

## “DON VITO CORLEONE: THE ORPHAN OF FAIRNESS”

by Bill Dal Cerro  
(Word Count: 6344)



In 2023 America, the word of the day is “woke,” that is, being attuned, as any good citizen should, of racial and social injustice. Fittingly, one of the spill-overs to wokeness is a reaction to the stereotypical ways in which various racial, ethnic, religious and (now) sexual groups have historically been portrayed in popular culture, specifically, movies and TV shows. Recently, this has even crossed into the cultural arena of childrens’ books. As a Dr. Seuss character might quip: “Out with the crude and the rude! In with the new and the true!” The children shall indeed lead us.

As a society, we have finally come to terms with how perniciously prejudice spreads when given the imprimatur of media approval. American Edward Bernays, considered the father of public relations, recognized this in 1928:

*“In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or ethical thinking, we are dominated by a small number of persons...who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind” (Propaganda).*

Bernays's dictum didn't include one of the most powerful cabals of all: Hollywood. And Bernays himself might have been shocked by the staying power of one particular image—indeed, its transformation from ethnic caricature to respectable personage: Don Vito Corleone, the gangster played by Marlon Brando in Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film, "The Godfather."

Stepin' Fetchit? The Frito Bandito? The shyster lawyer? The inscrutable Oriental? The "red savage" Native American? The mincing homosexual? Gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, and gone--and good riddance. Not only are these caricatures insulting; they make for bad art. And they do a great disservice to the complexity of American history, reducing it to pabulum.

Yet, Don Vito Corleone? He has more staying power than any centuries-old vampire, whether elegant Count Dracula or the ashen-faced Edward Cullen of "Twilight." Somehow, his image still transcends wokeness. But, why?

### **THE CREATION OF A MYTH**

This year 2022 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Francis Ford Coppola's Oscar-winning epic *The Godfather*. Since 1972, this film has had a special place in America's heart. It is, its champions say, more than just a movie. Over the years, we have been told that the three-hour mob saga (and its sequels) represents family, honor, and the immigrant struggle. It is, in short, the quintessential film about "America."

*The Godfather's* timing was also perfect: It came after the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, when the Vietnam War, racial strife, political assassinations, drug addiction, and domestic chaos ran rampant. In short, America needed a return to an era of rules and reasonable men. And in the figure of the fictional Don Vito Corleone, Americans got what they needed: a patriarchal figure *par excellence*, a man who seemed to transcend politics.

*The Godfather*, its defenders say, isn't really about criminals, or even Italians. It was, and remains, a work of art that wove our nation's immigrant roots with the struggles of the free market and the eternal quest for justice. To underscore this point, Mario Puzo, author of the original book and co-writer of the movie, quoted Honore de Balzac's statement that "*behind every fortune is a crime.*" The Italian underpinnings were seen as superfluous.

Even Marlon Brando, a stalwart liberal, when asked before the film's release about the stereotyping of Italians as gangsters, simply rationalized it: "*This is a film about American capitalism.*" One could also say the same about the heroic cowboys who regularly murdered Native Americans in John Ford westerns, clearing the way for vast Caucasian real estate acquisitions.

Such attitudes are what led *The Godfather* to become the single most regressive cultural and political influence on any American ethnic group since D.W. Griffith's civil war epic, *Birth of A Nation* (1915). It advanced the art of film but also set Italian Americans back 100 years, resurrecting criminal stereotypes of the community created by 19<sup>th</sup>-century yellow journalists. There had been films with Italian gangsters before, such as Edward G. Robinson as Enrico Bandello in 1931's "Little Caesar," but they were always outsider figures, alienated from even their own Italian families.

Puzo and Coppola, however, pulled off a magical sleight-of-hand worthy of Penn and Teller: They made criminal behavior and Italian culture *one-and-the-same*; that is, indistinguishable. The warm, romantic glow which infused the entire Corleone family was the balm a morally shaken America needed. A fictional gangster was treated with "dignity" and Italian Americans lost theirs, particularly in the very important realm of popular culture.

Although Italian Americans did finally assimilate into American society, as noted in a famous 1983 New York Times Magazine cover story, our media image remains frozen-in-time. The fictional Don Vito Corleone became--and remains--the official visual symbol of Italian American culture.

In the 1860s, General Philip Sheridan is said to have stated "*the only good Indian is a dead Indian.*" It is a deeply racist trope, yet not very different than Hollywood's apparent view of Italians: "*The only interesting Italians are the evil Italians.*" So: Isn't it time to wake up and smell the cappuccino?

