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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Commodifying the American Other: Irishness in American Gangster Films

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Contemporary US culture has absorbed, transformed and assimilated Irishness as a reliable multifunctional tool to suggest a great variety of meanings. Many critics have defined Irishness as a synonym of whiteness (Negra 2006bc, 2009; Eagan, 2006); others have tried to explain the tremendous visibility of the subculture as a result of a quest for the good old values (Third 2006: 224) or as a subtle manner of portraying new masculinities (Negra, 2009). This dissertation will analyse and discuss the portrayal of this particular identity in cinema in order to prove the unstoppable commodification of Irishness, in favour of an idealized, manufactured illusion. The focus of the study will be mainly placed on the gangster genre, the portrayal of masculinity, community, the relevance of authenticity and the implications of being an Irish-American criminal.

Introduction: Irishness in American Cinema

Among the most remarkable representations of Irishness in early American cinema are James Cagney (Fig.1) and his iconic film *Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman 1931). Cagney has often been considered the actor responsible for "establishing the Irish-American gangster as the most heroic urban criminal of Hollywood's Golden Age" (Shannon 2005:48). Nevertheless, the film reduces the references to Irishness to a minimum, to names—Paddy Ryan (Robert Emmet O'Connor)—, or the actor's ancestry (Carney's Irish-American upbringing). In spite of this, the film succeeds

Figure 1. James Cagney (1988-1986) in *The Public Enemy*

in portraying a hero who—contrary to Italian-American gangsters whose "desire for greatness" precipitates their destruction—represents an urban *Robin Hood* (Shannon 2005: 48-49). This character's tragic ending is a consequence of his unconditional loyalty to his neighbourhood. Furthermore, the usage of Irish-American references at this time was not a coincidence but a studied method of depicting an "ethnic vision of the city", a multicultural yet American scenario (Shannon 2005: 48-49). Ruth Barton argues that Irish-American productions have always shown a rejection of the *melting pot* ideal of America through an exaggerated manifestation of "inherited 'old country' attributions" such as the portrayal of drunkenness or an excessive usage of violence (2009b: 10). Yet, as an underlying theme throughout this essay, even in the most 'Irish' of the American-Irish productions, the depiction of racial identity is more often than not a mere vehicle for the celebration of American whiteness or, as Diane Negra proposes, Irishness is "a complex oscillation between otherness and whiteness" (2006b: 2).

Perhaps this "oscillation" is the reason behind the flourishing of films with Irish references during the last fifteen years, which among many others, include the following: *Gangs of New York* (2002), centred on the violent atmosphere that characterised the second half of the nineteenth century America: the arrival and life of the Irish Community in Five Points and the tremendously violent confrontation between these and the so-called "natives"; *25th hour* (2002), focused on the last hours of an American man of Irish descent before entering prison; *In America* (2002), which tells the story of a young couple and their two daughters, who manage to enter the United States and start a new life with the help of an African American man who is suffering from AIDS; *Mystic River* (2003), a drama with tints from the traditional gangster films, in which a group of childhood friends from a working-class neighbourhood in Boston are reunited by the murder of one of the member's daughter; *The Departed* (2006), a

remake of the Hong Kong production *Infernal Affairs* (2002) that will be further analysed later on in this dissertation; *P.S I love you* (2008), a romantic drama, in which a young widow receives letters from her dead *Irish* husband—a film that emphasises the romanticised view of the Irish identity and masculinity through simple, well known and widely accepted Irish symbols: an Irish funeral, pipes or the Celtic cross; and *Kill the Irishman* (2011), which could be considered the ultimate representation of a well-studied portrayal of the meaning of *Irishness* in the gangster genre.

A possible reason for this rise in popularity could be found in the 9/11 events. As the U.S. was depicted as a helpless victim of the tyranny of terrorism, many other voices, such as the recently departed Amiri Baraka, dared to challenge this mood of victimism by bringing to the fore the other side of the coin, the U.S. (and other powerful countries) as victimizers. Nonetheless, in the controversial "Somebody Blew Up America" (Amiri Baraka, 2002) the Irish are not placed together with the rest of the WASP community but with the oppressed, and the blameless victims:

Who killed the most niggers
Who killed the most Jews
Who killed the most Italians
Who killed the most Irish

[...]

Who invaded Grenada
Who made money from apartheid
Who keep the Irish a colony
Who overthrow Chile and Nicaragua later
[...]

This idea of Irish-American identity as intimately linked to oppression and forced to abandon their own country –always blaming the British Empire for their luck– could be found at the core of their overwhelming presence in the Police and the Fire-fighters

forces of New York or Boston.[1] Therefore, in the aftermath of the attacks not only were those forces conceived as the country's heroes but as a consequence, Irishness also became a synonym of the courageous *males* who gave their lives for those inside the towers. Diane Negra claims that a relevant changing point for the Irish-American occurred during a benefit concert in the Madison Square Garden, when the New York City fireman Michael Moran proudly stated "Kiss my royal Irish ass!," placing Moran as the one responsible for the unification of the event and the identity (2006c: 359-61). Nonetheless, what carries the most meaningful meaning in his speech is not only the reference to the famous *kiss* but also his previous words: "I *wanna* say one more thing, ***in the spirit of the Irish people***: Osama Bin Laden You can kiss my Royal Irish Ass."

