

# **The Portrayal of Italian Americans in Film**

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The book that the Statue of Liberty holds reads, “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” America is a country that has welcomed immigrants since its founding in the late 1600s. It is a country built on the backs of immigrants and thrives due to the services immigrants worldwide provide. Individuals coming to the United States hope to live the American dream of freedom and prosperity. However, while this is a beautiful notion, it is sadly not the case for most immigrants. America saw its first surge of immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Italian people emigrated with the idea that America would welcome them openly. But in reality, most Italian immigrants found themselves marginalized from the American dream. This marginalization gave way to segregation and stereotypes of Italians that shaped their experience in America. While over the 20th century, Italians found a way to integrate themselves into the American culture, the stains of their stereotypes never truly washed away and can be seen through decades worth of their portrayal in popular media.

Though Italians had been immigrating to America since the 1880s, their biggest surge was from 1900-1920. By 1920, Italians made up ten percent of America’s immigrants, accounting for more than four million people.<sup>1</sup> Italians immigrated for several reasons; the most pressing of these was their nation’s diseases and inexperienced government. At the time, Italy had just become its own country, united under one singular flag. Despite this, there was increasing poverty and internal chaos.<sup>2</sup> All of this strife, along with travel becoming more affordable, was reason enough to attempt a life in the great country of America. The initial reception of Italians was the same as other

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<sup>1</sup> “Italian: Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress: Library of Congress,” The Library of Congress, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/italian/>. <sup>2</sup> “Italian: Immigration...”

immigrants: do not interact with dangerous foreigners. The American government welcomed the opportunities immigrants brought – in addition to their low-cost labor – but the American population was not ready to open their homes to outsiders. Most immigrants also sought safety with their own ethnicity since they could communicate in the same languages and find comfort in their shared culture. Pocket communities began to appear for minority groups, including Italians. A prime example of this is an area called “Little Italy”, which is found in nearly every major city in America, from New York and Chicago to San Francisco.

While Italians found their own culture within these communities, it created a further “us versus them” mentality on both sides. Americans viewed Italians as an “other” group that was not yet a part of their country. Negative imagery of Italians (mainly Sicilians) began to appear in the minds of the American people. This image came from a capitalistic view of the value of a man; those who could contribute to the workforce and economy were valuable, and those who refused to contribute were beneath everyone else. While almost all Italian immigrants hoped to find work in America, only the lighter-skinned Italians from the north were being hired. Why didn’t America want the help of the Southern Italians gladly offering their services? Early 20th century America was ruled by racism and the separation of races due to the white supremacists’ view. Southern Italians were not viewed as fully black; however, they were also not fully white, “Italians from northern and central Italy were sober and industrious and therefore desirable, the absence of these attractive virtues among southern Italians and Sicilians rendered them detrimental.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, they could not enter the workforce. Since they could not enter the workforce, Southern Italian immigrants became branded as undesirable.

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<sup>2</sup> The Routledge History of Italian Americans (Routledge Histories). (412). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

With Southern Italians labeled as they were, many American people took the natural course of treating them as outcasts. Harmful stereotypes emerged, drawing from their skin color to their culture. These stereotypes and negative imagery allowed officials to paint those who were already in the country as well as any future Italian immigrants in a negative light, “Because Italians, especially those from southern Italy, fell short with respect to preferred characteristics, and because they constituted the largest group of new immigrants, their entry was doubly deplored.”<sup>4</sup> Anyone who immigrated was now considered dangerous; Sicilians were a part of mafias and bringing gang wars to America, Italian culture was lustful and sinful, and while Italians were not as dark as black people, they were not fully white either and thus could not be fully trusted.

This stigma encompassed the Italian American experience for decades. An article from the *Evening Star* in Washington, D.C., dated March 1941, recounts the perception of Italians during the Second World War. The article includes a quote from a little boy explaining that some kids were bullying him with a newspaper article mentioning Italians.<sup>5</sup> The article states, “The article razzed the Italian people, and 'ha-ha-ha' was written across it in pencil. Somebody did that because my name is Italian. But I'm not Italian; I'm American!”<sup>6</sup> This tells of two concepts: the treatment of Italians and the internalized fear of being Italian in America. Most Americans act out of fear, so Benito Mussolini's actions during the Second World War caused many Americans to be wary of their Italian next-door neighbors. Italians in America saw their nationality as a curse rather than a blessing, and many famous Italians even began to go by different names to avoid being associated with the culture and therefore have a better chance at success. It makes sense that decades of stigma, discrimination, and violence would cause Italians to have an internalized stigma against their culture. While this is not true for every single Italian immigrant, it is not too far-fetched to

have happened, as it did to the boy in the article. Whether it was internalized stigma or anti-Italian discrimination, the initial reception of Italians in America followed them for the rest of their American venture.

