

# From *Goodfellas* to *The Irishman*: Exploring the Aesthetic Transmutation of Martin Scorsese's Gangster Films

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Martin Scorsese is best known for his gangster films, especially biographical gangster epics based on real people or events. It can be said that Scorsese's attempts in the gangster genre both inherited the traditional American gangster films and enriched them with his unique artistic style, and made an indelible contribution to the expansion of this genre by offering criticism. In 2019, Martin Scorsese returns to the gangster genre with his masterpiece *The Irishman*. Although *The Irishman* is a profound film on its own, the only way to bring out its full charm is to link it to Scorsese's earlier works. By comparing the similar camera design and filming techniques in the two films, as well as the cultural changes behind them, this paper focuses on the inherent connection between *The Irishman* and *Goodfellas*, and tries to explore how *The Irishman* draws on the elements in *Goodfellas* to finally accomplish thematic sublimation and reach new heights in the aesthetics of gangster films.

*Keywords:* Martin Scorsese, gangster films, disenchantment

## Introduction

Growing up in New York's Little Italy, Martin Scorsese often heard and saw the various mafia incidents that occurred in the neighborhood, so while he appreciated the artistic quality of *The Godfather*, he also clearly pointed out the tendency to treat the film in an epic rather than realistic manner. *Goodfellas* was created to demystify, and after years of absence from the gangster crime genre, Martin Scorsese returned to his original intention in *The Irishman*, that is, a more realistic and restorative approach to the subject of gangsters, to dispel the magnificent filter of such stories, and to relieve the audience of the blind worship of gangs and violence.

### I. *Goodfellas*: A Microcosm of the Mob

Martin Scorsese stated in 1996: "We wanted to portray an environment and a way of life as honestly as possible ..... *Goodfellas* is in a way a documentary" (Scorsese, 1998). As such, *Goodfellas*, a film that does not glorify any of the characters and focuses on the most reprehensible and ugly aspects of the group between 1955 and 1987, is based on fact, including the restoration of the characters' last names. Unlike *Poor Street* or *Raging Bull*, the film does not show any moral or religious consciousness of the characters. Scorsese conceals his ego in the film, showing the story entirely from the perspective of the protagonist, Henry Hill. The film repeatedly shows murder from an objective perspective, whether premeditated or incidental, often accompanied

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by bloody violence, vulgar language, and extreme arrogance that also reflects the innate stupidity of the gang members. The details draw the viewer into vivid situations, with the camera trailing or following the characters head-on as if filming a documentary in real-time. There is no doubt that Scorsese judges these sins with a biblical approach, such as the use of a very hellish red color palette and the iconic technique of shooting from above the head when a character dies.

What characterizes *Goodfellas* is its unique irony, which calls for a truthful acceptance of all this rather than a critical accusation, a conscious involvement rather than contempt. Perhaps such irony can best be described as real self-knowledge. Scorsese sees through and shatters the myth of the insider, denying the perversion of childhood; at the same time, he is acutely aware that he, like the insider, is obsessed with wealth and stardom and special privileges that are so attractive to everyone. In a sense, therefore, Scorsese's dissection of human nature goes so far as to expose himself and the insiders together, revealing certain common elements that people would rather not see (卡·简亨, 1992).

Based on this, *Goodfellas* became the first strongly anti-mafia American film. The semi-documentary style demonstrates Scorsese's consistent sociological observation of the characters in his films, and at the same time, his complete establishment of a set of alternating subjective and objective points of view in the film makes the film not only a classic among contemporary Hollywood gangster films, but it is also a history of mobmembers with distinctive cinematic colors, ultimately realizing the inheritance and breakthrough of traditional gangster films, although with different perspectives and attitudes, its status in film history is comparable to that of *The Godfather* series.