When Moran mentions the *Irish spirit,* he is actually commodifying the notion of Irishness, using it as a *safe* vehicle to defy the terrorists without making it a national issue. Moreover, Moran uses Irish identity to legitimize the usage of the politically incorrect expression which not only implies a sense of toughness but also favours a vision of Irishness as a natural, exempt from formalities, brave identity. The fire-fighter could also have said "Kiss my white American ***," since for many scholars Irishness has become a synonym of whiteness (Negra 2006a, 2009; Eagan 2006; Casey 2006; Barton 2009a). Yet, the implications of it would have offended the many other communities and races involved in the act and who also suffered the attack. Besides, this particular usage of Irishness is far from original since a stereotyped view of the community is omnipresent in today's American visual culture; see for example the usage of it in the well known TV series *The Simpsons.* The Irish-descendant family is widely perceived as the average American family living in an average American village (Cantor 2001:69). They have become a mockery of tradition, and Irishness

[1] Their presence in these forces can be traced back to the Civil War, when the Irish Brigades, such as the famous 69th New York's Infantry, got involved in both sides of the conflict.

functions as an excuse for their politically incorrect behaviour—the drunkenness of the father—or as an explanation of their working class origins. They are a fully white American family whose Irishness is an accessory to their identity.

Another example of Irish commodification can be seen in Jim Sheridan's film *In America* (Fig.2). Catherine M. Eagan argues that the movie addresses one of the most American mottos: *from 'rags to riches'*. This critic states that "Americans like to imagine themselves as coming up from nothing," encouraging the myth of the American Dream. Sheridan's film also outlines the undeniable fact that American people (with the exception of Native Americans) were inevitably immigrants at some point in history (2006: 33-34). Therefore, *In America* is not only addressing the real immigrants but the entire nation, including the WASP[2], who like to see themselves as survivors, as true deservers of the Promised Land.

Figure 2. Johnny (Paddy Considine), Sarah (Samantha Morton), Christy (Sarah Bolger) and Ariel (Emma Bolger) in a scene from *In America*

To understand the reasons underlying the commodification of Irishness, it is necessary to take note of the search for uniqueness that has characterised American Society during the last decades. Cinema critics, such as Lester D. Friedman, attribute to the demands of the Black Communities the responsibility of encouraging other minor groups to claim their own representative "hyphenated" identity (1991: 12). In relation to this, Eagan quotes Pat Craig (1996) in an attempt to clarify the purpose at the core of

[2]White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

the rise in popularity of Irishness in the U.S.: “That bit of Celtic, Scottish or Irish blood they have is a sense of belonging and a sense of something that is kind of genuine, which is hard to get in America” (2006: 27). In other words, it is no longer enough to be a white citizen of the US, but people need something else to define themselves; a place to look up to or to blame for their flaws. As a consequence of this search for heritage, the notions *community* and *belonging* have gained enormous visibility. Nonetheless, even though it could be interpreted as a paradox, these terms also imply a sense of “exclusion” from mainstream society (Garcés 1995: 138). This exclusion and yet uniqueness is epitomised by the Gangster genre.

The Gangster Genre and American-Irishness

In almost every gangster film the characters are part of a closed, urban, ethnic *community* which—as mentioned above—identifies its members as much as it excludes them from mainstream society. Films have created an image of the gangster as a male character intimately linked to his neighbourhood—a strangled background in which he is born and where he often dies. At the same time, Hollywood has trained viewers to recognize a given sub-identity; if one asks an American citizen for the different kinds of gangsters they know, they would probably mention a long list of nationalities: Russians, Chinese, Jewish, Italians or *Irish* among others. This insistence on detaching the gangster from the WASP by emphasising their otherness could be interpreted as a consequence of the resistance towards the *melting pot* idea of the U.S. (Negra 2006b: 10).

Moreover, this depiction of criminality as something that characterises ‘The Other’ can be seen as an attempt to preserve and protect an idealized image of the safe,

good-hearted American society. Robert Warshow's celebrated article "The Gangster as a Tragic Hero" describes the gangster as a portrayal of our inner, subconscious desire of breaking with the idealised image of the American society. Warshow's gangster is an urban, self-created being who personifies both our aims and our fears (1946: 103). The mentioned emphasis on the American Other and Warshow's theory are complementary tools that enable a thorough understanding of the usage of Irishness in the genre. Through an Irish-American (or any other hyphenated American) gangster, directors offer the spectator the embodiment of their *darkest desires*, yet the pictured *otherness* functions as a fabricated safety net for the American identity. In other words, the punishable behaviours of a *Something*-American Gangster are the *Something's* fault, whereas the honourable, courageous actions are a result of the goodness in the American part of the individual.

