

REEL LIVES, REAL PREJUDICE: EXAMINING THE COMPLEXITIES OF ITALIAN-AMERICAN REPRESENTATION IN 1930s CINEMA

Cinema has been a mode of representation for various identities across the globe, including immigrants who were often unable to read or write in their own languages, let alone the language of the place they migrated to. One of the identities that it has played a central role in defining is Italianness in the United States.¹ The negative identification of Italians with Americanization and assimilation, fueled by anxieties and prejudices during the Depression era, resulted in a skewed and stereotypical image of Italian-Americans in 1930s cinema. This portrayal not only reinforced existing prejudices but also contributed to the socio-cultural discrimination faced by Italian-American communities in all parts of the country.

Italian immigrants arrived in America in the 1880s with a population of about 300,000 people. By the time this wave of immigration ended in the 1920s, there were about four million Italians in the country, which accounted for about ten percent of America's foreign-born population.² Although Italian Americans are no longer perceived as outsiders and are commonly identifiable members of the white establishment, in those days, there was a wave of anti-Italian

¹ Fioretti, Daniele, and Fulvio Orsitto, eds. 2023. *Italian Americans in Film: Establishing and Challenging Italian American Identities*.

² Mazzoli, Gilberto. "Italianness in the United States between Migrants' Informal Gardening Practices and Agricultural Diplomacy (1880–1912).

sentiment resulting from their mass migration into the States.³ There were anxieties surrounding rapid societal changes that stemmed from urbanization, modernization, and the increasing emphasis on materialism that characterized this era. This also led to the ‘criminalization’ of working-class immigrants, particularly during the 1900s to 1920s.⁴ The presence of working-class immigrants, often seen as culturally different and vying for insufficient resources, fueled fears about the deterioration of traditional American values and the erosion of social order. This ‘criminalization’ was not just about enforcing laws, but also about gaining control of shaping public opinion while protecting the dominance of established groups.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of modernity in the US due to increased technological progress and social shifts. This era saw the rise and fall of prohibition, which led to the creation of widespread bootlegging and even organized crime. This paved the way for concerns about morality, values, and norms in society. Moreover, the Wall Street crash of 1929, which started the Great Depression, was a major source of economic hardship, with millions of Americans losing their homes, jobs, and savings. Due to this, there was acute uncertainty about the future of American society as people started to become disillusioned and questioned the ‘American Dream’. On the international front, this was the period between the First and the Second World Wars. There was a global disorder caused by the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe.

³ Renga, Dana, ed. 2019. *Mafia Movies: A Reader*.

⁴ Dibeltulo, Silvia. 2014. “Family, Gang and Ethnicity in Italian-Themed Hollywood Gangster Films.”

As an attempt to divert people's thoughts from the various crises plaguing the nation and to create the perfect ethnic scapegoat who would take away the blame from the Establishment, classic mafia movies in the 1930s were created. The initial set of mafia cinema with movies like *The Black Hand* (1906), *The Fatal Hour* (1908), *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), D.W. Griffith's set of films (1907-1913), etc. did play a part in associating Italians with violence, extortion, and kidnapping, but did not exclusively attach the entire ethnicity with crime as was done by the movies in the 1930s. This shift can be attributed to the millions of immigrants who entered the country between 1905 and 1915.⁵ These people decided to forgo the agricultural path in rural parts of the country, as most before had taken, and decided to settle in the cities, which would help them to assimilate faster. Unfortunately, with the political tensions of the First World War, these immigrants were looked upon with suspicion since Americans questioned where the loyalties of these foreign-born people lay.⁶ In 1917, with the passing of the Volstead Act, which led to Prohibition, alcohol was being illegally imported and consumed, causing a sharp increase in criminal activity, Italians being one of the identities associated with it. This, paired with the media attention on gangsters of Italian descent like Arnold Rothstein, Frank Costello, Lucky Luciano, Johnny Torrio, and Alphonse Capone due to gang warfare and accumulation of wealth, led them to be the perfect subject for cinema to explore and declare as the scapegoats for everything that was going wrong in the country.

⁵ Bouchard, Norma. "5. Ethnicity and the Classical Gangster Film: Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* and Howard Hawks's *Scarface*"

⁶ Bell, Rudolph M., and Humbert S. Nelli. 1985. "From Immigrants to Ethnic: The Italian Americans."

