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University of Kent

School of Arts

# **Ethnicity, Masculinity, and the Representation of Italian-American Men in 70s Hollywood**

A Thesis by

**Stylianos Christodoulou**

Submitted in completion of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film Studies

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**ABSTRACT:** Hollywood in the 70s turned its gaze with fascination at the representation of Italian-American men, who feature in some of the decade's most popular and profitable films. This thesis attempts to explain the appeal of these representations by situating them within the overlapping discourses on ethnicity and masculinity circulating in mainstream American culture. From an incontestable privilege for most of American history, white masculinity became an increasingly problematic and guilt-ridden identity in the 70s, largely due to the growing cultural centrality of feminism and the civil rights movement. In this context, Italian-American men appeared to possess a certain advantage. The 70s ethnic revival movement reclaimed hyphenated identities out of the assimilationist melting pot and advocated a guilt-free shade of whiteness for the descendants of earlier Italian immigrants. Hollywood films invested in the perceived advantages of Italian-American masculinity and used them as vehicles for satisfying the desires and appeasing the anxieties of middle class, heterosexual, WASP men. The hyphen created a fruitfully ambiguous space for simultaneously exorcizing and embracing ethnic masculinity; for affirming the new liberal mores of WASP America, while fostering the fantasy of white masculine privilege. The thesis develops this argument through a historically informed study of the representation of Italian-American men in *The Godfather*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Rocky*. These films appropriate the familiar stereotypes of the Italian-American man as Mafioso, Palooka, and Guido to revive older masculine models, situate them within hybrid versions of the 70s, and render them plausible, believable, and appealing.

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of Italian immigrants in the United States has unfolded in parallel to the history of Hollywood. The massive wave of immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincides roughly with the birth of the American film industry; the first generation of American-born immigrants reached adulthood in the glory days of Classical Hollywood; and some of their children became the hottest names in the industry by the time of the New Hollywood. It is no surprise, therefore, that Italian-American men have always been present in Hollywood's fictions. Yet, for most of Hollywood history, there seems to have been an inverse relationship between ethnic characterization and positive characterization in representations of Italian-American men. The more pronounced the signifiers of ethnicity are in a character, the less moral, sympathetic, or heroic he is. In silent cinema, he is commonly the cunning shopkeeper, the simpleton labourer, the short-tempered drunkard, and the neighbourhood buffoon. The 30s granted him leading roles in feature films, but at the cost of adding the violent gangster to the list of negative stereotypes.

It was not until the 70s that Hollywood abandoned the demand for assimilation and the big screen filled with representations of likeable male characters that were openly, albeit often stereotypically, Italian-American. In 1972, *The Godfather* opened Hollywood's Italian-American parade with some of the most violent and distinctly ethnic Mafiosi that had ever appeared on the big screen. Four years later, *Rocky* topped the box-office with the rags-to-riches story of a stereotypical Italian-American Palooka, a dimwit, third-rate boxer. In the next two years, John Travolta skyrocketed himself to immediate stardom by portraying Italian-American Guidos in *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*.

This thesis locates the mainstream appeal of these representations in the ability of Italian-American masculinity to act as a surrogate agent for the anxieties and desires of middle class, heterosexual, WASP men in the 70s. At a time when white masculine privilege was under attack by the civil rights movement, feminism, and gay liberation, Hollywood's Italian-American men remain individualistic, overly sexual, racist, homophobic, and misogynistic. Their hyphenated ethnic identity performs the dual

function of simultaneously marginalizing and valorizing their troublesome masculine characteristics. On the one hand, Italianness bestows an ethnic character upon their aggressive masculinity, which keeps it at a safe distance from the new liberal WASP mores. On the other hand, Americanness provides the appeasing suggestion that white masculine privilege is still alive and available to all white men. Supported by the intersecting cultural discourses on ethnicity and masculinity in the 70s, this incongruous duality gained credibility and Hollywood's Mafiosi, Palookas, and Guidos became popular heroes.

### **Aims and Case Studies**

The thesis follows three interrelated lines of enquiry: interpreting representations of Italian-American men in 70s Hollywood, situating them in the context of American cultural history, and explaining their mainstream appeal. A comprehensive survey of all representations of Italian-American men in the 70s lies beyond the scope of my investigation.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I opt for historically qualified symptomatic interpretations of three hit films: *The Godfather*, *Rocky*, and *Saturday Night Fever*.

The selection of the three case studies satisfies two criteria. Firstly, they should feature Italian-American male characters in leading roles. These are characters portrayed as Italian-Americans within the filmic diegesis, irrespective of whether the actors playing them or the filmmakers involved in the production are Italian-American. The contributions of filmmakers and actors enter the analysis only if they were popularly perceived to have an effect on the representation. For example, Francis Ford Coppola's and Mario Puzo's autobiographical input in *The Godfather* does not influence the selection of the film as a case study. Their ethnic heritage is relevant to the discussion only because it was widely publicized at the time as a determining factor in the film's authentic look. Similarly, I make no assumptions that the ethnic heritage of John Travolta and Sylvester Stallone rendered the representation of Tony Manero and Rocky Balboa inherently different from, say, Marlon Brando's portrayal of

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<sup>1</sup> For thorough surveys of Hollywood's Italian-Americans since the silent era, see Bondanella (arranged by stereotype) and D'Acierno (arranged in chronological order and covering both representations of Italian-Americans and the work of Italian-American filmmakers).

Vito Corleone. I do investigate, however, how the signifiers of Italianness in Travolta's and Stallone's star personas circulated in the public sphere and affected the reception of their characters; in the same way that the Americanness of Brando's star persona shaped his character.

The second criterion in selecting the case studies is popular appeal, which I measure primarily as box-office success. David Cook has comprised a list of the most profitable American film releases in the 70s. Four films featuring Italian-American male characters in leading roles rank in the top twenty. These are *Grease* (fourth), *The Godfather* (sixth), *Saturday Night Fever* (tenth), and *Rocky* (seventeenth). In addition, *The Godfather*, *Rocky*, and *Grease* are the top grossing films in the years of their original release. The R-rated *Saturday Night Fever* ranked third in 1977, after the PG blockbusters *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*.<sup>2</sup> Although *Grease* was more profitable than *Saturday Night Fever*, I choose the latter as a case study primarily because it was released first and, as I examine further in chapter six, conditioned *Grease's* representation of the Italian-American Guido. In addition, I discuss *Grease* extensively in chapter one, as an example of the relationship between film and history.

Beyond profitability, the popularity of a film can also be measured through its cultural impact. Although an admittedly less objective measure, it is quite indicative that all four films produced equally successful soundtracks, inspired at least one sequel, elevated their newcomer actors (Pacino, Stallone, and Travolta) to immediate stardom, and provoked numerous appropriations and imitations. *The Godfather* is often cited as the film that reinvented the gangster genre (see, for example, Gardaphé 38-42); *Rocky* holds the honour of making training sequences a staple in sports movies (Baker 130); and *Saturday Night Fever* deserves credit for resurrecting the Bee Gees career and, more notoriously, for inspiring the cycle of utterly kitsch disco films in the late 70s.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These and all subsequent references to box-office revenue and rankings are taken from Cook's *Lost Illusions* (497-505). Figures refer to rental income, not total gross from ticket sales, and are unadjusted for inflation. Although the specific figures differ from one source to the other, the annual ranking order for the films discussed in this thesis corresponds with the lists of two websites, Box-Office Mojo and The Numbers, both of which rely on total gross.

<sup>3</sup> Among them are *Xanadu* (1980) and *Can't Stop the Music* (1980), which have the even more notorious honour of inspiring John Wilson, a film marketing manager, to start the Razzie Awards after watching them back-to-back.

Based on the abovementioned criteria, Martin Scorsese's work in the 70s is necessarily omitted from the discussion. *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Raging Bull* (1980) are arguably two of the most intriguing and complex representations Italian-American men in the 70s. Yet, neither of the two films fits comfortably within the Hollywood mainstream and both scored particularly low at the box-office.<sup>4</sup> The gangsters in *Mean Streets* were never embraced as warmly as the Corleones and Jake La Motta never became the popular icon that is Rocky. In chapter two, I do discuss Scorsese's 1974 documentary *Italianamerican*. This film, however, enters the discussion as evidence of 70s heritage quests, not for its popularity with audiences or its representation of Italian-American masculinity.

