

# ***Italian Immigrant's Culture in New York: A Comparative Study on *The Godfather II* and *Mean Streets* Through the Lens of Audiovisual Language***

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**Abstract:** This study explores the dynamics of cultural integration, assimilation, and identity formation of Italian immigrants in American films in the 20th century. It makes a comparative analysis of two iconic films, *The Godfather II* and *Mean Streets*, through the lens of audiovisual language. Drawing upon the semiotics theory, mirror theory, and root theory, this research aims to analyze the dynamic changes in culture, economy, and emotions experienced by Italian immigrants. The study is anchored in three key aspects. First, it focuses on the identity politics of Italian immigrants in the United States, with a spotlight on second-generation immigrants. Unlike the first generation, they retain a strong sense of separation from their Italian roots, exhibiting few traces of a transitional identity arc. The second aspect revolves around the directors' reconstruction of national history in a global context and its connection to the Mafia's influence on economic predicament. Lastly, by looking into the narrative symbols in these films, this research continuously explores the emotional dynamics in the process of cultural integration.

**Keywords:** film studies, Italian immigrants, culture fusion, audiovisual language

## **1. Introduction**

Italian immigration at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries can be regarded as a monumental event in the history of human migration, with few parallels in its general characteristics. As American scholar Robert F. Forster argued, "The duration of this Italian population migration is unprecedented in the history of human immigration" [1]. The massive and sustained influx of Italian immigrants to the United States was driven not only by the desire to escape political oppression and seek better material lives but also as a consequence of human capital allocation in the Western capitalist market economy. Italian immigrants stood out among the "new immigrants" in the United States and faced considerable exclusion due to their distinctive traits [2]. In this context, this study aims to examine the interplay of Italian immigrants within American cinema, focusing on two films, *The Godfather II* and *Mean Streets*.

During the early waves of Italian immigration, most migrants came from the northern regions, while later, the southern regions dominated. Southern Italian immigrants had a deep attachment to their homeland, despite having experienced numerous severe civil wars throughout history [3]. Several factors spurred this large-scale migration: increased oppression from the northern regions

following Italy's unification, industrialization's demand for affordable unskilled labor, population, and environmental pressures prompting government encouragement of emigration, and the capitalist global market necessitating global human capital allocation [4].

Migration often compelled individuals to adapt to new ways of life, leading to the abandonment of their original cultural characteristics [5]. In the context of both Chinese and Italian immigrants in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, transnationalism emerged as a response to exclusion, xenophobia, and the pursuit of freedom and equality within a new environment [6-8]. The cinematic portrayal of Italian American identity and dynamics is explored through various lenses, revealing the complex interplay between power, crime, legality, and familial tenderness. Specifically, Chen analyzes *The Godfather's* social realities across three dimensions: individual and group dynamics, power and crime, and legality and illegality [9]. These dimensions reveal the intricate power shifts within human society, from hidden gang-controlled realms to open societies masked by civility. Moreover, Sun highlights how female characters shape the narrative – stuck between restraining their involvement due to violence's consequences on men's careers, yet caught in a cycle of violence themselves [10]. The theme of family in *The Godfather II* further attracted academic attention. Family is taken as the space where dilemmas arise as characters navigate loyalty and familial emotions [11]. Regarding the other film, *Mean Streets*, Rodriguez investigates city dynamics, as it becomes a historical record of everyday life in 1970s New York, shedding light on the decline of the American Dream [12]. Additionally, *Mean Streets'* role in establishing Scorsese's cinematic presence is also emphasized. It is argued that Scorsese aims to bridge the objective present with a subjective past, portraying life in Little Italy and the limitations of that era and embodying Bazin's idea of coexisting objective and subjective elements in filmmaking and experience [13].

In conclusion, while existing studies are conducted from the perspectives of aesthetic value, multiple social reality elements, semiotic criticism, narrative art, character role, and vocal music, comparative analysis in the context of Italian immigrants remains relatively underexplored. These two films share similarities in many aspects, including movie style (gangster movie), content (concentration on the Italian gangster immigrants), and production teams (the second generation of Italian immigrants). Therefore, these two films themselves have their own cross-cultural diversity (American and Italian). This study aims to bridge this gap by employing an audiovisual language research method, dissecting films' scenarios to gain insights into the cultural environment and spiritual world of Italian immigrants in the 1970s in New York.

