

FAGIDABOUTIT: THE AMERICAN DREAM AND ITALIAN-AMERICAN
GANGSTER MOVIES

Justin V. Lamberti

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Justin V. Lamberti

Certificate of Approval:

Susan L. Brinson
Professor
Communication and Journalism

J. Emmett Winn, Chair
Associate Professor
Communication and Journalism

George Plasketes
Professor
Communication and Journalism

Stephen L. McFarland
Acting Dean
Graduate School

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Justin V. Lamberti

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Signature of Author

Date

VITA

Justin V. Lamberti, son of Vincent and Cathy Lamberti, was born June 9, 1977, in Brooklyn, New York. Justin graduated from the Department of Communication at the University of Rhode Island in 2000 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and a minor in Journalism. In 2003, Justin started his two years of study in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University. He graduated in August 2005 with his Master of Arts degree.

THESIS ABSTRACT

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Justin V. Lamberti

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This thesis answers the question, how have both aspects of the American Dream myth been presented in the gangster films and how has the American Dream in gangster films changed in recent years? As Italians immigrated to the United States, the Mafia system involving organized crime followed. As a result, movies based on real news headlines emerged, thus creating the gangster genre. Movies have great cultural value and communicate a society's myths, values, and beliefs. The American Dream is an important myth in American society and is frequently manifested in movies. The American Dream myth is clearly presented through the conventions of the genre and has not significantly changed in recent years. The genre's plot, setting, characters, themes, motifs, and props illustrate the gangster's drive to fulfill the materialistic and moralistic aspects of the American Dream myth. Ironically, however, the gangster never fully

achieves the Dream because her or his drive for success leads her or him to neglect the moralistic aspect that is key to the myth, demonstrating that in order to reach the American Dream, a person must do so legitimately.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Al Capone and John Gotti are synonymous with the image of a gangster because both men have received much media attention for their involvement with the Italian American mob. Since just after World War II, the Italian Mafia has captured the attention of the American public with countless numbers of books and films that have been produced on the subject (Paoli, 2003). Because of this popular interest, much of what people believe about Mafia culture is learned from the media, in particular gangster films. Paoli (2003) explains that “for many people the Italian American Mafia is and behaves as it is recounted in these romanticizing novels and films” (p. 3).

Although there have been early films about Italians, it was not until the *Little Caesar* (1931) release that these gangster movies became commercially successful because, as Woll and Miller (1987) argue, despite the criminal aspect, their popularity gave many Americans hope for financial success and independence during the Great Depression. Since the earliest gangster movies, the American Dream has been a central theme in these films. According to Munby (1999) the key to understanding the movie *Little Caesar* is the fact that “a hoodlum is seeking to make it in the big time- to be somebody” (p. 46). *Little Caesar* was the first authentic gangster movie that focused on the character of the gangster and on the relationship to larger cultural values and beliefs (Raeburn, 1988). In the movie *Little Caesar*, Rico Bandello is the main character, and according to Raeburn (1988), “Rico’s ascent thus parallels those of the ambitious and

capable heroes of the American Dream, men of lowly origins who raise to the top of their profession” (p. 49). According to Munby (1999) the gangster film “taps into a more general collective desire for upward mobility [that is] fostered in age-old American myths” (p. 44). Therefore, in gangster films, the stereotyped Italian American is linked to the pervasive myth of the American Dream.

This thesis undertakes a study of prominent gangster films in order to explicate how the American Dream has been utilized in this genre and how it has changed in recent years. In order to analyze the films, a genre approach will be utilized. The results of a close textual analysis will be the foundation of the critique that will shed light on the use of the American Dream as it contributes to the stereotypical portrayal of Italian Americans as mobsters in popular culture.

Significance to Communication

The filmic representations of gangsters are not unlike the mythic legends surrounding the romanticized outlaws of the old West such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid. Myths are important in the field of Communication because they help people make sense of the world around them. According to Nachbar and Lause (1992), myth says that “the belief/value is significant and long lasting--vital to the mindset of the culture which holds it--and that is widely accepted as being true” (p. 84). In addition, myths do not need to be based on truth or even verified in reality (Nachbar & Lause, 1992). Myths are also important to Communication studies because they are rooted in narrative processes of communication. As Nachbar and Lause (1992) demonstrate, “myth-narratives are stories we tell ourselves to give shape, definition and increased interest to our myths,

beliefs and values” (p. 86). In addition, myths are viewed as stable and significant beliefs that are central to a cultural mindset (Nachbar & Lause, 1992). But myths are dynamic and as time goes on and different aspects of people’s lives change, the myths change also. Nachbar and Lause (1992) explain that “a myth may alter its definitions as time passes and circumstances change” (p. 101).

Gangster movies illustrate values and beliefs associated with Italian Americans, which in turn shape the way in which Americans perceive and understand Italian Americans. Thus, gangster movies communicate stereotypes and roles that are associated with Italian Americans. According to Cawelti (1976) the potential impact of Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* has been great as “millions of copies of the book sold” (p. 51). In addition, for many Americans the gangster story is one that they can relate to and understand. According to Warshow (1962) “what matters is that the experience of the gangster as an experience of art is universal to Americans” (p. 130). Also, gangster movies are easy to understand because, as Shadoian (2003) claims, “the gangster/crime film isn’t hard to spot. We can recognize it instantly and can usually predict what’s likely to happen” (p. 18). Therefore the gangster image is prevalent and familiar to American audiences.

Context for the Link between Italian Americans and the Gangster Persona

From 1820 to 1930, about 4.7 million Italians immigrated to the United States, and this influx of immigrants marked one of the biggest moves to the United States from any European country (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). In many cases the new immigrants were unable to communicate in English, so they grouped themselves together in small ethnic communities within the large cities of the eastern seaboard (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni,

1972). Most of the new Italian immigrants stayed in New York and worked as construction and light manufacturing laborers (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). In 1930, seventy-five percent of the Italian-American population lived in areas referred to as Little Italy in middle Atlantic and northeastern states (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972).

Because a large number of Italians immigrated to America prior to 1920 and brought their culture linked to the Sicilian Mafia, certain crimes became linked to Italian-Americans, even though no Italian Mafia members migrated (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). In Italian-American ghettos, crimes that were reported, including extortion threats through death and body harm, were referred to as Italian crimes since they were the traditional crimes committed by the Italian Mafia (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). However, these crimes were not organized like the Sicilian Mafia crimes because they were random acts by various individuals not tied together by any organization (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). Just after 1920, two major developments occurred that placed the Italian gangster in America. First, many Sicilian Mafiosi were under attack by Mussolini, and they went to the United States as a safe place (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). Also, National Prohibition began in the United States, which gave newfound wealth to both new Italian immigrants and second generation Italian-Americans willing to bootleg alcohol (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). By the mid 1920s everything was in place for the formation of Italian-American Mafia, and this new Mafia quickly started to take shape (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972).

Well before the Italian-American Mafia was formed, stories of crime and the success of criminals have been a part of American culture as romanticized stories of outlaws such as Jesse James told America that crime was financially rewarding, exciting,

and could make an otherwise poor person famous. As Iorizzo and Mondello (1980) explain, “given the circumstances and the success stories in crime, immigrants, and especially their children, easily perceived that organized crime was a way of attaining quick wealth which would have otherwise taken generations to accumulate” (p. 187).

The American Dream Myth

Myths are stories “at the root of our universal existence” that create meanings and give a group of people a sense of belonging (Seger, 2003, p. 317). In addition, myths are much more than simply stories because they are based on real events. However, myths are “more than true. Many stories are true because one person somewhere at some time lived it. It is based on fact. But a myth is more than true because it is lived by all of us at some level. It’s a story that connects and speaks to us all” (Seger, 2003, p. 317). The American Dream is a prevalent myth in American Society, so much so that its promise of unfettered upward mobility is enshrined in the national creed. As Fisher (1973) explains, the American Dream is actually two myths: the materialistic myth and the moral myth. The materialistic myth is the notion that any person, no matter how lowly, can be successful. Fisher explains that the materialistic myth “relates to the values of effort, persistence, ‘playing the game’ initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). In addition, this allows a person to “reap the rewards of status, wealth, and power” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). Moreover, the second moralistic aspect of the myth is the idea of being fair to all, which involves “the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for the dignity and worth of each and every individual” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). This moralistic aspect focuses on brotherhood and moral good. Fisher (1973) warns that the two myths cannot be separated. Although at different times

and for different reasons one aspect of the myth can dominate the other, the two can never be released from their dialectical tension.

Method

The importance of the scholarly study of criticism dates back to the ancient Greeks and Romans and the birth of the teaching with the Sophists. Their curriculum included rhetoric (oral argument), politics (art of government), Arete (the virtuous ideal), exposition and criticism of poetry, philosophy, and anthropology. Criticism remained an important part of rhetoric and dialectic thus keeping it at the heart of the classical learning model in Greece and the Roman Empire. This tradition was continued into the Middle Ages where it was fundamental in the Trivium (which was the basis for university curriculum now known as the Liberal Arts). It was a natural blending of criticism into rhetoric and dialectic that produced the modern forms that we call criticism. Chesebro and Bertelsen (1998) state:

The critic uniquely investigates the values that humans employ. In this regard, critics examine the process that leads humans to appraise, rate, and scale the utility, usefulness, importance, and general worth of themselves, others, environments, and all items or phenomenon within their environments As media systems continue to grow in size and use, the study of valuing in the context and formatting systems of contemporary communication technologies would seem to be one of the most significant projects that a researcher might undertake. (p. 174)

Film Criticism and the Genre Method

Most people can understand the plot and story of mainstream Hollywood films but remain unaware of the more “abstract mythic, religious, ideological, or psychosexual significance” (Bordwell, 1989, p. 2). It is the role of the film critic to interpret these aspects of film. Bordwell explains that “interpretation has [always] been a social activity, a process of thinking, writing, and speaking within institutions governed by norms” (1989, p. 18). Overall the critic builds off other critics’ work and “every critic draws on craft traditions that dictate how proper interpretations are built” (Bordwell, 1989, p. 13).

Since the very start of filmmaking, many filmmakers have understood the importance of reaching a large number of people. Many of these filmmakers have taken into account key aspects such as “potential audience appeal, and at the same time, standardized those areas whose appeal already had been verified by audience response” (Schatz, 1981, p. 4). As the filmmaking process became more established, the filmmakers themselves started to learn how to put their own and their audiences’ stories into the films. It was clear that the film industry started to create a clear blueprint for narrative films by 1910. As filmmakers did this, the audiences wanted more imagination and variation within the films, but not so much that the films would be out of context. In addition, by establishing film genres of popular stories where the plots, people, and storylines within the films are reworked through mass media, filmmakers created a type of expression that brings the audience into the cinematic fold. The film genre can be viewed as a form of a pact between the filmmaker and the audience, whereas the genre film is the event that upholds this pact (Schatz, 1981). So then, the film genre can be seen as both a “static and a dynamic system” (Schatz, 1981, p. 16). Films within a genre

must remain similar so that audiences are familiar with the formula. However, changes are always occurring that force the film genre to constantly redefine itself. Such changes can be “cultural attitudes, new influential genre films, the economics of the industry, and so forth” (Schatz, 1981, p. 16). Film genre is a genre because it is governed by its rules, components, and function that all work together to bring the genre together.

Since genre films are like stories, each film can be broken down to its simplest forms of plot, setting, and characters (Schatz, 1981). According to Nachbar and Lause (1992), the popular story-like genre can be broken down to two parts. These elements are convention, which means there are similar story lines that go together, and invention, which adds a new element to the story. Likewise, Nachbar and Lause (1992) define a genre by plot, motifs, setting, characters, theme, and props.

The gangster genre has the backdrop of the city, and the gangster as the main character is viewed as a man of that city who has mastered the city’s language and knowledge. The gangster has clear goals and a clear method to achieve these goals. The gangster film genre often shows an upward movement that is all too often followed by a fast slide to the bottom (Warshow, 1962).

Movies

The movies that I selected to examine for this project are *Goodfellas*, *The Godfather*, *Godfather II*, and *The Last Don*. *Goodfellas* (1990) centers around Henry Hill, a minor gangster who teams up with his friends Jimmy Conway and Tommy De Vito, both of whom have visions of moving up within the Mafia. The next movie that I will examine is *The Godfather* (1972), and according to Berardinelli, “Since the release of the 1972 epic all ‘gangster movies’ have been judged by the standards of this one”

(Berardinelli, 1994). Berardinelli (1994) also adds that no matter what type of gangster movie exists, they are all modern day *Godfathers*. *The Godfather* depicts the head of a Mafia family, Vito Corleone, as he becomes embattled with another crime family. The feud arises as Corleone refuses to take part in the expanding criminal drug trade and his sons also join in the war. One of his sons, however, struggles with a decision to take part in the criminal activities of his family. Thus, the movie demonstrates Michael Corleone's beginnings and eventual rise through his Mafia family. In addition, *The Godfather* has won numerous awards including three Best Supporting Actor nominees, ten Academy Award nominations and was named Best Picture. The next movie is *Godfather II* (1974), which also managed to post twelve Academy Award nominations. *Godfather II* won Best Picture and has been called the best sequel of all time. This movie features two continuous plotlines involving Vito and Michael Corleone. Michael attempts to expand his criminal enterprise to Las Vegas, Cuba, and Hollywood. Simultaneously, flashbacks reveal Vito's early introduction to power and involvement with criminal activity as he becomes associated with the Mafia. The last movie I will study for this project will be *The Last Don* (1997), which was adapted from Mario Puzo's novel of the same name. Within this movie, the nephew of the Mafia family boss has been raised to take his father's place within the family. The nephew is unable to fully take over and moves to Las Vegas to run a casino business. While in Las Vegas the nephew begins a relationship with a woman, and the grandson of the family boss views this to be the perfect opportunity to take over the family business. All four movies illustrate mob members working their way through the Mafia hierarchy to achieve success within the family. In

addition, they narratively represent the American mafia from the early 1900s to the 1990s.

Research Question

How have both aspects of the American Dream myth been presented in these gangster films, and how has the American Dream in gangster films changed in recent years?

Thesis Chapters

- I. Introduction. The introduction will serve to justify this project, provide the methodology I will be using, introduce the texts I have chosen, and pose my research question.
- II. Literature Review. This section will examine the relevant research pertaining to the topic.
- III. Methodology. This section will explain genre criticism and how it will be used in this investigation of gangster films.
- IV. Analysis. This section will provide critical analysis of the films I have chosen.
- V. Discussion. This section includes my findings based on my analysis.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Italian-Americans represent a major ethnic group in America. When large amounts of Italian immigrants moved to America, many stereotypes became associated with them. Oftentimes Italian immigrants, especially those from Sicily, were labeled as members of the Mafia. As a result, movies capitalized on this stereotype and portrayed Italian-Americans as members of the Mafia. Thus, the stereotypes that arose within American society were translated into movies that eventually comprised a popular movie genre. However, as these stereotypes changed, so did the genre. Moreover, the gangster genre has specific components that set it apart from other genres, including setting (environment), characters, plot lines, and other aspects. Understanding the evolution of the genre provides a basis for understanding where the genre stands today.

In addition, the gangster genre uses the American Dream myth as a way of explaining gangster motivations. The American Dream myth is something that everyone within the country can clearly understand. In this chapter, I will explain the history of Italian immigration to the United States, the origins and evolution of the gangster genre, the specific characteristics of the genre, and the American Dream myth.

A Brief Italian-American History

Few phenomena since World War II have fascinated the American public more than the Italian Mafia (Paoli, 2003). In western Sicily, everything was in place for the spread of the Mafia: rural lifestyles, bad governments, and spotty law enforcement had

ruled over the island nation for centuries (Rolle, 1980). As a result, members of the leading families created a coalition to protect their estates against both intruders and competitors (Rolle, 1980). In the cities and countryside, these families, called *cosche*, controlled the basics aspects of life, whether it was marriages between families, contracts for vital foodstuffs, public works, or the election of local bureaucrats (Rolle, 1980). As the system grew in power it became more corrupt and fear became an important aspect of the Mafia system (Rolle, 1980).

