



April 2016

Rejecting the Ethnic Community in Little Caesar, The Public Enemy, and Scarface

Bryan Mead

Northern Illinois University, bmead1@niu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Mead, Bryan (2016) "Rejecting the Ethnic Community in Little Caesar, The Public Enemy, and Scarface," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20: Iss. 2, Article 42.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.20.02.42>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss2/42>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Rejecting the Ethnic Community in *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*

Abstract

Film scholars commonly suggest that the 1930s American movie gangster represented marginalized Italian and Irish-American film-goers, and that these gangsters provided a visual and aural outlet for ethnic audience frustrations with American societal mores. However, while movie gangsters clearly struggle with WASP society, the ethnic gangster's struggle against his own community deserves further exploration. The main characters in gangster films of the early 1930s repeatedly forge an individualistic identity and, in consequence, separate themselves from their ethnic peers and their family, two major symbols of their communal culture. This rejection of community is also a rejection of the distinctly Italian or Irish gangster's religious past which, as Catholic, heavily relied on communal relations, especially in early 20th century America. *Little Caesar* (1930), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) aesthetically construct this break with community spatially and audibly, with off-screen sound playing a major role in emphasizing the individualization of the gangster protagonist. These films also refuse to suggest that gangsters can reintegrate themselves into their ethnic or religious culture after they establish their individuality. Therefore, the gangster's attempt to overcome social parameters makes him a public enemy, but his attempt to individualize himself from his ethnic community irreconcilably separates him from his ethnic peers and his family.

Keywords

Catholicism, film, *Little Caesar*, *Scarface*, *Public Enemy*

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Author Notes

Bryan Mead is currently a Ph.D. student at Northern Illinois University specializing in Film and Literature. Bryan's articles and reviews have appeared in several journals including *Film & History*, *The Lincoln Humanities Journal*, and *The Apollonian*. His research focuses on the intersection of film studies with several other disciplines including literary studies, history, theology, and philosophy.

Most interpretations of 1930s American gangster movies focus on the ethnic gangster's struggle against American societal mores, and concentrating on this conflict makes sense considering the time period's prevailing notions of ethnic, Catholic otherness.¹ Herbert Hoover's decisive victory over Irish-Catholic presidential nominee Al Smith in 1928 represents the distance between Protestant and Catholic America at the time. The Irish, considered the most "American" of the immigrants since they were white and spoke a form of English, realized their integration was relative. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan observes, Irish Americans were "shocked" to find that so much of the country still viewed them "as immigrants with an alien religion."² Al Smith, speaking shortly after his defeat, opined that the "time hasn't yet come when a man can say his Rosary beads in the White House."³ Italians were likewise stuck between tolerance and full acceptance. Their relative "whiteness" provided advantages over other, non-white races, but the "foreign-ness" of their language and their direct relation to the Roman Catholic Church made many WASP Americans skeptical of their allegiances. The rise of gang violence enlivened anti-Italian feelings, ultimately leading Vice President Charles Dawes to ask the Senate to "rescue Chicago from a reign of lawlessness" brought about by "a colony of unnaturalized persons, hostile to our institutions and laws, who have formed a supergovernment of their own..."⁴ The early gangster films reflect this tension between ethnic other and American society. As Jonathan

Munby writes, the “central conflict which informs these [gangster film] narratives remains the question of social, economic, and cultural exclusion.”⁵

However, the conflict between the ethnic gangsters and WASP society is not the only conflict present in 1930s gangster films. A complimentary, and much less discussed, conflict is the ethnic gangster’s struggle against his own community. In attempting to overcome the prejudices of mainstream society, the main characters in gangster films of the early 1930s individuate and separate themselves from their ethnic peers and their families, two major symbols of their communal culture. This rejection of community is also a rejection of the distinctly Italian or Irish gangster’s religious past which, as Catholic, heavily relied on communal relations, especially in early 20th century America. *Little Caesar* (LeRoy, 1930), *The Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932) aesthetically construct this break with community spatially and audibly, with off-screen sound playing a major role in emphasizing the individualization of the gangster protagonist.

The gangster’s struggle with his ethnic community is a struggle against what Andrew Greeley terms the “dialogical imagination of Catholics,” particularly the emphasis on communal needs over the needs of the individual.⁶ Greeley and theologian David Tracy argue that the Catholic imagination celebrates God’s presence in the tangible world, and that through this lens Catholic and ethnic participation within a community functions as an important manifestation of God’s

presence and moral guidance.⁷ The Protestant domination of American social policy from its foundation through the end of the First World War established individualism as the norm, relegated ethnic minorities to second-class status, and functionally increased the role of ethnic communities as the only sites for ethnic-Americans to work, socialize, and worship. Yet, Mark Noll convincingly argues that the period between the Civil War and the end of the First World War marks the “last years of Protestant America.”⁸ Conflicts persisted throughout this period and Catholic ethnics relied on communal and religious unification for success.⁹ While denominational splits and the modernist/fundamentalist controversy divided American Protestants, the American Catholic Church built a system of community-based parishes and parochial schools that all but guaranteed religious and cultural unity.¹⁰