The thesis follows a two-part structure, with the three case studies comprising the second part, Mafiosi-Palookas-Guidos. The first part, History-Ethnicity-Masculinity, develops the analytic tools for a historically informed approach to Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men and explores changes to the meaning of Italian-American ethnicity and masculinity in the 70s. This exploration eschews the focus on cinema to consider other cultural discourses, texts, and practices that contributed implicitly or explicitly to renegotiating the respective meanings of ethnicity and masculinity. Situating this investigation as a preamble to the case studies provides a more comprehensive introduction to aspects of 70s history that, particularly in the case of the ethnic revival movement, are not commonly explored within the field of film studies. To be sure, my aim is not to assess the films' faithfulness to a pre-formulated definition of Italian-American masculinity. Rather, I begin by exploring the broader debates surrounding ethnicity and masculinity and proceed to situate representations of Italian-American men as active participants within them. As I explain further in chapter one, this approach yields interpretations that are symptomatic of the films' historical context and specific to their circulation in mainstream American culture at the time of their original release.

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<sup>4</sup> *Mean Streets* ranked twenty-fifth in rental earnings in 1973 and actually made a loss at the box-office. *Raging Bull* fared somewhat better in earnings and won an Oscar for De Niro's performance, but still ranked twenty-ninth in 1980.



## The Apparent Explanation and its Limitations

One would think, on the face of it, that changes in the representation of Italian-American men in the 70s bear little analytic interest. The combined histories of Italian immigrants and Hollywood can provide a comprehensive and convincing explanation. American cinema in the 70s was experiencing much broader changes, usually understood under the rubric of the New Hollywood. As the usual story goes, a new generation of film school trained filmmakers rose to prominence in the mid to late 60s. At the same time, the replacement of the production code with a ratings system in 1968 relieved Hollywood of the burden of censorship and allowed these young filmmakers to realize their deeply personal visions. They brought to Hollywood a unique influence from European and classical films and an appetite for experimenting, challenging conventions, and reinventing genres. In the meantime, the combination of new tax return legislation and a few immensely and somewhat unexpectedly high earning films in the early 70s—*The Godfather* key among them, but also *Love Story* (1970), *Airport* (1970), *Patton* (1970)—prompted Hollywood to invest in large-scale productions, which by the end of the decade led to the rise of the blockbuster.

Although this line of causality is by no means uncontested in the literature, what I wish to concentrate on is not the history of Hollywood per se, but its overlap with the history of Italian-Americans. By the time of the New Hollywood, the overwhelming majority of Italian-Americans were no longer first generation immigrants, living in urban clusters and restricted to working class jobs. The children and grandchildren of earlier immigrants had worked their way up the social ladder, gone to college, and moved to the bourgeois suburbs. Italian-Americans were not the only upwardly mobile ethnic group, but, according to the U.S. Bureau of Census, they were by far the largest among Southern and Eastern European immigrants (United States 1-2).

If we put the two histories together, then it makes perfect sense that some of the New Hollywood filmmakers happened to be Italian-Americans—the most commonly cited names being Coppola, De Palma, Scorsese, and Cimino. When offered a chance to work on personally meaningful projects, it is logical that some of these filmmakers turned to their ethnic heritage for sources of inspiration. This is not to

suggest that all Italian-Americans working in Hollywood in the 70s had an unquenched desire to display their ethnic pride on the screen. De Palma, for example, employed his talents to reinvent the horror genre with *Carrie* (1976), while his subsequent contributions to the gangster genre, *Scarface* (1983) and *Carlito's Way* (1993), focus on Cuban and Puerto Rican protagonists respectively. The ones who did wish to concentrate on Italian-American themes, however, certainly had more freedom to do so than their predecessors. Coppola has repeatedly noted the influence of his ethnic heritage in directing *The Godfather* (see, for example, Coppola 217, Farber). Stallone similarly claims that he drew inspiration from his own life as a young Italian-American actor to write *Rocky's* screenplay (Stallone 10). *Saturday Night Fever* was not written and directed by Italian-Americans, but it can be conceptualized as an indirect by-product of the same historical conjunction. According to *Cineaste*, Robert Stigwood, the film's producer, realized the profit potential of Italian-American themes and envisioned Tony Manero as a dancing Rocky (Auster and Quart 36).

If Hollywood history and Italian-American history can collectively provide a valid explanation for changes in Hollywood's representation of Italian-Americans in the 70s, then what is the use of revisiting this well-known history and investigating beyond authorial contributions? My intention is not to refute this explanation, but to problematize its seamlessness. The history of immigrants can explain the rise of Italian-American filmmakers in the 70s. The history of Hollywood can explain why they became prominent and were free to invest in ethnic subject matters. Yet, none of the two histories can explain what non-ethnic American audiences found so enthralling in Italian-American heroes. My aim is to explain both what changed in Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men in the 70s and why they became popular.

One could of course argue that the two outcomes do not require a joint explanation. The representation of Italian-American men is only one aspect of these films and, hence, one possible reason for their profitability. It does not take much insight to realize that these films speak to broader, all-American concerns. *The Godfather* has commonly been interpreted as an allegory of American capitalism; *Rocky's* eponymous hero has entered popular culture as the iconic American underdog; *Saturday Night Fever* catalyzed the late 70s Zeitgeist with its vision of a disco king. It would be misleading, however, to simply assume that the representation

of ethnic masculinity is unrelated to these all-American themes and to the films' popular appeal. Just because some Italian-American filmmakers decided to invest in their heritage does not necessitate that their proud Italian-American characters would become believable American heroes or that audiences would embrace them as such. The connections between ethnic themes and mainstream appeal become all the more intriguing when considering the antecedent Hollywood norm of erasing the ethnicity of likeable leading characters into a general sense of whiteness. In explaining changes to the representation of Italian-American men in the 70s, therefore, one can neither ignore the historical context nor focus exclusively on the rise of Italian-American filmmakers.

### **Representation, Ethnicity, Masculinity**

The apparent explanation for the presence of Italian-American filmmakers in 70s Hollywood seems to have left a gap in the literature for studies that explore the historical connections between representation and mainstream appeal. Film related research within the field of Italian-American studies, and ethnic studies more broadly, is often guided by an exclusively ethnic perspective, an underlying aim to discover how ethnicity shapes the representation or vice versa. This often manifests as a concentration on how the ethnic community is affected by Hollywood representations or how it appropriates and adopts them into its self-image.<sup>5</sup> In other cases, the ethnic perspective takes an auteurist form, as in research that focuses on the ethnic voice or agency of Italian-American filmmakers. Even when the object of investigation is representation rather than authorship, Italian-American studies has shown a clear preference for studying representations of Italian-Americans by Italian-American filmmakers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This concentration is evident, for example, in Ciongoli and Parini's edited volume on *The Godfather*, indicatively subtitled *Italian American Writers on the Real Italian American Experience*. It also surfaces in Laurino's comments on the role of Hollywood in fostering an Italian-American identity and in several contributions to the anthology *Screening Ethnicity*, edited by Hostert and Tamburri. *The Godfather* constitutes a noteworthy exception as the film that has been studied specifically for its broader effect on American culture (see, for example, Messenger, De Stefano).

<sup>6</sup> Scorsese and Coppola feature most prominently in the literature on Italian-American auteurs (see, for example, Casillo's monograph on Scorsese and Zagarrio's and Serra's essays on Coppola). More recently,

Film studies research into the representation of ethnicity proliferated in the 80s under the rubric of image studies. Although this early body of work explores the function of cinematic representations in American culture at large, it is often characterized by a more restrictive ethnocentrism. The focus is unusually on identifying negative stereotypes and exposing their inaccuracies.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, stereotypes are a useful and often unavoidable part of analyzing representations of ethnicity. This is particularly true for films in the 70s, which often take a self-reflexive look on stereotypes and seek to challenge or update them. On the other hand, the evaluative lens of image studies seems limiting and outdated. The key problem, as Steve Neale explains, is the 'inherent empiricism' of this approach, the attempt to assess the value of representations by comparing them to some unambiguous ethnic reality. A second problem that emerges therefrom is the invention of an 'ideal' against which to measure stereotypes. 'What in fact is being demanded is the replacement of one set of stereotypes by another' (Neale, 'Same Old' 34-35). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam agree that the task of exposing negative stereotypes relies on the creation of an equally limiting positive stereotype as a yardstick of authenticity (198-204).