From 1820 to 1930, about 4.7 million Italians immigrated to the United States, and this influx of immigrants marked one of the biggest moves to the United States from any European country (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). Eighty percent of the Italian newcomers to the United States after the Civil War settled in the northeast quarter of the country from New York to Minnesota and north of the Mason Dixon line, primarily settling in cities (Moquin & Van Doren, 1974). Generally, Italian immigrants to the U.S. were from the northern part of Italy, but slowly, because of the breakdown of the land tenure system, overpopulation, and the failure of the government to help the economic difficulties, the immigration shifted to the provinces of southern Italy (Moquin & Van Doren, 1974). By 1900, for the first time, over 100,000 Italians came to America in just one year (Moquin & Van Doren, 1974). Over the next fifteen years, that number continued to increase with 285,731 Italian immigrants entering in the peak year of 1907, and 283,738 in 1914 (Moquin & Van Doren, 1974).

In many cases, the new immigrants were unable to communicate in English, so they grouped themselves together in small ethnic communities within the large cities of the eastern seaboard (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). In 1930, seventy-five percent of the

Italian-American population lived in areas referred to as Little Italy in Middle Atlantic and northeastern states (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). As these Little Italy areas grew in major cities, New York City became the first choice for Italian immigrants because of its large Italian community (Moquin & Van Doren, 1974). In fact, by 1920, more than 500,000 Italian immigrants were in New York State, while Pennsylvania had 220,000, New Jersey 157,000, and Massachusetts 117,000 (Moquin & Van Doren, 1974). Most of the new Italian immigrants who stayed in New York worked as construction and light manufacturing laborers (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). In addition, although many immigrants had been Italian peasants with vast knowledge about how to cultivate land, they were relegated to the position of laborers where they were used for physical force (Moquin & Van Doren, 1974).

When immigrants came to the United States, they perceived a laxity of law enforcement that Iorizzo and Mondello (1980) assert became accepted in the country as early as colonial American times. Relatively few members of these groups of German, Irish, Jewish, Polish, and Italian immigrants perceived organized crime activities as American customs and did not become involved (Iorizzo & Mondello, 1980). However, Americans saw these immigrant groups as threats to their institutions. With time, the Italian-Americans became associated with the Mafia in the white public view and therefore Italian-Americans were seen as organized mob criminals (Iorizzo & Mondello, 1980). Stereotypes ensued in popular culture that characterized Italian, and especially Sicilian, immigrants as revengeful, ferocious criminals, an image that was ingrained in the American culture for generations to come (Iorizzo & Mondello, 1980).

Because a large number of Italians immigrated to America prior to 1920 and brought their culture linked to the Sicilian Mafia, certain crimes became linked to Italian-Americans, even though no Italian Mafia members migrated (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). In Italian-American ghettos, crimes that were reported, including extortion threats through death and body harm, were referred to as Italian crimes since they were the traditional crimes committed by the Italian Mafia (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). However, these crimes were not organized like the Sicilian Mafia crimes because they were random acts by various individuals not tied together by a formal organization as in Italy (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972).

Just after 1920, two major developments occurred that placed the Italian gangster in America (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). First, many Sicilian Mafiosi were under attack by Mussolini, and they went to the United States as a safe place (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). Mussolini arrested the Mafiosi or drove them from the country (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). Thus, Italian Mafia members came to the United States to escape hostility and to escape possible arrest or revenge from local enemies (Servadio, 1976).

Second, National Prohibition began in the United States, which gave newfound wealth to both new Italian immigrants and second generation Italian-Americans willing to bootleg alcohol (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). With Prohibition came a reworking of organized crime in the United States (Iorizzo & Mondello, 1980). Along with the support of the public and cooperation from local officials, the gangs of the 1920s managed to obtain both wealth and power that had never been achieved in the nineteenth century (Iorizzo & Mondello, 1980). Lasting from 1920-1933, Prohibition created a moneymaking opportunity unheard of in the previous decades (Paoli, 2003). According

to Paoli (2003), “the bootlegging organization set up by John Torrio and Al Capone in Chicago, for example, showed an annual gross from beer and other alcoholic beverages of at least \$60 million and perhaps as much as \$240 million” (p. 9).

The Italian-American Mob

By the mid 1920s everything was in place for the formation of an Italian-American Mafia, and it quickly started to take shape (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). Well before the Italian-American Mafia was formed, stories of crime and the success of criminals were a part of American culture as romanticized stories of outlaws such as Jesse James told America that crime was financially rewarding, exciting, and could make an otherwise poor person famous. As Iorizzo and Mondello (1980) explain, “given the circumstances and the success stories in crime, immigrants, and especially their children, easily perceived that organized crime was a way of attaining quick wealth which would have otherwise taken generations to accumulate” (p. 187). Thus, for the person working and living in the Mafia, the lifestyle represents one with rewards. According to Arlacchi (1986), “to say little, to keep a low profile, to disparage the extent of one’s influence- these were the rules the Mafia followed in its appearance in public life” (p. 117). Furthermore, members of the Mafioso felt they were superior and in an exceptional position established by the fact they were living a life of leisure (Arlacchi, 1986). In addition, living in a society where the majority of people work hard every day, the freedom to use one’s own time the way one sees fit is a clear sign of one’s honor and power (Arlacchi, 1986).

Servadio (1976) asserts that the Italian-American Mafia is a way of thinking, a way of life that is purely Sicilian, and the Mafia is a code of conduct based on traditions

and customs that every Sicilian has inherited. The main goal of the Mafia is to monopolize certain markets and then insure high profits (Conklin, 1973). According to Conklin (1973), these markets are “created by laws that make widely demanded goods and services illegal” (p. 5). The types of Mafia crimes are those that citizens voluntarily take part in (Conklin, 1973). A person places a bet with a bookie, a person buys drugs, or a businessperson borrows money from a loan shark, these are all seen as victimless crimes (Conklin, 1973).

In the early twentieth century, organized crime was dominated by Irish-American gangsters. It was not until the late 1920s and early 1930s that Italian-Americans became the dominant ethnic mob group (Conklin, 1973). The Mafia was made up of families that existed at local and regional levels (Conklin, 1973). According to Ianni and Reuss-Ianni (1972), these families were built on real and artificial kinship relationships. Additionally, Cressey (1969) states that the families were more bureaucratic in nature, but also identify the role of kinship.

Within the Mafia is an organization of criminal activities but also an organization of structure that is characterized by rationality, division of labor, and defined goals (Conklin, 1973). According to Ianni and Reuss-Ianni (1972), even though members of these families are related and interact with each other on a personal level, each person serves a specific function within the family. According to Cressey (1969), the local crime families are held together by a Commission that functions as a board of business directors, legislature, supreme-court, and arbitration board. Even if these families answer to the Commission, there is no national headquarters or office from which to have the Commission operate (Conklin, 1973). In addition, meetings do not often occur (Conklin,

1973). Furthermore, if there is a problem between crime families, well-respected and powerful bosses of different families will enter into discussion and offer a solution to the problem (Conklin, 1973). Cressey (1969) states that the Commission appoints bosses to be arbitrators, or it may also appoint subcommittees to handle specific issues. According to Ianni and Reuss-Ianni (1972), the kinship ties between families may determine which person makes the decisions and which person resolves disputes involving more than one family. In 1973, there were 24 crime families in the country, with five of them in the New York City area. Moreover, an estimate places about 40 percent of the nations' Mafiosi in the New York City area of the U.S. (Conklin, 1973).

Conklin (1973) reported that the Mafia's main source of income in the United States came from gambling, narcotics, and making loans with high interest rates (Conklin, 1973). Besides these three major sources of illegal revenue, the Mafia also took part in labor racketeering, hijacking of trucks, bootlegging cigarettes, and merchandising illegal goods such as fireworks and pirated audio tapes (Conklin, 1973). The Mafia then in turn takes the profits from these resources and reinvests in legitimate businesses (Conklin, 1973). According to Conklin (1973), the most important reason to do this is to "put money to work making even greater profits. Gangsters also use legitimate businesses to maintain a posture of respectability in the community and to show the Internal Revenue Service an honest source of income" (p. 14). In addition, the gangster may then turn over such businesses to other family members so that they can bypass a life of crime and enter into a middle-class lifestyle (Conklin, 1973).

Though the Italian-American Mafia began to resemble the Sicilian *Cosa Nostra*, several important differences surfaced. First, the Sicilian *Cosa Nostra* was made up of a

hundred Mafia families and had thirty-five hundred full members, while the American Mafia had made up of just 24 families (Paoli, 2003). Thus, the American Mafia is more centralized than the Italian Mafia. Second, the American Mafia was unable to gain the political power of legitimacy, which has long been established for the Sicilian *Cosa Nostras* (Paoli, 2003). As Paoli (2003) explains:

Italian states and the Mafia long shared power in large parts of Sicily and Calabria and the power of the Mafia groups was accepted and even legalized by government representatives, the tolerance and collusion of public authorities have been more limited in the United States. (p. 8)

As the Italian-American Mafia came about, even more stereotypes arose.

Frequently, the Mafia is treated as synonymous with organized crime in America (Ianni, 1975). According to Rolle (1980), “the Mafia, usually described as a sinister and secret ‘international terrorist organization,’ has allegedly been behind much criminal activity in the United States” (p. 78). Therefore, Italian homicides received heavy attention in the press, and southern Italians were portrayed as dramatically vicious in committing gangland crimes (Rolle, 1980). The headlines from metropolitan newspapers stressed “Italian crimes of passion” such as stabbings, murders, and assaults (Rolle, 1980). In the United States, with time, the Mafia became corrupted by second-generation criminals from slums of the cities (Rolle, 1980).

Two different types of crimes are associated with organized crime (Block, 1991). The first type consists of strategic and tactical crimes that do not produce any immediate economic gains and consist of such crimes as arson, assault, blackmail, bribery, corruption, coercion, extortion, monopoly, and murder (Block, 1991). Moreover, these

crimes are necessary for organized criminals to enter, but also to control illegal businesses and activities, which comprise the second types of crimes (Block, 1991). These activities consist of cigarette smuggling, counterfeiting, fraud, gambling, hijacked alcohol distribution, loan-sharking, narcotics, prostitution, protection rackets, and fencing (Block, 1991). Organized criminals then use both of these methods and merge them with their operations of legitimate businesses such as auto dealerships, factoring, restaurants and wholesale food distributorships, garment manufacturing, juke boxes and vending machines, nightclubs, trade associations, trucking, and waste disposal (Block, 1991).

Therefore, the Italian-American mobster stereotype existed before the Italian-American Mafia was realized. The appearance of this criminal organization and its rise during the years of prohibition and the Great Depression fed the public's interest in this stereotype and popular accounts of their crimes dramatized their crimes in the form of celebrity mobsters such as Al Capone which celebrated violence, womanizing, wealth, and a leisurely lifestyle that was presented as the epitome of the good life.

Gangster Genre

Evolution of the Genre

According to Warshow (1962), "the two most successful creations of American movies are the gangster and the Western: men with guns" (p. 135). Because of its popularity, the gangster genre is not difficult to describe and is a type of film that most movie audiences can instantly recognize (Shadoian, 2003). In addition, the gangster genre reflects its times and social settings and is flexible enough to change with both social and culture conditions (Shadoian, 2003).

From the start, people have been captivated by stories that focus on homicide, assault, and thievery because, as Cawelti (1976) explains, “man loves crime stories because he has some basic trait that, among other things, manifests itself in a fascination with tales of crime” (p. 52). According to Conklin (1973) gangsters are appealing because “they dare to live by the values to which many secretly aspire but are unable or unwilling to adopt. The gangster is thus something of a hero, although an antisocial one” (p. 3). Also, gangster films appeal to many people because they crossover both class and ethnic standings (Munby, 1999). Moreover, Shadoian (2003) asserts that the gangster genre consists of films that have made and will continue to make money. Thus, several aspects of the gangster genre make it both a popular genre with audiences and profitable genre with filmmakers.

Schatz (1981) illustrates that gangster roles depicted in movies originally came directly from current newspaper headlines detailing real criminal activities. For example, the plot of *Little Caesar*, the first commercially successful gangster film, was generated by a newspaper story about a real life big city gangster named Legs Diamond (Munby, 1999). Thus, the gangster is born of the historical moment of the conditions of her/his world, which created a field of opportunity for filmmakers (Shadoian, 2003). Additionally, the gangster genre did not find itself as a clear genre until the late 1920s during Prohibition when well-known crime figures like Al Capone were presented to the American public (Raeburn, 1988). Shadoian (2003) indicates that Al Capone was “the first and greatest gangster- the man whose name is synonymous with ‘gangster’- was the model, and everyone knew it” (p. 33). Capone was a dangerous criminal who also managed to become a hero in popular culture (Shadoian, 2003).

The struggle of Prohibition was one of the ethnic urban working class that paved the way for Al Capone to gain notoriety as a national hero in the context of Prohibition because this law was disliked across both class and ethnic lines (Munby, 1999). Capone not only went against the law, but he also went against the middle-class idea of commitment to the work ethic (Munby, 1999). As Munby (1999) illustrates, the gangster “championed the desires for public recognition of under- and misrepresented part of American cultural, the ethnic urban popular classes” (p. 37). At this time, the gangster became a cultural hero, a person who was able to challenge the system (Munby, 1999). The gangster gets rich quickly, spends money in ostentatious ways, and challenges authority (Conklin, 1973). Moreover, these films introduced a new view of the American Dream where everyone, regardless of class or ethnicity was getting their piece of the pie (Munby, 1999).

In addition, Warshow (1962) explains that “gangsters *as an experience of art* is universal to Americans” (p. 130). In a way then, the gangster is speaking for all of us who want to reject the qualities and demands of modern life and is what many want to be and what many of us are afraid we may become (Warshow, 1962). Another aspect of the gangster that is appealing to people is the gangster’s appetite for life and the freedom the gangster has to express her/his desires (Shadoian, 2003). According to Shadoian (2003), the gangster “enjoys the rewards of success: liquor, women, fancy clothes, money to burn: his zest for action and his plunge into forbidden pleasures serve to put our own drab existences into perspective” (p. 40).

Moreover, the gangster movie is a paradigm of the American Dream, thus appealing to many people (Shadoian, 2003). Shadoian (2003) demonstrates:

The gangster film is a vehicle that responds to our wish to have our dreams made visible to us in a form that retains their dreamlike qualities but contains a narrative that is the living dream of its hero who makes it happen, actualizes it. (p. 3)

Furthermore, people also seek involvement with the gangster because they identify the gangster as an American dreamer whose behavior and actions involve living out the dream that most everyone has within American society (Shadoian, 2003). In addition, the gangster is by no means an outlaw because outlaws do not live by the same rules as other people; rather, the gangster is aware of and simply violates rules and laws that the rest of society lives by (Shadoian, 2003). The gangster genre is able to take law-abiding people to a new world where they must go outside their own life, culture, and society to not only see but also understand. According to Shadoian (2003), movies in the gangster/crime genre:

make discoveries not possible from within, make us see things that would otherwise be hard to see. It locates an underworld, a world beneath the surface, and shows it to us a literal embodiment of those things that exist but are difficult to see in American life. (p. 5)

For many Americans during the 1920s, the gangster movie was the most exciting expression for the new consumer culture (Munby, 1999). In 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote about a gangster as a hero in the book *The Great Gatsby* (Raeburn, 1988). Soon after, urban criminals were featured on the Broadway stage in shows such as *The Gang War*, *The Racket*, and *Four Walls*. Then the gangster appeared in films in 1927 in the silent movie *Underworld* (Raeburn, 1988).

As technology progressed, producers were able to add sound to movies. In 1930, the movie *Little Caesar* gave the gangster a voice as the first gangster film with sound (Raeburn, 1988). The *Little Caesar* story depicted a gangster that rose to the top starting with nothing only to die later on (Munby, 1999). Also, the movie *Little Caesar* displayed the possibility for upward mobility in the social structure, which was important to the immigrant's position within American society (Munby, 1999). In addition to the gangster speaking within the movies, the sound added another important aspect to the telling of the urban tales (Munby, 1999). As Munby (1999) states, "city noise, the sound of cars, trams, buses, factory machines, and sirens and the cacophony of crowds on the street, helped dramatize the urban realm in a new way" (p. 34). Along with the sounds of the gangster's environment, the gangster having a voice was just as significant as the gangster's broken grammar and accent became a key aspect for the genre (Munby, 1999). When the gangster spoke for the first time in movies, the gangster rearranged the desires of his/her community in a certain politic and also in a certain social space (Munby, 1999). The gangster successfully represents lower-class ethnic American life where other genres are not successful (Munby, 1999).