## **2. Cultural Inheritance and Dynamic Change under the Cultural Discourse of Italian Immigrants in New York**

### **2.1. National Culture**

Key themes and characteristics, such as the “subculture” of Italian Americans, the struggles and self-redemption of ordinary individuals, and the blending of documentary-style realism with subjective expression, were further emphasized in Martin Scorsese's films, particularly *Mean Streets*. It holds significant importance in both the historical discourse of 1970s American society and within Scorsese's cinematic portfolio. In comparison to the early period of Italian immigration, second-generation Italian American directors like Francis Ford Coppola and Scorsese not only inherited Italian immigrant culture but also actively participated in the American cultural process as U.S. citizens. Their dual cultural background became the most prominent trait: on one hand, they consciously reflected the process of American society seeking and reconstructing its values amidst confusion in their films; on the other hand, they traced back to their increasingly distant homeland. Perhaps due to the majority of Italian immigrants coming from Sicily, this generation of immigrant directors collectively brought the legendary stories of American mafia families to the screen. Growing

up with the realities of the Mafia, they used film to recreate the mafia as a cultural symbol representing Italian traditions, making gangster films a carrier of Italian culture and reaffirming their own Italian heritage [14]. The reimagining of American Mafia family heroes can be seen as their final destination in their search for the lost American spirit, where American society remains the ultimate expression of individualistic success.

The portrayal of film scenes also plays a significant role in showcasing the current state of New York's Italian immigrant community. The films showcase the Italian immigrants' efforts to preserve and uphold their culture. They maintain their Italian language, customs, and traditional habits as a way of affirming their identity. Although the Italian immigrants gradually assimilated, their generational eating habits were well preserved, such as the adherence to traditional Italian food, the red wine and macaroni shared by Charlie and Uncle in *Mean Streets*, and the bright yellow orange juice on the dinner table in *The Godfather II*. Moreover, scenes such as Frank signaling a symphony orchestra to play a traditional Italian song, "Let's Have a Tarantella!" (24:17 in the movie). It was once seen as a sign that Italian immigrants had not been fully localized in the United States.

Facing language barriers and cultural differences, new immigrants chose to rely on ethnic-based community organizations and mutual support networks. In the films, the Italian immigrant community is portrayed as a tightly knit community, bonded together by shared culture and language, as well as the common struggles of life. Members of the community support one another, forming a sense of belonging akin to a large family.

## 2.2. Religious Culture: The Balance and Constraint of Italian Religious Views and Secularity

Several factors, including religion, culture, and language, make it difficult for Italian immigrants to quickly assimilate into American society. Most Italian and Southeast European immigrants are Catholics, and their arrival challenged the dominance of Protestantism in the United States [15]. This caused fear and panic among native white Americans and Protestants, who saw the newcomers as inferior races hailing from the Alps, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean. Groups like the "American Protective Association," established in 1887, fueled anti-immigrant sentiments, blaming social issues on the arrival of new immigrants, whom they viewed as contributing to the instability of American cities [16]. Italian immigrants faced persecution and instances of violence in many places [17].

*The Godfather II* effectively portrays Italian immigrant-related religious scenes, emphasizing two key moments. The first is the Italian street parade in a flashback sequence, where the camera moves horizontally with the parade boats, and when the wooden railings are moved, dollar bills hang from the sails, and a scene shows people pasting money and kissing it. The second scene occurs when the elderly godfather returns to Sicily to seek revenge, with a long shot of the church entrance. This church scene echoes the montage editing technique from the ending of the first *The Godfather* film.

