called a step back in the depiction of the two brothers and the Irish in general, but it somehow completes or recalls some of the issues raised in the first one, with some similar scenes and events.

2.2 The Boondock Saints – All Saints Day (2009)

The sequel, *The Boondock Saints – All Saints Day*, is set eight years after. This time the movie is edited by Stage 6 Films and distributed by Apparition. The actors are the same, with the exception of the FBI agent, played this time by the southern Belle Eunice Bloom (Julie Benz). The movie this time is produced by Don Carmody and Chris Brinker and edited by Bill DeRonde and Paul Kumpata. The movie has been followed by a comic book series written by Troy Duffy, that explains in detail the story of the brother's father.

The two brothers leave Ireland after having started a new thrifty life in the country. They shave and take back their weapons. The trigger that brings the Saints back to the States is the murder of a priest. Someone has killed him by simulating their way to kill, with two guns behind the head. They go back in order to find the man responsible of the

murder and during the trip they recreate their trinity by adding to their team a Mexican man, Romeo (Clifton Collins Jr.). The man is added to the group in a scene that reminds the one of Rocco's initiation. They scare him to death by threatening his life with two loaded guns. He reacts in a way that is very similar to Rocco's, asking them not to please not kill him. When they start laughing, he is first angry, then relieved, then he asks them to join their mission.

In the meantime, the mafia has a new leader, the son of Yakavetta. The Saints look for the responsible of the murder and they find out that there is an old conflict between their father and an Italian American man, who used to be his friend and instead betrayed him. The movie ends with a killing spree, and both the father and the Italian man die. The boys are arrested and the FBI agents plan a way to let them out of prison.



Figure 24 The father just killed the Italian responsible for the murder of the priest. An unnatural light shines on him. 1:26h

The movie recalls the idea of a divine mission. Here, the father is more present and the audience have the chance to get to know something about his past. He seems to be

given a power that is unknown even to his children. When he finds himself in front of the Italian American who killed the priest, he abandons himself to the Divine Providence, by giving the man a gun and playing Russian Roulette with him. While the two scared brothers pray, he plays the game and finally wins it. After killing the Italian American, he raises his head to Heaven in a thankful and relieved way, and an unnatural light shines on his forehead from above. The scene seems to suggest that the Catholic God is with them, and that he justifies the violence and the murderings executed by the Irish American men. Indeed, the father seemed to know already that he would have won, since God was on his side. The Italian American man, as Yakavetta Senior before him, dies in the middle of a swear word, and this implies that there is no possible deliverance for him.



Figura 25 Ireland is stereotyped and the two brothers are unrecognizable. Minute 2

The movie is a step back in the overcoming of stereotypes. It begins in Ireland, and the country is shown as undeveloped and almost with a medieval atmosphere, reinforcing the idea of an Old World, far behind from the development of the U.S.. It

looks as if Ireland had not changed after the famine. The two brothers are almost unrecognizable and they are probably hiding from the international police. The beard seems to give them an aura of wisdom, which is reinforced by the peaceful and idyllic landscape. The stereotype is recalled later in the movie, when the father is cooking potatoes in the old Irish house. This is a step back in the depiction of the Irish American brothers done in the first movie: in *The Boondock Saints I*, when the two brothers go to the police station after killing the two Russian mobsters, an agent is making irony of the Irish Americans, and they turn the joke against him:

GREENLY: (talking loudly) These guys are miles away by now.

[...]

But if you want to beat your head against a wall, then here's what you look for.

These guys are scared like two little bunny rabbits. Anything in a uniform or flashing blue lights will spook them. So the only thing we can do is put a potato on a string and drag it through South Boston.

[...]

MURPHY: (loud) You'd probably have better luck with a beer.²⁴

Italian Americans, as in the first movie, are still depicted as if they were not capable of ethics or good feelings. It seems that with the death of Rocco, the last possibility of redemption is gone. Indeed, Italian Americans commission the murder of the Catholic priest just to get the Saints back and get revenge on them. They are once again seen as capable of betraying their religion, their principles, their family and friends. The best friend of the father, an Italian American, sold the Irish American to the police for a better position in the mafia.

²⁴ The dialogues of this movie have been copied on.

The movie though is not well finished. The actors, supposed to be speaking Italian, mumble Italian-sounding words. Ethnic groups are not represented as nuanced as in the previous movie. From a technical point of view, the film sometimes recalls the previous one. Here too, after the priest is found dead with a modus operandi that is similar to the one of the brothers, there are interviews asking whether the Saints are back or not and if it was them or not who killed the clergy man. Public opinion is split into half: some are trusting them and saying they could not do it, whereas others accuse them of the murder.