With the huge commercial success of the *Little Caesar*, 25 more gangster movies were produced in 1931, and 40 more in 1932 (Raeburn, 1988). As a result, movies such as *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932) helped ensure the popularity of the gangster genre. From the early gangster films, these three movies (*Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*) are considered to be the building blocks for the later movies and set the genre into motion (Munby, 1999). However, of all the early gangster movies, *Little Caesar* "is the most powerful and compelling of these early gangster films, not only

establishing the conventions of the genre but doing so within an economical, tightly organized, and consistently sure-handed form” (Raeburn, 1988, p. 49).

The gangster genre adapted to changing times in American society. The early gangster movies of the 1910s and 1920s reflected the gangster lifestyle as degrading and evil in the modern world (Munby, 1999). During the Depression-era, gangster movies began to discuss moral and cultural standards (Munby, 1999). As time went on, the gangster genre’s use of violence changed, as did the views on the subject of violence changed (Shadoian, 2003). Munby (1999) identifies some of the main factors of change: “cultural, economic, and censorship priorities brought on by World War II” (Munby, 1999, p. 4). In the 1940s, the violence was surprising, quick, and bloodless, while in the 1960s and 1970s, the violence was graphic and the doing away with human life was applauded, cheered, and laughed at (Shadoian, 2003). With the rise of the gangster films came backlash from many who believed that these films were bad for society and that they showed a dark side of life (Munby, 1999). Even with high appeal, the gangster genre has been viewed with low regard (Shadoian, 2003). For the most part, the gangster genre displays America as a place of violent conflict, and the genre is dealing with subject matter that other entertainment movies overlook (Shadoian, 2003).

The Godfather

Along with *Little Cesar*, *The Godfather* directly impacted the popularity of the gangster genre and represented a turning point in the genre’s development (Cawelti, 1976). The gangster genre underwent a rebirth with such movies as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Godfather* (1972), and *The Godfather II* (1975) as the notion of the gangster life as lonely and isolated changed to “a normative culture so lethally inimical to human

needs that the only way to survive and find meaning in it was to create an alternative criminal society to nourish one's need for intimacy, fulfillment, and individual dignity" (Raeburn, 1988, p. 55). In earlier gangster movies, crime was the vehicle used to move up the social ladder for immigrants. However, *The Godfather* depicts the start of a criminal business empire while also demonstrating the importance of family and its role in protecting its own members. Hence, the most significant impact on the American public from the movie *The Godfather* is the use of the family as a central theme or symbol (Cawelti, 1976). Finally, as Raeburn (1988) concludes, "The genre's durability has been in its adaptation to changing cultural conditions, and it seems virtually certain that new cultural imperatives will sooner or later bring forth a reformulated gangster film commensurate with a new era" (p. 57). Thus, the gangster genre has evolved over time to represent changing popular culture and ideas.

Gangster Genre Specifics

Many aspects of the gangster genre separate it from other genres. According to Mitchell (1986), the gangster film genre is about the struggle between good and evil. The city environment plays a large role in the gangster genre. Scenes featuring dark streets, dingy rooming houses, office blocks, bars, nightclubs, penthouse apartments, and precinct stations are recurring locales in the gangster genre (McArthur, 1977). This genre features the gangster's environment as a modern city, at night, with wet streets, and black cars (Schatz, 1981). Moreover, the gangster's environment is violent and hostile, encompassing dark alleys where danger always threatens (Mitchell, 1986). The gangster's environment is also one that is a dense, crowded, noisy place, with car tires squealing and guns firing (Raeburn, 1988).

In addition, the gangster genre has the city as the backdrop for the gangster to try to reach her/his goals or dreams. According to Shadoian (2003), “the city, with its cramped, explosive life, becomes the arena to work out one’s ambitions and test one’s ability” (p. 7). The gangster is a figure that remains outside of the people, watching; the people can never become the gangster, nor do they want to be him. The gangster is either placed above or below the people watching the movies (Shadoian, 2003). According to Shadoian (2003), the “gangster’s character and identity are not only well defined, they are also magnified. Their characters are larger than life, and their environments- typically fashioned for verisimilitude- heighten, amplify, and extend their presence” (p. 31).

Along with setting, characteristics of the gangster continue to set it apart from other genres. According to Munby (1999), the gangster is “someone who had thrown off the straitjacket of bourgeois moral rectitude and had set about the business of selling pleasure” (p. 24). Additionally, the gangster is a person of the city and streets and her/his language and knowledge reflect that idea (Warshow, 1962). Activities of the gangster are comprised of a set of rational enterprises that involved goals and a number of techniques for attaining them (Warshow, 1962). Furthermore, the gangster is “lonely and melancholy and can give the impression of a profound worldly wisdom” (Warshow, 1962, p. 136). The gangster’s loneliness and melancholy are not genuine; they do not belong to the gangster because they do not come to the gangster truthfully. Instead, the gangster has put her/himself in a situation where everyone wants to kill her/him, and in the end someone will (Warshow, 1962). Thus, as Shadoian (2003) explains, the gangster is a tragic hero. Moreover, the gangster is a person without culture and manners, and

leisure is most often related to business (Warshow, 1962). According to Warshow (1962), however, the gangster is “crude in conceiving his ends but by no means inarticulate; on the contrary, he is usually expansive and noisy and can state definitely what he wants” (p. 136).

Along with the tough talking gangster, the gangster’s dress, guns, and cars are just as important. According to McArthur (1977), “clothes have always been important in the gangster film, not only as carriers of iconographic meaning but also as objects which mark the gangster’s increasing status” (p. 120). Along with the gangster’s dress comes the weapon of choice for the gangster, which is often the sawn-off shotgun or the sub-machine-gun (McArthur, 1977). Within the gangster genre, the automobile is another major aspect of the gangster genre (McArthur, 1977). As McArthur (1977) explains, the automobile has two main functions, “it is the means whereby the hero carries out his work and it becomes, like his clothes, the visible token of success” (p. 121). In addition, the automobile has become such a powerful icon within the gangster genre that some characters will be in fear at just the sight of an automobile before they see who is actually driving the vehicle (McArthur, 1977).

According to Munby (1999), the hero of gangster films is represented as an “ethnic gangster as bootlegger, as the boss of America’s urban nightlife, as a fashion leader, and as a capitalist opportunist was nativism’s nemesis” (p. 33). Thus, the main character of gangster films is involved in criminal activity (Schatz, 1981). The classic gangster movie focuses on the gangster’s drive as well as the loneliness that accompanies the gangster hero (Raeburn, 1988). Moreover, the classic gangster symbolizes the dark side of the American male or female because the urban setting keeps him/her from

gaining power and success by ways of legitimate means (Schatz, 1981). Because success cannot be gained legitimately, the gangster is viewed as a figure whose tragic flaw is that s/he cannot focus his/her individual energies into one direction (Schatz, 1981). Even though the gangster cannot be successful, the film gangster hero still draws the people's respect (Mitchell, 1986). Though aware of the gangster's tragic flaw, the audience is drawn to the gangster because "because he is a dynamic, self-reliant individual applying himself in the only profitable and engaging occupation available" (Schatz, 1981, p. 89). The gangster lives by using energy, being cunning, and showing bravura (Mitchell, 1986). However, even if the gangster believes that s/he is demonstrating signs of rightful position, status, or power, the gangster film exposes that this is not the truth (Mitchell, 1986). With a strong sense of self, the drive to be an individual and the motivation to gain personal success, the gangster often faces problems with society. As a result, societal institutions have been created to maintain law and order over aspects of the gangster's criminal organizations (Schatz, 1981). However, as Mitchell (1986) explains, "the law may be the instrument of the gangster's demise, but is never really the cause" (p. 162). Also, the main character within the American gangster film will be punished for his behavior. The gangster's death comes to be not because of the social or legal process but because the gangster has sinned (Mitchell, 1986).

American Dream Myth

Myths are stories "at the root of our universal existence" that create meanings and give a group of people a sense of belonging (Seeger, 2003, p. 317). In addition, myths are much more than simply stories because they are based on real events. However, myths are "more than true. Many stories are true because one person somewhere at some time

lived it. It is based on fact. But a myth is more than true because it is lived by all of us at some level. It's a story that connects and speaks to us all" (Seger, 2003, p. 317). Fisher (1973) illustrates that myths are "public dreams. Dreams are private myths. Myths are vehicles of communication between the conscious and the unconscious, just as dreams are" (p. 160). Moreover, Nachbar and Lause (1992) assert that the term myth is "frequently used to describe a mistake or error which has somewhat come to be accepted as true" (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992, p. 84). Thus, the purpose of the myth is to give meaning, identity, and a complete understandable image of the world and also to support the social order (Fisher, 1973).

According to Fisher (1973), myths and dreams are important to both people and nations because without them both people and nations would not have a past, present, and future. Moreover, as Nachbar and Lause (1992) explain, myths have nothing to do with either being true or false; instead, the myth is both significant and long lasting and is an important mindset of the culture that holds it and it is widely accepted as true. These myths are believed, and people make choices and take actions based upon the belief in the myth (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). Nachbar and Lause (1992) explain that "myths are too powerful to need facts or to allow them to get in the way" (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992, p. 84). In addition, Nachbar and Lause (1992) state that in most instances, "our myths have grown out of very real historical events and circumstances and have come to serve as expressions of the way we view that history and the 'lessons' we feel it has imparted" (p. 85). Furthermore, classical myths are narratives that communicate deeply held cultural beliefs that explain history, nature, and the evils of the world (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). According to Nachbar and Lause (1992), "myth-narratives are stories we tell

ourselves to give shape, definition and increase interest to our myths, beliefs, and values” (p. 86). In addition, each myth also has a number of other beliefs and values connected with it (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). Finally, myths are stable and important beliefs defining a cultural these myths may alter themselves as time passes and different circumstances change (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992).

The American Dream is a prevalent myth in American society, so much so that its promise of unfettered upward mobility is ensconced in the national creed. As Fisher (1973) explains, the American Dream is actually two myths: the materialistic myth and the moral myth. The materialistic myth is the notion that any person, no matter how lowly, can be successful. Fisher explains that the materialistic myth “relates to the values of effort, persistence, ‘playing the game’ initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). In addition, this allows a person to “reap the rewards of status, wealth, and power” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). Moreover, the second moralistic aspect of the myth is the idea of being friendly and welcoming to all, which involves “the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for the dignity and worth of each and every individual” (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). This moralistic aspect focuses on brotherhood and moral good. Yet Fisher (1973) warns that the two myths cannot be separated. Although at different times and for different reasons, one aspect of the myth can dominate the other; the two can never be released from their dialectical tension because both are necessary to fulfill the Dream. In addition, Pellegrini (1986) states that two aspects of the American dream exist: the collective and the individual. As Pellegrini (1986) explains, the collective dream is “initially, the enduring hope that the nation would progress in accordance with the ‘truths, ends, and purposes’ set forth in the

Declaration of Independence and the Constitution” (p. 3). Meanwhile, the individual dream is that of a person to dream and seek gains for her/himself, which is personal in nature. Another aspect of this characteristic is that the person has the right to that dream and the realistic change of gaining that dream (Pellegrini, 1986). As Pellegrini (1986) emphasizes, this aspect is “the supreme heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, of every American citizen. This legacy is structured in our democracy” (p. 4).

Movies are often based on the American Dream myth. Winn (2000) examines the American Dream myth within the film *Working Girl*. To reach the American Dream, a person does not have to leave his or her values and morals behind, because, as is the case in the film, morals do win out in the end. Thus, hard work leads to success (Winn, 2000). Additionally, Winn (2003) explores the American Dream myth as it applies to both *Wall Street* and *The Firm*. Within both films, the American Dream is available, but the protagonists lose sight of the moralistic myth and use dishonest means to achieve upward mobility. The result is that they fail at their attempts at upward mobility and learn hard moral lessons.

Pileggi, Grabe, Holderman, and Motigny (2000) examine another component of the American Dream myth. In addition to the aspect of upward mobility, Pileggi et al. (2000) find that the media provide other examples where the American Dream fails. Pileggi et al. (2000) also explain that the social mobility aspect is more common when the economy is strong because it reinforces stability and can restore order when the economy is weak. On the other hand, the failure of the American Dream is more common when there is a threat to society because it reflects the threat and attempts to move the country to a more stable position.

Also, this myth has been applied to ethnic groups in America. Jhally and Lewis (1992) find that the American Dream was reached by a Black family in *The Cosby Show*. As a result, many White Americans may believe that everyone can achieve the American Dream despite structural inequalities based on race. Moreover, Italians in the mob have been studied through mob portrayal in several films. In *The Godfather*, the Corleone family demonstrates the idea of upward mobility since the members start with very little and then come into power “within their own social system” (Bergesen, 1979, p. 292). Bergesen (1979) also discusses the common stereotype perpetuated through the media that Italians are all involved in organized crime. Pearce (1978) focuses on the mob as well and discusses the role that real-life gangsters play in the films about them. According to Pearce (1978), gangster films are based on reality since the creators base the movies in fact. Thus, Pearce (1978) finds that the portrayal of the Italian mob in American cinema is fairly accurate.

Summary

Italians started to immigrate to the United States in the 1900s. Soon after, the large number of Italian immigrants settled in the cities of the United States. When they learned the American norms and customs, some immigrants perceived a lack of law enforcement in their communities that led to their criminal activity. Moreover, because the Sicilian Mafia was so influential, Italian-Americans soon became associated with the Mafia, whether or not they had ties. As the stereotypes of Italian-Americans as mobsters became more prevalent in American society, popular culture began to reflect the labels. During the 1920s, movies were produced displaying Italian-Americans as gangsters and mobsters, and the movies oftentimes came straight from the newspaper headlines of the

day. As movies about Italian-Americans began to form the gangster genre, the American Dream became a recurring myth within the genre. This manifestation of the American Dream myth in the gangster genre forms the focus of my research.

III. METHODOLOGY

Movies have played and continue to play an important role in society. From 1896 to 1946, “movies were the most popular and influential medium of the culture in the United States” (Sklar, 1994, p. 3). Throughout the history of filmmaking, films have been a major force of socialization (Kellner, 1998). As films attempt to attract as large an audience as possible, they must “resonate to the audiences’ dreams, fears, and social concerns, and thus inevitably reflected social mores, conflicts, and ideologies” (Kellner, 1998, p. 355). However, films are not simple representations or mirrors of a social reality; instead, they “refract social discourses and content into specifically cinematic forms which engage audiences in an active process of constructing meaning” (Kellner, 1998, p. 355).

Moreover, films created a new mode of culture that altered patterns of leisure activity, thus playing an important role in the social lives of Americans (Kellner, 1998). Since the origins of filmmaking, film production represented a commercial activity. In addition, the production system has been based on an industrial model that manufactures mass-produced products. This mass production results from the goal to captivate and secure an audience share in order to realize a substantial profit.

Movies were the first major development of the modern audio/visual mass media; with the rise of the movie system came an increase in criticism (Sklar, 1994). The field of film criticism developed and continues to grow to better understand the meanings and

functions of movies. Film criticism goes much deeper into movies than just reviewing the movie and evaluating whether the audience should spend money to see the film. Furthermore, because of the mass production of movies and the desire of the studios to appeal to a loyal audience base, the filmmaking industry became centered on the use of genres and stars. This chapter begins by discussing the study of film criticism, and then explains how genre functions in film, and finally describes the genre methodology used in this thesis.

Film Criticism

Criticism has been a part of American culture for a long period of time and works rather well in terms of films. As Bordwell (1989) indicates, “Throughout its history, interpretation has been a social activity, a process of thinking, writing, and speaking within institutions governed by norms” (p. 18). When ordinary people watch movies, they evaluate what they see. Moreover, many audiences view film criticism as judging whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the film (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989). As Bywater and Sobchack (1989) explain, the “audience’s perception of what makes a narrative film valuable has changed little during the course of film history. If it produces the kind of entertainment viewers expect, then it gets four stars” (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989, p. xi).