This thesis returns to the investigation of stereotypes, but considers them through the updated lens that postmodernism has brought to film studies. Werner Sollors introduced the postmodernist perspective to studies of ethnic representation in *Beyond Ethnicity*. Sollors proposes that the meaning of ethnicity is subjective and constantly shifting, located in those 'mental formations and cultural constructions (codes, beliefs, rites, and rituals) which were developed in America in order to make sense of ethnicity' (9). Following Sollors, Thomas Ferraro explains,

Aesthetic media, especially quality media, have been integral to the persistence and dissemination, transformation and recovery, of Italianate sensibilities beyond their regional class base and family confines, and at no time more so than in our own: postindustrial, postmodern, and, in some ways, post-ethnic. (*Feeling 2*)

This conceptualization of ethnicity also highlights the new common ground between ethnic studies and film studies. Cinematic representations of ethnicity do not exist in

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however, scholars have explored the ethnic voice of such diverse filmmakers as Capra, Tarantino, Savoca, and de Palma (see, for example, Cavallero).

<sup>7</sup> Examples include the two collections of essays edited by Randall M. Miller and the one by Miller and Woll.

isolation from the 'real' ethnic experience, but are an intrinsic part in negotiating, challenging, and consolidating the meaning of ethnicity.

Nevertheless, taking a complete post-ethnic leap and focusing on ethnic representations as networks of codes and signs, confined within the immateriality of the filmic text, carries its own limitations. The main risk lies in suggesting that there is no reality in ethnicity (or race, gender, class, sexuality) except representation itself. This suggestion undermines the legitimate struggles of marginalized or subordinated groups. As Richard Dyer reminds us, representations 'have real consequences for real people, not just in the way they are treated [...] but in terms of the way representations delimit and enable what people can be in any given society' (Introduction 3). Representations can be traumatic and hurtful or even contribute to institutionalized violence. One needs to maintain the right to suggest that certain representations are false or pernicious, that *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Triumph of the Will* (1935), for example, are unambiguously racist films.

As a solution, Shohat and Stam propose linking the analysis of representation and stereotypes to the ideological and cultural context in which they were created and received (180-81). Instead of judging the accuracy of representations, one should accept them for the discursive categories that they are, but also take a second step and acknowledge their real repercussions. Paul Ricoeur's theory of history and myth can shed further light on the relationship between reality and stereotypes. Ricoeur argues that we must eschew the modernist view of myth as 'false explanation' in favour of recognizing myth's 'exploratory significance and its contribution to understanding' (490-92). The most commonly cited example of false but useful histories comes from Benedict Anderson's seminal study of nations as 'imagined communities'. Anderson studies national mythologies as discursive constructs that foster homogeneity and stability by helping people 'imagine' their common identity (15). Imagined communities need not be fabrications, but arrangements of historical events in a manner that emphasizes the common formative experiences of a people. Their usefulness as attempts for social coherence ultimately gains precedence over factual accuracy. This is not to suggest that cinematic stereotypes perform a benevolent civic function, no less than national mythologies are always targeted at political stability. What I am proposing is to shift the analytic attention from

discovering the 'real' history behind the representation to appreciating its historical relevance and cultural function as a construct. Chapter one is devoted specifically to explaining the theoretical underpinnings of this approach to film and history.

The narrower concentration of this thesis on representations of male characters is partly dictated by the empirical record. It is simply the case that Hollywood films with Italian-American themes and characters in the 70s tell stories that are driven forward by male characters. Immediately offset against this observation, however, is the recognition that it could apply just as well to the overwhelming majority of Hollywood films. Hollywood's gender power discrepancies are not unrelated to patriarchal hegemonies in American society and culture. Italian-American leading characters in the 70s do not just happen to be male, no less than they are just male characters who happen to be Italian-American. The addition of the word 'men' to the title of this thesis, therefore, cannot simply be a matter of pedantic specificity. In this respect, the representation of Italian-American women in the films is not entirely absent from the discussion. Such an omission would be myopic to the broadly accepted view in gender studies that masculinities are never defined in and of themselves, but always in relation to femininities (see, for example, Connell). Although restricted to supporting roles in the films, female Italian-American characters enter the discussion by virtue of being an intrinsic aspect in the films' representation of their leading men.

It is equally vital to appreciate that gender and ethnicity are not the only identities that underpin the representation of Italian-American men. As Shohat insightfully notes, the questions that film scholars often overlook when describing representations of ethnicity are inquiries into race, class, gender, and sexuality. I locate this thesis within this gap in the literature for studies that examine what Shohat calls 'ethnicities-in relation' (216). Although my primary focus is on the relation between ethnicity and gender, I remain open to their overlap with other identities. For this purpose, each case study incorporates a secondary focus on another identity—class in the case of *The Godfather*, race in *Rocky*, and sexuality in *Saturday Night Fever*. The term 'secondary' refers only to the position of race, class, and sexuality in this discussion; it is not meant to suggest a hierarchy of identities, where ethnicity and gender are at the top. Instead, I adopt the view that ethnicity and gender interact with

each other and with race, class, and sexuality in what Shohat effectively describes as 'shifting, relational social and discursive positioning, whereby one group can simultaneously constitute "norm" and "periphery"'. Indeed, Shohat's contention is especially relevant in a study of gender and ethnicity in 70s America, a time when the boundaries between 'norm' and 'periphery' became particularly malleable.

### **The 'Me' Decade**

The notion of the 70s as a culturally distinct period requires significant qualification. History is a continuum; to periodize it is to retrospectively impose artificial beginnings and ends for the sake of facilitating analysis. Such landmark events as a technological invention, a war, and the reign of a leader usually lend themselves as useful and justified barriers. The separation of history into ten-year chunks based on the numerical value of calendar years seems to be a particularly crude periodizing principle. It is, nonetheless, a very common principle in studying or referring to the history of the twentieth century. I follow this custom with the disclaimer that I use it for its convenience as an established heuristic device for analysis. I try to avoid broad descriptions of the entire decade, opting instead for situating each film within events and discourses particular to the time of its release.

If there is one historically valid justification to treat the 70s as a separate era, this would be the heightened self-consciousness at the time that America lived in the shadow of what came before. In December 1969, *Time* magazine published a survey of the decade that was coming to an end and its predictions for the one that was about to begin. Half-jokingly, but certainly true to the spirit of the time, *Time's* writers turn to astrology:

On Jan. 4, 1970, the planet Neptune, which has been under the influence of Scorpio since the mid '50s, will move into the sphere of Sagittarius, the sign of idealism and spiritual values. The result, predict astrologers, should be a profound change in the way people think and act. Just possibly, the astrologers may be proved right. In the short run, the clash between new values and old probably will produce uncertainty, confusion, frustration and dismay. In the long run, this decade and the next may well constitute an historical era of transition. ('From the 60s')

It required little knowledge of astrology in 1969 to predict that the dawning decade would be one of 'confusion', 'frustration', 'dismay', and 'transition'. The 60s bequeathed the 70s a heavy and conflicting load of history to come to terms with. Despite the legacy of social rebellion and the sheer promise of youth, the lasting effect of all the social and cultural turmoil was far from clear in 1969. Bruce Schulman begins his cultural history of the 70s by going back to 1968, which he describes as 'simultaneously an *annus mirabilis* and an *annus horribilus*' (1). In the midst of lingering divisions over the Vietnam War, violent social unrest, and increasing inflation, America witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy. In the same year, the young wife of the martyred president John F. Kennedy remarried a sixty-two-year-old Greek shipping tycoon, adding disappointment to the shock.

The most evocative slogan of Richard Nixon's early years in office was 'Bring Us Together', inspired by a sign that a thirteen-year-old girl held at one of his election campaign rallies. Nixon recounted the incident in his inauguration speech in October 1968 and turned the slogan into a promise, affirming that the great objective of his administration would be to bring the American people together (Evans and Novak 34). Instead, the many betrayals of his administration left a legacy of distrust and disillusionment. On 30 April 1970, Nixon announced his intention to expand the Vietnam War into the neutral nation of Cambodia. Four days later, the Ohio National Guard intervened to put down a protest against U.S. involvement in Cambodia at Kent State University. Four students were killed, nine were wounded, and the anti-war movement turned into an openly anti-Nixon and anti-government one. Three years later, the first energy crisis confirmed how vulnerable the American domestic front was to foreign policy. The crisis followed the Yom Kippur War between Israel and a coalition of Arab states led by Syria and Egypt. In response to the U.S. support of Israel, the Arab members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) instituted an embargo on U.S. exports. Both inflation and unemployment kept rising, the U.S. balance of trade showed a deficit for the first time, and the post-World War II economic boom came to a definite end.