## **AN OBJECTIVE ANALYSIS**

Let's make one thing clear: Loving *The Godfather* doesn't make anyone a bad person. It's possible to appreciate the film's artistic qualities, such as Gordon Willis's justifiably famous cinematography, with its innovative use of back-lighting, without unfairly invoking them as signs of ethnic prejudice.

But, let's also make another thing clear: Like any public work (think of the debates over historical statues in the summer of 2020), *The Godfather* also

has its not-so-ambiguous side. An objective look at how the success of the film negatively impacted Italian Americans is long overdue, particularly in a period of social upheaval. A revered film carries more weight than a statue.

With apologies to David Letterman, here are the Top Ten Reasons why “The Godfather” ultimately did more harm than good to Italian Americans:

- 1) It criminalized the history of the Italian American immigrant experience—a history in which, ironically, Italians were themselves victims of nativist violence (e.g. the 1891 massacre in New Orleans, the 1927 execution of labor activists Sacco & Vanzetti, and President Roosevelt declaring 600,000 Italian Americans “enemy aliens” in World War II, with 10,000 in California alone losing their homes).
- 2) It reaffirmed the prejudicial belief that criminal behavior is integral to Italian culture, regardless of where Italians emigrate.
- 3) It distorted the way Italian Americans viewed themselves, reinforcing a sense of inferiority via Anglo-American historical dominance.
- 4) It frustrated (and still does) Italian American artists in Hollywood who have tried to present Italian history/culture in non-stereotypical ways.
- 5) It made Italian Americans continual objects of mockery by cartoonists, stand-up comics, and late-night talk-show hosts.
- 6) It influenced the way “objective” journalists report on crime, many of whom used references to the film as a source of legitimate research.
- 7) It emboldened ambitious states’ attorneys to view Italian surnamed criminals as meal tickets for further political ascendancy.
- 8) It deflected the focus of the FBI from pursuing far more dangerous groups such as drug cartels, terrorists, and white supremacists.
- 9) It stifled the careers of several national Italian American politicians to our nation’s highest political offices: President and Vice President.
- 10) Finally, it has created a billion-dollar spin-off industry which has since spread to every conceivable media outlet in America: television, books,

theater, advertising, cable, and video games. In 2004, it even bled into children’s programming with “Shark Tale,” an animated film which caricatures Italian Americans much as the racist---and now banned---Walt Disney cartoon “Song of the South” mocked African Americans in 1949.



(Source: Walt Disney Company)



(Source: Dreamworks Animation)

For good measure, 2016’s cartoon “Zootopia” also featured a “Godfather” parody aimed at impressionable youngsters. The theme of that film was tolerance, a feel-good message which no doubt helped it to win an Oscar.

If *The Godfather* was the answer to a battered America’s prayers, it was also, first and foremost, a perverse romantic valentine to patriarchy. This is obvious via its popularity among men from all cultures and walks of life. And it especially hit a nerve with many Italian American men, then and now.

### **THE SHAME IS OVERCOME**

The 1940s and 1950s were, for Italian American males, eras of public humiliation, an outgrowth of the seeming incompetence and cowardice of Italy’s armed forces during the Second World War. Joe DiMaggio and the world of sports only carried so far in a man’s world. World War II still loomed large during this era. History was what the English and Anglo-Americans said it was. Jokes and zingers abounded, as they still do, denigrating Italian military prowess, despite evidence to the contrary.

Similarly, in this country, Italian American soldiers, although they comprised the largest ethnic fighting force overseas, found their

accomplishments overlooked and seldom lauded. World War II heroes like Sgt. John Basilone and ace fighter pilot Don Gentile were overshadowed by Hollywood's chosen golden boy, Audie Murphy. Images in American popular culture were no better, be they the bumbling immigrant in *Life With Luigi* or a talking mouse on *The Ed Sullivan Show* named Topo Gigio.

Ominously, the only Italian men treated with any degree of seriousness in the 1950s media were Italian crooks, whether real (appearing at U.S. Congressional hearings) or rehashed (the popular show *The Untouchables*).

The salvation for Italian American males came with the publication of Mario Puzo's 1968 pulp novel, *The Godfather*. There was no surrender or white flag in the gang wars. Instead of columns of war-weary Italians shrugging off to prison camps, or of semi-literate blue-collar workers toiling in America, "men of honor" defended their turf ("we go to the mattresses!").

When brought to the big screen in 1972, *The Godfather* restored the macho to the Italian American male image.