Still, *The Boondock Saints II* fails where the previous movie succeeded: representing Irish American identity as a whole and not as a series of stereotypes.

2.3 Kill the Irishman (2011)

The figure of Danny Greene is the core of the movie *Kill the Irishman*, a crime drama by Jonathan Hensleigh. The movie stars Ray Stevenson and Vincent D'Onofrio. It is an adaptation of the book *To Kill the Irishman: The War That Crippled the Mafia* written in 1998 by Rick Porrello. The movie is produced by Al Corley, Eugene Musso, Tommy Reid, Tara Reid and Bart Rosenblatt, edited by Douglas Criser and written by Hensleigh himself with the help of Jeremy Walters. It was distributed by Anchor Bay Films and the studios that took care of the realization are Code Entertainment, Dundee Entertainment and Sweet William Productions.

Danny Greene's story is narrated with the use of flash forwards, pieces of "real" history –that is, the news that actually went on television talking about the real Danny Greene – and fictional interviews. The movie gives room to the social and political events of his life, as well as to his private life and relationships.

The movie narrates the rise and the fall of the Irishman Danny Greene, a man who became famous in Cleveland during the seventies because of his clashes with the Italian American Mafia. Because of his tough reputation, after becoming chief of a union, he receives proposals of collaborating with some of the Italian American mobsters, in particular with John Nardi. With the famous sentence “Irishman is in business for himself now!”, he closes the relationship with the Mafia group and starts his own mobster career after realizing that he can do the same profits without paying a percentage to the Italian Americans for doing nothing. This of course turns his previous allies into dangerous enemies, and he manages to survive several murder attempts made by them. He kills many of his rivals but in 1977 he is eventually killed by a bomb placed in his car by an Italian hired killer. His untouchability is therefore mined only at the very end of the story, but still in a respectful and dignifying way. He understands that his car is going to explode and he does not show terror, he instead greets his murderer with dignity.

Danny Greene is represented through the entire movie as a tough man deeply convinced that his Irishness is his strength and his protection. In several occasions he underlines that, and the filming techniques are there to back and support the sacred aura of power and divine protection that is believed to surround him.

Some scenes in the movie show that he acted like a modern Robin Hood, paying rents for old ladies, and sending Christmas presents all over the city – namely turkeys, like in *A Christmas Carol*. Just before dying, he gifts his gold Celtic necklace, the one that he got from an old Irish American lady to a boy, after the kid confessed his admiration for him and that he wants to take an example of life from Mr. Greene. These facts contribute to depicting him as a good man in spite of what he does in order to earn a living, i.e. organized crime, and they make him different from the mafia mobsters,

simply better than them. Finally, his masculinity is underlined by the scenes in which women fall on their knees for him when his family and three kids are shown, and when he starts a new relationship with a young and beautiful woman after the breakup with his wife.



Figure 26 Danny Greene receives a Celtic cross from an old Irish American woman. Minute52

The first scene to be analyzed for its symbolic relevance is the one in which an old Irish American lady gives to Danny a gold necklace with a Celtic cross on it. The scene starts with the Irishman covering the rent that the lady had not been able to pay in the previous months. The lady invites him into the house and starts talking about Ireland and Irish tradition:

Lady: “Our People, yours and mine. They weren’t *just* fearless. They knew there was something better than just being a big shot. Something that means having the grace of God on your shoulder, to protect you, so that you can protect those around

you. Yeah you have the eyes of a warrior that's true, but I see something more than this. I see goodness. ”

Danny: “There's no goodness in me”

Lady: “Don't you ever say that! We're drunks, we're fighters, we're liars! But there's a bit of good in every Irishman. Give me your hand!”²⁵

The scene – and the screenshot specifically - has a strong symbolic power: the game of lights emphasizes the hand and the cross, as if it was a religious communion act, or the investiture of a knight. Some mystic power is given to him from someone who is not the lady anymore – indeed, the medium close-up only shows the arm of the woman, cutting her out of the scene. Also the light cuts her arm away. The suture, in this passage, is problematic, since we stop seeing the old lady in order to focus on Danny Greene. We do not see her facial expression while giving him the power of her ancestors. This investiture gives Greene a new moral power, the power to defy Italian American mobsters. It might be an allegory of the power – respect, acceptance, consideration - that white society gave to the Irish Americans when Italians arrived heavily in the U.S..