Oftentimes most people can understand the plot of a film but remain unaware of the more “abstract mythic, religious, ideological, or psychosexual significance” (Bordwell, 1989, p. 2). Film criticism, however, is much more complicated than simply evaluating a movie. Critics must interpret the meanings of films, which are made and not found. Bordwell (1989) points out that “most critics distinguish between comprehending

a film and interpreting it, though they would often disagree about where the boundary line is to be drawn” (p. 2).

A large amount of published film criticism concerns the narrative film, which is often the mainstream and theatrical Hollywood film (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989). This material, however, is rarely actually film criticism. Often mistaken as a film critic, a reviewer discusses a movie and then gives readers the relevant information they need to decide to see the movie or not (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989). As Bywater and Sobchack (1989) argue, “Often referred to as ‘film critics,’ these writers might more properly be called ‘reviewers,’ to distinguish their function from that of film critics whose primary aim is to investigate the medium as an aesthetic, social, and historical phenomenon” (1989, p. xii). Furthermore, film reviewers’ articles appear in popular press such as newspapers and magazines, and the work focuses on current movies (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989). The film critic, however, has no connection with journalism, and her or his publications usually do not discuss movies playing in theaters (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989). According to Bywater and Sobchack (1989), “film critics are usually academics, scholars, and teachers of film history, aesthetics, and theory; their film criticism is most often found in small journals geared to a scholarly audience and in books published by university presses” (p. xii).

In addition, Bywater and Sobchack (1989) define criticism as “an act of ordering, of organizing relationships, of identifying and observing patterns that make the cinematic experience meaningful as well as emotional, comprehensible as well as felt” (p. xiii). The function of these critics is therefore to present subject matter so that there is an increase of possible meanings and experiences of viewing and thinking about the movies.

According to Bywater and Sobchack (1989), the “critic/scholar writes with logical coherence, clarity, and accuracy in order to support a contention about the subject at hand” (p. xiii). Film criticism is important because its scope goes well beyond just the present movies being discussed; rather, film criticism is “a process that encourages clear thinking, the weighing of alternatives, the evaluation of evidence, and the risk of having to defend judgment publicly” (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989, p. xv). Overall the critic builds off other critics’ work and “every critic draws on craft traditions that dictate how proper interpretations are built” (Bordwell, 1989, p. 13). One area of study within accepted film criticism is genre criticism.

Two lines of thought exist within film study (Dyer, 1998). The formal-aesthetic approach to film assumes that films are worth studying because of their intrinsic value as art. This argument therefore identifies films as a valuable art and focuses on the images and perceptions, or aesthetic value, in films. The social-ideological approach, on the other hand, asserts that culture, which is communicated through film, affects everyday life. While these two approaches to understanding film are very different, each cannot exist without the other, and Dyer (1998) asserts that film study should include all aspects of film including “physics and chemistry, technology, aesthetics, psychology, the sociology of organizations and consumption, empirical study of producers and audiences, textual study of films themselves, and no doubt much else that we cannot yet envisage” (p. 9). However, this may not all be possible so film critics need to focus on particular areas of films but be ready to understand the other parts.

Genre

Since the very start of filmmaking, many producers have understood the importance of reaching a large audience. Many of these filmmakers have taken into account key aspects such as “potential audience appeal, and at the same time, standardized those areas whose appeal already had been verified by audience response” (Schatz, 1981, p. 4). As the movie process became more established, the filmmakers themselves started to learn how to put their own and their audiences’ stories into films.

It was clear that the film industry started to create a clear blueprint for narrative films by 1910. As soon as filmmakers did this, the audiences wanted more imagination and variation within the films, but not so much that the films would be out of their everyday context. By setting up film genres of popular stories where the plots, characters, and storylines within the films were reworked through mass media, filmmakers created a type of expression that draws the audience into the medium. The film genre can be viewed as a form of a pact or understanding between the filmmaker and the audience, whereas the genre film is the event that upholds this pact (Schatz, 1981). So then, the film genre can be seen as a “static and a dynamic system” that remains somewhat the same (as a result of the implicit agreement) and yet changes to suit the needs of the individual film (Schatz, 1981, p. 16).

The use of genres is vital and will continue to play a major role within film studies (Gehring, 1988). Films have been criticized because of their commercial and popular appeal, which is designed mainly for entertainment and escape rather than enlightenment (Braudy, 1999). Moreover, genre films are particularly criticized because they appeal to an already established audience, whereas a more unique movie will create

its own special audience (Braudy, 1999). In addition, critics often overlook genre movies because of their prejudice for the unique (Braudy, 1999). As Braudy (1999) explains, genre movies, “in fact, arouse and complicate feelings about the self and society that more serious films, because of their bias toward the unique, may rarely touch” (p. 614). Thus, a difference between the genre films and unique films is the way in which genre films invoke past forms while the unique films may deny them (Braudy, 1999).

While one culture can agree on what one genre is, other cultures will not necessarily agree that this is in fact the same particular genre (Tudor, 1986). However, there are some commonalities on the uses of the term. Genres take a large number of narrative films, categorize them, and then place them into smaller, more manageable numbers. The genre system is also the way of categorizing films that most viewers are familiar with and are able to define as meeting all of their expectations (Gehring, 1988). Nachbar and Lause (1992) state that “genres explore timeless themes in a timely manner, expressing . . . conflicts in culturally specific terms” (p. 425). The genre movie is not usually interested in complex character development or sophisticated visual style, but the focus on the generic narrative (Braudy, 1999). Moreover, “like fairy tales or classical myths, genre films concentrate on large contrasts and juxtaposition” (Braudy, 1999, p. 619).

Clarens (1980) states that “genres, in fact, were forged in the experience of movie-going: themes were reused, types and situations became familiar, and a landscape more psychological than physical was created” (p. 11). Also according to Clarens (1980) “genre is more concerned with articulating facts than with manipulating them” (p. 14). Furthermore, genre films can affect their audience especially by their ability to express

the warring traditions in society and the social importance of understanding convention (Braudy, 1999). Braudy (1999) states that “genre film lures its audience into a seemingly familiar world, filled with reassuring stereotypes of character, action, and plot. But the world may actually be not so lulling, and, in some cases, acquiescence in convention will turn out to be bad judgment or even a moral flaw” (p. 617).

According to Schatz (1981), films cannot be understood without a framework that acknowledges the production-consumption process of cinema in addition to the basic conventions of filmmaking. A genre approach provides this framework in several ways. First, this approach assumes that filmmaking is a commercial art, and creators therefore rely on proven formulas to “economize and systematize production” (Schatz, 1981, p. viii). Second, a genre approach realizes cinema’s close contact with the audience, whose response to individual films has “affected the gradual development of story formulas and standard production practices” (Schatz, 1981, p. viii). Third, a genre approach treats the cinema as primarily a narrative medium, with familiar stories that involve dramatic conflicts, which are based upon enduring cultural conflicts. Finally, this approach creates a context in which cinematic artistry is evaluated in terms of the filmmakers’ ability to reinvent traditional formal and narrative conventions.

Moreover, Schatz (1981) states that “a genre approach provides the most effective means for understanding, analyzing, and appreciating the Hollywood cinema” (Schatz, 1981, p. vii). Genre, a component of film studies, is a division of movies into groups that have the same subjects and themes (Gehring, 1988). The conventional nature of genre films has been set up to support the claim that genres are the present day equivalent of a tribal ritual and myth for mass mediated society (Grant, 1986). Moreover, a genre’s

“conventional characters, plots and settings are formed through a longstanding, ongoing communication with its audience so that it achieves consistent popularity precisely because it raises and expresses myths, beliefs and values which that audience finds relevant and meaningful” (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992, p. 424). However, genre is made up of two important aspects, “the secular myth and the assumed ‘contract’ between filmmaker and film viewer that allows for their existence” (Grant, 1986, p. 115). The secular myth aspect of genre movies involves plot, motif, and themes that give a movie a particular meaning in a society, which is the typical emphasis of film critics. Without the second aspect, however, the secular myth could not exist. People seek out genre entertainment because of the predictable excitement that is offered (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). As genres establish expectations even before the movie is seen, it is a crucial component of films, especially since, as Tudor (1986) explains, “genre is what we collectively believe it to be” (p. 7).

Though the term genre is frequently used in film criticism, there is little agreement on what it actually means (Buscombe, 1986). Neale (1990) argues that “we can easily end up identifying the purpose of generic analysis with the rather fruitless attempt to decide which films fit, and therefore properly belong to, which genres. We can also end up constructing or perpetuating canons of films, privileging some and demoting or excluding others” (p. 51). According to Braudy (1999):

no part of the film experience has been more consistently cited as a barrier to serious critical interest than the existence of forms and conventions, whether in such details as the stereotyped character, the familiar setting, and the happy ending, or in those films that share common characteristics- westerns, musicals,

detective films, horror films, escape films, spy films- in short, what have been called genre films. (p. 613)

As Tudor (1986) explains, the genre term is best used in the analysis of the relationship between “groups of films, the cultures in which they are made, and the cultures in which they are exhibited” (p. 10). The genre movie can be viewed as a reference to tradition that relies on past works and because of this commitment to the pre-existing forms genre movies can explore these topics at a slower rate (Braudy, 1999).

Although there are various definitions of what genre study is or does, Ryall (1998) asserts that genre study involves more than simply placing films into categories. Instead, it involves interpreting and analyzing films. Genres are therefore ways that a critic can read a film in the context of its genre instead of simply creating taxonomies or categories (Ryall, 1998). According to Culler (1975), reading a text requires background and context to form a general reference point that gives the film sense and meaning. Thus, the genre provides a basis for understanding a film as a text.

Moreover, Ryall (1998) indicates that a genre critic must define her or his level of analysis. Genre criticism can involve three separate concepts. First, the term can be used to study the generic system, which relates individual genres in terms of broad shared principals. Second, genre criticism or analysis can be used to refer to the study of individual genres where the critic defines a genre’s internal logics and conventions. Finally, the term can be used to mean the analysis of individual films in relation to their genre or genres. Ryall (1998) also explains that it is necessary to distinguish between generic systems or genres and individual films. The former are overarching concepts that do not exist in the same way that films exist. Thus, generic systems and genres are

abstractions that are partly based on individual films and are therefore completely distinct from each other in nature.

Within the study of popular arts there has been an attempt to recognize and define elements that a large number of events and artifacts share with each other and can be viewed in terms of their popularity (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). Genres can be categorized in two ways. First, theoretical categories are constructed a priori based on “basic characteristics of the art form itself rather than the analysis of actual works” (Ryall, 1998, p. 329). In this categorization, a film can be classified broadly as fiction, documentary, or abstract. Historical genres link films based on common themes, styles, and iconographies, for example westerns, gangster films, or melodramas.

Two broad categories of genre function to present the story’s meaning and conflicts: Genres of Social Order and Genres of Social Integration (Schatz, 1981). Genres of Social Order involve settings that represent battlegrounds where forces of evil or wrongdoing fight with characters who are most like the people of the general public for control (Schatz, 1981). The conflicts in these genres are decided by the hero who takes qualities from each of the opposing forces and then uses her/his skills on the side of justice, civilization, and progress (Schatz, 1981). Examples of Genres of Social Order include Westerns, gangster, horror, and detective movies. Genres of Social Integration, on the other hand, focus on the actions and choices of a “doubled hero,” or a couple, as they attempt to adapt their own individual characters and goals with the social environment (Schatz, 1981). Moreover, Genres of Social Integration are marked by discussions, negotiations and marriages whereas Genres of Social Order are marked by violence, ultimatums, and gunfights. These types of genres do not place society in

danger like the Genres of Social Order do (Schatz, 1981). This type of genre is marked by discussion and not violence and use negotiations and not gunfights or ultimatums (Schatz, 1981). Examples of Genres of Social Integration include musicals, screwball comedies, and social melodramas.

Schatz's genre categories and settings represent important aspects of society (Nachbar & Lause, 1992). These ritualistic reenactments represent two aspects of our culture. First, the Genres of Social Integration represent fundamental social conflicts within our society. Second, Genres of Social Order demonstrate opposing philosophies that seek to define society in the making. Not only do audiences enjoy movies because they are the same stories repeated over and over again, but they also see the resolution of fundamental social conflicts within the genre to be revealing and reassuring (Nachbar & Lause, 1992).

Furthermore, Nachbar and Lause (1992) have identified and detailed specific formulas that bring together many artifacts and events that a number of audiences have found consistently appealing over a long period of time. These popular story formulas share certain elements that help define the overall pattern as a formula creating specific audience expectations which the popular artist must meet to produce a successful result (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). According to Nachbar and Lause (1992), the popular formula is "a created product (often a story) that is generally repeatable and is therefore familiar to both the creator (of the specific formulaic work) and to the audience" (p. 417). Within the popular story formula, there are two types of elements: conventions and inventions (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). Nachbar and Lause (1992) state that "a single formula convention is one familiar building block of the genre and a combination of conventions

serve to define the genre's framework- i.e. conventions are the elements which each specific example of a genre shares with every other specific example" (p. 417).

Conventions can be classified into six separate categories: plot, motifs, setting, characters, theme, and props (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). Plot refers to familiar patterns through which the storyline within a genre develops. Motifs are the building blocks that make up each plot stage or smaller stories that work together to create the flow of the plot. The setting of a genre is the time and place of action. Characters in a genre are generally the hero who "animates, embodies and resolves the basic conflict of values which is at the heart of the specific genre," or everybody else (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992, p. 421). The theme is the deeper meaning and significance of the genre the specific myths, beliefs, and values that the genre is exploring and expressing (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). The last aspect, props, has become closely related as they are reused over and over in the story formula (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). According to Nachbar and Lause (1992), all genres "have heroes, stereotypes, icons, and ritualistic scenes (labeled motifs), and when they are translated into movies and television they also frequently have associated celebrities as well" (p. 426). The basic element of any genre is its ability to have a repetitive and familiar nature in the conventions that are recognized by both the audience and creator (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992).

In addition to meeting certain conventional expectations, the audience also needs to have an element of surprise (Nachbar, & Lause, 1992). As Neale (1990) argues, "While it may be the case that repetition is important, it is also the case, as we have seen, that variation and difference are crucial" (p. 65). Thus, new genre films add to existing genre group and also build on the genre by adding a new element or by building on one

of the old ones (Neale, 1990) through a process that Nachbar and Lause (1992) refer to as invention. According to Neale (1990) “individual genres not only form part of a generic regime, but also themselves change, develop and vary by borrowing from, and overlapping with, one another” (p. 57). Genre movies, genres, and generic regimes, however, contain both boundaries and frameworks that will always have limits (Neale, 1990).

Even though movies influence people differently, the movies are a part of a shared production system that carries certain narrative traditions that are set up for a mass audience (Schatz, 1981). Because movies are visual means of communication, genres can be defined by iconography (Bordwell, & Thompson, 2004). According to Bordwell and Thompson (2004), a genre’s iconography “consists of recurring symbolic images that carry meaning from film to film” (p. 111). With this in mind, audiences anticipate that a genre movie will have familiar aspects, but an audience will also seek some new variations (Bordwell, & Thompson, 2004). Furthermore, as time passes, the genre changes with the era that the audience is living in (Bordwell, & Thompson, 2004). Thus, genres are closely related to cultural factors and beliefs (Bordwell, & Thompson, 2004). As Bordwell and Thompson (2004) state, “Genres are ritualized dramas resembling holiday celebrations-ceremonies that are satisfying because they reaffirm cultural values with little variation” (p. 117). Moreover, as Tudor (1986) explains, “The crucial factors that distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating” (p. 6). Genres are therefore defined and shaped by culture and adapt to changing environments.

In addition, with a better understanding of Hollywood genres, genres are now viewed as not showing the homogeneity they once did (Altman, 1999). According to Altman (1999), Hollywood genres:

may be borrowed with little change from another medium, a second genre may develop slowly, change constantly, and surge recognizably before settling into a familiar pattern, while a third may go through as extended series of paradigms, none of which may be claimed as dominant. (p. 632)

Thus, a genre is “formulaic but at the same time must be flexible enough to incorporate the ongoing changes affecting all genres” (Gehring, 1988, p. 3).