The rise of the Legion of Decency and the establishment of the Production Code made the Catholic emphasis on community quite noticeable throughout the so-called golden age of Hollywood cinema. Several popular gangster films of the 1930s and 1940s include the combination of “bad ethnic” gangster and “good ethnic” priest or police officer, with the latter “superman priest” encouraging, and often succeeding in, communal re-engagement and moral repentance for the former.¹¹ For example, in *San Quentin* (Bacon, 1937), *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Curtiz, 1938), and *Brother Orchid* (Bacon, 1940) the violent gangster performs an act of penance toward the end of the film and accepts, at least implicitly, the call to

forego selfish individualism in favor of Catholic community and moral law. Grant Tracey argues that this struggle typifies the ethnic gangsters as those who do “not want to conform to the dictates of the WASP collective...[but] harness their energies for the communal good” through the “love of a WASPish woman or the demands of an authoritative Pat O’Brien (the allegorical Irish cop who keeps immigrant masses under control).”¹² Yet, Tracey’s reading of this struggle focuses too heavily on the ethnic gangster’s struggle against mainstream WASP society rather than on the struggle with his religious community. Tracey does not account for the “ghetto Catholicism” mentality that emphasizes a particularly Catholic, ethnic reconciliation rather than a reconciliation to mainstream hegemonic culture of which the ethnic gangster was never really a part. This Catholic “ghetto” was “home to enormous numbers of Americans, who sent their children to Catholic schools, bowled on Fridays with the Holy Name Society, and lined up for confession on Saturday evenings in the company of Catholic neighbors.”¹³ It was an insular society in which Catholics were “obliged neither to proselytize nor to show an undue interest in non-Catholic America.”¹⁴ Most gangster films reflected this “ghettoization.” For example, Pat O’Brien’s character in *Angels with Dirty Faces* is a Catholic priest in an Irish community, and his desire for Cagney’s character to at least fake panic at the sight of the electric chair is so that the Irish-American youth in his community would remain good Catholic boys. His wish is that the troubled youth grow in his Irish-Catholic, religious gang rather than

Cagney's violent gang. In this and other films, Cagney plays a "local hero who dies a sacrificial death brought on by a primal loyalty to the ties of neighborhood."¹⁵ Similarly, Edward G. Robinson's conversion in *Brother Orchid* re-connects him to Catholicism, not WASPish society, since by film's end he relinquishes his gangster ties to join a Catholic monastery, the ultimate symbol of Catholic communal living.

Yet, *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface* – the "source and example of all the [genre's] phases that follow" – provide narratives in which the gangster cannot reintegrate into their ethnic, criminal, or religious culture.¹⁶ In other words, these gangsters ultimately reject, and are rejected by, the Catholic "ghetto," and the moral chasm they establish between themselves and the rest of their ethnic community is irreparable. Rico Bandello, Tom Powers, and Tony Camonte all die violent deaths unconnected to penance. Not only are these criminals forced to die for their sins against the WASP-dominated law, they also die for their sins against the moral codes of their ethnic and religious community. Their death does not even restore others to the fold, but instead leaves them in the isolated middle-ground between "ghetto Catholicism" and WASP-run America. These films are "enriched and troubled by questions of ethnicity and faith," representing the "struggle between ethnic lower-class aspiration and moral obligation."¹⁷ The gangster's attempt to overcome social parameters makes him a public enemy; but his attempt to individualize himself from his ethnic community irreconcilably separates him from his ethnic peers and his family.

The main way these three films individuate the gangster is through violence. In contrast to his ethnic peers, each main character rejects the anxiety of moral judgement associated with Catholic ethics. The gangster protagonist separates himself by showing no fear at the prospect of, or remorse after, taking human life. The earliest of these classical gangster films, *Little Caesar*, exhibits this point. Immediately after a title card with the words “for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” from Matthew’s gospel, the film begins at night with a long-shot of a gas station as a car pulls into the parking lot. One shadowy figure emerges from the car, quickly enters the gas station, and fires several off-screen gunshots before returning to the car and fleeing the scene. By keeping the killings off-screen, viewers must accept Rico Bandello’s cold-blooded actions through audible means. The combination of consecutive gunshots breaking the otherwise silent soundtrack and the separation of sound from visual produce, as Mary Ann Doane argues, an “uncanny” effect that immediately distinguishes Rico’s violent action as unique.¹⁸ Yet, *Little Caesar* also includes the next scene when Joe, Rico’s fellow Italian gang member, describes Rico’s ability to kill without hesitation or thought. Joe’s description of Rico contrasts with Joe’s own confession of uneasiness about committing whole-heartedly to a life of crime. He says that once he’s made enough money he would “quit” and “go back to dancing.” A cut to Rico accompanies these words, and Rico’s face intimates his confusion at Joe’s comments. Rather than money or entertainment, Rico wants to “be somebody” and to “look hard at a bunch