## II. The Irishman: Bitter Inner Core

In his artistic path, Scorsese no longer believed in the possibility of redemption through massive bloodshed for any of the worst offenders. He recognized that the eradication of the mob and organized crime in any form would not happen overnight, but his expositors and his self-destructive "undercover agents" at least demystified the superpowered image of the mafia. *The Irishman* is another contribution in this direction, drawing on the late Frank's account of his past in the form of a set of memories, the first of which is of him and gangster Russell driving to a wedding in Detroit in 1975, a gas station they pass on the way evoking a second layer of memories. He joined Russell's gang and became the "Irishman" who does the "dirty work" (murder and arson); after being appreciated by the organization, he was assigned to be the help of Jimmy Hoffa, a senior member of the gang. Two storylines moving in parallel until they converge on the night before Russell's daughter's wedding in 1975 when Hoffa disappears. Hoffa was a political star in the 1960s, publicly known as an American labor union leader who served as the president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, but in fact, he had deep interests and involvement with the Italian-American mob, and within the mob, he was known as "our man at the top". Frank goes from being a nobody to having the ring, and along the way he is forced to witness many American historical events "Forrest Gump style", thus the personal insight of a gangster killer points to a broader picture of dark dystopia. In this respect, the central plot of *The Irishman* is a corrective and parody of *The Godfather*—the Corleone family is never a puppet of fate or some larger power, but each character in *The Irishman* is carried forward by the torrent of history. Each character in *The Irishman* is carried forward by the torrent of history.

Scorsese's focus is never on the specie-flow mechanism of money and violence, the network of interpersonal relationships within the mob and the interest groups it involves is so fragile that this is what Scorsese actually cares about in film but doesn't expose with a word. When he tries to present the structural principle and operation of the mob, he lets the audience see the relationship between individuals within the mob, which is the conclusion, tacit understanding, alienation, break between people, and the silence that envelops all human relationships. The silence in *The Irishman* has a double meaning: the obvious is the corporate culture of the mob, while the deeper subtext is a silent and sad gaze, a questioning and denial from "one of our own".

Scorsese introduces a child's perspective into the film—Frank's daughter Peggy, a sensitive little girl who, upon witnessing the scene of her father's violence, immediately understands what a horrible group of monsters her father and his companions are. She cannot accept this violent set of rules of the game, but at the same time, she was favored by the violent system and was on the receiving end of preferential treatment. When she could not change and had no ability to leave, she watched forever in silence as her father disappeared into the night. Peggy's "silence", offering a perspective that is both from within and at the same time interstitial, which is not the protest and condemnation of the innocent, but the confession and rejection of those in the same stream. Peggy broke off her relationship with her father in adulthood, and she finally left with determination. Peggy's "heartlessness" causes Frank's deepest pain as he walks to his grave.

*The Irishman* is exciting both on and off screen, in terms of viewing, storyline, performances, and many other aspects, but it is bittersweet. This may be the last epic work that can fully define a gangster film, and it may be the last time that three actors will play together to interpret the gangster role. At the end of the film, Frank follows Hoffa's habit of sleeping with the door open. This detail reveals the deepest tenderness and true repentance, which is a kind of mournful and open gesture. It is precisely Scorsese's mournfulness and openness that he has decisively shaped *The Irishman* with his emotions and abilities, he has created the rhetoric of images, and he has determined the texture and style of the whole film. Precisely because of this, *The Irishman's* relationship to the era is as plausible as the three leads' use of visual effects and age-defying techniques, seemingly out of place and with a sense of unspeakable bleakness and detachment. The narrative and emotions of *The Irishman* are too deep and complex, and contemporary Hollywood has reclaimed the creative power once delegated to directors and centralized the production team. But fortunately, there is an unrelenting audience and the emerging online streaming platform to enable a work like *The Irishman* to still hold on to its persistence.