Finally, the concept of verisimilitude is as essential to understanding genre as the notion of social and cultural functions that genres perform (Neale, 1990). According to Neale (1990), genres are not only in movies, but “they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectations and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process” (p. 46). By using these systems, the audience has the tools to recognize and understand the movies better (Neale, 1990). Neale (1990) argues that these systems:

offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen: a way of working out why particular events and actions are taking place, why the characters are dressed the way they are, why they look, speak and behave the way they do. (p. 46)

When genres possess verisimilitude, or are likely or plausible, they resonate with the audience, ensuring the stability of the genre. The systems of hypothesis and expectation have different forms of verisimilitude along with different systems of plausibility,

justification, belief, and motivation. According to Neale (1990), the “regimes of verisimilitude vary from genre to genre. As such these regimes entail rules, norms, and laws” (p. 46). In addition, another key component is the transgression of cultural verisimilitude and that certain genres have appealed directly and consistently to this cultural verisimilitude (Neale, 1990). Neale (1990) states that “gangster films, war films, and police procedural thrillers, certainly, often mark that appeal by drawing on and quoting ‘authentic’ (and authenticating) discourse, artifacts, and text: maps, newspapers headlines, memoirs, archival documents, and so on” (Neale, 1990, p. 47).

Genre as Methodology for this Project

This thesis critically examines *The Godfather*, *The Godfather II*, *The Last Don*, and *Goodfellas*. I will examine the conventions identified by Nachbar and Lause (1992) that pertain to the myth in the genre. By analyzing the films according to these elements, I will be able to break the films down into their component narrative and iconographic parts. This analysis will then allow me to conduct a form of genre criticism that will focus on the social norms, myths, and cultural aspects of the films. Once I have generated this criticism, I will be able to look at major themes, motifs, and narrative elements that work across these movies in order to investigate the American Dream myth as it is presented across these movies in relationship with the popular culture perspective of the Mafia.

Summary

Films are important aspects of popular culture, and as the film industry has grown, so has the field of film criticism. Though people generally believe that film

critics provide plot summaries of films and rate whether people should view them, this is actually the role of a film reviewer. Film critics are academics who present their work in scholarly journals as opposed to the popular press. Moreover, they interpret films and create and present new meanings within movies. Part of film criticism involves understanding the components that make up film genre. Because genre movies have formulas that are consistent among films within the genre, studying them can help understand important aspects of the films. Moreover, because films affect and are affected by society, genres provide important insight into culture. Because of this insight, my thesis focuses on the American Dream in the contemporary gangster genre.

IV. ANALYSIS

Many people make decisions to see movies based on their attitudes towards a movie's genre or predictable formulaic narrative. Nearly all movies contain certain characteristics or conventions that allow them to be easily grouped into categories or genres. Conventions involve the movie's plot, setting, themes, motifs, characters, and props. The audience's disposition towards the movie is shaped by the conventions of a particular genre. Although genres frequently undergo changes as society changes, the gangster genre is easy to identify based on its unique conventions. This chapter provides a genre analysis of the gangster movies, *The Godfather*, *The Godfather II*, *Goodfellas*, and *The Last Don*, to identify and analyze their distinctive genre conventions.

The Godfather

The Godfather is an important movie in the gangster genre. The movie introduced new aspects to the genre and became a successful film that added to the popularity of the gangster genre. Its conventions influenced all gangster films that followed its production, and it continues to be one of the most successful gangster movies of all time. The movie's plot, setting, themes, motifs, characters, and props are, therefore, important in conducting this study because of the movie's influence on the genre.

Plot

The plot of the movie revolves around the Corleone family's efforts to protect their interests while working to expand their criminal organization. As a result, the mafia family goes to war against four other mafia families and uses any means necessary to protect their interests. The family goes through some changes as the oldest of the Godfather's sons is killed and the Godfather himself becomes too old to carry out the family business. Because of the ailing Godfather, Michael, the youngest son, takes over and becomes the newest Godfather and head of the mafia family.

The Godfather's plot differs significantly because it is centered on the family whereas the earlier gangster films were about the individual gangster. According to Cawelti (1976), the deepest impact on the American public was the central symbol of the family since "this symbol's influence has virtually changed overnight the American public's favorite term for a criminal organization" (p. 53). In addition to focusing on the family, *The Godfather* uses historical events whereas earlier gangster films did not. By using history, *The Godfather* gives an account of the rise, difficulties, and the triumph of the family, which was a new component to the genre (Cawelti, 1976).

Characters

The main characters featured in the movie are Don Vito Corleone and two of his sons, Michael and Sonny, as well as an unofficially adopted son, Tom. Vito also has another son, Fredo, whose role in the family is limited. Other characters include the four other mafia families that are feuding. All of the main characters are male, and most of the supporting characters are male. Nearly all of the characters, especially those involved in the Mafia, are Italian-American. Don Vito Corleone is the Godfather and boss of the

mafia family who directs the family business that consists of gambling, prostitution, and extortion. Don Vito grows older and looks to his sons to take over the family business that he built over many years. Michael is the youngest son and the only one who does not want to go into the family business. This is made clear when Michael goes against the family's wishes and enlists in the Army to fight in the Second World War. Sonny, on the other hand, is the oldest of the Godfather's sons and is fully involved in the family business. The Godfather's adopted son, Tom was raised as a biological son of the Godfather even though he is not Italian. Tom is the family's lawyer and is vital to the family's survival in the mafia business world. He can never occupy the most powerful role of mafia boss within the family or move up within the hierarchy from his consultant role because he is not Italian. Michael's wife, Kay, differs significantly from the other characters because of her lack of involvement within the mob. Moreover, she urges Michael to remain outside of the family business.

The types of characters featured in *The Godfather* are different than characters in previous gangster films. Early gangster films focused on tensions between police and non-police characters (Schatz, 1981). Although one character in the movie is a police officer, the main characters in *The Godfather* do not involve police. Rather, the characters feud with each other instead of law enforcement, a new addition to the genre's conventions. Also, the emergence of a Don or Godfather as well as an enforcer who follows assignments for the family demonstrates *The Godfather's* transition to a clear mafia family hierarchy whereas previous films focused in the individual gangster (Cawelti, 1976).

Setting

The movie has three major settings, New York City, Italy, and Las Vegas. In addition, the movie takes place after World War II and spans several years. When the movie focuses on the New York City setting, most of the scenes are in city streets, cars, bars, and restaurants. These scenes take place mostly at night or are shot in minimal light. When the movie is in Italy, on the other hand, the scenes are outside in the countryside and are shot during the day, appearing bright and sunny. Moreover, the colors of the countryside are vibrant as are the clothes that the characters wear while in Italy. The Las Vegas scenes are all indoor sets, such as the Don's office, and are again shot in darker lighting such as the New York City scenes.

The city has always been important to the gangster genre. The 1920s led to urbanization, which led to a mix of races, classes, and ethnicities, a sociocultural milieu that paved the way for the rise of the gangster (Raeburn, 1988). Thus, *The Godfather's* emphasis on the city represents a key aspect of the genre because previous movies emphasized action. Moreover, the use of color, notably black and white, is important to the genre, and *The Godfather* plays on this convention with its dark scenes (Shadoian, 1995). Even after movies began to be produced in color, many gangster films remained in black and white because the contrasts convey many meanings in the movies and are associated with the darker side of life such as *film noir*.

Themes

The themes within the movie focus on both the mafia business and the Corleone family, which are inextricably linked. Because the family is involved with running the business, these themes play off each other throughout the movie. The movie starts with

the family gathered together for the wedding of the Godfather's only daughter, Connie, but even on this day of celebration, criminal business is still conducted as her father meets with people who want his favors. Additionally, the mafia organization that Vito runs is a family business involving each of his sons. After his daughter Connie marries, her husband becomes a member of the family and the family business. Therefore the themes of family and criminal business are dominant and interrelated.

Criminal activity has always been a critical aspect of the gangster genre. Early films taken from the headlines focused on the illegal endeavors of real-life gangsters, an aspect that remains a key component of genre films. Moreover, organized crime is significantly linked with the genre. However, the theme of family is a new addition to the gangster genre (Cawelti, 1976). As the family takes part in the business aspect of organized crime, it gains power and success. Thus, *The Godfather* shifted the focus of the gangster genre from the gangster as an individual to the gangsters' activities in relation to the family, while criminal business has always remained important.

Motifs

Corruption, respect, revenge, and violence are key motifs. An important motif of the movie is corruption. Because the mafia family members engage in illegal activities, their business ventures are corrupt. The Corleones and other mafia families profit from gambling and prostitution, and drugs. Though Don Corleone does not want to be involved with the drug trade, he eventually moves into the drug business to maintain his position in the mob. Corruption is not solely related to the family members. Police, judges, and politicians within the movie are corrupted by the mafia members. For example, when the Godfather is in the hospital after his attempted murder by a rival

family, the police are paid by the family to provide the Godfather with protection so the other mafia families cannot kill him. Unfortunately for the Corleone family, the rival mafia organization paid the corrupt police to leave the Godfather unprotected. Because he is angry that a rival mob keeps trying to kill his father, Michael becomes corrupt in his first illegal act as part of the mafia business. Before the attempted murder of his father, Michael had been a war hero with a “clean record,” but he is corrupted as he kills the crooked police officer and rival mafia head for their attempted hit on his father. Michael is able to make the hit because of his clean past. In other words, his adversaries do not believe that he is dangerous. Moreover, when Michael flees to Italy to escape revenge for his killings, he is surrounded by bodyguards including Fabrizio, who is initially loyal to Michael but turns on him when a rival mob family pays Fabrizio to execute Michael. Therefore, corruption within the family, its antagonists, and the non-mafia people is an important motif.

Respect is another important motif. Gangsters who fail to respect each other are killed or removed from the family according to an informal code of behavior. When young Michael goes to Italy for protection, he discusses a beautiful young woman in disrespectful terms, without realizing that he was speaking in front of her father. Michael apologizes, “I apologize if I offended you, and I meant no disrespect to you or your daughter.” Michael then explains he would like to have dinner with the family as a way to get to know both the family and the young woman. He says, “I want to meet your daughter, with your permission, and under the supervision of your family. With all respect.” If he had not mentioned respect, he would not have been able to meet the woman.

In addition, on his daughter's wedding day, the Godfather must listen to all requests for favors from family and friends, and a man asks Vito to kill some men that hurt his daughter. Though he listens to the request, the Godfather asks the man why he has so much disrespect, "Now you come to me, but you don't ask with respect." The Godfather explains that since the man has never even invited Vito over for coffee, it is disrespectful for him to ask such a huge favor. Because the man clearly disrespects the Godfather, Vito assists the man, but not fully. As the Don explains, the man asking the favor failed to respect the Godfather by not socializing with him even though the Don is an important person who never was disrespectful in return. The lack of respect leads the Godfather to lecture the man on his disrespect and to only partially grant his request.

Finally, when Carlo, the husband of the Don's only daughter, Connie, beats her, Sonny mercilessly beats him by punching, kicking, and repeatedly throwing a trashcan at him. Moreover, Carlo tells a rival mafia where Sonny will be and sets him up to be murdered. Because he does not respect the family, Michael tells him, "Carlo, you're out of the Family business. That's your punishment. You're finished. I'm putting you on a plane to Vegas." Michael then has Carlo murdered. Failing to respect the family therefore results in being excluded from the organization so all ties with the mob family are eliminated.

Revenge is an important motif. When the Godfather asks a Hollywood movie producer for a favor, the producer tells the Godfather that he will not perform the favor. The next morning, the movie producer wakes up in his bed and rolls over to find his prize thoroughbred horse's severed and bloody head in bed next to him. Because the

Godfather seeks revenge, the producer decides to do the favor the Godfather requested. Revenge is therefore useful for achieving the gangster's goals.

Additionally, revenge is used to make a statement about the gangster's power. When Michael becomes infuriated with the police officers who failed to protect his father and with the mafia boss who ordered the police actions, he seeks revenge on both of these men by killing them during a meeting. This act completely changes Michael's life and turns him from a respectable and law abiding citizen into a criminal. The death of his older brother, Sonny, seals his fate and he becomes a merciless Don and leader of a corrupt and evil empire. His revenge ends his former life, and he is reborn in blood and violence.

Sonny's death also leads the Godfather to ask the other mafia families to stop the violence because of the cycle of revenge that led to Sonny's death. The Don tells Tom to plan a meeting with the heads of all five mafia families and says, "I want no acts of vengeance. I want you to arrange a meeting, with the heads of the five families. This war stops now." Thus, because revenge is so rampant in the mob, the Godfather has to make a pact to end the cycle of vengeful violence.

Finally, violence is an important motif. Violence occurs for many reasons and in many circumstances, including domestic abuse, revenge, and family business. Connie's husband beats her several times in the movie. First, Carlo beats Connie and she tells Sonny, who ruthlessly attacks Carlo on the street in front of a large crowd of people. Later, Connie becomes enraged and begins breaking items in their house while Carlo insults her and beats her with a belt as he threatens to kill her. Domestic violence and the

fear of domestic violence is part of the life in this family as violence and the family are cinematically joined.

The first attempted assassination of the Godfather involved two men shooting a total of nine bullets at the Don, riddling the Godfather and his car in an act of brutal violence. In addition, on the day of Connie's son's baptism, Michael orders the heads of rival mobs brutally murdered. One man is shot through the eye, another is shot three times trying to flee, and another man is murdered as he steps off an elevator. Mo Green, a casino owner, is violently murdered so the Corleone family can take over his casino. This hailstorm of violence occurs in a rapidly edited sequence that juxtaposes the brutal killings with the baptism of the young child. The sequence has become famous in movie history for its violence and its cinematic impact, leaving the viewer awash in bloody violence that is associated with the rites of the church. New birth and hope is symbolically associated with blood, death, and violence as the family celebrates the christening of a new member, the family deals out death and violence to all who oppose its will.

The motifs present in *The Godfather* resonate with earlier motifs of the genre. *Little Caesar* established the gangster as a brutal, scheming, criminal, and this persona became a key element of the gangster genre (Schatz, 1981). All gangsters are and have been corrupt as they engage in criminal enterprises for their careers. While violence was certainly an aspect of early gangster movies, the way it was depicted on screen changed significantly in *The Godfather*. Violence in early films was quick and relatively bloodless due to censorship, while *The Godfather* featured much more graphic violence and, therefore, significantly different than the previous genre movies (Shadoian, 1995).

Props

Important props in the movie include guns, fine clothing, and expensive cars. The mafia men always carry guns in case they need to protect themselves or kill a rival. When the Godfather is nearly killed, the rival mob family uses a barrage of bullets in their attempted murder. When Michael decides to kill the corrupt police officer and the rival mafia family head, his plans revolve around using a gun that is hidden in a bathroom. As his family members discuss the killing, they focus on the gun and how it should be used. They explain to Michael that he must shoot the victims in the head at least twice to make sure he kills them. His entourage also goes to great lengths to hide the gun in the bathroom of the restaurant and reiterates its importance in the killing. Tessio explains that the restaurant has “an old-fashion' toilet, you know, the box, and the chain-thing. We might be able to tape the gun behind it.” When the scene develops, Michael cannot find the gun in the bathroom and the tension is palpable as the viewer realizes that the gun is the key to Michael’s plan and without the gun, Michael will fail and could be killed.

Guns play a very important role when Sonny Corleone is killed. Caught alone in his car at a tollbooth, he is shot incessantly by a group of men. Thirty seconds of film time are devoted to seven men wearing nice suits shooting Sonny. At the end, Sonny is clearly dead and laying on the ground, and a man in a nice suit walks up to Sonny and fires seven to ten more shots in him and then kicks him in the face.

Additionally, the mafia men dress in suits and jackets as they go about their daily activities meeting with others gangsters and family members to demonstrate their affluence. During Michael’s meeting with the police officer and mafia head, each man

wears an expensive suit. The mafia family head wears a black suit jacket with a light color tie, white button up shirt, and the police officer wears a black jacket with a bow tie and white shirt. Michael has on a black jacket with a white button up shirt and a dark color tie. By dressing like successful businesspeople, the mafia men demand respect since they show the rest of the world they are important members of the mafia business. The mobsters provide input on the mafia business decisions and dress accordingly to demonstrate their position in society.