of guys and know that they'll do what you tell them." The camera then cuts to a full shot of the two characters as Joe pats Rico on the back and tells him that he'll "get there" and will "show them." The desires expressed in this scene decisively separate Rico from his fellow ethnic gangster. Their actions, aspirations, and rhetoric are dichotomous. Joe's struggle is a conflict between ethnic marginalization and ethics. He desires economic freedom so that he can do what he enjoys and so that he can avoid the morally objectionable life of a gangster. In contrast, Rico wants to distinguish himself from his peers in order to control his own and others' destinies. The contrast between the opening Biblical quote and Rico's violence quickly establishes that Rico's desire for individual power and prestige will come at the expense of communal involvement and religious morality.

The next major killing in the film, when Rico kills Crime Commissioner McClure, further distinguishes Rico's moral callousness from that of the other ethnic gang members. As with the gas station robbery, Rico alters the sound landscape of the scene with off-screen gunshots while additionally being the only character afforded dialogue in the scene. Also, much like the contrast between Rico and Joe in the second scene of the film, this sequence uses another gangster, Tony, as a moral counter-point to Rico. The scene starts with Joe, who Rico forces to act as the burglary's inside man, pensively walking through the club as the patrons celebrate New Year's Eve. For most of the scene the crowd noise in the dining area overwhelms the soundtrack, and this diegetic background noise remains

undisturbed through several quick dissolves as Rico and his gang enter the building, hold the patrons in the lobby at gunpoint, and force the lobby workers to fill large sacks with money from cash registers. Near the end of the sequence McClure accidentally enters the lobby in an attempt to leave the party and recognizes the robbery taking place, the film capturing his eye-line in an over-the-shoulder shot with Rico centered in the frame. Breaking the series of dissolves, a jarring cut to a reverse shot follows as McClure slowly moves toward Rico. Another cut frames Rico yelling, “Stay where you are, all of ya,” silencing the previously dominant diegetic crowd noise. Not only does the film emphasize Rico’s power to change his aural environment, but the change from dissolves to cuts aesthetically distinguishes Rico’s ability to control his surroundings. The film then returns to an over-the-shoulder shot behind McClure as Rico raises his gun before a dissolve transition returns, re-framing McClure in a medium shot as Rico’s now off-screen gun fires. Rico, therefore, kills the Irish-Catholic police officer rather than allowing the cop to bring him back into the moral community.

During the series of dissolves, get-away driver Tony is the only other character provided a close-up, emphasizing the disparity between Rico’s violent actions and Tony’s panic. In the scene immediately following Rico’s murder of McClure, Tony’s nervous breakdown inside the getaway car and Rico’s verbal chastisement of him “losing his nerve” also connects to Joe’s earlier assertion of Rico’s cold-blooded nature that contrasts so sharply with Joe’s and Tony’s anxiety

over violence. After Rico verbally abuses him, Tony goes to his mother for comfort. The scene includes the mother, clearly coded as an ethnic Catholic, telling Tony to remember when he “was a good boy” and used to “sing in the church...in the choir with Father McNeal.” Her words sooth the troubled gangster and, by the end of the scene, he asks his mother to stay with him, re-uniting mother and wayward son. In fact, Tony’s familial unification inspires him to attend confession at church, and it is on the steps outside the cathedral that Rico shoots Tony from a moving car. Even though Rico’s family is absent in the film, Rico’s act exemplifies his rejection of family and faith. His fear that Tony will inform the church or the police of the gang’s actions leads to Tony’s death and the nullification of communal unification.

Off-screen sound and scenes of character contrast function similarly in *The Public Enemy*, individualizing Tom Powers from his fellow gangsters; and even though Richard Maltby correctly argues that Tom is “untroubled by any ambition to escape the neighborhood” in the way Rico is, Tom’s actions and the film’s aesthetics still isolate him from his communal peers.¹⁹ Unlike Rico, Tom transforms into an individualized, morally-calloused violent gangster rather than beginning as one. The scene leading up to Tom’s first murder is an inversion of the opening scenes in *Little Caesar*. Whereas Rico commits his violent act prior to the film’s comparison of Rico and Joe, *The Public Enemy*’s Tom and Matt first discuss Tom’s apprehension at the prospect of violence, initially making him