The decades of immigration and integration into American life were not completely negative. Italians were beginning to find ways to prove their worth, “the children of Italian immigrants could be found in all regions of the U.S., in almost every career and nearly every walk of life.”<sup>3</sup> Italians were starting to show America what they could accomplish, from sports to music, politics, radio, and film. Nevertheless, the fog of stigma still overshadowed the Italian American experience. This fog is most prevalent in American films. American-made films were praised and beloved all over the world. From the 1960s on, movie stars were *the* icons to worship; the average person wanted to live vicariously through the characters portrayed on screen. Italians found their way into cinema when they first became popular, but the 70s was when household names really began to appear. Actors like Robert De Niro, Marlon Brando, Joe Pesci, Stanley Tucci, Al Pacino, Sylvester Stalone, and John Travolta made big-time appearances between 1970 and 1990. The films made in these three decades are now considered classics; every parent shows their children these movies, and every person in America can quote at least one of the listed actors' movies. But the immediate, first thought that comes to mind when any of these names are heard are their mafia

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<sup>3</sup> “Italian: Immigration...”

<sup>4</sup> The Routledge History of Italian Americans (418)

<sup>5</sup> Humanities, National Endowment for the. “Evening Star. [Volume] (Washington, D.C.) 1854-1972, March 16, 1941, Page 2, Image 89.” News about Chronicling America RSS. W.D. Wallach & Hope. Accessed December 7, 2022. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1941-03-16/ed-1/seq-89/#date1=1920&index=2&rows=20&words=American+Americans+Italian&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=italian+americans&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>. <sup>6</sup> Humanities, “Evening Star”.

movies. Mafia movies dominated (and continue to thrive in) the American film scene. A quick Google search of “Italian American Movies” will instantly show gang and mafia-related films. The first article to come up with this google search is *Top 5 Best Italian-American Movies*. Four out of five of these movies are mafia related: *Goodfellas*, *Mean Streets*, the *Godfather* series, and *A Bronx Tale*, with the only exception being *Big Night*.

Why are most Italian-focused American films about the violent mafia in America? These films build on what is familiar to American audiences; the no-good Sicilian Italian immigrant. The decades of stereotypes of Italians and Sicilians in a negative light created the popularized depiction of the people in the entertainment industry. Most movies from the late 20th century carry with them the stigma surrounding Italians, creating three typecasts for Italian characters: the mafia man, the lustful romantic, and the good catholic priest. While each of these characters seems to contradict themselves, they are nevertheless the most popular ways to depict Italians in film. Furthermore, most, if not all, of these characters are played by Italian actors. To the public and the audiences watching these films, these portrayals have authenticity and accuracy due to the consistent Italian casting.

It is worth noting that while the presentation of these characters is often stereotyped, there is some truth behind them. Many stereotypes portrayed in the films stem from the truth; there was a mafia in America that was mainly Sicilian men, Italian gang wars often occurred throughout the 20th century, and most Italian musicians leaned in heavily to the image of a suave and lustful man. Films tend to reflect reality, and many American-made movies about Italian Americans do reflect the experience of these immigrants. However, the harm comes when the audience does not understand why this is the story being told and when we look at these films as the *only* experience

of Italians in America. Chazz Palminteri, an Italian American actor and director, said in an interview about the film *A Bronx Tale* that he wanted to give Italian Americans in the film a more “balanced portrait.”<sup>4</sup> The article quotes Palminteri saying, “Too many movies speak about us as just gombas or Mafioso... I wanted a movie about a working man, about a real Italian-American community. The real fabric comes from working men.”<sup>5</sup> Understanding why these men and women are being characterized in these ways in films while acknowledging that creative licensure has been taken will allow audiences to enjoy the movie without perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

To understand the American perception of Italians and how it spans through the decades, we can examine five movies that focus on the Italian experience in America: *The Brotherhood*, *The Godfather*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Goodfellas*, and *My Cousin Vinny*. These movies were made in 1968, 1972, 1977, 1990, and 1992 (respectively). The movies not centered around Italians in the mafia are *My Cousin Vinny* and *Saturday Night Fever*. *My Cousin Vinny* is about two young men who get falsely accused and arrested on a murder charge, and one of the boys calls their lawyer uncle, Vinny Gambini (played by Joe Pesci), to help get them released. During the course of the entire movie, the small-town folk consistently comment on Gambini’s attire and attitude. Gambini is portrayed as an eccentric, over-the-top money-loving Italian man who does not take anything seriously. Despite his profession as a lawyer, he is constantly joking and has the character trait of vanity that covers most of his personality. *Saturday Night Fever* is about a young man named Tony (played by John Travolta) who lives in Brooklyn with his grandmother. His main love is dance, and Tony consistently goes out to the disco with his friends. The story's main premise is centered