The words of the old lady remind of the tradition of Celtic tribes, and their opulence contrasts with the setting. It is 1975 in the United States, in a decadent neighborhood, but the words tell a story that goes back to Ireland, to the Old Land, to some past times where values were central and the Irish were a proud Folk, instead of a mass of unskilled laborers. This scene contrasts the general American stereotype of the Irish Americans as drunks, in the sense that it gives them some dignity, although it reinforces the belief that Irish Americans are more loyal to their background than to the new country they live in. It seems to say that they will never be able to integrate and get rid

²⁵ The dialogues of this movie have been copied on

of their background and heritage. What the lady says – “we’re drunks, we’re fighters we’re liars!” – reproduces exactly the original stereotype of the Irish Americans. In this scene, stereotypes are only overcome in the sense that a new one, the vigilante, takes the place of the previous one.



Figure 27 A man tried to kill Danny Greene and he survived again. He is now openly challenging the Mafia. Minuttee 73-74

Another scene regards a television interview to Danny Greene. The Mafia tries to kill him again, by sending a sniper. He does not get injured and manages to shoot back so that the man runs away. In the screenshot, we can see that he still wears the necklace that he got from the old lady.

Interviewer: “This is about the fourth time somebody has tried to kill you. How do you account for the fact that you survived each time?”

Danny Greene: I’m an Irishman with the Grace of God on my shoulders. I’m not going anywhere until He says so.”

The camera here films from a low position, and this gives power to the figure of Danny Greene. The medium close-up shows not only him with his Celtic gold necklace, but also his property and the Celtic club advertisement, that comes up bright from the background because of the contrast with the trees. It also shows the shamrock, one of the best known symbols of Ireland. These symbols, the cross and the shamrock, are clichés of Irishness, almost touristy giggles.

Interestingly, as he says he has Grace “on his shoulders”, the light is exactly pointing on the top part of his body, as to give concrete evidence of his gift. The filter used here lets the audience see the scene as if they were watching the interview on the news in the seventies. Although his body language gives him power: he is shown as extremely self confident, and the shirt he wears lets the audience see him in all his masculinity and self reliance. It might also not be casual that he is wearing white. It underlines his whiteness (Italian Americans are often dressed in black) and it connects him to the sign behind him. Everything else is in dark colors. So here, as in the scene analyzed previously, the focus is on him and there is no space – here as well, barely a hand – for the person he’s interacting with. This scene gives Danny Greene a great authority and power, and there is nothing that points in another direction: everything in the scene is built around and for him.

This movie manages to overcome the myth of the unskilled Irish American laborer, of the drunk, but it still presents Irishness as almost a fairytale, dotted with world known symbols as shamrocks or Celtic crosses, with men who are strong and self-reliant and

women treasuring Irish traditions. Also, *Kill the Irishman* presents the Mafia as a group of people with no feelings, without any substantial differentiation among the characters. This group is there only by contrast to Greene: we find definitions in differences among the two groups.

The movie gives, in this sense, a good representation of how people stereotyped ethnic groups at that time, in the seventies, but the contemporary audience should investigate on the meaning of those symbols and on the reliability of such a fictional – although real – character as Danny Greene was. It is to wonder if he really does represent the group he is part of, or only the general public idea of it that still somehow persists. Romanticizing an ethnic group that had been stigmatized in the past and make it acceptable only when compared to other minorities is not the best way to make a social apology, and if a 2011 movie still uses such devices, it is arguable that cinema has in some cases still not overcome the need of stereotyping.

3. Irish American Mobsters vs. Italian American Mobsters: Last Man Standing (1996)

Some movies show the conflict between Italian Americans and Irish Americans by contrasting two mobster groups. Here it is rare to find a hero in one of the two groups, they are usually almost equally negative and they are there in order to point positively to the WASP. This is the case of a movie like *Last Man Standing* (1996) by Walter Hill. It is set in 1931 and the protagonist is a white man, John Smith (Bruce Willis), who ends up in an abandoned city, Jericho, in the middle of a gang war between the Irish and the Italian Americans. The movie is inspired by Sergio Leone's 1964 movie *Per un Pugno di Dollari*, which in turn is inspired by *Yojimbo* (1961) by Akira Kurosawa. Interestingly, the three movies always change the ethnicities involved in the movie. The choice of Italians versus Irish Americans is specific of Hill's movie.