indistinguishable from the rest of the gangsters. Tom's transformation takes place after he, Matt, and several other bottom-rung gangsters are sent to rob the Northwestern Fur Trading Company by their boss, Putty Nose. As Tom and Matt emerge from the back of a truck, Matt tells Tom that he's "scared stiff." In a line similar to those of Rico, Tom responds with "There ain't nothing to be scared of." However, instead of reinforcing Tom's steadiness in the face of violence as Joe does for Rico, Matt challenges him by saying that Tom is "shaking" as well. The film confirms Matt's observation later in the scene. After the gangsters have quietly entered the building and are searching through the furs, Tom and Matt notice a collection of fur coats. When Tom moves the coats aside, a large stuffed bear appears, scaring Tom. The film cuts from an over-the-shoulder shot behind Tom to a reverse shot capturing Tom's alarmed face as he reaches for his gun, aims, and breaks the silence by firing his visible pistol several times at the bear. Police arrive after Tom shoots at the bear and the gang members disperse. An officer pursues Tom and Matt as they attempt to escape, and the ensuing chase ends with the sound of a gunshot, fired by Tom, as the two gangsters hide in a dark alleyway. Tom's initial use of the weapon at the inanimate bear, in which Tom, the gun, and gunshots were all present within the frame, worked in opposition to his previous assertions of individualized fearlessness and betray a hidden morality. However, Tom's gunshots in the alleyway at the end of the scene, which maintain their sound but

lose the visuals, starts to distinguish Tom from his ethnic peers and initiates his rejection of all moral law.

Tom completes his ethical transformation with his next murder. The scene takes place after Tom notices his former boss, Putty Nose, having dinner in a club. Tom pressures Matt into helping him get revenge on Putty Nose for leaving town after the Fur Trading robbery, and the two friends follow Putty Nose to his apartment. While inside, Tom verbally and physically assaults Putty Nose who pleads with Matt not to let Tom kill him. In an effort to remind Tom of the “old days,” Putty Nose moves over to his piano and plays a song that he used to sing for the boys when they were younger. As he moves, Tom follows him, standing behind Putty Nose as he begins to play. The camera pans to the left to capture the movement, framing the characters in a full shot with Putty Nose behind the piano and Tom hovering over him. As Tom unbuttons his coat and grabs his gun, the camera pans back to the right to show Matt standing by the door watching the off-screen action. Tom fires two off-screen shots, changing the sound of the song to the sound of Putty Nose groaning and falling onto the piano. The camera remains focused on Matt’s unsettled reaction throughout this series of off-screen sounds. Tom, in contrast, re-enters the frame, casually says that he should “call Gwen” because she’ll probably be back at the hotel by now, and unconcernedly pats Matt on the shoulder as he walks by, opens the door, and exits the scene. Matt remains for a moment, staring at Putty Nose, before slowly closing the door as the scene

fades out. In this scene Matt recognizes that violent crime no longer fazes his friend, reversing Matt's sardonic remarks about Tom's nerves earlier in the film. Matt's maintenance of moral anxiety even while serving as a gangster highlights the hard-heartedness with which Tom approaches and enacts violent crime.

Tom's rejection of religious morality extends to and ultimately undermines his familial interactions. As in *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* also includes the Catholic mother archetype, and Tom's Catholic mother obsesses over family unification even though Tom and his brother Mike's actions make unification impossible. When Mike enlists in the Marines it brings his mother to tears, and her plea with Tom, when he enters the scene, is that he promise not to leave her. For the mother, military service breaks the family bond even though, as she says, they "should be proud of him." Later in the film, Tom surprises his mother while she cleans the kitchen, and her joyous response to seeing her son after a long period of time is that she "was beginning to think" she had "lost" him. In the same scene, Tom's brother Mike interrupts Tom's attempt to give his mother money, and the mother quickly tries to stop the argument between brothers by saying that she doesn't want to see them fighting because "it ain't right for two brothers." As she says this the camera positions her in-between her boys, docilely gazing back and forth in hopes that they will make peace. Yet, Tom does not fulfill Mrs. Powers' desire for family unity because his individual aspirations outweigh his family bond. Tom will continually leave his family for the gang. His mother's words and

influence cannot overcome Tom's penchant for violence and his conflict with Mike. Tom's violent individualism surpasses his mother's ethnic and religious emphasis on family.

Like Rico in *Little Caesar*, Tony Camonte in *Scarface* opens the film as a hardened killer, exhibited through an off-screen murder that Tony commits in the film's first scene. Starting outside of mob boss "Big" Louis Costillo's club, a tracking shot moves through the dining hall as Louis talks with his associates and follows him to the back hallway of the club as he makes a phone call. The moving camera then continues past Louis and onto Tony's shadow entering through a back door. Once the camera reaches Tony the direction of the camera changes and begins moving left rather than right; closer to the front entrance than the back. As with the change from dissolves to cuts when Rico shot Crime Commissioner McClure, this change in tracking direction connects with a change in the soundtrack as Tony, still off-screen, begins to whistle. Tony's shadow soon stops, pulls out a gun, says 'Hello, Louis,' and fires, killing the mob boss in his own club. In addition to separating the visuals of his gun violence from the sound of the violence, *Scarface* also separates Tony's body from the sound that his body makes. Tony's disembodied whistle becomes an uncanny noise similar to the gunshots in the previous films, and Tony's lack of physical presence immediately distinguishes him from the similarly ethnic gangsters populating the scene.

