

them), Native Americans, Grinde and Johansen assert, are interested neither in being victims nor in demonizing whites. Leslie Marmon Silko's chilling fiction "Call That Story Back" recognizes the ugliness in all of us. In a pre-European "contest in dark things," witches from all the tribes try to outdo one another with stewpots full of "disgusting objects," dead babies and severed body parts. But one witch outdoes them all, summoning white people, setting

them in motion, the winds blowing them across the ocean. The witch narrates the whole history of genocide, the raping of the land. This scares the other witches, who tell her OK, you win, call that story back, but the witch replies, "It's already turned loose. It's already coming. It can't be called back."

If they indeed brought white people here, Indians have learned from their mistake. Indigenous Americans are taking responsibility for their past and their future. ■

Ungood Fellas

GEORGE DE STEFANO

The last decade of the twentieth century was not a happy one for the Mafia. During the nineties both the United States and Italy made remarkable strides in curbing organized crime, imprisoning gangsters and dismantling their business interests. Though it would be premature to declare either the

Italian or the American Mafia dead, both have been wounded, the latter perhaps mortally. But if the Mafia is a shadow of its former self, you'd hardly know it from pop culture. In fact, media images of La Cosa Nostra seem to be proliferating in direct proportion to the decline of organized crime. Not since Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* reinvented the gangster genre in the early seventies have there been so many wiseguys on screen. The past year brought the films *Analyze This* and *Mickey Blue Eyes*, and with *i fratelli* Weinstein, Harvey and Bob, having acquired the rights to the late Mario Puzo's final novel, *Omertà*, for their Miramax Films, there's at least one other high-profile Mafia movie on the way. Another may well be the fourth installment of Coppola's *Godfather* saga. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, Leonardo Di Caprio and Andy Garcia (Al Pacino's nephew in *Godfather III*) are keen to sign on to the project, pending a suitable script.

On television, gangsters with Italian surnames have been a surefire audience draw, from the days of *The Untouchables* to contemporary cop shows like *NYPD Blue*. A very partial list of recent programs includes the network miniseries *The Last Don* and *Bella Mafia*, as well as biopics about John Gotti and his turncoat lieutenant Sammy "The Bull" Gravano, and, on Showtime cable, an absurdly hagiographic one about Joseph Bonanno pro-

duced by his son, Bill. But no mob-themed show has generated the critical accolades and viewer enthusiasm accorded *The Sopranos*, the Emmy Award-winning HBO comedy-drama that has become the cable network's most-watched series, its recent second-season premiere attended by an avalanche of hype.

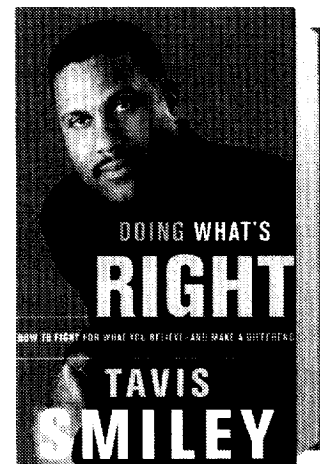
Moving from *The Sopranos*' suburban New Jersey turf to Palermo, HBO last fall premiered *Excellent Cadavers*, a feature-film adaptation of Alexander Stille's 1995 book about the anti-Mafia campaign launched by two courageous Sicilian magistrates. Why is Italian-American (and Italian) organized crime such a mainstay of American pop culture, and do these images reflect the reality of the Mafia? And does the persistence of the Mafioso as a pop-culture archetype constitute ethnic defamation of Italian-Americans?

That many of today's depictions of the American Mafia are in the comic mode—*The Sopranos*, *Analyze This*, *Mickey Blue Eyes*, the parody *Mafia!*—is possible only because organized crime is much less fearsome than in its heyday. Both *The Sopranos* and *Analyze This* feature Mafiosi on the verge of a nervous breakdown, their psychological crackups reflecting the disarray of their criminal enterprises under the pressure of law enforcement and the breaking of *omertà*, the code of silence, by gangsters who'd rather sing than serve time. V. Zucconi, a commentator for the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, analyzed this development in an article titled "America: The Decline of the Godfather." Zucconi claims that in the United States the Mafia

George De Stefano writes for a variety of publications, primarily on cultural, Italian-American and gay rights issues.