In the meantime, the events that would ultimately force Nixon to resign had already been put into motion. On 17 June 1972, five men were arrested for breaking and entering into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate



complex in Washington. The ensuing investigation linked the burglars to Nixon and the committee for his re-election. The Watergate scandal led to the end of Nixon's presidency in August 1974, but not to his punishment or definite judgement. His surviving image in the public sphere remained the picture of his triumphant resignation, smiling and waving to the public. In his widely unpopular decision to pardon Nixon, Gerald Ford seemed to compromise the legitimacy and authority both of his own administration and the institution of the American presidency. The year after Nixon's resignation, America's imperialistic adventure in Asia also came crumbling down. The withdrawal from Saigon in 1975 marked the end of a prolonged war and America's first military defeat abroad.

On the cultural front, *Time's* prediction for 'a profound change in the way people think and act' seemed ill-founded. The 70s is more easily remembered as an era of decadence, superficiality, and disappointment after the rebellious 60s. Faced with all the political, economic, and social instability, the various liberation quests of the 60s spilled over into the 70s with a much more inward focus. Tom Wolfe used the term 'plugging in' to describe the decade's dominant cultural trend in his famous essay 'The "Me" Decade and the Third Great Awakening'. Originally published on 23 August 1976 in *New York* magazine, Wolfe's essay has provided not only the most lasting moniker of the 70s, but also the most commonly cited explanation of its culture. The essay begins with the description of a woman attending a three-day Erhard Seminars Training (the most famous of the numerous self-advancement courses of the 70s) in the banquet hall of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. The instructor asks the participants to visualize the most significant source of their oppression. Wolfe's heroine happens to suffer from hemorrhoids and, at that critical moment, when she goes to the microphone to 'take her finger off the repress button' and 'share', she shouts 'me and my hemorrhoids' (26). 'In her experience', Wolfe proposes, 'lies the explanation of certain grand puzzles of the 1970s, a period that will come to be known as the "Me" Decade' (29). Such seemingly unrelated 70s trends as Eastern spirituality, organic farming, new age meditation, ultra-conservative Christian churches, and retirement communities are for Wolfe simply different ways to 'plug in' and focus on 'me'. They do not represent a genuine interest in the particular cause, identity,

religion, or organization, but the fulfilment of narcissistic masochism, a desire to break from the mainstream and indulge in self-imposed victimhood.

Ironically enough, the people most in need to break from the mainstream and shout 'me' were the holders of cultural hegemony, the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, heterosexual men that for decades constituted the American 'norm'. On 10 May 1971, *Time* magazine published an opinion piece by Melvin Maddocks describing this new cultural phenomenon. Taking his cue from the Italian-American Civil Rights League's campaign to banish the use of the terms 'Mafia' and 'Cosa Nostra' from *The Godfather*, Maddocks describes the new decade as 'the age of touchiness'. 'Not a day passes', he writes, 'but new and even touchier minorities surface. Feeling oppressed, in fact, has become something of a national sport with its own succinct rules. A posture of unequivocal outrage is *de rigueur*'. Maddocks proceeds to predict that, if all Americans keep breaking out into their separate minorities (whether defined in terms of ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, physical capability, or any other characteristic), then the only ones left will be the oppressors, who will inevitably united into their own oppressed minority. To illustrate his predictions, Maddocks ends his piece with an imaginary letter to the editor of *The New York Times* written in the year 2000 by this new minority, The Order of the Sons of England in America. 'A racial cliché', this hypothetical letter would state, 'has lied its way into the American mind. [...] The white Anglo-Saxon Protestant is consistently portrayed as an elderly square parent type, a money-oriented materialist'.

Although Maddocks's predictions proved prophetically accurate, he completely underestimated the time frame that the age of touchiness would take to evolve. In the same issue of *Time*, a two-column article by an unidentified author declares in its headline 'And Now, Men's Liberation'. The article reports, 'Across the country, hundreds of men have joined groups that hold monthly or weekly "consciousness raising" rap sessions, discussions in which they air their anxieties and strive for better understanding of women'. The overtly stated goal of men's liberation was for men to come to terms with their chauvinism and show their support to the women's movement. Yet, even as early as 1971, *Time* does note that 'some men who attend liberation meetings seem motivated more by fear of newly militant women than by conscience'. As the decade progressed, both the constituency and goals of men's

liberation became clearer. Liberated men were overwhelmingly middle class, heterosexual WASPs, the men who would belong to this invented Order of the Sons of England in America. From the undisputed hegemony of American society, these men became the targets of the feminist movement, the African American civil rights movement, the gay and lesbian liberation movements, and every other group demanding actual or symbolic liberation. By forming their own liberation movement, they could also 'plug in' and join the oppressed.

These men constitute the focus of this thesis in exploring the mainstream appeal of Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men. This is an admittedly limited definition of the mainstream that functions more as a theoretical paradigm than a concrete sociological entity. If we imagine the membership of Maddocks's Order of the Sons of England in America to comprise all the so called WASP-NN men (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men, native-born of native parents), then it would only include sixteen percent of the total American population in 1973 (Weed 19). This figure does not even account for such factors as age, social class, sexuality, and ideological affiliation. The more precisely one tries to define the quintessential Middle American man, the more obvious it becomes that he is primarily a cultural construct. He is, nonetheless, an analytically useful construct in positioning Italian-American men in 70s culture and explaining the appeal of their cinematic representations. In the eyes of all the other white men who labeled themselves chauvinists and sought liberation, Italian-American men must have enjoyed a certain advantage. With the right side of their hyphenated identity in the white norm and the left in the ethnic periphery, they could potentially forego liberation maintain their masculine chauvinism.

### **The Hyphen**

The adjectival form that should be used to describe Italian immigrants and their descendants in America has long been an issue of contention, with implications that go far beyond orthographic convention. 'Italo-American' reduces 'Italian' to an abbreviated adjective and privileges 'American'. In 1966, the American Italian Historical Association chose to reverse the two adjectives in its title specifically to

emphasize the Americanness of its members (Casillo 40).<sup>8</sup> Both 'Italo-American' and 'American Italian' never gained prevalence. The question usually comes down to 'Italian-American' or 'Italian American'—or, as Anthony Julian Tamburri puts it in the title of his book, *To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate*. Tamburri describes the hyphen as 'a disjunctive element', 'a colonizing sign that hides its ideological and, therefore, subjugating force under the guise of grammatical correctness' (44). In making this argument, Tamburri borrows from Daniel Aaron, for whom the hyphen represents a hesitation to accept the immigrant and distance him from the mainstream, to 'hold him "at hyphen's length", so to speak, from the established community' (214). Tamburri does not propose removing the hyphen, but 'tilting it on its end by forty-five degrees' to produce a slash, as in 'Italian/American'. This manoeuvre, he argues, 'actually bridges the physical gap between the two terms, thus bringing them closer together' (47). Since Tamburri made this proposal in 1991, the slash has not replaced the hyphen, but common usage seems to be moving towards dropping the hyphen altogether.

Why, then, do I adopt the hyphenated form in this thesis and why is this discussion not relocated to a disambiguation footnote? In principle, I agree with Tamburri's objections to the use of the hyphen. Apart from semantic meaning, however, the hyphen also has a distinct history that is intimately connected to the 70s. For much of the twentieth century, hyphenated identities were derogatory terms. The hyphen signified neither connection nor disjuncture, but simply a failure to assimilate and become wholly American. Italianness and Americanness competed in a zero-sum game; to be Italian-American was to be less American. Indeed, hyphenated terms were seldom used in everyday conversation and unassimilated Italian-Americans were simply 'Italian'. With the cultural nationalisms and liberation movements of the 60s, the demand for assimilation was eradicated and the 70s ethnic revival movement reclaimed the hyphen as a badge of pride. Ethnic revival advocates preached that the descendants of Italian immigrants could be civically and socially incorporated American citizens and unassimilated Italians at the same time. Italian-American men in particular

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<sup>8</sup> If this were indeed the reason, the reversal seems counterproductive, since the English language usually emphasizes the second adjective. The organization's members voted for its name to be changed to Italian American Studies Association in 2011.

found themselves in the advantageous position of simultaneously inhabiting the norm and the periphery. Masculinity and whiteness granted them access to the hegemonic mainstream, while ethnicity allowed them to shout 'me' and differentiate themselves from WASP whiteness.