Scarface further individualizes Tony by contrasting his actions with those of his boss, Johnny Lovo. Lovo, who ordered “Big” Louis’ murder, tells Tony several times not to provoke retaliation from rival gangs by crossing established bootlegging boundaries. Tony does not listen, opting instead to usurp Lovo’s authority along with the authority of rival gang leaders. As opposed to Lovo, Tony is comfortable not only rejecting societal and religious ethical codes, but also the ethical codes governing inter-gangster relations. In a scene similar to the opening scene of *Little Caesar*, Tony and a few gang members pull up in front of a bar, exit their car with guns drawn, enter the bar, and unleash a series of off-screen gunshots, keeping the visuals of the deaths removed from the sounds of the shooting. The film further solidifies Tony’s ability to kill without hesitation a few scenes later after he realizes that one of the gang members inside the bar did not die and is recovering in a hospital. Tony and his gang force hospital employees backward as they open several patient doors, and there are two quick cuts when Tony finds his target. The first is an eye-line-match when Tony recognizes the bandaged-up gangster. The second returns the camera to the hallway as Tony pulls his gun, reaches inside the doorway (completely removing the gun from view), and fires multiple shots into the room, again detaching the sound of the gun from the visuals of the gun. Tony’s impulsive, violent actions distinguish him from Lovo so completely that the other gangsters quickly appoint Tony to Lovo’s position. Yet, following Tony’s ascent, *Scarface* continues separating Tony from the previously

powerful Lovo, emphasizing the disparity between Tony and all other characters. After Tony takes over as mob boss, Lovo decides to hire gunmen to kill him. When Tony escapes the assassination attempt he seeks revenge on Lovo and confronts him in Lovo's office. During the scene there is a medium shot of Lovo pouring drinks, slowly realizing that Tony knows what he has done. A cut frames Tony in a close-up as he whistles before another cut moves to a close-up of Lovo's panicked face. This shot sequence exhibits the tangible power Tony's whistle holds over the other gang members. After Lovo begs for his life, Tony exits the office and motions to his best friend Rinaldo to shoot Lovo. After the camera follows Tony out of the office, Rinaldo fires a series of off-screen gunshots. Unlike the reaction shot of Matt in *The Public Enemy*, Tony's unflinching response to the sound of the gunshots confirms his callousness toward violent crime and rejection of the moral convictions of natural law.

Tony's violent individualism causes his Catholic mother to lose all hope for Tony's reunification with the family and she therefore focuses her attention on saving Tony's sister Cesca from following the same criminal path. One particular scene exemplifies this. During dinner, Tony hears Cesca enter the house and quickly moves to the hallway, catching Cesca kissing a man. After chasing the man from the house, Tony gives Cesca money and commands her not to see any other men. Their mother witnesses the exchange of money as she stands in the kitchen doorway, a picture of Jesus adorning the wall in the background, and she bypasses

Tony to question Cesca's motives for taking the money. She warns her daughter that Tony's actions are solely self-serving rather than family or community oriented. In fact, Tony's mother even tells her that Tony views Cesca as "just another girl" and that someday he will mix her "up in his business just like anyone else." In contrast to Tom's mother in *The Public Enemy*, Tony's mother in *Scarface* accepts the separation from her gangster son, focusing instead on the family members still capable of salvation. While she still performs her familial responsibilities by feeding and communicating with Tony, she knows that total reunification is impossible because his individualization is extreme and complete.

The conflict that Tom Powers and Tony Camonte have with their siblings takes added dimensions when accounting for the siblings' status within the ethnic community. While clearly conflicting with their gangster brothers' anti-communal behavior, both Mike Powers in *The Public Enemy* and Cesca Camonte in *Scarface* also distinguish themselves from their ethnic community. Mike, a veteran of World War I, consistently chastises Tom for illegal activity, confronting him in almost every scene they share. Yet, Mike's military service, while bringing him support from the community, also disassociates him from his family and fellow Irish-ethnics. After Mike's return from the war, friends bring flowers and gifts to the Powers' home and the iconography associated with the gifts is American rather than Irish-Catholic, typified by a large bouquet shaped like an American flag and Mike's donning of his military uniform. In many ways, Mike represents WASP

American ideals and morality rather than the ideals and morality of the ethnic community. This helps to explain why, as Maltby argues, for all of Mike's "moral rectitude, [he] disrupts every opportunity for family harmony."²⁰ Mike's idea of harmony contrasts with Tom's and the community, making his verbose attempts to reform Tom useless. American law shapes his notions of moral reform rather than communal notions of togetherness, exemplified in the dinner scene at the Powers' home. Tom's decision to bring a keg of beer to dinner during prohibition does not deter his mother from enjoying the family meal, yet Mike's visible anger and righteous indignation at Tom's lifestyle fuels Tom's departure. While in the Irish-ethnic community family takes precedence over American law, Mike's American moral vision precludes his enjoyment of family gatherings.