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survives mainly in its pop-culture representations, and that while it used to generate fear, today it is a source of humor. He says that in America one can observe “the funeral of the dying Mafia,” an outcome he hopes one day will occur also in Italy. Is Zucconi overoptimistic?

Criminologist James Jacobs reaches a similar conclusion in his study *Gotham Unbound: How New York City was Liberated from the Clutches of Cosa Nostra* (NYU Press). Organized-crime-control strategies “have achieved significant success in purging Cosa Nostra from the city’s social, economic, and political life,” he writes. Gangsters in New York, and also in other large and small cities, are losing their foothold in the labor and industrial rackets that have been the source of their power and influence; and there is a dearth of younger, rising stars to replace aging or incarcerated leaders. The decline, says Jacobs, has been so marked that “Cosa Nostra’s survival into the next millennium...can be seriously doubted.” It’s a different story in Italy. The Sicilian Mafia’s economic might, its alliances with politicians and indifferent law enforcement enabled it to grow so powerful that it threatened Italy’s status as a modern nation. As Alexander Stille observed in *Excellent Cadavers*, the war against the Mafia in Sicily is not a local problem of law and order but the struggle for national unity and democracy in Italy. HBO’s film based on Stille’s book promised to tell that story, but, at barely ninety minutes, it ended up too compressed to offer more than a skim on the events he reported and analyzed so compellingly. Talk about missed opportunities: Instead of the Z-like political thriller it could have been, *Cadavers* is a rather routine *policier*.

In the eighties, Mafia killings accelerated as ambitious upstarts from Corleone (a real place, *Godfather* fans) challenged the Palermo old guard for the control of organized crime. The body count included not only Mafiosi but also police officials, magistrates and politicians, who came to be called, with fine Sicilian mordancy, excellent cadavers. Two magistrates, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, began to pursue the Mafia with unprecedented persistence. Their efforts culminated in the historic “maxi-trials,” which resulted in the imprisonment of hundreds of Sicily’s most powerful gangsters.

The Mafia, of course, retaliated, assassinating Falcone in May 1992 and, two months later, Borsellino. The murders, however, ignited the simmering rage of Sicilians against the Mafia and the officials who protected it. The government

was forced to respond, and the subsequent crackdown resulted in the arrest of numerous Mafiosi and connected businessmen and politicians.

Italians overwhelmingly regard Mafiosi as the other; they do not identify or empathize with criminals, nor do they feel that portrayals of organized crime in movies, television and other media tar them with the brush of criminality. Many Italian-Americans, however, regard the seemingly endless stream of Mafia movies and TV shows as a defamatory assault. In mid-January a coalition of seven Italian-American organizations issued a joint statement condemning *The Sopranos* for “defaming and assassinating the cultural character” of Americans of Italian descent.

It’s undeniable that the dominant pop-culture images of Italian-Americans have been the mobster and the related, anti-working class stereotype of the boorish *gavone*. But there are important differences between these skewed portrayals and other forms of ethnic stereotyping. If the Mafia has been conflated with Sicilian/Italian culture, it’s in large part because Italian-American filmmakers and writers have so expertly blended the two. Coppola’s memorable and authentic depiction of an Italian-American wedding in *The Godfather* comes to mind. *The Sopranos*, created by veteran TV writer David Chase (*né De Cesare*), similarly gets many details right about *nouveau riche* suburban Italian-Americans, the eponymous mob family’s noncriminal neighbors.

The Sopranos cleverly acknowledges Italian-American indignation over Mafia stereotyping only to try to co-opt it. In an episode from the show’s first season, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, Tony Soprano’s psychiatrist, and her family have a lively dinnertime debate about the persistence of the mob image. The scene ends with the Melfis toasting the “20 million Italian Americans” who have nothing to do with organized crime. But Jennifer also mocks her ex-husband, an ethnic activist, for being more concerned about “rehabilitating Connie Francis’s reputation” than with ethnic cleansing. The line neatly skewers the tunnel vision of conservative Italian-Americans who ignore forms of bias and social injustice that don’t affect them. But it also poses a false dichotomy: caring passionately about the image of one’s group need not preclude a broader perspective. At other times, the show suggests that Tony, a murderous criminal, is an Italian-American everyman. He’s aware of his people’s history—he informs his

daughter that the telephone was invented not by Alexander Graham Bell but by Antonio Meucci—and he's depicted as more honest and vital than his snooty neighbors, or, as he calls them, the "Wonder-Bread wops."