In *Mean Streets*, churches are shot to counterbalance the rough texture created by the handheld filming in the streets and bars. When filming in more orderly locations, such as churches, Scorsese adds his familiar themes to create vivid and intriguing visual images. For instance, at the beginning of the film, Charlie goes to church to pray. When he gazes at Jesus, he attempts to touch the candle flame with his fingers. Later, in a voiceover, the father says, "There are two sides—the kind you can touch with your hand and the kind you can feel in your heart, your soul, the spiritual side. And you know, the worst of the two is the spiritual." He then turns and continues to repeat the action of burning his hand with the flame in the bar, affirming his faith's efficacy. His faith in Jesus allows him to achieve redemption on a psychological level, washing away the sins of the mob and freeing himself from the abyss of the family's criminal lineage. This narrative style reflects society's diverse individuals through shared behaviors and causal logic rather than traditional motives.

An interesting contrast in the films can be drawn between a scene in *Mean Streets* and the ending montage of *The Godfather II*. In *Mean Streets*, Charlie's uncle arranges mob work in the restaurant

while Charlie washes his hands in the restroom. Through a montage edit, the scene connects the uncle's decision-making hand gestures with Charlie's handwashing, suggesting Charlie's attempt to cleanse his sins and break free from the family's mob bloodline. His means of self-redemption involve saving Johnny.

In the concluding montage of *The Godfather II*, after a series of killings, the film superimposes a close-up of an elderly Michael's face and eyes. Michael's character undergoes a transformation from initially resisting the family's mafia dealings to eventually embracing the family's mission. It can be said that Charlie and Michael's paths lead in diametrically opposite directions, with Charlie seeking self-redemption while Michael shows no intention of doing so.

Overall, these scenes highlight the profound influence of religion on the thoughts, consciousness, and actions of Italian immigrants. Charlie's pursuit of redemption stands in contrast to Michael's alignment with family ideals, reflecting the intricate interplay between religion and cultural identity.

### 2.3. Family Values and “Roots”

In 1980, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari co-authored *Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Volume 2): A Thousand Plateaus*, in which they primarily aimed to criticize “tree-like thinking,” namely, the consciousness of roots [18]. They advocated the concept of “rhizome,” another botanical metaphor, referring to underground roots that have no central origin or endpoint but connect with other lines in an unconstrained and arbitrary manner. In the films, the characters' families are shown, presenting a warm family atmosphere and strong kinship. These scenes also highlight the importance of family in shaping the values and cultural heritage of the Italian immigrant community. The films also showcase the distinctive characteristics of Italian immigrants in their habits and religious beliefs, such as praying and sharing meals during Christmas. The concept of “roots” is deeply ingrained in *The Godfather II*. It not only refers to the homeland but also to bloodline, inheritance, and essence, immersing the entire film in a profoundly strong sense of fate. On the other hand, Michael's character has almost no character arc; the signs of growth in this role are relatively weak. The film was created in the 1970s before the rise of post-structuralism, decentralization, and pluralism, when people firmly held onto the “consciousness of roots,” believing that people inherently inherit values from “home” to “society” and that it cannot be shaken by education.

Emigrating and taking root in a foreign land becomes a new set of roots, resulting in a hierarchical class system. Michael naturally transforms from a college boy to a Mafia boss. Hence, in *The Godfather II*, there is scarcely any identity crisis or conflict between social education and family education in the new generation of immigrants. In *Mean Streets*, Charlie's consciousness of roots is reflected in his religious beliefs, the Catholic creed of atonement for sins, and the apparent desire to inherit the restaurant. The reason why Charlie refuses to leave the street goes beyond the promise of a restaurant from his uncle. It also reveals an existentialist temperament and an internal struggle to break free from the family's mafia bloodline.

*The Godfather II* features three typical female figures: the protagonist's mother, wife, and sister. *Mean Streets*, on the other hand, mainly portrays the female character in the protagonist's girlfriend, with limited depiction of a black dancer. The behavioral language paradigms of these female characters reflect the differences between native Italian cultural influences (Mike's mother), second-generation Italian immigrants (Connie), and American women's perceptions (Kay and Charlie's girlfriend) of family and Mafia business. In *The Godfather II*, the mother and sister embody traditional Italian womanhood, characterized by a lack of involvement in their husbands' business affairs. In contrast, Michael's wife and Charlie's girlfriend represent typical American female figures, emphasizing individual self-worth over traditional loyalty to the family. Kay would ask her husband about “business”. This reflects not only changes in the era but also acts as a mirror to the audience as individuals. The tradition behind the Italian family is that women never ask their husbands what they

do. In *Mean Streets*, Charlie's treatment of the beautiful black dancer is ambivalent, as he admires her allure and beauty while also showing a hint of disdain because of her race. He struggles to break free from societal prejudice tied to racial discrimination. Through his relationship with his girlfriend, Charlie seeks to escape the fate dictated by his gangster family and attempts to create a new life together with her. This provides not only female viewers with a new way of examining the film but also opens up a window to the unfiltered instincts behind the narrative.