The only times when the Godfather is not shown in a suit is when he is in his hospital bed recuperating. During the opening scene of the movie, the Don wears a tuxedo with a black jacket and black bow tie with a white shirt for his daughter's wedding. When the Don meets with Sollozzo to discuss the Don's possible involvement in the drug trade, the Don wears a gray suit jacket with a red tie and green shirt to the meeting. In the next scene, the Don is at a fruit stand wearing a brown hat, a long brown business jacket, a white shirt with a gray tie, gray dress pants and gray suit jacket under the coat. Because the Don is the head of his mafia family business, he must always dress the part. In order to conduct business, the Don recognizes that he must dress in business suits to be taken seriously. Not only does dressing in business attire let the Don to be taken seriously, but it also signals his success.

Expensive cars are also important to the gangsters as they are transported from meeting to meeting. The Don has a driver for his expensive car that takes him to and from places, and he is attempting to get into his car when he is gunned down. The Don tells his driver to wait with the car so he can buy some fruit, as he does so the camera

pans to the spotless, large, black car that shines with bright chrome thus calling the audience's attention to this fine automobile.

When Sonny goes to beat up Carlo for the second time, Sonny runs outside and gets into his car. In the scene, there is one black car facing the mansion's front gate, and Sonny walks to another car, which is a black two-door. The fact that Sonny is able to pick between two cars that are in the front of the house illustrates that the family is wealthy because at a time in America, most American families did not even have one car while this family has two. The more cars the family owns, the more wealth, respect, and power they are able to gain within the neighborhood by demonstrating their position in society. Guns, suits, and cars have always been important to the genre as emblems of the gangster's social position (Schatz, 1981). *The Godfather's* use of these props is a typical gangster genre convention.

Summary

The Godfather changed the gangster genre as it developed new elements that became important aspects of the genre. Family and business are key elements of the film, and in order to participate in both, each gangster must be corrupt but respectful, willing to use violence, and show concern to avenge the actions of other gangsters. Each mafia family is headed by a mob boss who dictates the family business and controls many people. Props of the gangster demonstrate the gangster's willingness to be a part of the mob as well as the gangster's position within the mob. Guns are important for seeking revenge, while they also reveal the gangster's importance in the organization and family. As the gangster moves up in the organization, she/he gains power and wealth and acquires fine cars and clothing. Earlier gangster films did not focus on the role of a

particular Godfather or Don and her or his journey as head of the family (Cawelti, 1976). In *The Godfather*, the head of the family therefore becomes significantly more important than in previous gangster films. These elements established by *The Godfather* remain important characteristics as subsequent films incorporate the same conventions.

The Godfather II

The Godfather II followed the same family as *The Godfather* and received as much acclaim as the first movie. Because it is a sequel and continuation of *The Godfather*, *The Godfather II* has many conventions in common with the first movie. Therefore, the plot, setting, themes, motifs, characters, and props identify the movie as a gangster film and a sequel. However, some conventions differ from the original film.

Plot

The Godfather II features two interrelated plotlines that intertwine and juxtapose the rise of both Vito and Michael Corleone in the American mob world. Flashbacks of Vito's youth and early involvement with the mob are juxtaposed with Michael's takeover of the family business and his problems with his family members. In this way, the audience learns what drew Vito to the gangster life as well as what kept Michael in the mafia family despite his original desire to avoid becoming part of the family's business. This plot differs significantly from the single story told in *The Godfather*. By simultaneously chronicling the rise and subsequent fall of the two gangsters, the movie juxtaposes the old gangster life with the new gangster life, which are markedly different. The plot therefore demonstrates an end of the old gangster life and explains how and why the new gangster life began while reinforcing the family theme established in the first film.

Setting

This movie's setting begins in the Italian countryside in 1901, then moves to New York City later that same year and continues in 1917 in New York as Vito establishes himself as a mafia leader. The New York scenes are again dark and dreary and are often in small rooms in apartments, houses, or bars. Michael's move to take control of the family takes place in New York, Nevada, and Cuba during the late 1950s. The Nevada settings, Reno and Las Vegas, are brighter than the New York scenes, but focus on inside settings such as Michael's office and bedroom. Nevada and Cuba both represent the illegal business that drives the mafia world. While *The Godfather* takes place mostly in New York, *The Godfather II* setting involves a variety of settings in addition to New York. Reno, Las Vegas, and Cuba represent new areas for the gangsters to conduct their business and demonstrate the expansion of the mafia further into American society.

Themes

Family and business continue to be important intertwined themes throughout *The Godfather II*. The family conducts business together, and business is only conducted through family members. When someone is treated as a member of the mafia family, they become a part of the Corleone family. For example, although Tom is not really Vito's son, he becomes an adopted son and occupies a key role in the mafia family business. Tom is the mafia family's lawyer who understands all the family's business practices and is trusted with making sure that all family members stay out of prison. Tom is closer to Michael than Michael's real brother Fredo, and Michael tells Tom that Tom is the only person he can trust. Because of his devotion to the family, Tom becomes an integral part of the family's business.

Motifs

Corruption remains an important motif in the movie since the Corleone family business is illegal. Thus, the family must use criminal practices to maintain their wealth and power. When Kay, Michael's wife, confronts him about his family's business dealings, he vows that the family will be completely legitimate in five years. As Michael takes over the organization, Kay points out that the family is still completely involved in illegal activities seven years after his promise. Michael overtakes the gambling, prostitution, and drug trade for the family. Moreover, Michael forms a business relationship with a corrupt senator, Geary, who attempts to extort money from Michael in return for legal gambling licenses in Las Vegas. Finally, although Michael has a business relationship with Hyman Roth in Miami, the corrupt Roth secretly plots to have Michael killed. Roth even tells Michael that Michael will control their joint operations venture when the ailing Roth dies. However, Roth's real intentions are to have Michael killed and, therefore, control Michael's business.

As with *The Godfather*, revenge continues as an important motif in *The Godfather II*. When Vito is a child in Italy, his father and brother are murdered by Don Ciccio, the Godfather of Corleone, Italy, because Vito's father disrespected Don Ciccio. Vito's mother takes the young Vito to see Godfather Ciccio to beg him to spare the boy's life. Don Ciccio feels no sympathy and explains that he must kill the boy or else, "when he is a man, he'll come for revenge" for the Ciccio's murder of Vito's father and brother. Vito's mother swears that this will not happen, but the Godfather kills her and attempts to kill young Vito. When Vito grows older and established in the American Mafia, he returns to Italy and attains his revenge as he kills Ciccio.

Michael seeks revenge upon his brother Fredo who conspired with Hyman Roth to have Michael killed. Because of the betrayal, Michael has Tom kill Fredo. This final example shows that importance of revenge to these films as it takes precedence over the family for Michael. Fredo's murder on Michael's orders shows that revenge is centrally important to Michael and drives his decision making.

Closely interwoven with revenge is the violence motif. At the very start of the movie, Vito's whole Italian family is brutally killed and his mother is shown trying to kill Godfather Ciccio. Furthermore, Vito realizes that he can improve his standing in the fledgling New York mob by killing Don Fanucci and so he plots to kill Fanucci during a festival. As Fanucci walks through the streets during the festival, Vito waits for him in the hallway of Fanucci's apartment building. When Fanucci arrives home, Vito shoots him in the chest. When Fanucci looks down to inspect his wound, Vito shoots him again in the cheek. When Fanucci falls to the floor, Vito again shoots the Don as he sticks the gun in Fanucci's mouth and pulls the trigger. This is a famous scene of violence in American film history. The scene demonstrates that Vito is capable of ruthless violence in order to improve his position in the New York mob world.

Moreover, as the Godfather, Vito orders many people who crossed him to be violently murdered. When Vito gains power and status, he returns to Italy to confront Don Ciccio, the man who killed his family. As he speaks to the Italian Godfather, Vito leans in and repeatedly stabs Ciccio in the stomach to ensure his death. Again, Vito's ruthless violence is shown as he personally and brutally kills the old man with his knife. Violence is therefore crucial to Vito's character and to the audience's understanding of

who he is and what he is capable of. It is this brutal violence that will later link him to Michael as Michael transforms into a brutal killer and powerful mafia don.

As in *The Godfather*, respect is also an important motif in its sequel. A few short examples will show that the theme is unchanged from the original movie. First, the audience learns that Vito's father was murdered for disrespecting a local mafia boss in Italy. Fredo disrespects Michael by plotting to kill him, and as a result, Michael orders Tom to murder Fredo because of Fredo's disrespect for the family. Additionally, Fanucci threatens Vito and his associates who are stealing goods and tells them that they must respect him as the mafia head. In order to pay their respect to him, Fanucci orders them to give him a cut of their loot. Disrespecting Fanucci by not giving him money would lead to their deaths.

Characters

The main characters in *Godfather II* are the same as *The Godfather* and are still for the most part Italian-American males. Vito and his sons, Michael, Fredo, and Tom continue to run the family business after Sonny's murder. As the Godfather is too old to lead the family, his youngest son Michael takes over and rises to be the new mob head. Kay's role also becomes more important in the film as she struggles to accept Michael's involvement with the mob. She questions Michael's ethics and morals and is unable to handle his corruption. Michael's descent into evil forces her to seek a divorce.

Fredo, the Godfather's middle son, is irresponsible and is skipped over as the mob chief and consequently "works" for his younger brother Michael. Fredo resents Michael and unsuccessfully attempts to conduct some of his own business without the family's knowledge. Tom stays on to help Michael as the mafia family's lawyer and is still

trusted with all the family's business. Therefore, the main characters in the sequel are the same as in the original film.

Props

Early on in the movie Michael is shot at his home, and the use of violence and guns sets a clear tone early. As in the first movie guns dominate the mafia life and every important gangster has one for protection or business. Vito initially becomes involved with the mob because a neighbor asks him to hide some guns. After Vito participates in this criminal activity he uses a gun to kill Fanucci for control of the neighborhood mafia.

Likewise in the sequel, gangsters always wear nice suits and drive nice cars to meetings. The corrupt senator Geary demonstrates the importance of suits as he tells Michael,

I don't like your kind of people. I don't like to see you come out to this clean country in your oily hair, dressed up in those silk suits, and try to pass yourselves off as decent Americans. I'll do business with you, but the fact is, I despise your masquerade, the dishonest way you pose yourself. Yourself, and your whole fucking family.

In addition, Fanucci's elaborate attire consists of a pristine white suit with a white hat and jacket. Before killing Fanucci, Vito wears a low-quality long-sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a white undershirt shows underneath the long-sleeve shirt. Vito also wears suspenders that loosely hang from his pants. Once Vito takes over the family, he changes his wardrobe from working-class clothing to a more professional look consisting of nice suits. After killing Funucci, Vito walks down the street in a long brown business jacket and, as he picks out a piece of fruit from a fruit stand, is told that

he does not have to pay. Furthermore, Vito wears a gray dress shirt with a red tie and black vest while he has a business meeting with a woman to discuss her problem with her landlord. The suit is therefore a symbol of Vito's importance and power within the neighborhood. Because his appearance communicates his influence, people in the community give him free items and come to him for help.

Cars are important props within the movie. Expensive cars are always shown outside of Michael's house, and Michael is chauffeured in an expensive sedan through Cuba when he attempts to assassinate Roth. Michael's son also realizes the importance of cars as he draws a picture of a limousine for his father and receives an electric car for his birthday. Tom picks out the present for Michael who was too busy to shop. Tom explains that he bought "a little car with an electric motor that he can ride in. It's nice."

Summary

The Godfather II builds off the first movie and uses many of the groundbreaking elements to further the gangster genre. The role of the family and business are again important, and the use of guns, cars and suits all are the key to the development of the movie. Respect, violence, corruption, and revenge are vital concepts within *The Godfather II*. One new aspect that differs from *The Godfather* movie is the fact that more scenes are shown from Las Vegas, Reno, and Cuba, whereas the first movie takes place mostly in New York. Moving the setting indicates the genre's evolution. The mob's reach is shown to extend beyond New York City, to the entire country and even other parts of the world. Thus, the control of the Mafia is strengthened within the genre as more business takes place outside of the traditional setting of New York and similar urban areas, once a staple of the genre.

Goodfellas

Goodfellas is a more recent gangster movie than *The Godfather* and *Godfather II*, but it follows many of the same conventions. The plot, setting, themes, motifs, characters, and props contribute to the movie's success and make it an easily identifiable gangster genre movie. There are, however, a few conventions in this film that indicate the changing nature of the genre.

Plot

This movie follows a young child, Henry Hill, as he lives his life in a mafia family. At a young age, Henry finds a job working for a local mafia family and, through the years, works for the family and becomes a trusted member. In the end, he becomes involved in the drug trade, angering his mafia boss, and, because he fears for his life, he becomes an informant or "rat" and divulges the family's secrets to the FBI. Because he exposes the family's criminal organization, he flees via the FBI's witness protection program and cuts all of his ties with the mafia family. The plot differs significantly from previous gangster movies because *Goodfellas* focuses on a non-Italian's rise through the mafia ranks. Moreover, Henry Hill becomes part of the mob family even though he is not a family relative. This film therefore illustrates the changing focus on the importance of a traditional family. People that are not full-blooded Italian and are not blood related to the family are still able to become important family members.

Characters

The movie follows the rise and fall of Henry Hill within the Italian-American mob, and along the way he becomes friends with Jimmy Conway and Tommy de Vito. Henry and Jimmy are part Irish, and Tommy is Italian. Both Tommy and Henry started

to work with the mafia family as teenagers and meet because of their work within the family. In addition, Paulie is the boss of the Italian-America mob who supervises Henry. The longer Henry works for Paulie, the more trust he gains and the faster Henry moves up the family ladder. Since Paulie is the head of the family and the person making all the decisions, Henry develops a close relationship with Paulie. Henry's wife, Karen, also plays an important role in the film as she struggles to find her place in the mob family.

Setting

The setting of the movie is largely in New York City starting from the 1950s and continuing through the early part of the 1980s. Common sets include dark restaurants and bars, which are often used as meeting places for the mafia to conduct business. Besides conducting business in the bars, the gangsters also frequently meet together in dark rooms to gamble. These dark settings symbolize the gangsters' involvement in illegal activities. When Henry first meets Jimmy, they are in a dark, underground room surrounded by illegal gambling. As Jimmy passes through the room, he hands out large amounts of money gained through illegal means to bartenders, the doorman, and waitresses. Moreover, a restaurant owner offers a share in the restaurant to Paulie. The dark restaurant becomes a front for Paulie's illegal fencing business, and as the merchandise is transferred through the restaurant, the scenes are minimally lit. Thus, the scene associates the illegal activity that is so important to the gangster with darkness and, therefore, symbolizes the corrupt nature of the gangster.

Themes

One of the main themes in the movie is the notion of family. Family, however, does not refer to blood relationships as it did in *The Godfather* movies. The early

gangster films focus on a literal family where the members are all directly related to each other. For Henry Hill, family refers to the group of gangsters who look out for each other. Thus, in order to be a gangster, Henry does not have to be a blood relative of the boss; rather, he becomes a symbolic brother of the other gangsters. Karen explains as she meets with her friends: “We were all so very close. I mean, there were never any outsiders around, absolutely never. And being together all the time made everything seem all the more normal.” Karen explains further as she is getting ready to go shopping with her friends:

We always did everything together, and we always were in the same crowd.

Anniversaries, christenings- we only went to each other’s houses. The women played cards, and when the kids were born, Mickey and Jimmy were always the first at the hospital. And when we went to the islands or Vegas for vacation, we always went together, no outsiders, ever.

Karen’s comments exemplify Henry’s place within the family even though he was not a blood member of the family. The individuals all become close to each other and take on the roles that mimic traditional family members.

Motifs

Corruption is a key motif in this movie. While his initial contact with the mafia was parking cars for the gangsters, Henry clearly becomes involved in the illegal aspects of the business by running errands and picking up packages for the gangsters. As Henry begins to learn the business operations, he becomes involved with selling stolen goods. Gangsters bribe delivery truck drivers and then steal cigarettes and other goods from the trucks. When the police investigate, the gangsters give them stolen goods or pay them

off. Moreover, when Henry grows older, the police frequently search his house for incriminating evidence so Henry will pay them to keep quiet about the illegal goods they find.

One of the clearest motifs in the movie is violence. For example, the movie's first scene involves Henry, Jimmy, and Tommy driving a car at night. When they hear a noise from the back of the car, the men pull the car over and open the trunk. As they open the trunk, they realize that a man they thought they had killed is still alive, so Tommy stabs the bloody man several times with a knife. After stabbing the man repeatedly, Jimmy fires his gun into the body several times. Excessive violence is shown as normal as gangsters conduct business each day in violent ways.