In *Scarface*, Tony Camonte's sister Cesca represents the increasingly Americanized generation of female second- or third-generation immigrant children struggling to balance the demands of American culture while maintaining her ethnic culture. The repeated verbal conflict between Cesca and her mother reflects the cultural struggle between the "traditional domestic ideology of woman as mother and moral guardian of the family [that] was the prevailing thought among most Catholics" and the modern ethnic-American female who "sought to redefine the role of woman in a modern age."²¹ Cesca's desire for sexual freedom and power puts her at odds with her traditional mother, and Cesca repeatedly rejects her mother's maternal protection, insisting instead that she can "take care of" herself.

Cesca's modern ideals also separate her from Tony who tries to protect Cesca from modern society. Yet, Tony's protective instincts differ from the maternal instincts driving the mother, and scholars often point out the film's not-so-subtle incestuous implications. Not only does the mother's warning that Tony views Cesca "just like any other girl" allude to sexual tension, as does the rage Tony shows whenever he encounters Cesca with a man or out in public, the soundtrack also provides supporting evidence. The tune of Tony's recurring whistle is from "the sextet from Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*," which includes an illicit love-triangle between brother, sister, and friend.²² Rather than paternal or maternal concern, individual desire fuels Tony's need for Cesca to remain domesticated. Since Cesca's desires for individualization contrast with Tony's, conflict ensues, and Tony is severed from familial communion.

After the gangster separates himself from his peers and his family, each film affords him an opportunity to de-individualize; yet, whether the gangster accepts the communal offer of reconciliation or not, *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* all deny the gangster communal reintegration. Rico's climactic confrontation with Joe in *Little Caesar* provides the exemplar case in this regard. Late in the film, after Joe denies Rico's request to help the gang in another job, Rico and Otero confront both Joe and Joe's fiancée Olga. A long shot captures the gangsters' entrance into Joe's apartment, positioning the pairs on either side of the frame as Otero calls Joe a 'dirty, yellow double-crosser.' Then, after a cut to a

medium shot of Rico and Otero, Otero tells Rico to ‘give it to’ Joe before the soundtrack silences. During this silence Rico slowly strides forward and reaches inside his coat for his gun, and as he does so there is a cut to a medium shot of Joe and Olga in a frightened embrace. Another cut frames Rico in a close-up reminiscent of his close-ups just before he killed McClure earlier in the film. However, unlike the earlier scene, Rico does not alter the soundtrack and instead slowly moves forward toward the camera until another cut reveals that he is standing close enough to Joe and Olga that his gun rests against Olga’s side. In this scene it is Joe that substantially breaks the silence, moving Olga out of the way and positioning himself in front of the gun before telling Rico to shoot him. Another close-up of Rico follows, this time visibly distraught, as Joe continues to encourage Rico to pull the trigger. Instead, Rico slowly moves backward, maintaining his silence, until he quickly puts his gun away and yells, ‘Come on Otero, let’s go!’

Rico’s unwillingness to kill Joe and his inability to break the silence with a gunshot contrasts with the violent individualism he previously established. Rico’s loyalty to Joe, his oldest communal tie, forces him to forego individual safety and protection. Instead, Rico’s actions are selfless and other-oriented, and the aesthetic construction of the scene represents this. As Rico attempts to leave, Otero, channeling Rico’s former violent individualism, says that Rico is getting soft, pulls out his own gun, and fires once at Joe. The film captures this in a long shot, making this the first instance in the film that a visualized gun connects to the sound of a

gun. Therefore, while the sound of off-screen gun violence and aural agency distinguished Rico from his peers, the absence of aural agency and the presence of on-screen gunshots de-individualize Rico. By conceding to his communal urges, Rico loses his power. Yet, unlike the gangster films released later in the decade, this communally focused act does not result in Rico's re-establishment as community member. Instead, because of his prior sins, Rico must now live on the run from the law, hiding out in cheap flophouses until the police finally find him, surround him, and bring him to his own violent end.

Tom's communal reconciliation in *The Public Enemy* is more complex than Rico's. Rather than confronting a friend, Tom's climactic encounter occurs when he seeks revenge after the Burns mob kills his friend Matt; and rather than aesthetically deconstructing Tom's violent individualism, the climactic encounter further emphasizes Tom's ability to differentiate himself through moral callousness. Thus, Tom's default response is violence whether he is attempting to gain power or revenge a friend's murder. The scene begins with a full shot, representing Tom's eye-line from outside the building, of a gangster standing inside the Burns gang's headquarters. As cars pull in front of the building, Tom quickly ducks behind a staircase and out of sight before reaching into his pockets to pull out his guns. At least eight gangsters emerge from the cars, check the surroundings, and signal for their boss to enter the building. Once the mob boss enters the frame, a cut returns to a medium shot of Tom on the staircase smiling, and then glaring as

he recognizes his target. Then, a tracking shot dollies backward to maintain a medium long shot of Tom as he moves toward the building before a cut reverses the angle and shows Tom entering the building in a long shot. Seconds later, several gunshots ring out and Tom, visibly wounded, staggers out into the street and collapses near the curb. While Tom's concluding declaration that he is 'not so tough' as he falls in the street may recall Rico's fall from power when he could not kill his friend Joe, the scene's visuals declare the opposite. The scene inverts Tom's first killing scene when Tom attempted to assert his toughness in spite of the physical manifestations of his nervousness. It does this by visualizing Tom's violent individuality, single-handedly killing several members of the Burns gang and still surviving, and accompanying this action with words attempting to do the opposite.