### **MACHO TURNS TO RIDICULE**

Italian Americans soon discovered, however, that *The Godfather* wasn't the magic makeover for which they had hoped. Puzo's novel, amplified via Coppola's grand-opera film, devolved over the decades into comical spin-offs or violent TV shows with an intellectual veneer (HBO's *The Sopranos*).



Even once-respected terms within Italian culture---'godfather,' 'family,' and 'soprano'---are currently used as insults by non-Italians. Ultimately, the Italian American gangster has become an overweight, blue-collar guy with a goofy nickname and only a passing command of the English language.

Fifty years after *The Godfather*, the Italian American gangster is anything but intimidating. His crimes pale in comparison to other ethnic groups who perpetrate billions in Medicaid fraud, financial schemes, identity theft, and drug trafficking. These crimes dwarf the sums that a handful of Italian thugs still gain from sports betting and loan sharking. There is little macho left in the aging wise-guys whom the FBI regularly parade before the media..

Instead of an Italian American version of Robin Hood or Billy the Kid, the “made men” in real-life were mostly high school drop-outs, pathetic shadows of the “men of honor” the cinema has conned us with. It is instructive to note, for example, that real-life wise-guys, impressed by the dignified classiness of the fictional Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*, soon began cleaning up their own verbiage and dressing in three-piece suits.

In the book *Conversations with Scorsese*, film critic Richard Schickel and filmmaker Martin Scorsese address this overlooked element of the film:

Schickel: “*I think (the Godfather) is a great movie.*”

Scorsese: “*I do, too.*”

Schickel: “*But it’s a total fantasy.*”

Scorsese: “*It is, yes.*”

Schickel: “*I mean, Mario Puzo just made all of that stuff up. I don’t think it’s observed reality on his part.*”

Scorsese: “*But does great art have to be reality? No.*”

Puzo told anyone who would listen that he did no actual research on the film, and was often offended if people thought he was part of organized crime. But even though it came straight from the horse’s mouth (rather than a horse’s head—yet another made-up incident), Puzo was given guru status.

The possible real-life inspiration for Don Vito Corleone—another Vito, the New York crime boss Vito Genovese---was far from a kind, grandfatherly figure. He murdered people, made millions off of heroin, and died in prison. One can’t imagine him cavorting happily in a tomato garden with a child, as Don Vito does so memorably toward the end of the movie.

In short, “reel” Italian gangsters overtook “real” Italian gangsters in the public’s imagination. Even though 99.9% of Italians, here and in Italy, had nothing do to with crime or criminal gangs, *The Godfather* became the holy

gospel of the Italian immigrant experience. The kick-ass Corleones became role models of toughness to all Americans from all walks of life.

One can only imagine what Coppola must think now when he sees his classical dialogue and nomenclature applied to doddering street thugs.

Objective journalists delight in playing up Italian thugs' nicknames, or quoting lines from the movie while covering court cases. FBI agents and states' attorneys know that prosecuting Italian surnamed gamblers will move them up the career ladder. Politicians such as former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, who prosecuted mob guys, mimicked Don Vito Corleone at public fundraisers---not to scare people, but to amuse them. Every season, and with every new cast, NBC's "Saturday Night Live" does mob sketches.

Essentially, Coppola's work of art ushered in an age of fossilized ridicule, which has only hardened over the past 50 years. In fact, anti-Italian disdain seems to be the one thing which unites both the political Right (the late Rush Limbaugh mocking Dr. Anthony Fauci with an exaggerated Italian accent) and the political Left (the comedy duo of Jordan Peele and Keegan Michael-Key via a sketch in which a man shoots his family dead after mistaking a surprise birthday party for a mob "hit"). Don Vito Corleone for president!

### **A DEEPLY FLAWED CULTURE?**

Talk to any average Italian American across the nation and ask them if anyone in their family is a criminal, associates with criminals, or raises their kids to be criminals. The answer will be a largely resounding, "No. We're good Americans." Why, then, do so many of them embrace a film that portrays them as bad Americans? How can they not see that the fictional Don Vito Corleone, as the late New York governor Mario Cuomo once pointed out, is basically a caricature of their own fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers, who were genuine men of honor-- that is, hard-working Americans? Why do they not distinguish between the form of *The Godfather* (its cinematic skill) and its content (the negative imagery)?

