THE ORGANIZED CRIME:
THE POPULAR PERFECTIONISM OF MOB FILMS

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It's not often that you find a democratic leader openly admitting to a penchant for tyranny. So it came as quite a surprise when Boris Johnson, after being asked to name his favorite movie moment, nonchalantly replied: the "multiple retribution scene in *The Godfather*" (qtd. in Groves and Doyle). 'Retribution' may be the wrong word. The sequence—usually dubbed the baptism scene—depicts a mob boss, Michael Corleone (played by Al Pacino), securing his underworld omnipotence by having his rivals murdered. The UK did not fail to miss the terrifying political implications of Johnson's choice: out-of-favor MPs must have been more than a tad worried that the Prime Minister would conduct his own vengeful string of administrative firings—and rightly so: Johnson may have been likening himself to Michael Corleone when he dismissed eleven ministers later that month (Swinford). Indeed, he would not have been the first political figure to make the comparison. According to Francis Ford Coppola, the director of *The Godfather*, Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi both listed *The Godfather* as their favorite movie (Coppola). Nor would Johnson have been the last to take a tip from the Corleones: the current US administration, too, has sinister links to Coppola's mafia trilogy. In November 2019, prosecutors asked that scenes from *The Godfather: Part II* be played at the trial of Roger Stone, after claiming that the President's former advisor had been inspired to use the same dirty tricks the clip displays when he texted an associate to "Do a Frank Pentangeli" (Kilgannon). The rhetoric of the 'The Don' has been compared to that of Fredo Corleone ("Letters to the Editor"); Trump has been said to use "a vocabulary from *Goodfellas*" (Landler). Refusing to mince his words, Robert De Niro, who played the young Vito Corleone in *Part II*, has called Trump a "gangster president" (De Niro and Pacino).

Perhaps this shared obsession makes the leaders truly populist: they simply have the same movie tastes as the common people. A glance at some 'Top 100s' reveals that the paterfamilias of the mafia genre—the first two *Godfather*s along with Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*—are among some of the best-loved movies ever made: on *Empire*'s greatest films list, *The Godfather* ranked first with *Goodfellas* coming in sixth place and *The Godfather Part II* in twelfth ("The 100 Greatest Movies"). Yes, the list does have populist undertones (*Star Wars: Episode V* is in second place) but this only reinforces the notion that mob films continue to be exceedingly well-liked in the public eye—and hugely influential. In his book, *The Gangster Film: Fatal Success in American Cinema*, Ron Wilson cites a study conducted from 1996 to 2002 which found that, from the release of *The Godfather* in 1972 to 2002, close to three hundred films had been produced that portrayed Italians as criminals—an average of nine a year (Wilson 81).

In Wilson's words, not only does this suggest a "bias concerning Italian stereotypes in gangster films," but it indicates "that a standard barometer for these depictions is one film in particular—*The Godfather*" (81). That study was concluded nineteen years ago, but little has changed in the popularity of either the genre or *The Godfather*. Screenings of the *Godfather*s and *Goodfellas* are a regular feature at film festivals (*Part II* screened to a packed house at the New York Film Festival in September 2019); a new documentary called *Shooting The Mafia* was released in November 2019 after playing at the Sundance Film Festival; Martin Scorsese's mob hit *The Irishman* was watched by twenty-six million households during its first week on Netflix (Spangler). It is Scorsese's fifth film in what could be called his extended universe of the American underworld: from *Mean Streets* to *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, and *The Departed*.

The demand for big-screen mafiosi is proven not only by the production of good mob films but by the production of bad ones, too. The trailer for one such cinematic embarrassment, *Mob Town*, was recently released—the title a warning in itself of the abundance of stock stereotypes and laughable clichés that it promises to offer. Then there was 2018's astonishingly awful *Gotti*, which stars John Travolta as the former head of the Gambino crime family. *Gotti*, like *Mob Town*, has a rare "0%" score on the critical aggregation website *Rotten Tomatoes*. It has just one word as the critics' consensus: "Fuhgeddaboudit"—a parody of the film's gaudy, vernacularized vision of crime ("Gotti (2018)"). And yet it is this same glossy hyperbole that highlights the central contradiction of the mafia genre: the fact that these films—which have been scorched onto the American imagination to the extent of becoming clichés—are about criminals. Crime has become a cliché, and a popular one at that. These are bad people: the very characters who audiences all over the world have been taught to despise and lock up. You would not think the public (even less, our leaders) would want these crime films at a time when factual veracity and political justice are more important than ever—ideals that contrast with the unabashedly fictionalized criminal groups that have warped how we see Italian-Americans. Moreover, there is a striking contrast between the longevity of mob films and the 'fatigue' that seems to be collecting around long-running film series. Think Star Wars and Marvel; remember when, in November 2019, Martin Scorsese wrote in *The New York Times* that he was tired of the "sameness of today's franchise pictures" (Scorsese). Mob movies do not receive this criticism, but why? Why are these films still popular?