Thomas H. Pauly summarizes the nature of the gangster by stressing their identity rather than their actions: "Our definition and perception of the male criminal is not confined to what he does. Often it is simply a case of who he is" (1997:776). From the beginning of this dissertation the very notion of Irishness has been put side by side with the idea of whiteness. Nonetheless, this is only true when considering today's perception of the subculture. The history of the Irish community in the U.S. is marked mainly by poverty, overcrowded neighbourhoods and racism. Once these factors have been considered, it is no wonder that criminality soon became associated with the newcomers. Only with the passing of time, together with hard work, a subtle abandonment of Catholicism and, to a great extent, favoured by their white skin were they considered fully White Americans. However, the cinema never forgot their dark beginnings, but made use of them to both prove the plausibility of the American Dream and to personify the most white of the gangsters. Cinema, both contemporary and early,

more often than not, has placed the focus on the early years and the working class neighbourhood in which the Irish-American gangster grew up. These films use a rather Freudian way of explaining their later lives, often relying on binary opposite outcomes: police/gangster (*Mystic River, State of Grace*) or even gangster/priest (*Angels with Dirty Faces,* Michael Curtiz 1938*).* Friendship, religion and community-life are central themes in these films, which could be interpreted as a return to the old values of the American Society.

The first cinematic Irish-American gangster, as has already been mentioned, was James Cagney. The two productions with a memorable Irish 'antihero'—*The Public Enemy* and *Angels with Dirty Faces*—begin with a young Cagney committing small crimes always accompanied by a brother-like friend. The destinies of the children are linked to each other as much as to the place they are living in. In *The Public Enemy,* Tom Powers's (Cagney) and Matt Doyle's (Edward Woods) lives are interrelated: Tom's decisions are not an individual matter but they have consequences on his childhood friend and right-hand man—Matt dies as a result of Tom's determination to abandon the safety of a secured place.

The close relationship between the two boys is also depicted in *Angels with Dirty Faces:* Rocky Sullivan (Cagney) and Jerry Connolly (Pat O'Brien) were – like Tom and Matty—partners in crime, yet this time they get caught. The future of the young boys is once again determined by Cagney's decisions. On this occasion, it is his determination to take all the blame and not giving Jerry's name to the police that ultimately results in their separation of paths:

Figure 3. Sullivan (Cagney) and Jerry (O'Brien) moments before the gangster's execution in *Angels with Dirty Faces.*

Rocky becomes a gangster and Jerry a Catholic priest. Nonetheless, their lives are reconnected when Rocky returns to his childhood neighbourhood. At the end, Rocky Sullivan is executed for his crimes, but he follows Father Jerry's advice and asks for mercy, which has a devastating yet advisory effect on the youngsters from his neighbourhood who admired him. Rocky Sullivan and Tom Powers' attitudes manage to place the focus on the morality, loyalty and humanity of the gangster rather than on his crimes. They embody both the heroic figure and the villain of the films and are ultimately defined by who they are—although at the end they always pay for what they did.

Several decades later, Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River* (2003) can be seen as an example of Irish commodification in contemporary thrillers and gangster films. Eastwood's film deals with the lives of three boys from your typical working class neighbourhood. The film starts with the kidnapping and abuse of one of the children (Fig.4) and goes on to examine their later lives: Jimmy (Sean Penn) is the owner of a shop in their old neighbourhood; he is an ex-convict and ex-gangster, though his criminal past will be revived as a result of his daughter's murder. Paradoxically, it is the discovery of the girl's body that reunifies the boys' paths. Sean (Kevin Bacon) has become a federal agent and is now in charge of the case; and the abused boy Dave (Tim Robbins) is a traumatised, protective father in a low-wage job. The film's Irishness relies on the viewer's capacity of recognition for it is based on names (Jimmy, Sean or Dave which are typical American-Irish names) and on the

Figure 4. Dave (left), Sean (centre), Jimmy (right) and the kidnapper in *Mystic River*.

religion they profess (the daughter of one of them is doing her First Communion). In this case, Irishness is used to enforce the meaning of community: the boys grew up together; they were members of the same social group—fully American yet also unique and self-controlled. In the last scene, Jimmy and Sean are at the neighbourhood parade, each of them surrounded by their families, Jimmy has killed Dave and Sean is aware of it though he does not arrest him. This scene proves that the cinematic Irishness is in charge of emphasising the existence of *Otherness* in America: the neighbourhood and its people are a self-contained society, they are fully American, they go to parades and wave American flags; yet at the end of the day they are also Irish, and they have their own way of dealing with events.