In addition to living vicariously through its tough-guy characters, millions of Italian Americans—men and women--still worship *The Godfather* because it provides a nebulous sense of pride about their heritage. In truth, they probably know very little, if anything, about Italy or Italian culture. They think that watching *The Godfather* provides them with a direct pipeline:



*“Yes, I’ve been to Italian weddings like that”*

*”I love cannoli”*

*”My grandfather had a tomato garden just like Don Vito’s”*

Watching a film is much easier than actually reading a book or traveling to Italy. More Italian Americans have probably been to the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas than have actually visited the picturesque city near Lake Como.

This “dumbing down” isn’t unique to Italian Americans, of course; however, the extent to which they refuse to move beyond the godfather image is disturbing. One can understand, if not condone, culturally ignorant Italian Americans from the post-WWII era embracing the macho of mafia lore, but there is no such excuse today. Assimilation has taken place. We live in an era of so-called sensitivity. Stereotyping is no longer accepted.

Sadly, what the previous generation has passed down to the current one is the same sense of ethnic fatalism characteristic of their immigrant grandparents—who, to be fair, were also cruelly caricatured by the popular media over a century ago. It is basically the psychological equivalent of a shoulder shrug, a gesture which echoes the sense of shame and low self-esteem likewise inflicted upon their greenhorn ancestors: *“Don’t make waves...Stop speaking Italian...We are inferior...We can’t do anything about insults...We’re lucky that America let us come here.”*

In fact, the Founding Fathers of our country rejected their English homeland and took inspiration from another nation: Italy. It was from classical Rome and the Italian Renaissance that people like Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams took succor. There is even a real godfather, if you will, who guided our new nation: the political writer Filippo Mazzei, who provided his Virginia neighbor, Thomas Jefferson, with feedback and ideas for the Declaration of Independence. To this day, the Tuscan city of Poggio a Caiano remains “Sister Cities” with Charlottesville, Virginia, a symbol of this friendship.



FILIPPO MAZZEI

(Source: U.S. Post Office)

The rejection of classical Italian culture, or even an appreciation of notable Italians throughout American history, is what has led to the current erosion of any sense of genuine ethnic pride among Italian Americans. It is a long, sad slide from real people like Mazzei to the fictional Don Vito to the panoply of goombas, guidos, and reality show goofballs who permeate every American media outlet today---images which non-Italians also embrace.

### **CINEMATIC SCARLET LETTER**

If the media is your source of knowledge, Italian Americans top the chart for criminal mischief. Thanks to *The Godfather*, America doesn't enjoy hearing about the endless war on drugs against Hispanic and Asian criminals. Corporate crime is multi-ethnic and boring, and Eastern European mega-thieves who regularly fleece America have little cultural romance about them. But these criminals needn't fear the spotlight when a don or a wise-guy hits the newsprint. In the media's eyes, forty-year-old mob crimes consistently outrank today's mass murders or terrorist bombings.

In his seminal 1986 book, *The Story of English*, writer Robert MacNeil explains why: "*Hollywood's love affair with gangster movies has ensured a wide dissemination of criminal slang. The fact that these words—in the minds of many—now come with Italian accents, has to do with the power of the media, not the mafia.*"

What about the power of the U.S. government? Within the space of fifteen years, the U.S. Congress held three public hearings on gamblers and low-lives during the post-WWII era: the Kefauver Commission of 1954, the Valachi Hearings of 1963, and Commission on Organized Crime of 1967.

Such Congressional hearings, if held today, and if focused on other ethnic, racial, or religious groups, would immediately be denounced by the media (and rightly so) for fostering unacceptable negative stereotyping. But these

hearings put the new medium of television on the map, just as the popularity of the 1932 film “Scarface” reflected the growing cultural power of film.

The results of all three investigations were inconclusive; they found no evidence of a single, secret, omnipotent organization controlling crime in all 50 United States. The reality is that these were simply scattered criminal gangs comprised of Italian surnamed crooks who did what other criminal gangs always did and still do: initiate members, gamble or sell drugs, coordinate scams (e.g. the Las Vegas casino skims and NY gasoline rip-offs of the 1980s), corrupt local politicians, invest illegal money into legitimate businesses, murder members who disobey their rules, etc. Nothing new here.

Yet the idea of a mythological criminal dragon hiding in the shadows, ready to breathe fire, took hold of the public imagination. Puzo’s novel and Coppola’s film added the mythology and the cultural texture just as Da Vinci and Michelangelo transformed the Bible from words to paintings.