I opt to use the hyphen as a reminder not only of its new meaning for Italian-Americans in the 70s, but also of Hollywood's investment in this meaning. The privileges of the hyphen are readily apparent in the Corleones, Rocky Balboa, and Tony Manero. Like typical revived ethnics, they embrace their heritage, but remain the central heroes of American stories. They are simultaneously more Italian in their characterization and more American in their narrative function. It would be misleading, however, to consider *The Godfather*, *Rocky*, and *Saturday Night Fever* simply as documents of the ethnic revival. Their protagonists are still far from the model of the 'decent, law-abiding American' advocated by anti-defamation organizations and closer to Hollywood's standard stereotypes of the Italian-American man as Mafioso, Palooka, and Guido. To understand these representations and explain their appeal, we need to consider them through the eyes of all those non-ethnic, non-hyphenated Americans who made them so popular.

The central argument of this thesis is that Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men in the 70s carried a dual appeal for the WASP mainstream. The left side of the hyphen functions as a dumping ground for all the less palatable attributes of traditional patriarchy. Aggression, violence, racism, homophobia, and sexism remain contained within ethnic stereotypes. The right side of the hyphen allows these macho men to remain socially and culturally central within the American norm. For all those non-ethnic white men in the audience, the presumed members of The Order of the Sons of England in America, the existence of old-fashioned white machismo in their midst fosters the possibility of a world that is still familiar, secure, and patriarchally ordered. Hollywood's Italian-American men offer a vision of this masculine world that is at once intriguingly proximate and safely kept at a distance.

Locating the appeal of *The Godfather*, *Rocky*, and *Saturday Night Fever* in this duality constitutes a departure from many existing interpretations of the three films. While reserving my critical engagement with these interpretations for subsequent chapters, one common tendency deserves early mention. Italian-American ethnicity is

often interpreted as a representational element that either justifies and redeems or marginalizes and controls excessive machismo.<sup>9</sup> This polarity, however, hinders the development of more nuanced interpretations that acknowledge the interaction between the marginalizing and valorizing impulses in representations of Italian-American men. More pressingly, it underappreciates the historically specific meaning of the hyphen as an ambiguous but representationally fruitful space between Italianness and Americanness.

The first chapter of the thesis is devoted to formulating the methodological and theoretical approach for subsequent chapters. It draws on examples from *Grease* to extrapolate between theories that explain the relationship between film and history. Chapter two looks specifically at the meaning of white ethnicity in the 70s and how it was negotiated and circulated outside ethnic communities. The discussion draws on evidence from the literature and activities of the ethnic revival movement. Chapter three examines the challenges to traditional masculinity in the 70s, the new demand for male liberation, and the development of the movement into an anti-feminist cause by the end of the decade. This chapter ends by outlining the opportunities that these developments created for Italian-American masculinity. The subsequent three chapters comprise the three case studies. Chapter four explores the seamless combination of capitalist business and patriarchal family values in *The Godfather's* portrayal of the Corleones. Chapter five discusses *Rocky's* resurrection of the American Dream and white privilege in the midst of America's Bicentennial angst in 1976. Chapter six focuses on *Saturday Night Fever* and the survival of Tony Manero's reckless disco adventures in a narrative that forces him to give them up and mature.

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of the former include Messenger's analysis of *The Godfather* in popular culture, J. Reich's reading of the *Rocky* series, and Kupfer's analysis of *Saturday Night Fever* as a personal growth narrative. Examples of the former include Gardaphé's analysis of *The Godfather* and Italian-American gangster films, Biskind and Ehrenreich's comments on both *Rocky* and on *Saturday Night Fever*, and Nystrom's chapter on *Saturday Night Fever's* portrayal of the working class. I examine each of these interpretations further in my discussion of the corresponding film.

**PART I**

**History – Ethnicity – Masculinity**

## CHAPTER ONE: Film (and) History

To argue that Hollywood's fictional stories are connected to the experienced history of those who make them and those who watch them would hardly constitute an original argument. Scholars have repeatedly turned to Hollywood films to find reflections of reality, evidence of cultural trends, vehicles of escapism, and responses to people's desires and fears. Yet, the precise nature of these connections and the analytic frameworks that should be used to study them remain matters of a broad debate. In this chapter, I examine some common responses that have been offered to explain how American films are connected to American history. My aim is not to reach any universally applicable conclusions, but to formulate a theoretical and methodological approach for the present investigation. This approach begins with the film itself and all the narrative and stylistic elements that may contribute to the representation of an Italian-American man. I proceed to look for symptomatic meanings and cultural significance at those moments where the representation intersects with ambient discourses and other texts circulating in the public sphere. These texts and discourses may be directly related to the film's production and reception or evoked through intertextual and contextual connections.

To provide a degree of uniformity to the discussion and remain within the thematic concentration of the thesis, I use *Grease* as a case study to illustrate the different interpretive paradigms considered. *Grease* also serves a secondary aim of this chapter, which is to introduce some key aspects of representations of Italian-American men in the 70s. At first glance, Danny Zuko's Italianness may appear inconsequential to the narrative and themes of *Grease*. Considered in the historical context of the late 70s, however, his version of Greaser machismo becomes distinctly ethnic. I conclude this chapter with the contention that Italian-American masculinity allows Danny Zuko a privileged and culturally central position in *Grease's* microcosm of American society.



## ***Grease's* History**

*Grease* can serve as a particularly illustrative example of the relationship between Hollywood and American history. On a first level, *Grease* belongs to a category of films that choose to present a historical past, either by adopting an explicitly historiographic function (as in the case of historical documentaries and some costume dramas) or by setting fictional narratives in a historical space and time, which is the case with *Grease*. The film's story opens in August 1958 in California, with Danny Zuko and Sandy Olsson separating after a summer of romance. Danny is a local high school senior and the leader of a Greasers' gang. Sandy is from Australia and has just moved to the U.S. with her parents. As luck would have it, the autumn finds them both enrolled at Rydell High and the plot follows their blossoming love and the hurdles posed by their cultural differences and their respective groups of friends, the T-Birds and the Pink Ladies.

On a second level, *Grease* occupies a particular place at the crossroads of different Hollywood histories. It belongs, for example, to a specific moment in the history of the musical genre, the history of the blockbuster, the immediate post-New Hollywood history, and the history of John Travolta's stardom. All these histories involve the people who make films, watch them, and bring along a third level of historical relevance. Filmmakers and audiences do not exist in a sealed Hollywood vacuum, but are bound by cultural practices, political ideologies, social institutions, and economic systems. Cinema provides a site where their individual and collective subjectivities can be visualized, negotiated, perpetuated, and challenged. These 70s subjectivities inevitably colour the representation of Danny and Sandy's story in the 50s. It is in those moments of purposeful, but not necessarily intentional, divergence from the 'real' history of the 50s that the different levels of historical resonance overlap and *Grease* reveals its ties to the history of the 70s.

For all its cheerfulness, *Grease* opens on a melancholic note, with Danny and Sandy spending their last evening together by the beach. Before we see them on screen, a series of establishing shots of the ocean under the warm light of the sunset set the tone (figure 1). The sound of waves crashing on the reefs blends with the soft melody and dreamy vocals of 'Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing'. The song originally appeared in the 1955 romantic drama *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955). Ringo

Starr included his rendition in the 1970 album *Sentimental Journey*, while CBS used it from 1967 to 1973 as the theme song of a soap-opera with the same title. Vera Dika notes that *Grease's* opening 'is almost identical to the one that begins *A Summer Place*' (*Recycled* 127), the 1959 film starring Sandra Dee and Troy Donahue, both of whom are subsequently referenced in the film directly (figure 2). On the one hand, Dika seems to exaggerate the similarities between the two openings. A kissing couple is absent from *A Summer Place*, while seascapes seem to be a very common opening for otherwise quite different films. In fact, if one is to identify a particular 50s reference in *Grease's* opening, the iconic scene of Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr kissing by the crashing waves in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) poses as a more obvious choice. On the other hand, Dika rightly points out that *Grease's* opening mimics the overall sentimental mood of 50s romantic dramas. Instead of using a superimposed title or a reference in the dialogue to situate the narrative in the 50s, *Grease* relies on quoting and appropriating images and sounds that evoke a 50s atmosphere.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

These quotes become much more prominent and playful in *Grease's* credit sequence, which immediately follows the opening scene and swiftly abandons its romantic mood. The credit sequence introduces cartoon versions of the main characters, interspersed with sketches of 50s posters, billboards, and advertisements.