### 3. Economic Reality and Identity Dilemma

#### 3.1. Economic Hardships

Both films vividly capture the daily struggle of the lower-class Italian immigrants in New York, showcasing the vibrancy and congestion of the Italian immigrant community. The bustling and noisy streets reflect the community's vitality and multiculturalism. In *Mean Streets*, night scenes dominate the street depictions, with neon lights accompanying the constant flow of vehicles and pedestrians. The red hotel signs and flashing LED lights create an ambiguous nighttime atmosphere (26:36 in the movie). There is a scene in contrast between the two films: in *Mean Streets*, a homeless man cleans car windows (27:46 in the movie), while in *The Godfather II*, children rush to knock on car doors to sell newspapers, and police execute people lined up on the streets. This contrast reflects the hidden sins and decay in the impoverished and bleak corners of the streets, while the mechanized modern urban landscape with strong linear elements symbolizes the untouchable emptiness brought about by modernity, the uncontrollable void and anxiety beneath the giant modern urban cage, giving the films a highly philosophical and postmodern characteristic.

In *Mean Streets*, small shops and restaurants are frequently visited places by the main characters. These scenes depict the daily life and intimate relationships within the Italian immigrant community. These establishments serve as gathering spots for people to socialize and interact, as well as places for the protagonists to relieve stress and forget their troubles. For instance, in a scene (24:42 in the movie) from *Mean Streets*, an Italian restaurant entrance is shown, and the main characters get into a car while surrounded by a noisy and bustling environment with loud drum music playing. The overall tone is dim and heavily biased towards cool colors. In contrast, in *The Godfather II*, scenes of crowded gatherings and dinners are depicted, with the vibrant orange color of juice being prominent on the dining table. Additionally, when Vito follows someone and passes through a small alley, the surrounding restaurants and shops are also covered in cold and dark hues. These two scenes open a window for viewers to glimpse the New York Italian immigrant society at that time.

The film also shows the economic hardship faced by Italian immigrants, many of whom come to the United States in search of a better life, but who often fall into poverty and difficult livelihoods. Italian immigrants, while providing cheap labor, wisdom and talent for the construction of the American economy, endured the worst working and living conditions that Americans could offer [19]. For example, in *The Godfather II*, the young old godfather smuggles into New York to work but is forced to quit his job because of the local Mafia. This economic predicament prompts some people to turn to the Mafia and become a part of it.

#### 3.2. The Mafia and Crime

The two films showcase the connection between the Italian immigrant community and the Mafia. The Mafia plays a significant role in this community, influencing the characters' choices and destinies. It operates as an organized criminal group, controlling various aspects of community life, including the economy, politics, and social activities. This control instills fear and discourages resistance, allowing the Mafia to continue its existence in the community.

In *The Godfather II* films, the collusion between characters like Corleone and other Mafia leaders illustrates the influence and status of the Italian immigrant community within American society. In *Mean Streets*, the drama of the poolroom, the roughhouse, and the mutual help of the gangsters also go to great lengths to depict the life of the Mafia in New York's Italian immigrant neighborhoods.

In creating conflict, *The Godfather II* uses silent and calm depictions of tense fighting scenes. The stable composition and static shots, combined with minimal sound, create a sense of calm before the storm during intense gunfights. Noteworthy examples include the scene of friends absconding with carpets and the elder Corleone's encounter with Fanucci. A mixture of warm and dark colors, along with the quiet and steady camera angles, contributes to a unique visual language in the film.