One explanation is that these films are violent. Jack Shadoian espouses this view, saying in *Dreams & Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film* that the "gangster/crime film is a genre like pornography and the horror film" because it "exposes our deepest psychic urges" (Shadoian 3). According to this view, gangsters enable us to sate our criminal aspirations without breaking any laws. This is the idea of catharsis, which can be used to explain cinema's obsession with another breed of criminals: serial killers. As the author of *Why We Love Serial Killers: The Curious Appeal of the World's Most Savage Murderers* Scott Bonn opines in a BBC article, serial killers are "almost like a catharsis

for the worst of us, a lightning rod for our darkest thoughts, like the sin-eaters in medieval times who would take away the sins of others" (qtd. in Bond). The article adduces the morbid popularity of 'murderabilia'—the collectible paraphernalia of serial killers—on online auction houses as an example of this "catharsis". But this point of view becomes complicated when examined further. Just return to the man who made catharsis famous: Aristotle. Writing about tragedy, Aristotle says in his *Poetics* that a truly tragic plot "should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens" (*Poetics* 22). This "pity" in turn elicits a catharsis or "purification of such emotions" (*Poetics* 10). Although the exact meaning of this phrase is debated (it is the only time Aristotle uses the word *katharsis* in the *Poetics*), a predominant interpretation is the one given by Scott Bonn: catharsis is a way "for the worst of us" to "take away" these sins. Grisly spectacles, in this view, are nothing more than moral warnings. It is the fear of suffering the same fate as the victim which makes a person "shudder" (*Poetics* 22). Using Bonn's catharsis logic, people should not be attracted to these killers: they should be scared of them.

The same can be said for mob films. If people were 'cleansed' by a mob film's violence, an audience would leave the theatre shaking their heads, forced into a morally ascetic existence, having been warned off wrongdoing; with mafia movies at the lectern, crime would be despised. But the opposite seems to have happened: the tropes in these films have become clichés. Further, if crime movies were cathartic, if they did tap into our subconscious and spook us, they would necessarily be relatable. But, as proven by the *Gotti*s and *Mob Town*s, mob movies have become decidedly unrelatable and ever more hyperbolized in a long bloodline of cinematic tradition. Mob movies are entirely dependent on their fictionality, which goes alongside their exciting vision of crime; the popularity of the mafia genre cannot be boiled down to catharsis, because mafia films tend never to be cathartic.

Instead of being purifying, mob films are simply satisfying—a satisfaction attained by reaffirming structure and order. One experiences the same satisfaction reading or watching an Agatha Christie murder mystery: the most enjoyable moment is the great dénouement when the audience finally discovers whodunnit. Joan Acocella writes in her New Yorker piece "Queen of Crime" that there have been sundry "explanations for Christie's popularity and for the general enthusiasm for the detective novel in her time." But, according to Acocella, "all these arguments are the same": ultimately, she writes, "the appeal of the detective story is the restoration of order" (Acocella). Though detective fiction relies on the restoration of moral and judicial order—as thriller writer David Baldacci says, "evil is punished, and the good guys mostly win, after solving the puzzle" (qtd. in Hannah)—in art, one can also find satisfaction in the restoration of any order, even, surprisingly, one that is morally wrong.

The heist film is proof of this. The bank robbery is a scene of necessarily pre-planned action, of choreographed illegality. For this reason, the heist is extremely

satisfying—as proven by the online popularity of bank robbery scenes from films such as *The Dark Knight*, *The Town*, *Heat* or the *Ocean* films. We expect satisfaction; this becomes even clearer when the stick-up is *not* successful. And there is no better on-screen bungle of a burglary than Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon*. Lumet's 1975 film re-enacts the true story of a failed bank robbery from August 1972, starring Al Pacino as John Wojtowicz and John Cazale as 'Sal' Naturile (both actors in the full swing of *Godfather* fame). The film is purposefully frustrating. By refusing to portray the perfectionist methodology of a heist, Lumet shows that reality is decidedly not cut and dried. The present cannot be pre-planned. That is why people watch crime films. For a crime film is all about the risky but *successful* realization of a plan. A film is itself an edited and rehearsed medium which sandpapers the messiness of the present day into a structured and finite form. The popularity of movie crime lies in its logical escape from life. And nothing is more different, nothing more logical than the movie mafia.