Sandy, for example, is the archetypal virginal 'good girl' of popular imagination. She is assigned an animation style that mimics Disney fairytales and portrayed as the typical blond princess, complete with friendly forest animals rushing to her assistance as she gets out of bed (figure 3). The animation, however, is rough and sketchy, as if acknowledging that this is just a hasty imitation of Disney. The purpose is not to faithfully recreate Disney's style, but to borrow a quick reference of innocence and virginity, before moving on to the next character.

The credit sequence is accompanied by the theme song 'Grease', which did not feature in the original Broadway musical, but was written specifically for the film by Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees and sung by Frankie Valli. Their combination brings together 50s nostalgia with the late 70s popularity of disco. Instead of the melodic sentimentality of 'Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing', Gibb opts for the repetitive beat and catch-phrase lyrics that turned his soundtrack for *Saturday Night Fever* into such an immense success a year before. Valli, who made a name for himself singing in falsetto in the 50s and 60s, is the ideal candidate to bring some retro allusions into disco. The lyrics stress the ubiquity and importance of grease, incessantly repeating the phrase 'grease is the word'. 'Grease' refers to the popular 50s hairstyling product and synecdochically to the Greaser youth subculture. Nevertheless, the near obsessive repetition of the word in the song turns it into an all-encompassing, albeit completely absurd, definition for all the bits and pieces of 50s culture assembled in the film. When the song fades out, and the animated image of Rydell High dissolves into the corresponding live action shot, we enter a constructed universe, where chronology has collapsed to bring the 50s and the 70s together.

Why does *Grease* represent the 50s in this manner? How exactly does this representation correspond with American history at the time of the film's release? More pressingly, what analytic tools and theoretical paradigms should the historian use to identify and analyze the connections? Published in 1975, Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America* is one of the first historical accounts of American film that goes beyond the technological and industrial histories to describe Hollywood cinema as an intrinsic aspect of American history. Sklar's method for telling *A Cultural History of American Movies*, as the subtitle of his book promises, relies on an eclectic assemblage of data, ranging from production anecdotes to audience demographics. As proof that films are

indeed related to the social, cultural, economic, and political history at the time they were made, Sklar's method serves its purpose. Almost forty years after its publication, few would disagree with this basic contention. The pressing issue is no longer whether a cultural history of American movies exists, but how this history ought to be told. Each of the following sections examines a different set of responses to this question.

### **The Bottom-Up Approach**

One way of addressing the question of Hollywood's ties to its sociocultural context is a bottom-up perspective, which attributes agency to audience preferences in determining what is shown on the big screen. As a profit-maximizing industry, Hollywood's main concern is to meet viewers' demand and make the films that will induce them to pay the ticket price. In other words, films are products of their time insofar as they document Hollywood's interpretation of what people want to see at a particular time and place. The task of the film historian, therefore, is to account for the popularity of the film, attempt to decipher what audiences found appealing or satisfying, and then use that information to explain the film's relation to its historical context.

*Grease* belongs to the era of blockbusters, carefully calculated products targeted at becoming massive box-office successes and attracting diverse audiences. The film yielded Paramount in excess of ninety-six million dollars in U.S. rentals and became the highest earning film in 1978. Wyatt categorizes *Grease* as a 'high concept film', a term based on the Hollywood principle that a marketable film should be reducible to a single, easily comprehensible concept. This process of simplification is readily evident in the changes made while adapting the Broadway musical into a film. Originally produced in 1972, the stage musical focuses on the change from the sexual conservatism of the 50s to the sexual revolution of the 60s. To alleviate the ideological load and make the film more cheerful, some of the rough dialogue in the theatrical script is pared down and the inner city setting moved to the more innocuous Southern California. In addition, the film discards half of the strictly 50s rock 'n' roll score of the original Broadway musical (Wyatt 3-4). Many of the new songs were written or performed by ShaNaNa, a band founded in 1969 and specializing in retro acts. The

band also appears in the film as Johnny Casino and the Gamblers, the performers at the high school dance.

Noël Carroll's 1982 article 'Hollywood in the Seventies' can offer further insight into *Grease's* appropriation of both the Broadway musical and 50s romantic dramas. Carroll agrees that Hollywood's intention is to make films that appeal to a wide demographic, but points out that this goal faced an additional challenge in the 70s. Whereas, in earlier decades, Hollywood's loyal constituency comprised predominantly the college-educated middle classes, in the 70s 'the queue at the box-office is dominated by teenagers seeking hearth away from home' (56). Audience-minded filmmakers, Carroll asserts, turned to the traditional genre films to satisfy the changing 70s clientele. Their key to success was revising genres in 'a two-tiered system of communication', whereby younger viewers receive 'an action/drama/fantasy-packed message' and older, more intellectually-inclined viewers receive 'an additional hermetic, camouflaged, and recondite' message (56).

Although Carroll does not discuss *Grease*, his argument provides an accurate description of the film's amalgam of 50s and 70s allusions, all packaged within the familiar generic form of a musical. Consider, for example, the film's cast, which comprises two young popular stars, which would attract teenagers, and a host of 50s and 60s media stars, which would appeal to what Carroll calls 'film gnostics in the front rows' (56). Sid Caesar, a comedian known primarily from NBC's *Your Show of Shows* (1950-54), plays Rydell High's Coach Calhoun. Edd Byrnes, the aspiring detective Kookie Kookson on ABC's *77 Sunset Strip* (1958-64), plays television host Vince Fontaine. Frankie Avalon, the star of the *Beach Party* film series in the 60s, materializes as Teen Angel to sing 'Beauty School Dropout'. Eve Arden, known primarily for her role as the sardonic English teacher in the radio and television show *Our Miss Brooks* (1948-57), plays Principal McGee in *Grease*, the same character after two decades and a promotion. Middle-aged viewers can enjoy watching familiar but forgotten faces on the big screen, while participating in the self-gratifying game of spotting intertextual references.

In contrast, younger viewers can indulge in the pleasure of John Travolta's star power. While reserving the exploration of Travolta's stardom in the late 70s for chapter six, some remarks deserve early mention. Although *Saturday Night Fever* was

Travolta's first major role on the big screen, he was already popular from the television sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter* (1975-79). His television career was sufficient for film and music producer Robert Stigwood to sign him on a three-movie deal in 1977. By the time *Saturday Night Fever* reached audiences, *Grease*, the second part of the deal,<sup>10</sup> had already been shot and was released six months afterwards and four months after Travolta's nomination for an Academy Award. The two films also received some joint publicity. In its December 1977 review of *Saturday Night Fever*, *Newsweek* announced *Grease* as a summer hit and included a publicity shot of Travolta with Olivia Newton-John (Orth 63). Newton-John's music career had already peaked in the early 70s and, by 1978, her success was waning. Her 1977 album, *Making a Good Thing Better*, was her first that failed to be certified gold, while the release of *Olivia Newton-John's Greatest Hits* in the same year indicated that it was time for a turn in her career, which came with her leap from singing to acting in *Grease*.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Fully aware of *Grease's* main attractions, the 1978 trailer promises audiences a 'movie filled with more song, more dance, more of everything', while cheekily announcing that '[Travolta] does it all with Olivia Newton-John'. The opening scene

<sup>10</sup> The third film is the spring-winter romance *Moment by Moment* (1978), in which Travolta co-stars with Lily Tomlin. The film was widely anticipated as a fictionalized version of Travolta's real life relationship with the forty-one-year-old actress Diana Hyland, who plays his mother in the made-for-television movie *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* (1976) and died of cancer while Travolta was shooting *Saturday Night Fever*. Nevertheless, *Moment by Moment* failed to live up to the success of *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*.

teases audiences with a gradual revelation of its stars. Travolta and Newton-John are initially absent from the first couple of shots, then appear in an extreme long shot as silhouetted figures on the beach (figure 4), and, finally, as 'Love is a Many-Splendored Thing' reaches a crescendo, they come together in a two-shot (figure 5). Audiences in 1978 are not actually confronted with two 50s teenagers, but with a thirty-year-old music star in her film debut and the twenty-four-year-old star of *Saturday Night Fever*. The credits that follow the opening scene actually read 'John Travolta as Danny' and 'Olivia Newton-John as Sandy', the colour and size of the typeface highlighting the stars more than the characters (figures 6 and 7).