### **III. The Contrast and Connection of Elements in *Goodfellas* and *The Irishman***

#### **Opening Long Take**

The opening scene of *The Irishman*—a Steadicam follow-up long take—will undoubtedly remind the audience of the two long takes in *Goodfellas*, the first being the famous Capa Cabana long take, followed by the less famous protagonist Henry's subjective viewpoint follow-up longtake, it introduces Henry's gangster cohorts one by one, presenting the life of the mob community. The camera movement and the choice of background music seem to respond to *Goodfellas*, forming a kind of hidden intertext, and the differences between the two reveal the importance of thematic expression. The camera shifts more, almost hobbling, as it "walks" to its destination, slowly bringing Frank, the wheelchair-bound protagonist, and narrator, into the frame. With the same camera technique, *The Irishman* portrays a lone gangster on the verge of extinction, with

Scorsese focusing on the fleeting nature of gangster life and the ensuing emptiness and hollowness, as well as the different perspectives adopted on the subject. This opening longtake directly distinguishes the tone of the two films, strongly indicating to the viewer the difference in direction and theme between the two.

### **Freeze Frame**

Martin Scorsese's signature stylized technique in his films is the freeze-frame. In *Goodfellas*, the freeze-frame helps to build the background and image of Henry's character, presenting his life surroundings and interpersonal circle. This technique is also used in *The Irishman* to introduce the characters, but the difference is that there are additional captioned business cards in the frame to tell the audience the cause of death and the year of death of these characters in a straight forward manner. *The Irishman's* emphasis on death and passing throughout the film, even in the character introductions, is a shift in narrative perspective, as in *Goodfellas*, Henry espouses the mob life as a myth of truth, "It's impossible for us to change our way of life", and Scorsese tries to use visual irony to expose the mafia, that is, to let Henry appear as a self-conscious bystander, and in the end, he proves to be a slightly negative protagonist who often stays out of it despite his involvement; while in *The Irishman*, the protagonist is a solitary and lonely Frank who looks back on the past, after all, other people who lived through it are long gone.

### **Climactic Paragraph Setting**

The structure of both films is built around a penultimate sequence that precedes an epilogue and to build climax, in which all scenes are tightly laid out to take place on the same day, but Scorsese treats these scenes in the two films in extremely different ways. *Goodfellas* has an air of madness in its camera arrangements, detailing the timing of each small event, which is filled with drugs and delusions of grandeur, accompanied by strong music and rapid editing, and an overall explosive, wild style; but *The Irishman* has a series of quiet scenes, with Frank's familiar mechanical execution of murderous orders. The two films' very different use of style here serves as a stark contrast to reinforce their similar structural features, and it is from this that the audience can see the great difference in perspective between the two films. In this section of *Goodfellas* music, editing and narration combine to bring the plot to a climax and give the film a lively burst of life, but in *The Irishman*, the passion is gone, leaving only a clear, direct listing of events on the screen.

And in this section of the most important point that is the death of the character, *The Irishman* Jimmy Hoffa and *Goodfellas* Tommy's dying moments in the camera also constitute a visual correspondence, the plot design of the two scenes are suffering betrayal, but the difference between the two is very obvious, the former is abetrayal of others and the latter is suffering betrayal. *The Irishman* is, in a way, quite personal and legendary, but at the same time, it maintains a certain restraint, a restraint that is very obvious when compared to *Goodfellas*, in which no one who can only influence a part of the people, a part of the region, a part of the state of affairs, and beyond that, most of the state of affairs is out of its control.

## **III. Thematic Level Change: The Complete Dissolution of the Gangster Myth**

Martin Scorsese was born in New York City on November 17, 1942, the standard descendant of immigrants from Italy. He lived in the Lower East Side of New York, known as Little Italy, which provided him with the life experiences and cultural atmosphere of New York, which made him one of the directors of the

