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by Plag Report Report

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ITALIAN AMERICAN CRIME: THE ROLE OF AMERICAN CINEMA IN STEREOTYPING
ITALIAN-AMERICANS

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As the Italians immigrated to the U.S, the Italian-American crime, Mafia, became popular. The Mafia immense success resulted from illicit liquor trade, which was prohibited in the 1920s. After the ban, the Mafia diversified into other crime sectors in the country, such as illegal gambling and drug trafficking. However, the majority of the Italian immigrants, over 99%, infiltrated in labour unions as well as legitimate businesses like garment industry and constructions. Italian-American secret rituals, aggressive crimes and notorious individuals such as John Gotti and Al Capone have emerged as popular culture in U.S. films, and Television shows portray cultural values and also communicate myths of a specific society. The American film industry has stereotyped Italian-Americans. Despite a vast history that shows Italian-Americans involvement in crime, hardly 1% of them are involved in criminal activities¹. Hollywood has utilized this small percentage to stereotype Italian-Americans negatively. This paper discusses how American cinema created the Italian mobster stereotype. To achieve the goal, the essay will provide three films that have immensely created the 'gangster' stereotype, followed by a comprehensive analysis.

The American cinemas have overrepresented Italians as mobsters in TVs and films. Presently, there are over five hundred films of the Italian-gangster genre that continue to perpetuate the myth of Italian-Americans as criminals². The following are examples of television shows and films that have significantly contributed to stereotyping Italians.

¹ Dickson-Gilmore, J. "The History of Native Americans and the Misdirected Study of the Organised Crime." *The Global Crime*, 2008: 66-83.

² Gardner, G., and Gardner, H. *The Godfather Movies: A Pictorial History*. New York: Wings Books, 1993.

The first film is *The Godfather* that served as the pioneer of the model of the Italian mobster genre. The film was adapted from Mario Puzo's book, *Godfather*. It was directed by Ford Coppola and was released in 1972. The plot of the film revolves around Don Vito Corleone (Godfather) and his sons who run organized crime in New York City. Vito's role in the Corleone family is handling business matters such as negotiation of crime deals and planning on the extermination of some people when necessary. In a situation where the father is incapacitated, the sons are mandated with their father roles such as heading the family and ensuring the business is operating correctly. A setting that Coppola uses to show the Italian gangster behavior is Michael Corleone, Vito's son, change of character from a good son to a violent and a cold-blooded mob boss³. After Michael took over the leadership of the family business, he initiates an operation to systematically kill all the people who had attacked the Corleone's family.

Another film that created the Italian gangster stereotype is *Goodfellas* film which was written and directed by Martin Scorsese. This film was immensely inspired by the *Godfather* film and was based on a true story of the life of Lucchese crime family and their business associate Henry Hill. The film largely centers on Hill and his close allies and mentors as they commit different crimes such as drug peddling and series of heists⁴. At some point, Hill is convicted, and numerous of his partners murdered while at the illegal businesses. The main characters in the film like starring Ray Liotta, Joe Pesci, and Robert De Niro are involved in massive bloodshed, excessive aggression and heavy drug use.

Another film that heavily perpetuates gangster stereotype against Italian-Americans is *The Sopranos*. David Chase created the film and aired from 1999 to 2007. The plot revolves

³ Maranzana, S. "Italian americans and the Mythology of Crime: The Godfather Paradox." *ResearchGate*, 2018: 1-9.

⁴ Dickson-Gilmore, J. "The History of Native Americans and the Misdirected Study of the Organised Crime." *The Global Crime*, 2008: 66-83.

around a fictional Mafia, Tony soprano, who runs a crime organization in New Jersey. Chase depicts the problem that Italian-American mobsters face while trying to balance between their normal family life as well as criminal operations⁵. This is underpinned when Soprano visits a psychiatrist where he openly expresses his problems in executing his family duties like a husband and a father while at the same time being the leader of the criminal organization.