Take *The Godfather*'s famous phrase as an example: "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse." It reflects a complete assurance in the future: the mobsters' bitingly systematic game of action and immediate reaction. The mafia genre is a perfectionist: like murder mysteries and heist movies, it offers audiences a satisfying re-establishment of order. It is an order based around the first organization: family. "A man who doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man," says Don Corleone in the first *Godfather*. Mob films, as Ron Wilson has shown, come down to the concept of "la famiglia"— the family that is constructed around loves and loyalties (89). In Wilson's words, the "concept of la famiglia . . . marks a distinct shift away from previous images in gangster cinema. Earlier representations of the gangster as either racketeer or outlaw emphasized his individualism . . . However, with regard to the Mafioso, there is a communal aspect to the idea of family that marks a symbiotic relationship between him and others" (Wilson 89). A similar concept is outlined by Aristotle: not in the *Poetics*, but in the *Politics*. Part of this work is devoted to an analysis of the relationship between family (*oikos*) and city (*polis*). The two are, on one level, intertwined—"every state consists of households" (*Politics* 62)—but there is also a difference between them: whereas the *polis* depends on unreliable, voluntary obedience, the *oikos* is an eternal and natural order that is bound by blood (Shields). The state may have, as Aristotle put it, a "natural priority over the household" (*Politics* 60), but "priority" doesn't always make the household obey. The mafia film is a modern update on this theme. But, rather than reconciling family and state, it tears them apart: the *oikos* order is restored to center stage.

The mob film epitomizes the restoration of familial order. It also epitomizes the restoration of *all* order. Chris Messenger is correct when he writes in *'The Godfather' and American Culture* that the attraction lies in the fact that "[m]obsters have everything you don't: power, money, women, cars, security, and most of all, a certain leverage" (12). The "money" and the "women" may be part of it, but the true appeal is that "certain leverage." As Robert de Niro said in a 2019 interview with the BBC's Graham

Norton, the appeal of the gangster underworld is that these characters "have their own laws": it was "the idea that this culture had more respect and more structure". It is, perhaps, not a surprise that *The Godfather* trilogy took off in the early 1970s, with the Vietnam War, race riots, and Watergate all on the boil. With little moral clarity, transparency, or "structure" in government at the time, mob films were the perfect tonic.

Nor is it a surprise that John Wojtowicz, who planned the robbery depicted in *Dog Day Afternoon*, took his co-conspirators to see the first *Godfather* before the attempted heist. As he recalled in a recent short film, Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory* (2000), Wojtowicz chose *The Godfather* because he thought it would "inspire the troops." Indeed, the typewritten note which Wojtowicz had planned to give to the bank manager by way of introduction—"This is a hold-up"!—ended with the *Godfather* quote: "This is an offer you can't refuse" (Federal Bureau of Investigation 35). "The Boys" (as the robbers called themselves) expected their robbery to be successful because they had been imbued with the step-by-step, extra-legal rationality of the Mafiosi. The same can be said for all '70s audiences, who saw in these films a tidy and harmonious system based around a hierarchy that's decidedly organic and terrifyingly authoritarian. This is what has caused the genre's popularity and why the films continue to be so attractive to modern-day audiences, at a time when, once more, the White House is becoming increasingly unstable.

The bitter irony, however, is that this instability has been caused by the very same desire to re-establish order. The apparent links between *The Godfather* films with Trump and Johnson are hardly surprising: the logicality of the mob film would go hand in hand with popular demagoguery—the leaders who garner support by promising to restore 'law and order.' And all too often are these cod-dons elected; and all too quickly does their rhetoric give way to despotism, a statesman's homage to the mob underworld. For, in the paranoid eyes of a tyrant, the "multiple retribution killings at the end of *The Godfather*" may seem like the same political restoration once promised, while the significance of "la famiglia" may be taken to mean blatant nepotism. Thus, whilst the mob genre can provide audiences with a glimmer of excitement and structure within a crumbling body politic, be warned: these films can, to some, also reflect a tyrannical desire for pin-pointed perfectionism.

The mob film is one of the most popular genres in American cinema history. Since its early days, filmmakers have been eager to put backstreet immorality on the big screen. It has spawned great movies and less-than-great ones, but ultimately all crime movies have strived not for catharsis, but for satisfaction by way of organization. These are organized crimes that appeal to all who seek some kind of order, proffering audiences a two- to four-hour slot (the mafiosi are not known for their brevity) to ditch the messiness of the present as we gaze on a blueprint from absolute hindsight. Time becomes meaningless in this confident vision—a lens so dependable it has slipped into cliché. It is a totalitarian, undeniably patriarchal assurance in every cog of

society. And we envy them for that. Because, though these wise guys may not be particularly lawful, they sure know how to get a job done.

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