New Hollywood generation, he is known as the New York School of American cinema, along with Woody Allen and Spike Lee. Moreover, at the time he lived, American cinema was inevitably influenced by the Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave from Europe. In particular, those cultural foundations from his Italian homeland and the precept of authorial cinema at New York University, where he studied, gave his films a distinctly individual or authorial character. But Martin Scorsese's films are also undoubtedly part of Hollywood and originate from this vast industrial system, and have always driven the industry with their high standard of work. As a neo-realist director, the difference between his films and the genre films that have been established in Hollywood is that, although his films are no different from the classic Hollywood genre films, at the core, he is always committed to expressing his own unique and detailed observations in his films, and no exception is made when it comes to the spiritual world of his characters. Scorsese's gangster films have always been dedicated to the image of street gangsters, these characters do not have a noble spiritual world, and some of them are even very empty and nasty, Scorsese does not look for too much excuses for their criminal behavior. In *Goodfellas*, Henry, Jimmy and Tommy trio's external life are a mess, this absurd life is actually closely related to their chaotic, cannot be explained by the regular character development laws and causal logic of the mental world. Henry grew up uneducated, influenced by Italian immigrant culture, he aspired to become a member of the mob since he was a teenager, and grew up to live the privileged life he dreamed of, becoming a member of the mob was not only no choice, but also his willingness. However, it is also in the constant crime, they offend fellow gangsters to the extent that they themselves are not safe, living a life of crisis. In this situation, the emptiness, ignorance and fear that lurked in the spiritual world only pushed them into the abyss of drugs. Scorsese always believes that this lack of spirituality is the most universal and representative value for gangsters. The violence of the characters is difficult to deduce from normal logic, and the only things that seem to explain their despicable behavior are greed, emptiness, boredom, hopelessness, and self-interest.

Although both *Goodfellas* and *The Irishman* show Scorsese's exposure and accusation of the true nature of gangsters, both in the visual presentation of the tone and the choice of age of the protagonists, it can be appreciated that Scorsese's interpretation of this theme has been advanced more deeply, complemented by a deeper tone. So, it's no coincidence that the end of *Goodfellas* echoes the opening of the final scene of *The Irishman* when we compare the two films. This is because the final scene of *The Irishman* is far more profound and expansive in its thematic expression than *Goodfellas*. If Henry's final escape from the gang is a kind of "golden finger" aura, then *The Irishman* strips away all the filters that glorify the gangster life, and Frank finally lives the peaceful life he wants, but that's it, especially since this peace is not a true peace of mind. At the end of *Goodfellas*, Henry, the narrator throughout the story, breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the audience, at which point the film and the narrative itself are integrated into the conversation, as if confessing from the witness stand. There is a similar moment in *The Irishman*, where Frank picks up the narrator's monologue after a long, bumpy opening shot of the film, and it goes without saying that such a deliberate choice means that *The Irishman* picks up where *Goodfellas* left off on a thematic level. Henry's confession is a means of self-preservation, Frank's confession is not to escape from the law or to save himself, but to save his own soul at the end of his life; Henry is redeemed in terms of personal safety and law, and he regrets having to give up his gangster life, while whether Frank is redeemed or whether he can get the chance to

be redeemed, these questions of the spirit and the heart are also in line with the “unclosed doorway” left by Scorsese at the end.

### Conclusion

Compared to the sensation of *Goodfellas* in the year and its revealed sense of bravado, *The Irishman* seems to be more like a summary statement with a strong sense of late-life, a review of the 20th-century gangster films, and perhaps the final curtain call. And it's hard not to think of Martin Scorsese's previous criticism that he compared Marvel movies to theme parks. The texture and features of *The Irishman* are indeed on the opposite side. More subtly, both Scorsese's work and his words attempt to convey the desire for repentance and redemption from an insider's perspective: Frank Sheeran's look back at the gangsters and Scorsese's bitter words about contemporary commercial films form a bitter polyphony, both of them are insiders, both of them are old and dying “old-schoolers”. Although Scorsese believes the big screen is the best way to view *The Irishman*, watching it via streaming does not compromise its quality, and there are times when its micro-aggressive dramatic energy and silent emotional tension are better suited to the finer points of a private viewing. Whether it is the genre of gangster films or the gangsters themselves, or the era that nurtured their prosperity, or even the classical, sophisticated, and high-priced filming methods, their “passing years” have long since drifted away from the spiritual world of this era, which makes Martin Scorsese's gangster films destined to be more and more obscure.

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