Perhaps one of the sources that encourages the recognition of Irishness in the film is found in the choice of actors, more precisely in Sean Penn whose acclaimed role in *State of Play* (Phil Joanou 1990) was also that of an Irish-American. In this earlier film, he embodies an undercover agent returning to his childhood neighbourhood to dismantle the Irish mob from within. As in most of the Irish-American based films (*Mystic River, The Departed*), the emphasis is on the neighbourhood and the transformation of the community by newcomers. Terry Noonan (Sean Penn) gets reunited with his childhood best friend Jackie Flannery (Gary Oldman) (Fig.5) and manages to get himself involved in the Irish mob, led by Jackie's brother Frankie (Ed Harris). Remarkably enough, every Irishman in the film is either a policeman or a gangster (with the exception of the omnipresent figure of the Irish barman in the genre). This brings to the fore, the idea

Figure 5. The undercover agent Noonan (Sean Penn) and his childhood friend Jackie (Gary Oldman) in *State of Play*.

mentioned in a previsions paragraph, that Irishness is a phenomenon reliant on binary oppositions.

One of the key elements of the film is Frankie's role and his insistence on unifying the Irish mob with the Italian mafia. Yet, the Irish leader is no longer a member of the community, he does not live in the neighbourhood nor does he defend his own people (as he kills Stevie [John C.Reilly] and his own brother Jackie). Therefore, when Noonan kills the entire mob, although it is during the St.Patrick's parade, it does not represent an Irish warfare, since the only true Irishman is Noonan. He is the only one left to promote real Irishness; therefore, his role is no longer that of an undercover policeman but he has become a portrayal of Thomas H. Pauly's gangster: Noonan is not defined by what he does, but by who he is and he is an *Irishman*.

Irishness in Martin Scorsese's cinema

The gangster genre cannot be appropriately acknowledged without alluding to Martin Scorsese's cinema and his characteristic usage of *otherness*. From *Mean Streets* (1973) to his Oscar nominee *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), the famous director has portrayed characters whose identities define them as *outsiders*. Scorsese's comment on his childhood provides an explanation for his interest towards the Catholic communities —Italians and Irish—and their connection with organised crime:

> I grew up on the East Side, which was a very closed community of Sicilians and Neapolitans, and it took me years to work out what was happening among the organized crime characters. But I was aware of these older men and the power that they had without lifting a finger. As you walked by, the body language would change, you could just feel the flow of power coming from these people, and as a child you looked up to this without understanding it. (In Christie and Thompson 2004: 150-151)

The attraction felt by the director as a child towards these powerful men is present in many of his productions, in particular in the characters of Henry (Ray Liotta, *Goodfellas,*1990) and Collin (Matt Damon, *The Departed*) who, like the young Scorsese, feel attracted by the powerful appearance of the gangsters in their neighbourhoods (Fig.6). In the case of Henry, he is a hybrid; half-Irish, half-Italian, even pretending to be half-Jewish. For this hybridity, the character can be seen as an 'everything and nothing', not being part of any group and having traces of everyone. Henry, like Jimmy (Robert de Niro), is never going to be part of The Family for its membership is restricted by the purity of their shared hyphenated Italian-American identity. Besides, as Scorsese defends, Henry's betrayal (he becomes a so-called *rat)* lies in his condition as "outsider" since, in contrast to the fully Italian-American Gangsters, he *talks* (1989:158). This could be interpreted as a reassurance of Pauly's theory about the nature of the gangster—that he is not what he does but who he is: even though Henry is 'educated' by the mob and in spite of his close relation to its members or his actions, he will never be one them because he is, always has been and always will be an outsider.

Figure 6. The young Henry (Christopher Serrone) transformed into a gangster in *Goodfellas.*

As to the references to *Irishness* presented in the film, it could be advocated that Scorsese's approaches the topic relying on one theme: violence. The only two fully Irish-American characters, Henry's father and Jimmy, are portrayed as intrinsically violent men attempting to gain power through it—beating his son or killing those who interfere in his agenda. Furthermore, it could be suggested that Jimmy replaces the figure of Henry's father since he is the focus of the young boy's admiration and the one

who takes care of his economic needs. In sum, in *Goodfellas,* Irishness is an excluding feature for the characters, it prevents them from being part of the mainstream society as well as from becoming part of the powerful criminal group. It is depicted as a violent, unrefined identity, functioning as a co-operator to the Italian-American criminal community.