Respect is also an important motif in this film. Henry tells a story about a day when "some of the neighborhood kids carried my mom's groceries all the way home for her. You know why? It was out of respect." Because Henry works hard within the local family, everyone in the neighborhood pays Henry and his family the proper respect. When Henry and Jimmy are at a bar, Tommy walks in with a girlfriend. At this time, a former friend of Tommy's named Bats disrespects Tommy by teasing Tommy in front of his girlfriend and friends about his shoe shining job as a teenager. As a result of the lack of respect, Tommy becomes enraged and brutally murders Bats at the bar. In addition, Paulie warns Henry not to become involved with drugs, and Henry lies to Paulie, saying he would never sell drugs. When Henry is arrested because of his involvement with drugs, Paulie turns his back on Henry because Henry disrespected his orders.

Closely tied with the notion of respect is revenge. As a young boy involved with the mob, Henry drops out of school. As his absences add up, his father receives letters in

the mail that indicate Henry's failure to attend. Consequently, the mob members abduct the letter carrier responsible for delivering the letters to Henry's father and threaten to kill him if he brings another letter. Moreover, the gangsters force the letter carrier's head into an oven to demonstrate their willingness to follow through on their threat.

Moreover, Karen tells Henry that her neighbor attempted to molest her. Infuriated, Henry drives to the neighbor's house and assaults him with his gun to seek revenge for hurting Karen. When Tommy kills a gangster from another mafia family without first asking permission from the mafia family boss, he is punished for his actions. On the day he is supposed to become a "made man" himself, he is instead murdered because he disrespected his own family's rules and the gangster code of respect. Therefore, the other mob family along with Tommy's family kill Tommy.

Props

Several props are essential for the gangster film. Early in the movie the gangsters' dress is shown to be very important as Hill comes home wearing an expensive suit. Henry's mother says, "You look like a gangster," demonstrating the association between nice suits and the gangster life. When Henry grows older and becomes an established gangster, his closet becomes full of expensive suits. As the camera pans his clothes, the audience sees dozens of classy suits as well as Karen's fancy dresses. The camera quickly pans over his closet then slow pans across, showing each of the roughly 50 in a variety of colors in the closet. The scene then moves to Karen's closet, which is full of roughly 50 suits and expensive dresses. The entire scene lasts for seventeen seconds, mostly focusing on the wardrobe.

In addition to wearing nice suits, the gangsters all drive expensive cars. A teenage Henry marvels at the cars he parks as a valet for the top mob members. Each of the cars he parks is expensive and new. Moreover, as he exacts revenge for the family, Henry breaks the rear windshield of six brand new cars before pouring gasoline in them and lighting them on fire. The scene lasts forty-one seconds in the dark parking lot full of nice cars. Although it is unclear why Henry is doing this, he clearly performs the action for the mob family as he waves to another gangster to make sure he is doing the job correctly. Also, when Henry, Tommy, and Jimmy pull off a major heist, the members of the crew immediately spend the money, and one of the associates buys his wife a brand new expensive car because buying a car demonstrates his success. He is later murdered in this car to indicate the mob's displeasure with his extravagance when they were attempting to keep quiet about the heist.

Additionally, guns are important for the gangsters in case they need to protect themselves or conduct business. Henry uses a gun to beat up Karen's neighbor and then has Karen hide the gun at her mother's house. When Henry asks Karen to hide the gun, Karen comments, "I know there are women like my best friends who would have gotten out of there the minute their boyfriend gave them a gun to hide. But I didn't. I gotta admit the truth, it turned me on." Thus, the power and prestige associated with guns excites Karen, and she marries Henry.

Summary

Many of the conventions in *Goodfellas* are consistent with the conventions established by *The Godfather*. The relationship between family and business are still key in the movie, and the gangsters continue to be involved with illegal and corrupt business

practices. Violence, mostly through the use of guns, continues to dominate the lives of the gangsters, and the gangster's drive for success and wealth continues to be a focus.

While most of the conventions of *Goodfellas* follow the traditional genre conventions, the plot differs significantly. The notion of family is different than in *The Godfather* movies as both Henry and Jimmy are not Italians, but they are still welcomed into the mob family business. These movies therefore expand the conventions of the genre to include other ethnicities. However, Henry and Jimmy are limited in how far they can advance within the family because they are not Italian. Although more types of people may be allowed to be part of the mob, they are still limited to how far they can rise within the organization. Moreover, the role of the traditional family is a new invention to the genre. *The Godfather* movies strictly focus on the blood family ties, but *Goodfellas* focuses on a more figurative family. The gangster's ability to be successful in the mafia family is therefore less dependent on having true family ties than in previous gangster movies.

The Last Don

The Last Don is the most recent gangster movie in this analysis, but it shares many of the same conventions with *The Godfather* movies and *Goodfellas*. Its plot, setting, themes, motifs, characters, and props are typical of other gangster genre films. The movie, however, demonstrates several inventions to the genre, which indicate the genre's attempt to change with society.

Plot

This movie depicts the rise and fall of several gangsters in one mafia family, the Clericuzios, as the boss grows older. In the beginning of the movie, the head of the

family is Don Clericuzio. His daughter, Rosemarie, marries the son of a rival mob family when she becomes pregnant. On her wedding night, the Don orders his nephew, Pipi, to kill the entire rival mob family including the new husband. Rosemarie's life is spared, but she witnesses the killing. Because of Don Clericuzios' order to execute the rival family, a mafia war is sparked that continues throughout the movie and spans 30 years. The movie also follows Rosemarie's child, Dante, and Pipi's child, Cross, as they grow up, become part of the mob, and compete for control of the family.

The plot of this movie is slightly different than the other three because it involves a much more complex view of a mafia family. Instead of focusing on one or two characters, the plot of *The Last Don* focuses on several characters simultaneously in an ensemble cast fashion. Moreover, the movie diverges from the typical plot as the Don's grandson and great-nephew vie for control of the family instead of the Godfather's own sons who are heavily involved in the business. Finally, while the previous gangster films involve illicit activities, *The Last Don* depicts a character, Cross, who originally takes part in the mafia life but then slowly severs his ties with the family. Also, the Don purchases a movie studio in a move that takes the family away from the traditional gambling ventures into a more legitimate business.

Setting

The story begins in 1964 and continues for the next 30 years in New York City, Las Vegas, Italy, and Los Angeles. The New York scenes mainly take place in the Godfather's house, a dark setting that is heavily guarded to ensure the safety of the Godfather. The Las Vegas and Los Angeles scenes occur in expensive houses or inside the mob's casino. The Las Vegas scenes are centered on the casino, and the scenes are

dark with many people inside the casino. The scenes show the importance of the money to the family business as it is one means that the family is able to gain power.

Meanwhile, the Los Angeles scenes are very bright. The scenes are either outside in front of expensive homes or outdoor locations such as the beach. Even the interior scenes are bright and lively in Los Angeles.

Although the Godfather remains in New York City, the business focus shifts to the west coast activities of the family. This change in setting from the other gangster films indicates the gangster's venture to new business areas. In addition, much of the focus is on the gambling business in Las Vegas, and locations within Las Vegas are much brighter than locations in New York. Thus, the genre continues to evolve from a bleak New York City setting to a vibrant west coast setting where the mob's key activity, gambling, is legal. The move may therefore minimize the corruption that is associated with the gangster genre.

Characters

Don Clericuzio is the head of the family, and he has several sons who assist. Don's nephew, Pipi is also involved in the family business along with his son, Cross. Additionally, the Don has a daughter, Rosemarie, who lives with the Don but does not participate in the business, and her son Dante becomes a hit man for the Don. The Don is in charge of all the family's business and is looked to for leadership. Pipi is the Don's nephew and the Don's best hit man. Because of Pipi's important role in the family, he is able to move up the family's hierarchy. Later in the movie, Pipi's son Cross also becomes involved in the family business as a hit man like his father. Cross is also able to move up through the family business rather quickly and presents a clear threat to the

Don's grandson Dante. Dante, the son of the Don's daughter Rosemarie, aspires to be a key mobster and becomes a hit man as well.

Themes

The two central themes that are prevalent throughout the movie are the importance of the family and the business. The importance of family cannot be made clearer than on Rosemarie's wedding day when her father orders the death of her husband and family. Even after Rosemarie knows that her father ordered the hit, she still does not betray her father or her family to the police. The police know that she has information about who committed the killings and ask her to come to the police station where she will be safe, but Rosemarie assures the police that she knows nothing. Rosemarie then tells her father not to worry about her speaking to the police because she will always keep quiet, and she continues to live with her father. Thus, although Rosemarie is disgusted and distraught about the murders, her family is so important to her that she will not betray them.

Business, which is conducted through the family, is very important for the Clericuzios. Pipi occupies an important role as the family hit man, and his son, Cross, and Rosemarie's son, Dante, also take part in the family business. Pipi is the head hit man for the Clericuzio family and is consistently referred to as the "top man" in the family. He is valued by other family members for his contributions and Don Clericuzio thanks him for his service. Because Pipi has chosen to become the family's hit man, Cross must follow in his footsteps or lose status. Moreover, as Cross is an adolescent, Pipi trains him to be a hit man by introducing Cross to guns through killing animals.

Consequently, Cross embarks on his own hit and kills another man to prove his position and importance in the family business.

Although Dante initially takes no part in the mafia business when he is in his early twenties because his mother forbids him, he sees Cross positioning himself to become the next top man after Pipi retires. Dante therefore becomes interested in the power associated with the business and aspires to take over the family. As a result, Dante kills Pipi and attempts to have Cross killed so he, and not Cross, will be the next family leader.

Motifs

Violence frequently occurs throughout the movie and is, therefore, a key motif. In an early scene, a rival mafia family orders a hit for one of the Don's sons. As the hit men kill the son, they shoot him repeatedly, even after he is dead. The excessive use of violence seems unwarranted and is obviously overkill in order to mutilate the body. Moreover, even Cross, who is considered the least violent of all the family members, murders a man in order to "make his bones" in the family, or prove his ability to be an asset to the family. Although hesitant, Cross and Pipi follow a man who murdered the daughter of a Congressman who has ties to the mob. As the man leaves a restaurant alone and gets into his car, Cross walks up to the car and shoots the man in the head at point blank range several times. When he sees that the man is dead, Cross returns to his father in the car, and his father tells him that he is very proud. The film indicates that in order to continue in the family and the family business, gangsters must be willing to use brutal violence.

Respect is also an important motif. When Pipi marries a Las Vegas woman without gaining permission from the Don, the Don punishes him. Pipi was previously running an area in New York City, but the Don demotes him to running the family business in Las Vegas. As the head of the area in New York, Pipi was in the middle of all the mafia action and had many people who reported to him. Being in New York allowed Pipi to be close to the inner workings of the mob and remain near the Don and the Clericuzios. In Las Vegas, however, Pipi no longer worked as closely with the Don, and he had much less power over others. Running the casino is seen as a less important position because of its location, so Pipi's input on business decisions in New York, which are seen as vital to the family business, are limited and he is therefore set apart from the other family members and business associates.

In addition to violence and respect, revenge is another important motif. Because Pipi killed his father, Dante violently murders Pipi just after Pipi retires from the family business. Dante seeks revenge because he grew up without a father and because the murder of his father deeply affected his mother, who confined herself to the house in response to the murder. Days after Pipi retired from the family business, he buys a new house where he will propose to his girlfriend so they can live together. As he walks to the house, Dante, who is wearing a mask, attacks Pipi and shoots him once. Upon firing the first shot, Dante removes his mask so Pipi can see his killer, and Pipi, enraged, tells Dante that he knew Dante was trying to take down the family. Dante shoots several more times until Pipi is clearly dead. Furthermore, when Cross finds out that Dante killed his father, he seeks revenge and kills Dante. At a party at one of the Las Vegas hotels, Cross knows that Dante plans to kill him so he sets up a plan to kill Dante first. After lining a

room with plastic so the blood could be easily removed, Cross traps Dante and shoots Dante several times.

A final motif that is important is corruption. The corruption spreads from the mafia members to outsiders. When Pipi is caught in an attempt to kill a man who owed him money, he has to attend court. Various witnesses gave statements to the police on the day of the shooting that indicated Pipi as the triggerman, but Don develops a plan to help Pipi win his court case so he will not be sent to prison. Don tells his son to “spread some money around” since “memories fail and juries can be bought.” Because of their influence, the witnesses offer testimony in Pipi’s favor, and he is found innocent of the murder charge.

The mafia also has ties to a congressman who takes money from the family with the promise that he will vote to legalize gambling in all 50 states and persuade other congress members to vote his way as well. The congressman even asks the mob to assassinate the president of the country because the president would veto any attempt to approve gambling, but the vice president would vote the mafia’s way on the issue. The Clericuzios also corrupt a Los Angeles detective by paying him to keep the family out of legal trouble as well as arrest people who threaten the family. Dante eventually takes the detective under his wing by promising him more money and a job within the mafia business, and when Dante kills Pipi, the detective covers up the crime and alleges to have seen another man commit the crime.

Props

The props used in the movie include guns, suits, cars, and houses. Guns are essential for the gangster to have for protection and to kill other people. Shortly after

Pipi marries his first wife, he prepares to leave in the middle of the night on a business trip. As he gets dressed, he straps a gun to his holster and his wife sees the gun. She becomes upset and scared, but he assures her that the gun is only for protection from others while it is really his tool for murder. Guns are nearly always the tools for murdering as Cross uses a gun to perform his first hit, and Dante uses a gun to kill Pipi.

In addition, the gangsters are always seen in suits. Each meeting with the Don, the family members and business associates all wear nice business suits. When Cross becomes involved in the casino business, he is seen always wearing a professional business suit. Before Dante becomes interested in joining the mafia business, he dresses like a thug, wearing baggy jeans and oversized shirts. Once he is taken in to the business, his wardrobe changes and he begins to wear nice suits like the other gangsters.

The gangsters also always drive expensive cars. In the beginning of the movie shortly after Rosemarie tells one of her brothers how much in love she is with the rival family's son, the brother drives home in a new, expensive red Corvette to discuss the marriage with Don Clericuzio. The brother is then brutally killed in his car by the head of the rival mafia.

Homes are also important for the gangsters. Once Pipi establishes himself in Las Vegas, he buys a brand new high-priced car to go with his new house. The Godfather tells young Dante that he grew up in a one bedroom house and now lives in a mansion, and Dante is impressed by the Godfather's move. Moreover, Pipi buys his first wife a new house that she believes is too large for them to use, but they nevertheless live in the house.

Summary

The Last Don therefore follows many of the conventions that define a gangster genre movie. The concepts of corruption, respect, and revenge play important roles, and the mafia business is centered on the family as everyone who works for the Don is either related to him or has had a very close relationship to him. Guns, suits, and cars are important as the gangster conducts business and demonstrates her or his position in the mafia. Some new twists on the old conventions exist within the movie as well. This movie uses more scenes from Las Vegas than other gangster films, and the movie follows the lives of many more characters than other gangster movies. Finally, a main component of gangster movies is the illegal business ventures of the gangsters. In *The Last Don*, however, the characters engage in illegal activity and over time, some of the characters become involved in legal activities.

Genre Analysis

The conventions of gangster movies have stayed relatively constant over time, resulting in many decades of movies with similar plots, settings, themes, motifs, characters, and props. In order to be part of the gangster genre, a movie must have a plot that follows the life of one or several gangsters. Although these movies typically chart the lives of one or two gangsters, the genre may be expanding to include several interrelated plotlines in which more than two characters move up through the mob family over a period of time. It is also clear that many mob movies are set in the past, most of them in the late 1950s during the American mafia's heyday when gangsters flourished in society and became important real life figures.

In addition, Italian-American gangster movies express the themes of family and the importance of their illegal business dealings to the family. Therefore, the two are necessarily intertwined. While the traditional family was present in the early mafia movies, the genre may be evolving to include family members who are not direct members of the mob boss' immediate family. Thus, extended family members and outsiders became a central part of the mafia family in later movies.

Important motifs in the genre include corruption, violence, respect, and revenge. The gangsters' business practices are corrupt and corrupting. In addition to illegal business practices, the gangster must use violence as a necessary part of the business. Violence is also connected to respect and revenge. When characters are seen as disrespectful, they are dealt with in violent ways. Thus, revenge in gangster movies is characterized by excessive violence in response to a violent action or disrespect.

