



Watching Mob Movies with my Fourteen-Year-Old Son

Joey Skee (July 29, 2008)



A “teachable moment” about mafia realities and representations.

Over the past few months my kids and I have watched a series of gangster films, courtesy of netflix.com, from Little Caesar (1931) to Donnie Brasco (1997). Yes, even the torpid debacle The Godfather: Part III. These viewings have been part of my larger design of cinematic edification; we’ve made our way through a film studies program’s worth of noir, 1950s sci-fi/horror, French New Wave, samurai films, spaghetti westerns, Soviet animation, and, of late, Bing Crosby movies, my daughter



Akela's recent fave.

The fascinating thing was that my son Lucca knew many of the cinematic references before he watched a single gangster film. Parodies of *The Godfather* and other films appear repeatedly on "The Simpsons" and youtube.com. Don Corleone's backhanded facial scratch is just another dislocated and free-floating media quotation populating our pomo pop world.



Ever the great celluloid impressionist, my son quickly began repeating bowdlerized versions of famous lines:

“Sonny had five fingers but he only used three.”

“Leave the gun, take the cannoli.”

“I mean, funny like I’m a clown? I amuse you? I make you laugh?”

Did I need to worry about anti-defamationists’ admonition that my son might be internalizing “negative” imagery that is inexplicably damaging his “ethnic self-esteem?” Did he come away from these movies thinking that Italian Americans were only gangsters? Or were these new additions to our family’s [pop lexicon](#) [2] no different than us imitating tough noir talk or (faux) feudal Japanese after viewing other genres? “I don’t have to show you any stinking badges!”

My son was born and raised in one of New York City’s last remaining, albeit rapidly gentrifying, Italian neighborhoods settled by immigrants in the late nineteenth century. Over the course of the twentieth century, Williamsburg, Brooklyn was the stomping grounds for the likes of Joseph “Joe Bananas” Bonanno, James “Jimmy Nap” Napoli, Dominick “Sonny Black” Napolitano, among other infamous Italian Americans. Thankfully, they are less a presence in our lives than Pesci, De Niro, and Scorsese.

These films prompted questions about the mafia – which my son had little or no knowledge of – regarding history, organizational structure, etc., asked with a teenage boy’s fascination with power and violence. A “teachable moment” to be sure.

Not only did I point out former ([the Motion Lounge social club](#) [3]) and current (zitto zitt’) mobbed up haunts, but we discussed mafia realities and representations, and how they dovetail. (The intertextual estrangement of seeing Pacino play clean cop Frank Serpico after watching his performance as young “Michael Corleone” highlighted the cinematic frame of all these narratives.) We talked about America’s glorification of violence and how the real American mafia destroyed lives at local and global levels through extortion, drugs, and homicide. And we talked about Italian Americans and organized crime.

These discussions are part of ongoing conversations about things Italian American in our family that include stories about activists, artists, and working people, and how to learn from one’s past to do right in the world. Because as we all know, “The saddest thing in life is wasted talent.” Happy Birthday Lucca!

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[1] <http://www.ility.org/files/3492donhomer1217347452jpg>

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AFI's_100_Years..._100_Movie_Quotes#The_list

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Motion_Lounge