Scorsese's fascination towards authenticity is further depicted in his 2002 film *Gangs of New York*, which even though it was considered a box-failure, did manage to fulfil the director's life-long interest in the project (Sotiel, 2010:73-79). The story opens with the rivalry between two gangs in the 1840s New York and their violent confrontation in the recognizable Irish neighbourhood of 'Five Points' (Fig.7). After this tremendously riotous beginning, the film follows the quest for vengeance held in the 1860s by Amsterdam (Leonardo Di Caprio), the son of an Irish Priest and head of the Irish gang The Dead Rabbits. Amsterdam goes back to his childhood neighbourhood, after growing up in a religious centre, to kill the man who murdered his father, Native leader Bill 'The Butcher' (Daniel Ley-Lewis). Amsterdam's revenge is used as a cinematic vehicle through which Scorsese examines the darkest years of the foundation of the USA. Authenticity and the problematic issue of the label 'American' in a time when ships carrying immigrants were incessantly arriving soon become central issues of the film's narrative (Sotiel 2010:80). Perhaps the best example is the character of Amsterdam, since although he is born in America and despite

Figure 7. The Irish Dead Rabbits. Amsterdam's father (Liam Neeson) in the centre in *Gangs of New York.*

claiming to know nothing about his ancestor's country; he is often considered an outsider and being confused with the new Irish arriving in the 'coffin ships.'[3]

Gangs of New York can be considered a gangster movie for it follows its main conventions: the presence of a not-blameless hero returning to his childhood home and getting involved with the 'wrong crowd', violence, murders and a *vendetta.* Yet, the second reading of the film cannot be neglected, that is, Scorsese's exploration of the darkest side of the country's foundation: the intrinsic social differences, a wide extended corruption, racism and poverty. Additionally, the film offers a dismantled vision of the idealized American Civil War through its focus on the process of recruitment and the possibility to pay a fee to avoid fighting, which brings to the fore the inequalities of the often celebrated war

Concerning Irishness, Scorsese admits to have used it as a vehicle to transmit a message: [Regarding the beginning of the film] "They [The Irish] come out from the underground, these people come right from the bowels of the earth, they represent every group that's ever been oppressed and every group that's ever been part of the dispossessed, they are the underground men" (In Kelly, 2007: 5-6). Therefore, Irishness once again becomes a commodity, a way of addressing a great majority of groups by using a romanticised, recognizable identity. Furthermore, Scorsese continues to explain his choice by alluding to the religion professed by these immigrants and how it mirrors the experience of many other communities who faced and continued to encounter religious discrimination in a country that openly defends 'freedom of faith':

> "They were poor, they had no skills, didn't speak English for the most part, they spoke Gaelic, and they were Catholic. And even though this is a country that claims that there is religious freedom, it still was a struggle for Catholics and for other religions – and it's still a struggle today for other

[3] The name given to the ships in which thousands of passengers and crew died on their attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean: "Thirty per cent of those bound for British North America in 1847 and 9 per cent of those sailing to the United States, perished on board ship or shortly after their arrival" (Kenny, 2000:102)

> religions, as we know, mainly because people feel that they're going to threaten our way of life, and this is a question even more alive today than in the 1840s and 1850s." (2007:6)

Kevin Kelly points out the parallelism between the Catholic threat that the Irish represented at the time and today's Islamic controversy (2007:6). From this, it could be inferred that Scorsese is not only commenting on the past of the USA or the immigrant struggle during the 19th century, but also making a strong criticism of today's American attitude towards the immigrant enterprise.

Martin Scorsese has been gradually introducing American-Irish characters since his already mentioned 1990 film, *Goodfellas*. In *Casino* (1995), he depicts an American-Irish female character whose Irishness is only addressed by insults "Irish bitch", as well as the figure of an Irish lawyer "Hey, you fat Irish prick!" whose identity is also known only through racist insults. In 2002, he released *Gangs of New York* and in 2006 his Irish Gangster film *The Departed.* It could be suggested that Scorsese has developed the gangster genre, taking it from the Italian-American *Godfather* tradition to a more Irish-American experience. The following section will analyse *The Departed* in terms of identity, masculinity and authenticity, in order to prove that once again Scorsese has transformed the recognizable identity into a narrative commodity.

The Departed (Martin Scorsese, 2006)

Throughout this dissertation, Scorsese's fascination towards American authenticity has been placed as a main feature in his gangster stories. Thus, if there is a film where this interest is clearly depicted, that is *The Departed.* The film explores the undercover endeavour of two young men from Irish-American descent in one of the most gangster-related city of the United States, Boston. Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) (Fig.8) is a truly committed police officer who is ordered to infiltrate himself in the Irish mob, lead by Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson), due to his dead uncle's

relation to the criminal group. Set as a parallel story, the film introduces the character of Collin Sullivan (Matt Damon), a boy who grew up in the mob's neighbourhood and who, as happened with Henry in *Goodfellas,* is lured into the organization appealing to the young boy's ambition of power. Yet, on this occasion the mob leader has greater plans for the boy: his entire life is modelled to become an infiltrated gangster in the police forces.