Last Man Standing is a representation of how the figure of the Irish American can almost embrace the same negativity of the one of the Italian American. The movie begins with the image of a church and a woman praying, a detail that foreshadows the importance of the religious element in the story. John Smith, whose name already suggests that he is an Everyman, because of the commonness of such a name, arrives in a city called Jericho – another hint since this is a biblical name - and finds himself in the middle of a civil war between Irish Americans and Italian Americans. As he arrives, Italian Americans welcome him with vulgar gestures while Irish Americans destroy his car because he dared watching their boss' "girlfriend". He tries to make money out of this civil war. His good nature makes him lose all his money in order to help two women, the Italian boss' girlfriend and the Irish boss' one, escaping from the respective gangs. Here more than in other movies, being Catholic, no matter whether Irish or Italian American, is intimately connected to violence and to illegal activities. For

example, the local pub serves alcohol (namely two typical Irish drinks, beer and Whiskey) without caring about prohibition. The city is a micro cosmos of what happens in the United States. Indeed, as it is said in the movie, those gangs are only an example of the contrast that spreads all over the country. The two groups in particular respond to the main gangs of New York and Chicago. Capt. Tom Pickett, in charge of ruling the town, explains how the situation is out of control:

Things in this town are out of control. Two gangs is just one too many. I'm not an idealist. I know a lot of things that people do are awful low, but that's between them and God. Do you believe in God? I believe in God, son. But what I'm concerned with is keeping a lid on things, and what we got here in Jericho is just way out of hand. [...] I'm coming back here in ten days, and I'm gonna bring about twenty rangers with me. I will tolerate *one* gang, because that is the nature of things. A certain amount of corruption is inevitable. But if I find *two* gangs here when I get back, then in a couple of hours there will be *no* gangs here. So it's simple. One gang quits and goes home. You boys work it out. I don't give a damn which one.²⁶

Since even the exponents of the law are disillusioned, in this film redemption is only allowed for some individuals, definitely never Catholic, and there are only few features that make Irish Americans look better than Italian Americans. The main difference is in the way the two ethnicities act in regard of women. While the Irish American boss has a girlfriend of whom he is very jealous, a woman he won and who is actually his slave, but is not touched by anybody else and who is treated well with the exception of the lack of freedom. The Italian American boss has a Polish girlfriend whom he beats and treats badly, with almost no regards about what she does with other men. The only one who is really respectful of the two women is John Smith, who risks

²⁶ The quote comes from Internet Movie Database (IMDB).

his life in order to set them free. The movie encourages identification with him, rather than with the other characters. Italian Americans are always portrayed gesturing in a vulgar way and arguing with each other while Irish Americans are always violent. After John Smith kills three of the Irishmen, the Irish American boss asks him to join his gang, and when John replies that the boss should be mad at him, the boss instead of agreeing says that “It’s the only cure I know for being stupid”. This shows that in this movie even Irish Americans are merciless.



Figure 28 Irish Americans are torturing John Smith and showing him the cross that belongs to the Mexican woman he helped to escape. 1:08h

The connection between violence and Catholic religion is explicitly symbolized when John Smith is beaten and a Cross is passed on his face covered in blood. Also the final scene happens in a church, and there the last of the mobsters are killed. The church is falling into pieces, but it is still the reference point for everyone – even for the non Catholic. When John Smith is hurt, he uses the church as a place where nobody would look for him.

The movie leads to nihilism and suggests that Irish and Italian Americans have become the same, with no respect for church, family and women. The only character who brings some ethics in the movie is John Smith, who is still a criminal. This film is problematic in the sense that it seems to give a different epilogue to the fights between Irish and Italian Americans. In the other movies, there is – at least for the Irish American- hope to achieve a better quality of life. Here, instead, violence will never end unless a white man eliminates both Italian and Irish Americans.

Conclusion

My research has shown that the presence of Italian Americans in these movies clearly helps defining Irish American identity and that this has an historical reason: when Italians started migrating in the U.S. the Irish Americans, who had been exploited and discriminated, tried and managed to put the new group hierarchically below themselves in American society. This fact brought the Irish Americans closer to being considered whites.

While a movie like *The Man in Blue* has portrays the Irish American policeman as a purely positive figure, contemporary movies give a more nuanced representation of Irish Americans. The cops in *The Departed* and *State of Grace* are torn between their relationship to other members of their community and their loyalty to the state. The figure of the Irish American vigilante is represented as borderline. The illegal activities are paradoxically justified by the ethics of their mission or their general good behaviour towards the innocents. For the two brothers in *The Boondock Saints* and Danny Greene their Irishness and their values are more important than the laws of the United States. And yet, since they fight against the “bad ones”, and the viewer ends up justifying their actions. Films like *Last Man Standing* finally blur the line between the respectability of Irish and Italian Americans, but still put the first group in a better position, suggesting an identification with the Irish Americans rather than with the Italian Americans, whose function is mainly to contribute to define Irish Americans and their superior position in American society.

The clear rivalry of the two groups has only mildly been pointed out in literature or history, whereas, I argue, it has become a real topos in the movies, and their analysis can be useful to understand and overcome constructed stereotypes on racial identity.

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