In contrast, *Mean Streets* employs more shaky handheld shots to create a sense of chaos and tension. The director aimed to evoke a constant feeling of anxiety and restlessness, which the rough visual style accomplishes. Most of the movie was shot using handheld cameras, and a custom device connected the camera to the cinematographer, enabling dynamic and unrestricted shooting. For example, in the bar scene where Joe is completely drunk, the custom shoulder strap is attached to the actor, and a wide-angle lens is used. Additionally, a battery was attached to the actor's waist. The chaotic shooting style, along with intense lighting and a glaring red color scheme, visually complements the character's state of confusion on the screen. In the pool hall fight scene, several adjustments in camera placement were made, reversing positions between characters to intensify the confrontation.

## 4. Visual and Emotional Changes under Symbolization

### 4.1. Pain: Mirror and Oranges

"Mirror" appears many times in *Mean Streets*. As an important image throughout the film, it first has the basic function of expanding space and enriching vision. The use of metaphorical composition also makes the image language extremely stylized. For example, the film is good at expanding the space with mirrors and giving full play to the meaning of mirrors. Scorsese, as a "sociologist of film", interprets mirrors as the meaning of French psychologist Lacan's theory. Generally speaking, the mirror is not only a tool for self-examination, but also a kind of desire for the ideal self to become a valuable individual to the society, so he inevitably produces a kind of loss that is difficult to reconcile the contradiction between the idealized expectations of others and self and the objective reality, and cannot achieve the ideal self. The flame became the symbol of Charlie's atonement in the film *Mean Streets*.

Oranges, a recurring motif in *The Godfather* films, notably symbolize the impending presence of death. The frequent appearance of oranges serves as a prelude to impending bloodshed. In addition to being a symbolic representation of Italy, the abundance of oranges in Sicily aligns with the film's portrayal of death, adding an intriguing layer of symbolism to the narrative.

### 4.2. Struggle: Color, Music, Lighting, and Shadows

Color conveys rich symbolic meaning is a big feature of the film *Mean Streets*. The strong impact of rock music and the vivid visual characteristics of the "urban street" video space, the dark night and hazy smoke, create a strong emotional tone from the visual desolation. Red has become an iconic symbol, and the director likes to use monotonous colors to show Charlie's heart. Whenever Charlie feels guilty, the bar scenes cast his face in a crimson hue, representing sin, blood, and inner turmoil.

The film employs a nostalgic musical backdrop, generational references, and color contrasts to evoke emotional responses. The warm yellows and cold, heavy blacks, often accompanied by classic nostalgia-filled music, contribute to the film's distinct atmosphere. Orange and black can be said to

be the more frequent colors in the *Godfather* films, with warmer tones dominating memory pictures and cooler tones prevailing in scenes from Mike's perspective. Lighting and shadows are used to emphasize interior contrasts, employing techniques like Rembrandt lighting to showcase the transformation of Michael's face as he becomes the Godfather. In *Mean Streets*, when dealing with night scenes, due to insufficient sensitivity, the photographer inevitably chose to use hard light (only this can be the most economical exposure), which resulted in strong shadows, resulting in a rough and fierce image style, which has been affected until the 1990s.

In terms of dialogue, *The Godfather II* employs two main forms of camera composition: scenes involving two or more people and individual close-up shots of single individuals. The former typically frames the speaker's face and the listener's shoulder or the back of their head, allowing the audience to feel present, as if eavesdropping on the conversation. The latter captures close-ups of the characters' faces, particularly during confrontations between characters, negotiations between Michael and Roth, and conversations between Michael and Frendo. These close-up shots help the audience better sense the characters' emotional changes and inner conflicts. Compared with the dialogue shot of *The Godfather II*, *Mean Streets* uses relatively more of Charlie's inner monologue. In the close-up of the dialogue between the two people, the camera is also slow and constantly shaking, and the music is more in line with street and heavy metal rock than the sad classical presented by *The Godfather II*.