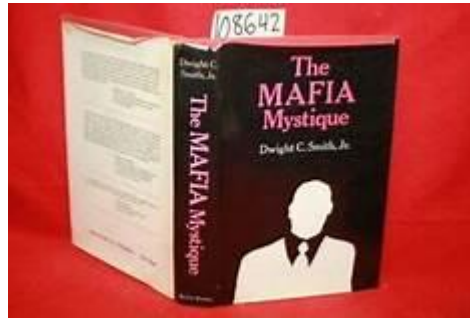
Yet even at the time, public figures like U.S. attorney general Ramsey Clark were disturbed by the media’s fixation on Italian surnamed criminals:

*“Organized crime is a very small part of America’s crime. What does it have to do with the juvenile offender, or with street crime, murder, rape, mugging, assault, robbery, white collar crimes, protests, riots, school disturbances? The general violence in our environment is barely touched by organized crime. The greatest harm we could suffer from organized crime would be to distract us from the major problems we face if we are to control crime in America.” (Crime in America, 1970).*

Clark, who passed away on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021, got to see his concerns realized on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001: Fanatical terrorists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C., killing nearly 3,000 innocent Americans. While a slew of FBI agents tailed John Gotti’s drug-dealing brother miles away, “pure evil,” as President George W. Bush referred to it, took place in downtown Manhattan.

Although one can’t really compare such a large-scale massacre to anything ever perpetrated by Italian criminals here or in Italy, President Bush, a few days later, publicly compared the terrorist group Al-Qaeda to “the mafia” (!).

Scholars in the early 1970s did expose the media's obsession with Italian criminals—for example, Professor Dwight Smith in his 1974 book The Mafia Mystique. But Smith and Clark were lonely voices in the wilderness. Calm, measured research can't compete with Hollywood hype. It still can't.



Predictably, most Italian Americans fell for the hype; they were all-too-eager to embrace this grafting of crime and culture on the big screen. It was magic to see “an Italian story” sweep America. Pizzerias, delis, and gift shops amplified the message that the Italians were the big shots. It was the first time Hollywood had ever lavished such production values on a story focused exclusively on characters with vowels at the end of their names. Suddenly, other ethnic crime syndicates, despite their own notoriety, became invisible.

It is noteworthy that no other American ethnic group has ever achieved the cinematic status of Italians in crime, despite scattered attempts by various filmmakers (e.g., *The Yakuza* by Sydney Pollack, *Once Upon a Time in America* by Sergio Leone, and *The Road to Perdition* by Sam Mendes).

Quick sidenote on Sergio Leone: Due to the success of his 1960s spaghetti westerns, he was initially approached to direct “The Godfather.” But, if you’ll pardon the pun, he refused the offer. He said that the film glorified the mafia and defamed the revered Italian concept of family. He was correct.

### **AMERICA’S ETCH-A-SKETCH**

Unlike pioneer filmmaker D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), the scandalous civil war epic which demonized African Americans, *The Godfather* won’t “sleep with the fishes” very soon. As demonstrated by that last sentence, the film’s famous catch-phrases, and its story of family loyalty, have become part of accepted Americana. It is even a favorite film of former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump---a cutting irony,

given that another former president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, praised Griffith's now-tarnished film as "*history written in lightning!*"

Times and sensibilities have changed, and yet the idea of Italians-as-criminals holds strong. The content of the film isn't seen as prejudicial at all. Indeed, in the film *You've Got Mail* (1998), Tom Hanks's character refers to *The Godfather* as "*the sum of all wisdom.*" One wonders how Hanks's sexist character in that film would react if he knew that Puzo based Don Vito Corleone on a woman—his own mother, Maria. Quote the dutiful son Mario:

*"Whenever the Godfather opened his mouth, in my own mind I heard the voice of my mother. I heard her wisdom, her ruthlessness, and her unconquerable love for her family and for life itself, qualities not valued in women at the time. (Vito's) courage and loyalty came from her; his humanity came from her."*

A few years ago, the American Film Institute voted *The Godfather* the second-greatest American film of all time, after *Citizen Kane*. It has even crept into *Sight & Sound* magazine's famous "Critic's Poll," a Top Ten list of great movies voted on by critics around the world every ten years.

Yet, in the final analysis, is *The Godfather* truly a fresh and original work of art, or of propaganda masquerading as art—a blurring of fact and fiction?

Propaganda is a technique whereby facts are selectively omitted in order to collectively influence a large audience, either to buy a product or, in this case, to accept an image of a community. And propaganda quite often uses stereotypes—that is, a limited way of looking at a particular ethnic group, over and over and over again.