Tom's near-death experience gives him a chance at reconciliation with his family. Tom's mother and brother visit him in the hospital, and the camera captures the entire family in a full shot as Tom tells Mike that he is "sorry." When asked to specify exactly what he is sorry for, Tom says that he is "just sorry." This vague apology leads Tom's eternally hopeful mother to say that Tom and Mike "are going to be friends again," and leads her to ask Tom if he is going to be "coming home again, to stay." Near the end of the scene Tom's mother even claims that she is "almost happy this happened" because it means that the family will all be "back together again." However, Tom does nothing to support these hopes for

reunification even though he responds in the affirmative. monotone and softly spoken answers replace his formerly commanding vocal presence, and he qualifies each answer, challenging his mother's hopeful optimism. He says he will come home to stay "if he ever gets out" of the hospital. Ultimately, the film proves Tom's pessimism correct. His years of individualism were too much to overcome, and the remaining members of the Burns gang kidnap him from the hospital and kill him. In an ironic twist, the final image of the film is Mike letting the murdered Tom, who was propped against the front door, drop into the family home.

Scarface further complicates the climactic act of communal reconciliation by forcing Tony to choose between ethnic peer and family. Like in *Little Caesar*, Tony's final major confrontation is with his best friend; however, unlike *Little Caesar*, Tony's confrontation with his friend results in his best friend's death rather than communal-based non-violence, in large part because Tony is acting out of the perverse sense of familial responsibility he has for his younger sister. During a period when Tony leaves town to avoid police interrogation, his sister Cesca becomes romantically involved with Tony's friend Rinaldo and they marry. However, all Tony is told when he returns is that his sister is living with a man. Tony's over-protectiveness of his sister leads him to find Cesca so that he can kill the man she is with. When he arrives on the floor of the apartment where the couple is staying, Tony begins whistling again, setting the audience up for another murder. Yet, when Rinaldo answers the door Tony does not act immediately as he had done

in every previous murder in the film. Instead, a reaction shot captures Tony's look of surprise when he sees his friend. A cut accompanies this brief hesitation, framing Cesca in a medium shot as she sees Tony, begins to explain her actions, then nervously yells 'Tony, don't!' as Tony shoots his friend three times off-screen.

When faced with the choice of friend or family, Tony chooses family; yet, the film problematizes the apparent reconciliation between Tony and Cesca in two ways. First, the overtly incestuous feelings Tony carries for Cesca make his act less a matter of family reconciliation and more a selfish act of individualized violence characteristic of Tony's action throughout the film. Second, Cesca's own position within the ethnic community makes any potential reconciliation between Tony and Cesca a unification of ethnic outsiders. The film's coding of Cesca as a modern woman and the contrast it establishes between her and her obviously Catholic mother connects Cesca and Tony as ethnic characters searching for individualization. This becomes clear during the film's final sequence as Cesca follows Tony to his apartment during his shootout with the police. Cesca initially points a gun at Tony, seeking revenge for her husband's death in much the same way that Tom avenged Matt in *The Public Enemy*. Yet, Tony quickly convinces Cesca that they can overcome the police and their circumstances, an idea Cesca accepts quickly. She then turns from vengeful widow to violent accomplice, hoping to help Tony shoot the officers outside the building. Cesca's initial desire to avenge her husband's death was not an act based on community but one, much like Tony's

murder of Rinaldo, based on individual emotion. As with the protagonists in *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, Tony and Cesca end the film in complete isolation. Their violent deaths separated from their family and friends accentuate the irreconcilable gap created by their individualistic lifestyle.

Ultimately, Rico Bandello, Tom Powers, and Tony Comante represent two prominent ethnic-American social struggles of the early 1930s. The first, exemplified in most scholarly research on Classical Hollywood gangster films, is the ethnic-Catholic's struggle against WASP societal norms. The second struggle, outlined above, is the gangster's struggle against his ethnic community, represented most powerfully in separation from ethnic peers and family. Even though several gangster films later in the genre's cycle provide the gangster a degree of communal restoration, the most popular films of the early 1930s make this separation irreversible. The main characters in *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface* embody the fragile relationship between communal status-quo and success in mainstream society. These characters, unable to maintain either their community or their success, remain eternally separated from both. Through spatial and aural aesthetics, these three films engage their historical situation and provide a powerful reminder of the racial, religious, and communal aspects of ethnic-American life in the early 1900s.