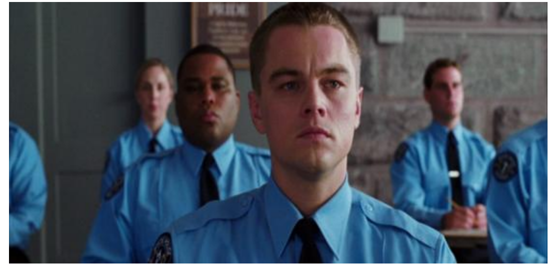

Figure 8. Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) in *The Departed.*

Scorsese manages to depict two parallel lives, defined by their Irish sub-identities while constructing a complex dialogue between the sense of identity and that of authenticity. The film opens with Costello's nostalgic reflexion about the transformation of society, picturing the past as a community-centred environment, destroyed by the black movements of the 60s. Thus, this statement is 'protected' from being labelled as a racist comment uttered by your average white-man, given that it is made by another marginal community voice—the Irish. Frank's words attempt to compare the Black Community's search for equality with the 'battle' of the Irish; implying that the former expected to be given such privilege while the latter fought for it:

> "I don't want to be a product of my environment; I want my environment to be a product of me. Years ago we had the church, that was only a way of saying 'we had each other'. The Knights of Columbus[4] were real head-breakers, true guineas. They took over their piece of the city. Twenty years after an Irishman couldn't get a fucking job, we had the presidency- may rest in peace. That's what the niggers don't realize. If I got one thing against the black chappies, it's this. *No one gives it to you, you have to take it*" (Frank Costello, opening speech)

[4] A fraternal self-reliant Catholic society founded in 1881 by Father Michael J. McGivney. Its aim was to help the marginalized Catholic communities in a time of economic need. (Miller, 1985:533)

Nonetheless, immediately after his memorable speech, the narrative directs the audience attention towards the criminality lying at the core of the mentioned success (exemplified with Frank's collection of money from a local restaurant). Costello's flaunt of power is also the turning point in Collin Sullivan's life (Fig.9). As Henry did in *Goodfellas,* he is lured by the man's means, by his money and the world that he opens up for him. Moreover, Costello anticipates the film's main struggle: that of identity definition in the infiltrated status of the main characters: "When you decide to be something, you can be it. That's what they don't tell you in the Church. When I was your age they would say we could become cops or criminals. Today what I'm saying to you is this: when you are facing a loaded gun, what's the difference?"

Figure 9. Collin Sullivan and Costello meet for the first time.

Paradoxically, both Collin and Billy turn out to be products of that environment claimed by Costello. Collin Sullivan is depicted as a self-centred, individualistic, extremely ambitious man, obsessed with appearances. He is soon revealed to be the son of a janitor and accused by his equal of dreaming excessively high. Nevertheless, his working-class upbringing does not become an obstacle for him on his road to success, a path built by himself although inseparable from the mob's hand. Billy, on the other hand, is a more humane, self-conscious and insecure character. The son of divorced parents from two different backgrounds—upper class and lower class—his loyalty towards the police is questioned given his father's family links with the Irish mob. Collin and Billy are true believers in the American Dream—it is the means to achieve such a goal that ultimately distinguish them. Moreover, this famous Dream is

accompanied by a failing system, one incapable of recognising the true nature of the individuals, favouring the individualistic, hidden criminal to the detriment of the humane, true cop. This failure is illustrated by Queenan (Martin Sheen) and Dignam (Mark Wahlberg) in their interview with Billy, especially when analysing it in comparison with the welcome conversation held with Collin moments earlier:

> **Queenan**: Do you wanna be a cop? Or do you wanna appear to be a cop? It's an honest question; a lot of guys wanna appear to be cops: gun, badge, pretend they're on TV
> [...]
> **Dignam**: [to Billy] I know what you are, and I know what you're not
> [...]You're no fucking cop!

The implications underlined by their Irish descent can be said to bring to the fore an already proposed issue: the usage of Irishness as a complement of Americanness. Collin and Billy are able to embody the American Dream seekers due to their low-class roots. Irishness is used to enforce this idea of self-made man that so often identifies and defines American literature and cinema. They are part of the mainstream because they are white, yet at the same time they come from the margins of society—white and American, but Irish.

Masculinity is another key feature in the film. Collin epitomizes what Negra defines as *hypermasculinism* (2009: 286). He replaces his lower roots by a careful construction of a self. His perfect appearance adorned by flawless tuxedos, his homophobic comments, his individualistic nature and his exaggerated womanizer attitude serve as a perfect screen for an insecure man in constant need of power (Fig.10). Nevertheless, as the narration progresses, Collin is

Figure 10. Collin uses his exaggerated self-confidence to convince Madolyn (Vera Farmiga) to have a date with him.

revealed to be incapable of sexually satisfying his girlfriend; that is, he is not only a fraud as a ‘Statie’ but also as the man that he brags to be. This confirms that Collin Sullivan lives a life of appearances and that he is obsessed with progress. His ultimate goal is the State House[5] and his apartment, the most relevant symbol of his quest for its views of the emblematic building as well as for the realtor’s luring words “You move in, you are upper-class by Tuesday. Furthermore, when analysing the *mise-en-scene* of the luxurious apartment, it is its “sterile and cold” atmosphere that stands out (Negra 2009: 291). This appearance is intimately related to the coldness and sterility that characterises the character.