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<sup>4</sup> Ebert, Roger. “Deniro Reverses Roles in 'Bronx Tale': Interviews: Roger Ebert.” Interviews | Roger Ebert. Accessed December 7, 2022. <https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/deniro-reverses-roles-in-bronx-tale>.

<sup>5</sup> Ebert, “Deniro...”

around the love story between Tony and Stephanie (played by Karen Lynn Gorney). However, there are moments when the Italian stereotypes shine through. For example, there is a moment in the film when the parents have a (figurative) heart attack when Tony's brother mentions he doesn't want to become a priest. You are either a good Catholic or a good Catholic priest in their household. Tony's and his brother's actions do not align with his parent's views, so they are shown to be consistently disappointed in him. These two films show the first two types of Italians portrayed in American movies – the eccentric and lustful jokester and the good Catholic boy or priest. The last type, and the probably most commonly portrayed in movies, is the mafia man.

*The Brotherhood* and *The Godfather* are mafia-centered movies. *The Brotherhood* occurs in Sicily and New York post-Vietnam War, while *The Godfather* in New York in the 1940s. It is worth mentioning that the movie *The Goodfellas* has the same premise and also takes place in New York. There is a trend in which these mafia movies take place in New York and other urban cities. Historically, most immigrants tended to settle in urban areas, where work was easily found. Additionally, all three mafia movies center around Sicilian men and mention this several times. At the beginning of *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone (Al Pacino's character) mentions that his father's right-hand man, Tom Hagen, was always close to the family, "Even though he's not Sicilian."<sup>6</sup> There is an emphasis on the importance of being Italian, specifically being a Sicilian. Most Sicilian men were considered part of mafia organizations, a stigma that still exists today. In *The Brotherhood*, one of the older characters retells how some other crime bosses (not specifically Mafia members) proposed combining their efforts to increase their success and control. The same character then says they rejected this idea because they were outsiders. He says, "In the family, in

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<sup>6</sup> Coppola 1972, (31:15) 2hr., 55m.

the blood stay pure.”<sup>7</sup> This line, as well as the other ideals displayed in these movies, is trying to push the notion that Sicilian men only trust other Sicilian men to do the work they do. This clique-like organization paints Sicilians in a shady and untrustworthy light, implying that anyone Italian and especially Sicilians are most likely working for one of these mafia families.

Another stereotype that is pushed in these mafia movies is that of ‘respect from fear’. In all three movies, the mafia bosses rule anyone not Italian with an iron fist, thus gaining their respect and reputation through fear and crime. However, anyone who is Italian and Sicilian is treated as family, even if they are not directly involved in the mafia. The theme of family is pushed throughout every movie; in *The Brotherhood*, the two main characters are bonded because the older brother, Frank, works to provide for his younger brother Vince. In *The Godfather*, Italian people looking for help will receive what they need, even if bad blood exists between the families or two men. And finally, in *Goodfellas*, the mafia bosses will take in stray boys who need work, so long as they are Sicilian. It is also worth noting that each movie portrays a very masculine man; the men do not cry, are expected to provide, and are often violent. However, when it comes to family, tears are allowed to be shed. *The Godfather’s* character of Vito Corleone (played by Marlon Brando) screams at his godson for crying and getting upset about a role in a movie he wanted but could not get. However, later in the movie, Vito cries in front of his family due to his son's loss and his other son's mistreatment. Even in the mafia movies, there is a strong theme of family and how important family is in Italian culture.