The nature of the characters is crucial to the gangster film. Mafia members are always male and at least partly of Italian heritage. Females only occupy roles as wives and girlfriends. Additionally, while the gangsters in the early films were full-blooded Italian, the emergence of gangsters with a mixed ethnicity arose in these later films. Gangsters who are only part Italian never head a mob family.

Several props are very specific to the gangster movie genre. Nice suits must be worn because they demand respect from other gangsters and outsiders. Similarly, expensive cars and houses also demonstrate a gangster's position in the mafia family. Guns are needed to seek revenge through violent means, and they are important props for all gangsters. Thus plot, setting, themes, motifs, characters, and props work together to define the gangster genre and distinguish it from other movie genres.

Though typical conventions distinguish gangster films from other genres, each film has specific changes to the formula to set it apart from other genre films. *The Godfather* started a new form of the gangster genre and all gangster movies since are compared to *The Godfather*. As a turning point for the genre, *The Godfather* delved deeper into the notions of family, respect, revenge, and the use of violence within the genre. In addition the use of guns, cars, and suits also play a vital role in the new genre as each of these concepts become important to the gangster. *The Godfather* set the stage for the second film *Godfather II*, which started to use more and more scenes away from New York. While New York was still seen as the center of the mafia business world, Las Vegas became an important location as well within the gangster genre. Building on this change of setting, *The Last Don* takes this change one step further since much of the movie occurs in the casinos of Las Vegas, and Los Angeles. This is an important change for the gangster genre since most gangster movies center on locations of New York, and the change indicates the mobs prevalence and control in society. As the gangster has become less traditional, so has her or his image on screen.

Moreover, *Goodfellas* and *The Last Don* expand the genre's definition of family as they show that as times change, so does the notion of the mafia family. *Goodfellas* demonstrates a slight move away from the traditional Italian-only mafia from which other ethnicities are excluded since two important characters are only half Italian but still able to work their way up the mafia hierarchy and gain both wealth and power. However, the gangster genre has not expanded enough to allow a non-Italian gangster to reach the top of the mob. Moreover, the blood relationship in *Goodfellas* is not as important as in the other gangster films. As long as characters have some connection to the Italian heritage,

they are allowed to move up within the mafia whereas characters from the *Godfather* films were mostly all related directly to the Godfather. *The Last Don* also expands the definition of family as the Don's nephew, Pipi, and Pipi's son, Cross move to take over the mafia family. Previous gangster movies focused solely on the father-son relationship and the take over of the family business by the Godfather's sons.

All of the inventions to the gangster genre formula allow each film to be distinct from each other while still recognizable as a gangster movie. Moreover, the evolution of the genre through new twists on old conventions allows the genre to adapt to the changing interests of society. Core components of the genre, such as the struggle between family and business and the corrupt, violent mafia business practices, have remained the same throughout the decades while other less important components have changed over time. The change allows the genre to remain popular in American society so it will continue to attract moviegoers and producers alike.

V. DISCUSSION

The Mafia flourished in Italy when Italians created coalitions to protect their estates from intruders and competitors (Rolle, 1980). When many Italians immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century, stereotypes arose about Italians as organized mob criminals because of their link to the Italian Mafia (Iorizzo & Mondello, 1980). Although Sicilian Mafia members did not initially immigrate to America, certain crimes became linked to the ethnic group (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). As Mussolini attacked the Sicilian Mafiosi, many fled to the United States (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972), and Prohibition led to a reworking of organized crime (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972), creating a moneymaking opportunity for the Italian-American mob (Iorizzo & Mondello, 1980).

With the rise of the Italian-American mob came the rise of the gangster film. Early gangster films came directly from newspaper headlines (Schatz, 1981) when figures like Legs Diamond (Munby, 1999) and Al Capone became notorious for their criminal enterprises (Shadoian, 2003). People identified with the gangster because the gangster was seen as a person living out her or his dream (Shadoian, 2003). Moreover, the genre gave law-abiding citizens access to a new and exciting world that appealed to ordinary people who led quiet lives (Shadoian, 2003). The genre evolved in response to changing societal viewpoints. Early movies depicted the gangster lifestyle as degrading and evil (Munby, 1999). *The Godfather*, however, revolutionized the genre, and changed the focus from crime to family, establishing a new theme for the genre (Raeburn, 1988).

Also important in society, myths demonstrate societal values and allow us to understand the world around us (Fisher, 1973). The American Dream myth is prevalent in American society and represents the idea that any person can succeed in America

(Fisher, 1973). Moreover, the myth consists of two components, the materialistic and moralistic aspects. The materialistic aspect refers to the desire for material wealth and money while the moralistic aspect refers to brotherhood and treating others well (Fisher, 1973). Because of its pervasiveness, the myth is frequently represented in Hollywood films. In order to analyze the American Dream myth in the gangster genre, this thesis employed a genre criticism methodology. A genre criticism approach allows for an analysis of gangster films by focusing on the genre's conventions, which consists of the films' plots, settings, characters, themes, motifs, and props.

The conventions used in the gangster film have made the genre successful and enduring. By understanding the generic conventions, it is possible for the film critic to interpret gangster films as meaningful texts. The plot, setting, characters, themes, myths, and props all work together to illustrate accepted societal values, ideas, and myths.

For this thesis I have asked: How have both aspects of the American Dream myth been presented in these gangster films and how has the American Dream in gangster films changed in recent years? The American Dream myth is clearly presented through the conventions of the genre and has not significantly changed in recent years.

Genre Analysis

To the gangster, the American Dream consists of wealth, power, and the opportunity to move up from the bottom of the mob hierarchy. Each gangster aspires to one day take over the mob family. Michael Corleone, Henry Hill, Dante Clericuzio, and Cross de Lena fight to advance their positions in the Mafia so they can be even more successful. While the gangster's version of the American Dream myth seems like a common dream, it varies considerably in many aspects from the typical (non-criminal)

American Dream myth. In order to be successful in the mob world, gangsters must use illegal means. No gangster has a typical job; rather, each gangster is involved in drugs, gambling, and other illegal activities including murder. Thus, in order to be a successful mobster, she or he must become corrupt and violent. Moreover, the more corrupt and violent a gangster becomes, the higher she or he can go in the mafia hierarchy those fulfilling the materialistic aspects of the American Dream.

Furthermore, specific conventions of the mafia films indicate a gangster's success. The plot involves the rise and/or fall of a gangster in the mafia family, which shows the gangster's attempt to reach the American Dream. In addition, the setting of New York is indicative of the American Dream because the city is a place where immigrants enter the United States. New York is seen as a place of opportunity where immigrants could make a name and achieve wealth and power. Las Vegas is another important setting for gangster movies, and it represents several important things for the gangster. "Sin City" represents the corruption that is necessary for the gangster to advance, and because the city is a gambling city with large amounts of money, Las Vegas also represents the gangster's desire for materialistic wealth.

Also, the gangster movies I considered take place over a span of many years rather than being set in a limited "present-day." This is significant because it demonstrates that the gangster genre's plot contributes to the American Dream myth. Since the genre movies chronicle the life of a gangster or gangsters over a period of time, they focus on portraying the story of the gangster moving up through the family ranks. Devoting time to telling the story of the rise to power of a mafia family allows gangster

genre movies to illustrate the material success side of the American Dream for the gangster.

Additionally, gangster characters must possess certain traits in order to become successful. Only Italian-American males are allowed ultimate success within the mafia family. Henry Hill and Jimmy Conway were unable to head the mafia family because they were not full-blooded Italian-Americans, but Michael Corleone and Dante Clericuzio were eligible because of their heritage. Thus, the American Dream is an inherently male-dominated myth in the gangster genre as women are not part of the leadership and have no opportunity to work their way through the family. Moreover, the myth is inherently ethnic as well as only Italian-Americans are able to fully achieve success. These traits are, therefore, essential for a character in the gangster genre, and they demonstrate the American Dream myth as an Italian male myth which is inherently conflicting with the egalitarian moralistic side of the American Dream myth.

Italian-American males who are successful acquire various props to demonstrate their position within the mafia family. Nice suits, cars, and houses are props that demonstrate that a gangster has moved up within the family and exemplify her or his success at achieving the materialistic part of the American Dream. Additionally, guns show the violence and corruption that are necessary for a gangster to be successful and attain the success they desire.

Moreover, the props used in gangster movies tie the films' themes and motifs together. Family and business are themes that demonstrate both aspects of the American Dream myth. In order to be successful, a gangster must remain loyal to her or his family as she or he works hard to move up in the family business. Gangster's who fail in either

aspect are expunged from the family and ultimately fail to achieve the success they desire. Michael Corleone fails as he neglects his wife and other family members in his pursuit of ultimate success. Henry Hill betrays the mafia family and is forced into the witness protection program, losing all of his ill gotten success. Cross de Lena and Dante Clericuzio both betray the family and are unsuccessful in their moves to become the head of the Clericuzio mafia family.

Corruption, violence, revenge, and respect are important motifs that drive the plot of gangster movies. A gangster must achieve success through corrupt and violent means. These motifs represent the gangster's attempt to fulfill the materialistic aspect of the American Dream as she or he uses corruption and violence to gain material wealth along with power. In addition, revenge and respect demonstrate the gangster's position in the hierarchy as well as dedication to the mafia family. Once a gangster moves up through the hierarchy, she or he is able to seek revenge while being respected by other gangsters. These motifs represent a moralistic aspect of the American Dream myth as the gangsters focus on brotherhood and establishing and maintaining relationships with other gangsters who will benefit them. Motifs therefore contribute to the American Dream myth as the gangster strives for personal wealth and power while remaining close with the members of the family. However, this morality is corrupt and does not fit with the true nature of the moralistic myth of the American Dream which requires the respect of all people for their own self worth—not for the ability to contribute to the success or failure of a crime family.

Ironically, the gangster's drive for success is her or his ultimate demise. As the gangster attempts to gain more power and money, she or he forgets to maintain

relationships with the people around her or him. Because of his focus on more money and continually having the most successful mafia business, Michael Corleone ultimately fails to be successful because he drives his family away with his ruthlessness, corruption, and violence. Henry Hill ignores warnings from the mafia boss to avoid the drug trade, but the desire for more money leads to his downfall. Dante Clericuzio ignores his commitment to the family and kills or attempts to kill fellow mafia family members in his drive to overtake the entire family. The need for all of the things that define the gangster, suits, cars, houses, and guns, leads the gangster to forget that the brotherhood that is so important to the family. This drive for ultimate success isolates the gangster from her or his family members as they become so involved in gaining money and power that all they focus on is wealth and control, leaving no time to nurture important relationships. As the gangster wants more and more, she or he neglects her or his obligation to the family until she or he is killed or driven from the family.

Thus, the American Dream is never fulfilled within the gangster genre because the search to satisfy the materialistic aspect paradoxically forces the gangster to neglect even the corrupt moralistic aspect of this criminal family and ultimately leads to the gangster's failure.

Significance

Movie representations affect the way groups of people are viewed and view themselves. Much debate has arisen with regards to the potential affects of portraying Italian-Americans as organized criminals. When *The Godfather* author Mario Puzo was introduced to Frank Sinatra, the singer became verbally abusive because he was angered by the stereotypes presented in Puzo's films (Gardner & Gardner, 1993). Members of the

Italian-American Civil Rights League in New York spoke out against *The Godfather*, feeling that the movie portrayed Italians negatively (Biskind, 1990). Moreover, modern day gangsters feel the films are representations of their lives. Mobsters Anthony Rotundo and Joseph “Tin Ear” Sclafani were caught on tape discussing their belief that *The Sopranos* was written about them and contained characters with traits resembling their mob friends (Keller, 1999). This research is therefore important in demonstrating values and characteristics associated with mobsters that may, in turn, affect Americans’ perceptions of real life Italian-Americans.

Similarly, these films communicate a corrupt version of the American Dream myth which focuses on power over morality. Because the films are so popular, gangster genre films communicate to a large audience that the success promised by the American Dream is attainable through illegal means. As the films reinforce the success myth over the moralistic myth it is possible for people to internalize the corrupt myth. As a result, the movies contribute to shaping the way America is viewed by outsiders as well as Americans. As Nachbar and Lause (1992) indicate, myths do not have to be accurate to be believed. This research indicates how the myth is constructed in the gangster genre, a popular genre seen by many people.

Finally, this research provides significant insight into our society and what we value. Because the myth is a main component of the gangster genre, it demonstrates America’s desire for material wealth over moralistic success. The fact that the gangster is her or his own ultimate demise demonstrates their failure to achieve the legitimate American Dream; however, the lure of easy money, power, and the trappings of the gangster lifestyle have long attracted Americans to the big screen and the little screen.

The point of these films may ultimately be that wealth and power unchecked by the respect for all people taught by the moralistic myth of the America Dream leads to failure, but that point never seems to be the aspect of these bloody genres that is celebrated in our popular culture. Instead it is the images of brutal power and the trappings of wealth that accompany the gangster lifestyle that are celebrated in the visible aspects of our popular culture such as posters and t-shirts. It is no surprise that the violent and misogynistic gangsta rap genre took its icons, plots, and characters directly from the gangster film genre.

In this way, it is really predictable that over two decades after its release *Scarface* posters and t-shirts are easy to find in shops that specialize in movie and music items and on the Internet. Al Pacino's violent portrayal of Tony Montana was a 1980s update on the classic 1932 film. Pacino as a ruthless gangster drug dealer is a coveted icon of many young people who see him as the quintessential rebel. Perhaps that best explains the popular t-shirts and posters that simply say "Scarface, the American Dream" (http://www.80stees.com/pages/t-shirts/80s-movie/Scarface_t-shirts.asp). Thus, not only does this analysis indicate how the myth exists in the movies, but it also shows what we value in our culture and communicate through a popular genre.

Limitations and Future Research

Mario Puzo significantly affected the gangster genre, writing several screenplays that became important movies. Because of his influence three of the movies chosen were taken from his writings, *The Godfather*, *The Godfather II*, and *The Last Don*. Consequently, the analysis may focus on Puzo's interpretation of the American Dream myth, providing a limited analysis. Moreover, this analysis attempted to pick popular

movies from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. However, this examination lacked a major film from the 1980s. Analyzing a film from this decade would provide a more complete glimpse into the evolution of the myth.

Moreover, although *The Last Don* is available in movie format, it was originally a made for television movie, distinguishing the movie from the feature films in the analysis. Because the movie was made for a television audience, the material presented may have differed considerably from material that is presented in feature films. For instance, television programs have significantly more restrictions as far as language and violence are concerned whereas feature films have more freedom in content.

Thus, future research should continue the examination with movies that Puzo did not write. While his screenplays are popular, other films merit study. In addition, future research should examine a movie from the 1980s to fully understand the American Dream myth throughout recent years. Including the decade might indicate changes that were not apparent in this study.

Other areas of future research should be examined as well. This analysis focused on movies from the original dramatic gangster genre, but new subgenres have emerged throughout the decades. For example, several movies, such as *Mickey Blue Eyes*, *Married to the Mob*, and *My Blue Heaven*, illustrate a gangster subgenre in which the lifestyle is portrayed as a comedy. These films may further demonstrate the American Dream myth and provide a new angle for analysis. Future research should examine if and how the myth is manifested in subgenres.

Future research should also examine the American Dream myth as it is manifested in the immensely popular television series *The Sopranos*. The program has become

widely successful in American society and may provide more insight into the American Dream myth. Tony Soprano, the program's main character, is a mobster who has risen to the top of the mafia family hierarchy. As a result of his search for success, he loses his family and security, much like the gangsters in this analysis. *The Sopranos* therefore demonstrates a new avenue for research on the myth.

Finally, Italian-Americans are typically associated with gangster films, and this analysis focuses on Italian-American gangster films and male characters. However, they are not the only ethnic group portrayed onscreen as involved with organized crime. Future research should explore how the American Dream myth is manifested in gangster movies with a different ethnic makeup. Such an analysis would provide further insight into what our culture values and associates with other ethnicities. The role of women in gangster films also merits further research. These suggested avenues for future research demonstrate areas to fully understand how the American Dream myth is manifested in the gangster genre in American society.

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