In relation to his excessive womanizer attitude, his constant homophobic comments and his sexual problems, Collin is mistaken to be a homosexual by the realtor at his new place, which could be interpreted as one of Scorsese’s devices to suggest a possible suppressed homosexuality in the character. Billy, on the other hand, is openly insecure and emotional; his constant use of violence can be compared to Collin’s tuxedos—a facade, a mechanism to hide his true self. Nevertheless, the masculinity depicted by DiCaprio is very distant from that of Damon. He is mentally fragile, even unstable, more childish and often feminised (as exemplified by his choice of drink ‘a cranberry juice’ and his need for psychological aid and pills). However, he does deliver sexually with Madolyn (Vera Farmiga), which from the conservative masculinity discourses defines him as a real or authentic man.

Returning to the notion of authenticity, David Kelly claims in his article “Model Citizens” that each man has to make use of certain behaviours to claim authenticity: the judicial in the case of Collin and the criminal in Billy. Thus, each corresponds to a different identity, the former to Americanness and the latter to Irishness (2007:2). Kelly

[5] Massachusetts State House is one of the most emblematic buildings of Boston and the seat of the city Government.

openly classifies Costigan as American and Sullivan as Irish, which could be seen as a further clarification of their duality: Billy is not only an undercover agent in the mob but he has also infiltrated the Irish Community. In addition, according to Madolyn and Collin's conversation, Freud stated that "the Irish were the only people impervious to psychoanalysis," which excludes Costigan from the given picture of the identity. This un-identifiable part of Billy is further explored by Diane in relation to the envelope with the 'Citizen' inscription that ultimately leads to the film's shocking resolution: "The meaningful circulation of this envelope [...] is telling us that *The Departed* is concerned with the current conditions of American citizenship and that it presents Billy Costigan as nearly the only character in the film for whom citizenship is still an intelligible concept."(2009:292).

In other words, every character's identity is well delimited by his background or accent (as proven by the many characters with Irish accent): Costello's 'girlfriend' Gwen (Kristen Dalton); Fitzy (David O'Hara), or the Irish man who Costello calls 'IRA motherfucker'. The Italian Gangsters from Providence—which once again brings to the fore the tensions between communities, characteristic of gangster films—, the continuous references to Irish distinctive features, such as Captain Queenan's Irish nature known through the references to the Catholic University of Notre Dame and his son's name Patrick are further evidence of this point. As to names, ironically, Billy's undercover status is visible from the very nature of his: Billy is the diminutive of William, a name intrinsically avoided by Irish families given its British connotations. In other words, while everyone is identifiable and clearly defined, DiCaprio's character does not perfectly fit into any classification, he is a complete hybrid.

Irish identity has been often associated with a search for the old values that constituted America, the notion of family being a key feature in the equation (Third

2006:224). Yet, it is not the good-old caring family that is depicted in Irish gangster films, and surely not in Scorsese's cinema. The role of the family in these films is performed by associations of interest, and more often than not, the figure of the father is replaced by a paternalistic character: in *Goodfellas* it was Jimmy who played the father role for Henry, and in the film under discussion, each protagonist has his own 'substitute'. Captain Queenan and Billy share a special relationship (as proved by the old man's reliance on the boy's respect towards his persona for continuing with the agenda). Ironically, Queenan dies as a result of his protective attitude towards the young undercover agent (Fig.11). Similarly, Costello provides Collin with an education, money and a set future; the latter even refers to the mob leader as 'Dad' whenever he wants to hide the caller's identity (2009:293-294). Costello's death presents undeniable similarities with the Captain's for it is also a result of an encounter between him and his 'son':

Figure 11. Billy and Queenan moments before the latter's death

> **Costello**: You know I'd never give you up. You're like a—
>
> **Collin**: What? like a son? To you? Is that what this is about? All that murdering and fucking and no sons.
>
> [Costello shoots Collin, misses and Collin shoots him back, resulting in the former's death]

This conversation resembles an argument between a resented son and a father. Collin's words convey hatred; yet not for the murdering or the illegal activities, but for his betrayal, for collaborating with the FBI and jeopardizing his position and future plans. Costello's bloody death at the hands of his 'son' is intimately linked with his words at the very beginning of the film: "I don't want to be a product of my environment; I want

my environment to be a product of me." Paradoxically, he is murdered by his own creation: he created Collin Sullivan and he dies as a result of it. Moreover, the mob leader is wearing a T-shirt where the word IRISH can be clearly read (Fig.12), which is completely covered in blood in an obnoxious, yet stellar symbol of the violence linked with the identity. Once again, Scorsese associates the end of the mob leader with the beginning of the film and the description given by the man of the Irish battle for equality as a violent enterprise. The presence of this T-shirt, when taking into account that everyone else in the mob dies in the cross-fire, can be interpreted as a signifier for the end of the Irish mob, the disappearance of the last remnants of an identity—especially when considering the very end of the film.