### 4.3. Immigrant Dream

The film also depicts the pursuit and expectation of some Italian immigrants for the American dream. They come to the United States hoping for a better life but often face harsh and challenging realities. In *The Godfather II*, the Statue of Liberty is originally a symbol of the American dream, but Don Corleone is isolated by the customs after he comes to the United States, which is the irony of the American dream realized through the lens. The first generation of Italian immigrants in history, despite waving the American flag, lived in Italian communities, engaging in Italian traditions, songs, plays, festivals, and attire. They identified with the values of modern American society, while retaining the unique cultural attributes of Italy. Like other ethnic groups, they came to the United States from other places and integrated together, with both similarities and characteristics, so they constitute today's cultural melting pot of the United States. The content of these cultural attributes is presented through the lens language. Through Scorsese's protagonists such as Charlie in *Mean Streets*, we comprehend the complexities that generate their anxiety within the specific environments, in this case, New York, and how the city affects their personalities and the relationships they forge. For Charlie, he desires a better life, one that he can be proud of, however, this yearning comes with a cost: delusions filled with harsh realities.

### 4.4. Lack of Recognition of Immigrant Identity

In *Mean Streets*, the cinematography plays a significant role in symbolically representing the urban immigrant experience. The use of handheld cameras creates a sense of rawness and chaos, mirroring the characters' inner struggles and the turbulent nature of the immigrant community. Through the juxtaposition of gritty street life and the dark, moody lighting, the film visually captures the societal challenges faced by Italian immigrants. Additionally, the frequent use of close-up shots during dialogues intensifies emotional exchanges and reveals the characters' inner conflicts, contributing to the overall visual language of the film.

The films also reveal the marginalization and discrimination faced by Italian immigrants in American society. In *The Godfather II*, several scenes depict discrimination and insults directed at Italians: First, during Roth's treatment, Roth distrusts an Italian doctor who does not even speak English and demands someone else. Second, during the congressional hearing interrogating Michael,

a senator remarks that it is an insult for an Italian to be there. Third, the scene of Vito's surname change at the beginning has a dual meaning: it reflects the locals' misunderstanding due to language and cultural barriers, somewhat condescending, and implies that Vito is not alone from the beginning. He symbolizes the family and the town. He carries all of Sicily in him. In *Mean Streets*, Johnny and Charlie do not have steady jobs, and they live in poverty and chaos. They often deceive young boys by posing as slick black-market merchants for small amounts of money. Among them, Charlie's situation is slightly better as he has an uncle with real connections to the mafia. Additionally, the scene of the fight and bribery of the police in the pool hall reflects the living conditions and lack of recognition and discrimination against Italian immigrants in New York streets at that time. Through the use of camera techniques, color grading, and cinematography, the film *The Godfather II* successfully portrays the complex emotions and cultural background of the New York Italian immigrant community. Additionally, by depicting the life status and immigrant dreams of Italian immigrants, the movie also reflects the diversity and challenges within the New York immigrant community.

Both films skillfully depict the life and emotional atmosphere of the New York Italian immigrant community using colors and scene composition. With their authentic and profound portrayals, these films create either tender or violent pictures of Italian immigrant culture and the New York Community.

In conclusion, the use of symbolization in *Mean Streets* and *The Godfather II* elevates the cinematic portrayal of Italian immigrant experiences in New York City. Through visual metaphors, mirror imagery, and the symbolic representation of cultural heritage and societal struggles, these films provide a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted immigrant narrative. The semiotic analysis of the films' cinematography and narrative techniques reveals the directors' prowess in conveying complex themes, and in doing so, the films become powerful reflections of the Italian immigrant community's journey to reconcile their past with their aspirations for a new future in America.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the portrayal of Italian immigrant culture and its connection to religion in American gangster films exemplifies the depth of cultural fusion within American cinema. These films showcase how various cultural elements have shaped the narrative styles and visual representations, reflecting the complexity of American society as a melting pot of diverse traditions and beliefs. As this analysis highlights, the study of American genre films can offer valuable insights into the cultural dynamics and ongoing processes of assimilation and identity formation in the United States. Moreover, this research also uncovers the special meaning of the audio-visual symbols in the context of Italian immigrants and their connections to the culture of Italian immigrants in New York. This analysis can serve as one of the methods to explore the profound cultural fusion behind American cinema.

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