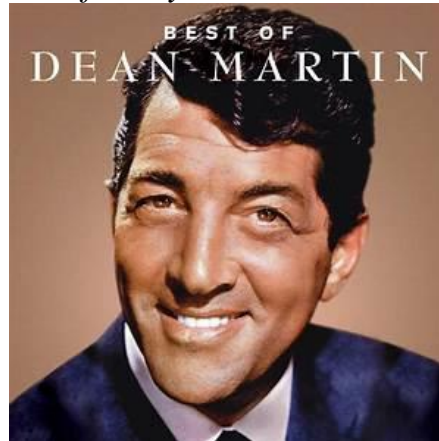
In 1968, when a down-and-out novelist named Mario Puzo needed to erase some gambling debts, he knew that writing a mafia story would catch on enough to make some money. Newspaper articles and TV Congressional hearings had long conditioned public perceptions. What he could not have predicted is that, when his pulp novel was finally turned into a movie, he had successfully turned a well-upholstered prejudice into a template of success.

As it turned out, the film broke box-office records, and it remained, for over a decade, one of the highest-grossing American movies of all-time, surpassing even *Gone With the Wind*. To add icing on top of the cannoli

cake, American film critics, with few exceptions (John Simon and Stanley Kauffmann among them), praised Coppola's work as "*the greatest gangster movie ever made in this country*" (so wrote the *New Yorker's* Pauline Kael).

### **FIRST DO NO HARM**

Some high-profile Italian Americans did pan the film when it came out, particularly singers Tony Bennett (born Anthony Benedetto) and Dean Martin (born Dino Crocetti). Bennett called the film's linking of crime with Italian culture "*pernicious,*" adding, "*It gives the impression that organized crime is all Italian, when, in fact, it consists of many nationalities.*"



Dean Martin didn't like what it did to the Italian people: "*There was no call for that,*" he told reporter Kay Gardella of the *New York Daily News*. "*I've met gangsters in real-life, and they weren't all Italian.*"

In 1974, the St. Louis priest and social activist, Father Sal Polizzi, told *TIME Magazine* that "*every time someone uses the word 'mafia', they take away my U.S. civil rights.*" He is correct: the mafia is a terrorist group **in Sicily**.

It didn't help that the one protest movement which did grow out of the film's making was led by Joe Colombo, a shady individual with a previous gambling conviction. He was also connected to the Profaci criminal gang. Colombo's movement happened accidentally: What started as an innocent, one-man protest against the FBI---he felt they were harassing him and his family, particularly his son---soon garnered thousands of supporters, most of whom joined his Italian American Civil Rights League to legitimately protest "*The Godfather.*" Many members had no inkling of Colombo's past.

Ever the opportunist, Colombo became a media celebrity, which didn't sit well with his unsavory associates. In 1971, in front of a huge crowd at Columbus Circle in New York, Colombo was gunned down by someone posing as a journalist. To this day, no one knows who committed the murder. Colombo languished in a coma and died seven years later in 1978.

The Colombo incident, however, does beg the question: Though the messenger, Joe Colombo, was flawed, does that mean that his message of rampant media defamation was groundless? It would be a bit like trashing Transcendental Meditation simply because of its history of corrupt swamis.

In 1987, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Mike Royko, a non-Italian, recognized this by coining the phrase "The Godfather Syndrome." Royko, who was defending then-New York governor Mario Cuomo against charges of oversensitivity for speaking out against anti-Italian slurs, noted how Coppola's film perpetuated a stereotype so powerful that it made objective journalists view Italian surnamed politicians with suspicion. It is this ingrained prejudice which many still consider the major reason why the eloquent Cuomo ultimately decided against a run for the presidency in 1992.

Cuomo had a good reason to take a pass. When Geraldine Ferraro was selected in 1984 to be the first female vice-presidential candidate for a national ticket, reporter Sam Donaldson demanded to know, on national television, if any of her relatives were "*in the mafia*." Imagine reporters today asking our current female vice president, Kamala Harris, if any of her relatives are crack cocaine dealers, based on nothing but crude stereotypes.

In 1991, during a televised press conference, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, asked about the possibility of Cuomo as a potential challenger to President George H. Bush, kept repeating Cuomo by his first name, Mario, telling a reporter: "*That's his name. Mario, Mario. Mario. He better get used to it.*" The not-so-subtle implication: Mario was an "ethnic."