Figure 12. Costello's violent death.

Once Costello is dead, the two protagonists meet for the first time. Sergeant Sullivan materialises Costigan's lack of identity by erasing his file, depriving him of his true self. At the same time, Costigan threatens to expose Damon's character real persona. Each has already failed, yet the film seems to be providing the viewer with a longed-for "happy ending." However, in an unexpected turn of events, Costigan is killed and Sullivan safeguards his secret by killing the only person capable of jeopardizing his story. The murder, although shocking, is by no means inexplicable since, at the end of the day, the Sergeant was not part of any community but a fervent believer in individuality. Nonetheless, as Negra advances, his dream is not achieved either: in the very last scenes, Sullivan enters his apartment floor, the one which was supposed to give him an immediate social position, but his own neighbours refuse to see him as such (2009:291). The man's incapability of achieving his goal is further

symbolized by the last image on screen before the black screen: the finally unreachable place, the State House view that follows Sullivan's murder (Fig.13). Finally, the deaths of the characters remind us of Costello's allusion at the beginning of the film: when facing a loaded gun, police or criminal, there is no difference, the two end up dead.

Figure 13. The view of the State House from Collin's apartment.

The Departed has been discussed as an inherently male-centred production. Nonetheless, Irishness—or any other identity—cannot be fully understood without taking notice of the role of women. The text under discussion presents a complete absence of women in the police forces as well as in the criminal group, which implies a separation of spheres. Women are portrayed as mothers, nuns, secretaries, psychologists and girlfriends; they are never central characters, but are "relegated to the sphere of emotions" (Negra 2009: 280). This unfavourable vision of women is by no means an exclusive feature of this film; the gangster genre and surely Scorsese tend to emphasise these differences in order to underline the aggressive self-reliant masculinity of the protagonists. Women are often seen as the character's accessories, like Costello's girl Gwen, or 'safe-heavens' like the psychiatrist Madolyn.

Finally, the portrayal of one of the most essential features of the Irish community—Catholicism and its church—as a laughable organization on the part of Costello, as well as Dignam (through his continuous references towards pederasty), brings to the fore Scorsese's aim to depict a corrupted identity, one different from the authentic, pure Irishness that first arrived in the States. This could also be seen as a mechanism to disassociate the real Irish identity from the corrupted and violent one

depicted in the film. That is, Martin Scorsese has made use of Irishness in order to depict a violent white lower-class criminal, distinctive enough to protect the American identity. Yet at the same time, he has introduced mechanisms to provide the authentic Catholic Irish community with some relief.

Conclusion

Throughout the dissertation, the usage of Irishness has been associated with that of a commodified ‘Other’. Notions of race, religion and history have been outlined in order to defend that the Irish identity has been used as an enabling mechanism, used by directors to transmit a great variety of messages: from portraying the average working-class white American to using it as a symbol for all the immigrant experiences.

Each film discussed has a unique way of dealing with Irishness, as well as its own methods of transforming it to favour their agendas. However, the ultimate commodification of Irishness in contemporary American gangster films, one that encapsulates the main ideas proposed throughout the dissertation, can be found in *Kill the Irishman* (Jonathan Hensleigh, 2011). The film plays with all the conventions of the identity, from traditional Irish names—Danny Greene (Ray Stevenson), Grace O’Keefe (Fionnula Flanagan) —to an excessive usage of the green colour and Gaelic symbols (the claddagh ring, the Irish pub, the shamrock). The protagonist, Danny, is portrayed as an outstanding man, brave and Robin Hood-like. He is proud of his roots, comparing himself with the lofty ideals of the Celtic Warrior; yet paradoxically, he admits to having never been in Ireland. The sentence that summarises the depiction of Irishness in the narration is one uttered by Grace, an old Irish lady living next to the protagonist: “We are drunks, we are fighters, we are liars but there’s a bit of good in every

Irishman.” This film proves that the interest of U.S. filmmakers in Irishness is by no means finished. But, once one starts paying attention to the subtle—and not so subtle — references to Irish themes and motifs in cinema, it becomes obvious that Hollywood has always suffered from a silent invasion of the once marginalised “Paddys”.

Finally, what is left of the actual identity in the transformed depiction of Irishness in these films are, more often than not, stereotypes, accents, shamrocks, tattoos or religious scenes. However, from this excessive commodification of the culture, a story of success can be inferred. They prove that the Irish community has managed to integrate themselves into mainstream America, without disappearing as a result of the mixture. Their combination of uniqueness and commonness have allowed cinematographers to use them as a tool, but at the same time, they have helped to create a perception of the Irish as a brave, self-created community, as American as any other, yet sufficiently distinguishable to be part of “the other.”

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