Figure 8



Figure 9

If, based on *Grease's* box-office success, we can conjecture that the average viewer in 1978 desired fantasy and stardom, the next step would be to determine what shaped this desire. This is the approach of Travis Malone, who examines 'the way [*Grease's*] production elements promote a nostalgic and utopian view of the 1950s that manages [...] the instability prevalent in American culture during the late-1970s' (115). The film represents the 50s as a carefree time of innocence and simple values, a pastel-coloured vision that does not quite correspond with the way the decade represented its own history. The opening scene, for example, affords Danny and Sandy a single kiss to say their goodbyes, and even that is visually obscured as they are silhouetted against the setting sun (figure 8). In contrast, *From Here to Eternity* has Lancaster and Kerr in bathing suits rolling around the surf and kissing passionately (figure 9). As Dika points out (in the context of a very different interpretation, which I

examine subsequently), *Grease's* portrayal of the 50s also differs from portrayals of the 50s in the 60s. 'The 1950s', she explains,

did not always signify 'harmless fun' to American audiences, especially not in the 1960s when this era was generally regarded as a failed historical period. When ShaNaNA first appeared at Woodstock in 1969 and performed 1950s style rock 'n' roll in full period costume, their act was an active parody of a now discarded past. (*Recycled* 125)

Juxtaposed against the aggressively politicized music of the 60s, ShaNaNa's performance appeared intentionally naive and dated. Nine years afterwards, *Grease* turned the parody into escapist nostalgia for the presumably simpler life of the 50s.

This brief discussion of how *Grease* may satisfy audience demand in 1978 is by no means intended to be a complete and definitive interpretation, but only one example of how a bottom-up approach can illuminate the film's relation to its sociocultural context. The main element I adopt from this approach is the emphasis on accounting for the profitability and popularity of a film when investigating its historical relevance. A stylistically innovative or a critically acclaimed film may have less to say about people's concerns, fears, desires, and moral values than a profitable film. It may already be apparent, however, that while moving from the question of audience demand to the question of how Hollywood's supply rises up to meet it, so has the analysis shifted away from a strict bottom-up perspective. To engage in a discussion of what kind of fantasy *Grease* offered viewers in 1978 is to acknowledge a degree of agency on the part of producers and filmmakers in translating audience demand into specific narrative and formal arrangements. On the other side of the theoretical spectrum are top-down theories, which view Hollywood as much more than an impartial translator of audience demand.

### **The Top-Down Approach**

If the bottom-up approach considers audiences to be fully in charge of their demand, the top-down approach regards films as products of the preferences, values, and ideologies of those who make them. Consequently, the job of the film historian is not to search in a film for evidence of what audiences wanted to see, but to assess what interests the filmmaking industry served by giving that film to audiences. In effect, the



analytic focus shifts from the capacity of people to demand what films they want to see to the unconditional capacities of Hollywood to control their desires.

The dominant paradigms that explain this top-down relation derive from the Frankfurt School theory of culture, which applies Marx's concept of commodity fetishism to artistic and cultural works. 'A commodity', writes Marx, 'appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood'. If we take a commodity to be any tangible or intangible object produced by humans, then its value can be easily measured by the human labour that goes into its making. Marx proceeds to attribute to the commodity 'mysterious' and 'transcendent' qualities that determine its social meaning (76). This mysticism arises after assigning a 'use-value', a price tag, which transforms commodities from made objects to owned and exchanged objects. Labourers can have access to what they have produced (the value of their labour) only insofar as they can meet its use-value. 'This', writes Marx, 'I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities. [...] There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (77-78).

What happens when a film or any other work of art becomes a commodity? Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer find in the notion of commodification an explanation of how the cinema industry regulates not only the production, exhibition, and distribution of films, but, more fundamentally, their meaning. 'Film, radio, and magazines', they explain, 'form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together' (97). They term this system 'the culture industry', a pervasive network of art production, which perpetuates capitalist ideology by commodifying and fetishizing works of art:

For consumers, the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish—the social valuation which they mistake for the merit of works of art—becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy. In this way the commodity character of art disintegrates just as it is fully realized. (Adorno and Horkheimer 128)

In 'Transparencies on Film', Adorno offers further insight into this process, arguing that the capitalist regime atomizes a Hollywood film into a series of fetishes, including the star persona of an actor, special effects, and beautified images (178-86). In the case of *Grease*, therefore, the combination of audiences' attraction to Travolta's star persona

and filmmakers' efforts to satisfy their desire belong to a system of production and reception that commodifies cinema and turns actors into fetishes. Raymond Williams concurs that the culture industry does not simply use manipulation and indoctrination as forms of control. 'It is a lived system of meaning and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming' (110-111). In effect, *Grease* does not embrace capitalist ideology as much as it embodies it. Audiences who watch the film are not mysteriously brainwashed into the virtues of capitalism, but they unwittingly become part of the culture industry.

Vera Dika finds in *Grease* 'an immediate social and political purpose' (*Recycled* 142) that reveals her indebtedness to the Frankfurt School. In support of her argument, she offers the example of Rydell High's sexual mores. Out of all the female students, only Rizzo, Stockard Channing's character, fits the stereotype of a 50s 'bad girl' who has no reservations sleeping around with boys. The rest of the Pink Ladies may dress like 50s 'good girls' and giggle around boys, but they all seem to be sexually active. At an indicative moment, Rizzo calls Marty a 'one-woman USO [United Service Organizations]', alluding to her collection of overseas boyfriends. At another instance, the film has the Pink Ladies put on blond wigs and sing 'Look at me; I'm Sandra Dee, lousy with virginity. Won't go to bed till I'm legally wed.' Although, as Georganne Scheiner points out, Sandra Dee's public persona was more complex in the 50s, imagining her as the virginal 'good girl' serves much better the purposes of a utopia constructed for 70s audiences. It creates a false vision of normalcy in an innocent past that never really existed. In this vision, Dika finds a deliberate attempt from the Hollywood culture industry 'to eradicate the most threatening aspects of race, gender, and class raised by recent 1960s progressive movements, while also indulging in the titillation of still marketable sexual freedoms' (*Recycled* 142). Consequently, *Grease's* pastiche of the 50s and 70s is not just innocent escapism, but a purposeful effort to depoliticize feminism and promote social conformity.

If *Grease* were successful in fulfilling its ideological function, then its historical anachronisms would need to remain concealed and audiences 'fooled' into believing its constructed version of the 50s. Dika cannot but acknowledge, however, that the construct is often rough and clumsy. 'In this suppression of history', she writes 'the film's illusionistic surface is ultimately threatened with disruptive meaning' (*Recycled*

124). Dika's conclusion reveals the reductive logic and levelling effect that the top-down approach can have. Any popular Hollywood film is 'ultimately' either successful at buttressing hegemony or collapses with 'disruptive meaning'.



Figure 10

A closer look, however, will reveal that part of the pleasure in watching the film derives specifically from recognizing those moments of 'disruptive meaning' that threaten to expose its 50s utopia. At an indicative moment during the opening scene, Danny poses in front of a sand castle as Sandy takes a picture (figure 10). The self-reflexivity of having Olivia Newton-John produce a beautified 50s picture with the hottest Hollywood star of 1978 seems too overt to be dismissed as a disruptive moment. *Grease* is punctuated with several such moments of whimsical self-reflexivity that invite audiences to appreciate its inconsistent historical references. In another instance, the camera tracks along a row of parked cars, with a couple in each one having sex, while on the soundtrack we can hear a radio advertisement for acne medication. The camera pauses when we reach Kenickie and Rizzo's car, just as they discover that their condom is broken. In the scene that immediately follows, Rizzo announces her suspected pregnancy. The irony in juxtaposing sex, acne, and pregnancy lies not only in the realization that an advertisement for condoms would have been more appropriate, but also in the recognition that the characters are not actually teenagers in need of acne medication. They are played by adult actors, who have already experienced, along with the audience, the popularity of the contraceptive pill. Appreciating these moments of irony does not come at the cost of being pushed outside the world of the film or feeling uneasy. On the contrary, there is a certain pleasure to be gained from recognizing the film's artificiality. The viewer who can

laugh at the anachronistic joke immediately joins the film's elevated and more knowledgeable position.