Finally, there is the stereotype of gender roles. The men in the movies are involved in the family business; every single man is involved somehow. Even the two men in the *Godfather* and

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<sup>7</sup> Ritt, 1969, (50:49) 1hr., 36m.

the *Brotherhood* who want to get out and live a different life eventually find their way into the mafia; Michael Corleone eventually follows in his father's footsteps and even becomes the head of their family, and Vince Ginetta is the successful college graduate who is drawn to the mafia life even after expressing he didn't want anything to do with the business. At one point in the film, Vince's new wife comments on his desire to join his brother, saying, "You want to go in with him, don't you?"<sup>8</sup> This quote implies that his wife, Emma, knew that eventually Vince would be drawn to the life, which further implies that it is a draw no Italian man can escape from. After saying this, Emma is adamant that she knows nothing about what Vince is doing; she does not want to be a part of the business. In *Goodfellas*, Karen, Henry Hill's wife, does not want to be involved in the mafia, and Henry complies by not talking about business in front of her. While this eventually changes, and Karen ends up knowing and even helping Henry at some points, her primary role is still to be the children's caretaker and decorate the household. Finally, in *The Godfather*, Vito has two sons and one daughter. Each of his sons eventually finds his way into life, but Connie (the daughter) is never involved in the deals or the schemes like her brothers are. Her husband joins the family business when she is married, but Connie stays with her role as mother and dutiful wife. The role of women in the films is to be supportive no matter what and to handle domestic affairs. When the men in the movies occasionally need the help of their wives, they are expected to obey, no questions asked. Additionally, women are bound to domestic work and entertain any and all guests the men bring home. It is worth noting that the mafia bosses see them as an extension of their husbands. So, if any harm should befall the men, the bosses tend to care for the women and their children.

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<sup>8</sup> Ritt, 1969, (50:49) 1hr., 36m.

The scene that displays these three stereotypes the best is the 'wedding scene'. *Goodfellas*, *The Godfather*, and *The Brotherhood* all include a big Italian wedding scene. In these weddings, we see the mafia, the family, and the gender roles displayed perfectly. The mafia members consistently do business at the wedding, even if it's their own. These under-the-table deals imply that everyone in the room is a member of one of the crime families and attends these weddings to do public deals without being suspicious to the authorities. However, the family theme is still incredibly strong; fathers dance with their daughters, families dance in circles, brothers make toast and drink, mothers cry, and everyone related attends. Traditions, singing, and dancing are all displayed in these movies to further show Italian culture, and most of the dialogue is in Italian during these scenes. Finally, the wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers are all happily dancing and enjoying themselves, blissfully unaware of what is occurring under the table. On the other hand, the men never fully immerse themselves in the event; deals are being done, guards are being inspected, guns are held sneakily in their jacket pockets, authorities are being vaguely threatened, and undesirable attendees are being violently dealt with. The audience sees an image of never-ending violence and shadiness during these scenes; even during a celebration, there continue to be mafia dealings and threats being made.

Martin Scorsese is one of the most famous directors of Italian American lead movies. His portrayal of Italian Americans has been continuously debated on whether or not his films paint Italians in a bad light. On the one hand, he is perpetuating these stereotypes and immortalizing them in incredibly popular and successful films. On the other hand, he allowed Italian men to represent themselves in media and show the duality of being an Italian throughout the decades.

In an article entitled *Prospero's Muccs: The Meaning of Martin Scorsese's Italian American Dialect*, the author expresses that Scorsese's films can be viewed through both lenses. The author writes, "To many Italian Americans, Scorsese's perpetuation of working-class and criminal stereotypes amounts to infamia, public disgrace. But Scorsese is not just making Wopsploitation movies. He is inventing the Italian American screen human... revealing to the public the ostensible savage's psychological complexity and a high degree of civilization."<sup>9</sup> While it is true that many of Scorsese and other directors' characters tend to be complex individuals who are more than simply one typecast, there is undeniably a trend in Italian lead movies that perpetuates the Sicilian stereotypes in their films. It is important to give everyone a space to show their culture on screen, so that audience members feel represented in the media. However, can we as a society say it is 'representation' when the only representation is a stereotype?

Overall, it is undeniably clear that the stigma and stereotypes the initial Italian immigrants received during the early years of immigration stained their experience in American culture. Every label, from slurs like 'Sigi'<sup>10</sup> to typecasts and gender roles, can be seen in American-made films spanning decades. These stigmas have persisted from the early 1900s to the popularized films from 1960 to the 1990s and arguably, still today. As mentioned, the most significant draw to immigrating to America was the immortal American Dream. However, the early reception of Italian people and their depiction in film has made that dream even more difficult to be a reality. The Italian American experience cannot be separated from how they were discriminated against and villainized in the early years of integrating into American life.

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<sup>9</sup> GUIDA, GEORGE. "Prospero's Muccs: The Meaning of Martin Scorsese's Italian American Dialect." *Italian Americana* 28, no. 1 (2010): 5–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41932388>.

<sup>10</sup> Translates to "half a n\*\*\*\*r\*", associating Sicilian men with being not fully black, but not fully white

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