¹ This is the prevailing, and almost universal, critical approach to early gangster films. See Richard B. Jewell, *The Golden Age of Cinema: Hollywood 1929-1945* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 202; Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 201; Johnathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 39-43; and Ron Wilson, *The Gangster Film: Fatal Success in American Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2015), 30 for a few examples.

² Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish in New York City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963), 265.

³ Les Keyser and Barbara Keyser, "Crime Movie: Immigration, Gangsters, and Guns," in *Hollywood and the Catholic Church: The Image of Roman Catholicism in American Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1984), 43.

⁴ Thomas A Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 77.

⁵ Jonathan Munby, "Manhattan Melodrama's 'Art of the Weak': Telling History from the Other Side in the 1930s Talking Gangster Film," *Journal of American Studies* 30.1 (April 1996), 101.

⁶ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics* (New York: Collier, 1990), 45-47.

⁷ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁸ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 286.

⁹ Lee Lourdeaux, *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America: Ford, Capra, Coppola, and Scorsese* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 5.

¹⁰ Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 350.

¹¹ Alexander McGregor, *The Catholic Church and Hollywood: Censorship and Morality in 1930s Cinema* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013), 68.

¹² Grant Tracey, "'Let's Go Places with Jimmy': James Cagney as 1930s Immigrant Icon," *Journal of Film and Video* 50.4 (Winter 1998-1999), 4.

¹³ Leslie Woodcock Tentler, "Introduction," in *The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholicism Since 1950 in the United States, Ireland, & Quebec*, ed. Leslie Woodcock Tentler (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2007), 12. See also James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating*

Consciences (New York: Continuum International, 2010), 15 for more details on the moral teachings of the Catholic Church in regards to child education during the early part of the 1900s.

¹⁴ James T. Fisher, "Clearing the Streets of the Catholic Lost Generation," in *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, ed. Thomas J. Ferraro (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 83.

¹⁵ Christopher Shannon, "Public Enemies, Local Heroes: The Irish-American Gangster Film in Classic Hollywood Cinema," *New Hibernia Review* 9.4 (Winter 2005), 48.

¹⁶ Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 29.

¹⁷ Johnathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 116.

¹⁸ Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," in *Film Theory & Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 323.

¹⁹ Richard Maltby, "Public Enemy," *Senses of Cinema* 29 (December 2003).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 124.

²² Asbjorn Gornstad, "Mean Streets: Death and Disfiguration in Hawks's *Scarface*," *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 2.2 (2003), 400.

References

Doane, Mary Ann. "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space." In *Film Theory & Criticism*, edited by Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Dolan, Jay P. *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Fisher, James T. "Clearing the Streets of the Catholic Lost Generation." In *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, edited by Thomas J. Ferraro. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997: 76-103.

Gornstad, Asbjorn. "Mean Streets: Death and Disfiguration in Hawks's *Scarface*." *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 2,2 (2003): 385-410.

-
- Greeley, Andrew. *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics*. New York: Collier, 1990.
- Guglielmo, Thomas A. *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Jewell, Richard B. *The Golden Age of Cinema: Hollywood 1929-1945*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Keyser, Les and Barbara Keyser. "Crime Movie: Immigration, Gangsters, and Guns." In *Hollywood and the Catholic Church: The Image of Roman Catholicism in American Movies*, edited by Colleen McDannell. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1984.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.
- Lourdeaux, Lee. *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America: Ford, Capra, Coppola, and Scorsese*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.
- Maltby, Richard. "Public Enemy," *Senses of Cinema* 29 (December 2003).
- McGregor, Alexander. *The Catholic Church and Hollywood: Censorship and Morality in 1930s Cinema*. London: I.B. Taurus, 2013.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish in New York City*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963.
- Munby, Johnathan. *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Munby, Jonathan. "Manhattan Melodrama's 'Art of the Weak': Telling History from the Other Side in the 1930s Talking Gangster Film." *Journal of American Studies* 30,1 (April 1996): 101-118.
- Noll, Mark A. *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003.
- Shadoian, Jack. *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Shannon, Christopher. "Public Enemies, Local Heroes: The Irish-American Gangster Film in Classic Hollywood Cinema." *New Hibernia Review* 9,4 (Winter 2005): 48-64.
- Tentler, Leslie Woodcock. "Introduction." In *The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholicism Since 1950 in the United States, Ireland, & Quebec*, edited by Leslie Woodcock Tentler. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2007: 1-20.
- Tracey, Grant. "'Let's Go Places with Jimmy': James Cagney as 1930s Immigrant Icon." *Journal of Film and Video* 50,4 (Winter 1998-1999): 3-17.

Tracy, David. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad, 1981.

Wilson, Ron. *The Gangster Film: Fatal Success in American Cinema*. London: Wallflower Press, 2015.