The Mafia has become the paradigmatic pop-culture expression of Italian-American ethnicity for several reasons: the aura of glamour, sometimes tragic, surrounding the movie mobster, exemplified by Coppola's Corleones; the gangster genre's embodiment of the violent half of "kiss kiss, bang bang," Pauline Kael's famous distillation of the essential preoccupations of American movies; and, perhaps most important, the enduring appeal of the outlaw—the guy who, in a technocratic, impersonal society, has the personal power to reward friends, and, more important, whack enemies. Although real Mafiosi are venal and violent, films and TV too often have presented them far more sympathetically than they deserve—*The Sopranos* is just the latest case in point.

Italian-Americans, whose forebears fled *la miseria*, the crushing poverty of Southern Italy and Sicily, in numbers so vast that their departure has been likened to a hemorrhage, constitute one of the United States' largest ethnic groups. An Italian-American film critic and author told me some years ago that it was "selfish" of our *paesani* to complain about Mafia stereotyping given their largely successful pursuit of the American Dream and the more onerous discrimination faced by other minorities. He also insisted that most Americans are smart enough to realize that gangsters constitute only a tiny minority of the Italian-American population.

But it is dismaying—no, infuriating—to see one's group depicted so consistently in such distorted fashion. Unlike racist stereotyping of blacks, portrayals of Italian-American criminality don't reflect or reinforce Italian-American exclusion from American society and its opportunities. (Faced with a threatened NAACP boycott, both the NBC and ABC networks recently agreed to increase the hiring of blacks, Latinos and Asians, in front of and behind the TV cameras.) The pervasiveness of these images, however, does affect the perception of Italian-Americans by others. Surveys indicate that many Americans believe that most Italian-Americans are in some way "connected" and that Italian immigrants created organized crime in the United States, even though the Irish, Germans and others got there first.

Besides fostering such attitudes, the

Mafia mystique also serves to obscure other, more interesting and no less dramatic aspects of the Italian-American experience. In 1997 the City University of New York hosted a conference on "The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism." Scholars discussed the immigrant anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti (executed by the US government), other major figures like the labor organizer Carlo Tresca, the New York City Congressman Vito Marcantonio and such icons of sixties activism as civil rights advocate Father James Groppi and Mario Savio of the Berkeley Free Speech movement. The conference also highlighted unsung men and women who were labor militants, anti-Fascist organizers and politically engaged writers and artists.

Besides such efforts to recover and understand the radical past, there has been a surge of cultural production and activism among Italian-Americans. In recent years the American-Italian Historical Association, a national organization of academics and grassroots scholars, has held conferences on such hot-button topics as multiculturalism and race relations. Fieri, an association of young Italian-American professionals, last year commemorated the life and work of Vito Marcantonio—an amazing choice given the far less controversial figures they could have honored. The New York-based Italian-American Writers Association and journals such as *Voices in Italian Americana* (VIA) and *The Italian American Review* promote and publish fiction, poetry and critical essays by writers whose vision of *italianità* flouts the pop-culture clichés. Italo-American gays and lesbians have come out with *Hey, Paisan!*, a new anthology, and *Fuori!*, a folio of essays published by VIA. Actor/playwright Frank Ingrasciotta's *Blood Type: Ragu*, currently enjoying a successful run at the Belmont Italian American Theater in the Bronx (several of whose productions have moved to Off Broadway), offers an exploration of Sicilian-American identity and culture free of *goombahs* with guns.

Ethnicity remains a powerful and contentious force in American life, and popular culture should illumine its workings. Italian-Americans who want to promote more diverse depictions might not only protest Hollywood film studios and TV production companies. They might put some of the onus on Italian-American creative talents who have built careers on the Mafia. And they could also support the alternative, community-level work being done. Other stories from Italo-America can and should be told. ■

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