Indeed, there is a veritable laundry list of Italian Americans whose careers in politics were directly blunted by The Godfather Syndrome. To wit:

- a) Senator John Pastore (D-RI)--a popular potential VP candidate for President Johnson's reelection campaign in 1964, Pastore was nixed after aides pointed out that his "*eye-talian*" last name would be a handicap, given the 1963 Joe Valachi organized crime hearings;
- b) Joseph Alioto--the dynamic mayor of San Francisco in the 1960s, and a revered name in local business and politics on the West Coast, Alioto successfully sued LOOK Magazine for defamation for associating him with criminals; he later lost bids both for California governor and a possible VP spot with Jimmy Carter;
- c) Albert Rosellini--the popular and reform-minded governor of Washington State who oversaw the 1963 World's Fair, Rosellini's comeback bid in the mid-70s was derailed by "Godfather" caricatures;
- d) Lido "Lee" Iacocca--the brilliant businessman who rescued the Chrysler Company from bankruptcy in the 1980s, Iacocca was compared to a "mafia don" in numerous media profiles;
- e) and, as mentioned, Geraldine Ferraro (D-NY), the first female vice presidential candidate on a major ticket (1984), whom journalists also tried to "mob up" via her father's gambling conviction and some of her husband's dead-beat real estate tenants (nothing was ever proven).

It should be noted that, even though Italian Americans eventually broke the ethnic glass ceiling in politics, it didn't mean that respect soon followed. In 2015, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York Mayor Bill DeBlasio, both progressive Democrats, were caricatured as gun-toting gangsters on the front cover of the New York Daily News—an unthinkable lapse in an era of so-called 'respect for diversity.' Endless mob movies, either new ones or those endlessly repeated on cable television, continue to make such prejudice palatable, even among highly educated Americans.

### **MEDIA LAND VS. REALITY**

Anyone who watches the myriad cable stations finds a fiber-optic America that is a lot different than the one we actually live in. Nearly every TV



series and movie is overloaded with minority and female super characters, whether on a fictitious police force, a hospital staff, or legal practice.

Judging by these shows, America has successfully transcended racism, anti-feminism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. But one group still remains a stock character in Media Land: the Italian American. Need a villain? Need a “white” person with serious moral flaws? Need a bumbling comical sidekick? These voids are easily filled with Italian surnamed characters.

*The Godfather* saga and its progeny continue to dominate the cable stations regardless of how dated they are. Though made in the 1970s, the film can usually be found at least three times a month somewhere on cable. And there are always *Godfather* festivals and anniversaries to put the series in a weeklong loop. It is easily more prevalent than either the *Wizard of Oz* or *Casablanca*. Such an immortal presence, along with ubiquitous reruns of *The Sopranos*, *Analyze This*, *Goodfellas*, and *Casino*, ensures that succeeding generations of young Americans are being imprinted with these anti-Italian criminal stereotypes, even in a more enlightened society.

(And not only as criminals, but as buffoons: Constant repeats of 1992’s *My Cousin Vinny*, featuring Joe Pesci as a dressed-in-leather lawyer, degrade the dignified public image of such Italian American lawyers as Vincent Bugliosi, who prosecuted 1960s killer Charles Manson, and Daniel Petrocelli, who literally made O.J. Simpson pay at his 1997 civil trial).

Despite the abundance of Italian American lawyers, doctors, teachers, police officers, firemen, businesspeople, sports figures, and military types in real society, you will rarely find them on television or in the cinema. Italian media stereotyping is so ubiquitous that even Italian American actors have internalized the negativity and generally play non-Italic roles—or, if they do choose to draw upon their heritage, they fall back upon the accepted clichés. Screenwriters use formulas to create characters. Why waste valuable screen time to develop a suspicious character when you can give him or her an Italian surname? The audience expects it and is always rewarded.

Remember, there were no good Italians in *The Godfather* saga, just different degrees of thieves and murderers. Ditto *Goodfellas* and *The Sopranos*.

In 2015, the Italic Institute of America, an educational think tank, completed a sampling of over 1,500 Hollywood movies made about Italians since 1915. Two statistics about *The Godfather* stood out:

- 1) There was a sharp increase in films featuring Italians as gangsters after the film's release (81%), an increase which shows no signs of slowing down fifty years later; and
- 2) Out of over 500 films featuring Italians as gangsters, nearly 90% of those movies (nine out of ten) portray fictional mobster characters with no basis in reality—in short, phony stereotypes, dreamed up by hack Hollywood screenwriters.