In the three films, the negative stereotyping of Italians is very apparent. The Italian-Americans are portrayed as violent and coldblooded gangsters whose aim is individual gains and money. In the Godfather film, the Mafias are portrayed as unintelligent individuals and helpless individual who uses violence to ensure their criminal organizations are beneficial to them. For instance, at the start of the film, some people visit Vito at his daughter's wedding ceremony and request him for some favors which they would repay him with other services. Prior to his meeting with Vito, Luca Brasi has practiced his speech; however, the henchman still stammers his words and appears as a simple-minded man. Also, Brasi appears to be intimidated with the fact that they were meeting in person with the Godfather. These characters perpetuate negative stereotypes that Italian-Americans are both unintelligent people and hard people to deal with. Also, following the stereotyped character of Italians in the Godfather, The Sopranos and Goodfellas storylines and characters imitated Coppola's setting. The films incorporated staple characters such as henchmen, oblivious women, unapproachable bosses, underbosses and bratty children. In the entire Sopranos film, the creator, David Chase, makes many references to the Godfather where characters keep on reciting quotes adapted from the film. For example, Silvio Dante keeps on reciting the common line in the third Godfather film, "Just when I thought I was

⁵ Maranzana, S. "Italian americans and the Mythology of Crime: The Godfather Paradox." *ResearchGate*, 2018: 1-9.

out, they pull me back in"⁶. Amazingly, Chase makes an important move in the film where he introduces the issue of stereotyping where mob characters refute claims their involvement in crimes and term it as the conception of people that Italians are criminals. For instance, in responding to questions that her daughter was involved in crime, Tony Soprano, the mob boss, asserted that "everybody immediately assumes that you are mobbed up because you are an Italian. It is a negative stereotype, and it is offensive"⁷. However, it is actually hard to determine whether it was Chase's way of film or it was Sopranos clever way to clear claims that her daughter was involved from the Mafia.

Another apparent stereotype created in the American cinemas was that of oblivious women. In the three films, the wives of the boss gangsters are completely not involved in the gangster; instead, they serve as accessories to their husbands. For example, in the Godfather film, Vito's wife, Carmela Soprano, does not speak so often and when she does, her English is very poor. Mostly, the women are shown caring children and in the kitchen preparing food. These characters portray Italian-American women as unconscious to the operations of their husbands. Also, Carmela does not question her husband on unfaithfulness issues to hide the husband's vulnerability to potential enemies. This action portrays Italian wives as women who stand by their husbands no matter his negative actions such as unfaithfulness and murders.

While films portray Italian-Americans as mobsters, a minimal percentage of the entire population of Italians inhabitants in America is involved in mob activities. However, numerous films have created a general conception that Italian-Americans are hardened and violent criminals. According to research, of the 1512 Italian films, only 476 show Italians on a positive

⁶ Cavallero, J., and Plasketes, G. "Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 2014: 178-187.

⁷ Maranzana, S. "Italian americans and the Mythology of Crime: The Godfather Paradox." *ResearchGate*, 2018: 1-9.

note. The remaining 1036 depict Italian-Americans in a negative light. Five hundred twenty-eight of the negative characters feature crime contents, both fictional and real, while 460 of the films depict Italians as unintelligent. A report by Italic Institute of America disapproves the perpetuated gangster stereotype. The report that was based on 2010 Census shown that of the 17 Million Italians in the U.S, only 1150 of the people have been convicted of the crime activities⁸. The number translated to about 0.0068% of the total Italians convicted for crime reasons. The stereotyping of Italians was more apparent in the 1980s when the most Italian-related films showed more contents of uneducated and criminal Americans⁹. In addition, even in the present day, television shows and films continue to perpetuate criminal stereotype on Italian Americans. As a result, the general public is subjected to make judgments of Italian-Americans based on the preconceived beliefs that are deeply rooted in the films and television shows.

Conclusion

The Italian-Americans involved in the Mafia activities are less than 1% of their total population. However, American Cinema has played a significant part in stereotyping them as criminals. The Godfather film served as the model for Italian-American criminal genre, and since the production of the film, Italians have been viewed as unintelligent and violent criminals. Other films such as goodfellas and the Sopranos have immensely perpetuated the stereotyping of the Italians. The wives of the Italian criminals have been portrayed as oblivious and individuals who would stand by their husbands despite their bad characters. However, the stereotypes against the

⁸ Cavallero, J., and Plasketes, G. "Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 2014: 178-187.

⁹ Dickson-Gilmore, J. "The History of Native Americans and the Misdirected Study of the Organised Crime." *The Global Crime*, 2008: 66-83.

Italians have been disapproved by the fact that only 0.0068 of the entire population has been convicted of Mafia involvements.

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