Within a brief span of time, Hollywood released several gangster films, *Little Caesar* (1931), *Chinatown Nights* (1930), *Doorway to Hell* (1930), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932). The years 1931 and 1932 saw the release of twenty-five and forty gangster films respectively, which constituted about ten percent of the entire industry's production.⁷ *Scarface* and *Little Ceaser* were the most popular, both loosely based on the life of gangster Al Capone. These movies did much more than merely entertain the audience; they formed the perception of Italianness in America. They "achieved the paradigmatic construction of the Italian ethnic subject as the 'true' urban criminal."⁸

Filmmakers enforced many stereotypes and archetypes with the way they depicted characters in the two movies and the others following them. Both *Little Caesars* and *Scarface* begin with Rico Bandello and Tony Camonte as adults, with their childhoods never depicted on the screen. This ensures that their criminal tendencies could not be blamed on unfavorable childhood conditions like poverty or other social ills, as seen in *The Public Enemy* (1931), a movie about Tom Powers, an Irish-American gangster. Thus, audiences assume that the cause for their evil and lawlessness stems from either the intrinsic nature or the ethnicity of the characters, and not because they could have been victims of the circumstances they grew up in.⁹ Moreover,

⁷ Bondanella, P. E. (2006). *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, palookas, romeos, wise guys and sopranos*.

⁸ Bouchard, Norma. "5. Ethnicity and the Classical Gangster Film: Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* and Howard Hawks's *Scarface*" Page 53

⁹ Jonathan J. Cavallero & George Plasketes (2004) *Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety*, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*

filmmakers chose certain attributes that were shared among all the Italian-American gangsters. Some of the common ones are selfishness, disloyalty, immaturity, reliance on instinct that is almost animalistic, dim-wittedness, and an overall lack of maturity.¹⁰ These characters did not care about who was affected in the crossfire; fueled by their thirst for revenge and power, they were disloyal to even their own friends and family and were blindly ambitious. These rhetorics and purposeful choices proved to be quite unfavorable for the Italian-Americans who were trying to assimilate into the American space and culture. All the negative attributes seen on screen were now being associated with members of the entire ethnicity in the real world.

The portrayal of non-gangster characters in the movies is what led to prejudices being formed against the entire ethnicity, instead of associations being formed with just the gangsters. In *Little Caesar*, Rico's former partner Joe Massara wants to give up his criminal ties to pursue his dreams of becoming a professional dancer. By the end of the movie, Massara is compelled back into the criminal life by Rico. This shows that regardless of the passions, personal preferences, or intentions of Italian-Americans, they would always be lured back into crime and lawlessness. Another positive character who leads viewers to vilify the entire ethnicity is Tony's mother in *Scarface*. She embodies the perfect and kind person, but she is unable to control her children, considering her son is a gangster who has incestuous feelings for his sister and abuses her. She embodies the apparent inability of Italian-American mothers to raise children with proper American morality and values.

¹⁰ Jonathan J. Cavallero & George Plasketes (2004) Gangsters, *Fessos*, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*

The portrayal of Italian-Americans in 1930s mafia movies had a profound and lasting impact on American society. These films went beyond mere entertainment, serving as powerful tools for reinforcing negative stereotypes and shaping public perception. By presenting Italian-Americans as inherently violent, criminal, and incapable of assimilation, these films fueled anxieties and prejudices that had existed long before their release. The consequences of these stereotypical representations were devastating for Italian-American communities. The characters depicted on screen became the faces of Italianness in the American consciousness, leading to discrimination, social exclusion, and even violence directed towards individuals of Italian descent. These stereotypes not only hampered their efforts to integrate into American society but also cast a long shadow that continues to influence perceptions of Italian Americans even today.

SOURCES:

1. Fioretti, Daniele, and Fulvio Orsitto, eds. 2023. *Italian Americans in Film: Establishing and Challenging Italian American Identities*. 1st ed. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
2. Mazzoli, Gilberto. "Italianness in the United States between Migrants' Informal Gardening Practices and Agricultural Diplomacy (1880–1912)." *Modern Italy* 26, no. 2 (2021): 199-215. doi:10.1017/mit.2021.16.
3. Renga, Dana, ed. 2019. *Mafia Movies: A Reader*. 2nd ed. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
4. Dibeltulo, Silvia. 2014. "Family, Gang and Ethnicity in Italian-Themed Hollywood Gangster Films." *Film International* 12 (4): 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1386/fiin.12.4.25_1.
5. Bouchard, Norma. "5. Ethnicity and the Classical Gangster Film: Mervyn LeRoy's Little Caesar and Howard Hawks's Scarface" In *Mafia Movies: A Reader, Second Edition* edited by Dana Renga, 52-57. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487510466-006>
6. Bell, Rudolph M., and Humbert S. Nelli. 1985. "From Immigrants to Ethnics: The Italian Americans." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15 (3): 552. <https://doi.org/10.2307/204167>.
7. Bondanella, P. E. (2006). *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, palookas, romeos, wise guys and sopranos*. Continuum International Publishing Group.
8. Jonathan J. Cavallero & George Plasketes (2004) Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 32:2, 50-73, DOI: 10.3200/JPFT.32.2.49-73 To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.3200/JPFT.32.2.49-73>