Like a virus, this pattern has since spread to American culture in general: advertisements, TV shows, and fictional novels continually feature evil or corrupt characters with Italian surnames. And, since the media make absolutely no attempt to balance such blanket negativity, “reel” Italians continue to overwhelm “real” Italians, an irony which would have dazzled—and surely sickened---a writer like Luigi Pirandello (himself a Sicilian). The idea that there are more Italian cops than Italian gangsters is seen as fantasy.



(Source: “The Simpsons,” Fox TV)

*Lisa Simpson's “guidebook” when learning the Italian language*

*(Author's note: Imagine Lisa studying a book on the Muslim religion featuring visual symbols of bombs or bombed-out buildings, e.g. 9-11).*

Filmmakers who have tried to fight this tsunami of negativity quickly found out what they were up against.

In 1996, for example, actor Stanley Tucci, frustrated at endless stereotypical portrayals of Italians on-screen, made “Big Night,” a comedy-drama about two Italian immigrant brothers in 1950s New Jersey (Tucci and Tony Shalhoub). Studio heads, although they liked the script, were uneasy about financing the film unless Tucci “put a mob guy in it” (a direct quote from Tucci to me when I interviewed him as a cub reporter at the time). In their minds, this made the film more palatable to audiences, more believable as an “Italian” story. To his credit, Tucci refused, and “Big Night” was eventually financed independently. Now, *there’s* a tough guy!



“BIG NIGHT” (1996)

Sadly, the people who have fostered this now-institutionalized cultural prejudice were the Italian-surnamed people behind *The Godfather*: Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola. These “insiders” were actually “outsiders.”

Shortly before his death in 1999, author Mario Puzo finally came clean in an Associated Press interview: *“Italian criminals never called each other godfather. Never. It was a term that I made up. I wanted to create a romantic myth, like the American cowboy.”*

And in a 2003 interview in *Cigar Aficionado Magazine*, Francis Ford Coppola shocked his interviewer by admitting that he *“knew nothing”* about Italian American criminals. Quote Coppola: *I had no experience or knowledge of the mafia. I based the film all on my uncles and relatives, who were musicians, businessmen or tool and dye makers...I used memories of what it was like in my family. In acting, they call it substitution*

(*Note*: Coppola’s father, Carmine, was a respected musician in Arturo Toscanini’s renowned NBC Orchestra of the 1930s and 40s)

## CODA:

It took decades, but D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" was finally put into its proper context. It is rarely, if ever shown; indeed, an announced public showing in Los Angeles in 2003 was cancelled by the mere hint of possible protests. It is now confined to art-house screenings or film school classrooms, where critics and instructors alike are careful to distinguish between the film's undeniable artistry (form) and its blatant racism (content). The shrinkage of that film has finally allowed African Americans their fair shot at living the Hollywood dream of proper media representation.

In yet another example of cultural irony, the D.W. Griffith Award, given annually to a respected Hollywood filmmaker, had Griffith's name removed in 1999. It was considered unseemly to give out an award named for a filmmaker who managed to distort--even uglify--the soul of an entire American ethnic group via one single film. Hollywood applauded the move.

And one of the chief proponents behind the change? Francis Ford Coppola!



To put this into perspective, I return to a conversation I once had in Rome with an Italian restaurateur. We talked about "The Godfather," a film he liked ("*good fiction*," he told me). He then noted that American tourists, more than others, were quick to make "mobster" jokes in his presence. He considered such comments rude and offensive, although his Italian sense of decorum prevented him from confronting such blatant ignorance directly.

He then asked me, quite exasperated, "*Are there no criminals anywhere in America? And if yes, only Italian ones? Basta! (Enough!)*"

The words of journalist Jack Newfield, written in a 1979 piece in the Village Voice ("*The Myth of Godfather Journalism*"), still ring true, then and now:

*“There is no one mafia godfather. There is no ‘capo di tutti capi’ There are just law enforcement agencies trying to arrest gangs of career criminals--and newspapers trying to improve circulation. The rest is hype, the rest is myth.”*

-30-

**“The Godfather’s” Cultural Big Lie:**



The fictional Don Vito Corleone, loving “Nonno” to his grandson



The real Vito Genovese, cold-blooded killer

**CULTURAL REGRESSION:**

Prior to “The Godfather”, Italian Americans were considered wholesome (Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon, below) and the essence of cool (Dean Martin, same).



## Don Vito Corleone: The Orphan of Fairness



In 2022 America, he stands alone, towering over the crude and offensive stereotypes of others (below)