The top-down approach cannot adequately account for such moments of interpretation that are activated by a particular audience at a particular time and place. Although Adorno and Horkheimer overcome the issue of conscious manipulation and provide a more complex and organic model of how the culture industry functions, their key assumption remains that Hollywood films come to an audience pre-coded with ideological messages that perpetuate hegemonic structures. If audience reception fails to meet the rendezvous with the dominant ideology, then the implication is that something went wrong at the moment of production, that the coding of the ideology has perhaps not been clear enough—as in the case of the 'disruptive meaning' that Dika finds in *Grease*. In consequence, the interaction between the audience and the film is conceptualized as fixed and predetermined.

### **Synthesizing Text, Context, and Intertext**

The discussion this far has been guided by the assumption that a film is the outcome of a process that could be described as its making or production. Whether audiences recognize in that outcome their desires and preferences being met (bottom-up arguments) or become passive recipients of its embedded ideology (top-down arguments), the focus remains squarely on the film as a product that reaches completion once it has been made. The implication is that the history of a film and its relationship to the sociocultural context around it are formulated before it reaches audiences. Following the same logic, viewership is a straightforward process that lasts for the duration of the film and as long afterwards as it takes for the viewer to decide if supply has met demand or to digest the ideological message provided. As Cortés effectively reminds us, however, 'When you talk about filmic images, you are talking about at least three focal points: the creator of the images; the film as captured image; and the viewer as processor of these films into perceived and retained images' ('The History' 65). In this section, I concentrate specifically on how this last part of the process affects the relationship between a film and its historical context and outline the synthesis of views that forms my theoretical and methodological approach.

If we translate Cortés's tripartite division as studies of production, textual analysis, and reception, the latter is undoubtedly the one that has received the least scholarly attention. Indeed text-centred analyses often operate under the assumption that interpreting a film equals determining audience reception. Studies of reception and spectatorship conceptualize the relationship between films and audiences as a multivalent and dynamic process, a constant negotiation of a film's meaning that overrides textually embedded meaning. They tend to reject the view of a film as a sealed text and concentrate on the formative role of external contingencies that different audiences, at different times, and in different viewing conditions may bring to it. Once a film is made and released, it begins its own trajectory in the public sphere. *Grease*, for example, was received enthusiastically by audiences, reviewed in the popular press, appropriated into a second version of the stage musical from which it derived, mediated into publicity products, and exported into other cultures. It ought to be noted, however, that spectatorship does not occur in an open-ended, relativist field. John Fiske, for example, has shown that different cultural and social circumstances provide viewers with different criteria for interpretation. Fiske studies the case of Australian aboriginals' interpretation of *Rambo* (1982). Whereas American audiences found the film's major conflict to be between Western democracy and communist totalitarianism, Australian aboriginals saw a conflict between the hero coded as racial subordinate and his white oppressors (Fiske 105).

While Fiske concentrates on culturally-specific interpretations of a single film, much of the scholarship in audience-centred film history eschews the idea of interpretation altogether. Many scholars choose to concentrate on the processes and institutions through which films are distributed, exhibited, and circulated in the public sphere. In their introduction to the 1997 anthology *Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes propose a distinction between film history and cinema history. The former refers to a text-centred history of films and the latter to the history of cinema as an institution (2). Underpinning their discussion is the contention that film history has both dominated the discipline and often provided misguided or false histories. The tradition of concentrating on individual texts that catalyze the *Zeitgeist* has created a canon of historically influential texts, which commonly exemplify nothing more than their suitability as vehicles for

insightful analysis. For most audiences, however, the experience of cinema 'has not been with individual movies-as-artefacts or as texts, but with the social experience of cinemagoing' (Maltby and Stokes 2).

The distinction between film and cinema history poses a new challenge to a project that focuses on a historically specific analysis of representations. As defined by Maltby and Stokes, cinema history allows no overlap between a study of historical context and a study of individual films. My position is that a synthesis of paradigms is not only possible, but indeed necessary to appreciate the multiple factors that shape the relationship between a film and its historical context. Maltby and Stokes define historical context exclusively in terms of the institutions and policies of film circulation. When it comes to interpretation, however, their approach can be as limiting as the text-centred approaches they criticize. If the Frankfurt School approach focuses exclusively on what goes into the making of a film and ignores its circulation after it is made, the new cinema history risks suggesting that films arise spontaneously in the public sphere for the sole purpose of being distributed and exhibited. These institutionalized processes, however, operate within the broader structures of society, including, but not restricted to, the capitalist system. Audience reception may not be conditioned exclusively by the text, but neither is it merely the product of institutional context. Audiences are also socially stratified, gendered, raced, and historically situated.

Instead of deciding between cinema history and film history, therefore, I side with explanations that emphasize the homology between a filmic text and the cultural, social, economic, and political structures and institutions in which it is made and received. Richard Johnson poses the question if compartmentalization is more harmful than helpful for studying cultural products.

What if [theories of production, textual analysis, and reception] are all true, but only as far as they go, true for those parts of the process which they have most clearly in view? What if they are all false and incomplete, liable to mislead, in that they are only partial, and therefore cannot grasp the process as a whole? What if attempts to 'stretch' this competence (without modifying the theory) lead to really gross and dangerous (ideological?) conclusions? (45-46)

As a response, Johnson proposes a 'circuit of the production, circulation and consumption of cultural products' (46). This model negates the polarity of the linear,

one-directional understanding of production-text-reception by joining the two ends into a circle. According to the circuit model, producers must draw upon the ongoing social experience for raw materials, selectively borrow the elements they need and filter them into cultural products. When audiences receive these mediated products, however, they treat them as raw material in their own right, introducing another process of mediation and interpretation 'of the elements first borrowed from their lived culture and forms of subjectivity' (Johnson 47).<sup>11</sup>

Although Johnson's proposal provides a useful synthesis of other approaches, it does not constitute a full-fledged methodological paradigm. Johnson's aim is to outline a general approach to the study of cultural products, not to develop analytic tools for film studies. For these tools, I turn to specific cases of film studies research, which explicitly or implicitly acknowledge this process that has been variously described as circularity, homology, or correspondence. As early as 1976, Stephen Heath focuses on what he calls 'epiphenomena', such as posters, trailers, and advertisements. Such publicity material creates not only avenues of access to the text, but also shapes the way viewers interpret it. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott concentrate on the effects of peripheral texts, such as film reviews, star interviews, and advertisements, in conditioning the interpretation of Bond films. Janet Harbord looks at the way meaning is produced in 'film cultures'. The term refers to the spaces in which we watch films, the different formats in which they come to us, and the social and cultural networks in which they circulate. Despite the thematic diversity among these works, they all acknowledge that interpretation is not an exclusively text-centred endeavour, but agree that it should not be abandoned. Instead, they share the premise that text and context are inseparable in any interpretation of a film.

My methodological approach follows on this trajectory of contextually informed and qualified interpretation. I attempt to locate those areas where Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men intersect with historically specific discourses, texts, and practices to produce meaning. Some of the evidence I consider comes from the films' publicity campaigns and sources that directly express

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<sup>11</sup> The circuit model cannot of course serve as a universal paradigm for either film or cinema history. Although it is applicable to the present study of cinematic representations at the time and place they were originally produced and received, it is less useful to projects such as Fiske's, which looks at what happens to a film once it leaves the circuit.

an opinion on a film, such as reviews and comments in the popular press. These sources, however, are typically suggestive of the opinion of a particular social group, which does not always match that of the American mainstream. I treat these sources with caution and account for the intentions and preferences of the particular commentator or journalist. In addition, I complement these opinion pieces with evidence that is suggestive of dominant ideas, social mores, popular beliefs, common fears and anxieties. I aim for a diversity and plurality of sources, ranging from magazine articles and advertisements to bestselling books and highly publicized court cases.

A central tenet in my methodology is verifying the relevance and connection of sources to the film. For this, I rely on what Barbara Klinger calls 'intertextual activations on reading that exceed intrinsic control' (7). Klinger appropriates Bennett and Woollacott's concept of 'inter-textuality', which the authors distinguish from the non-hyphenated form of the term. As proposed by Julia Kristeva, intertextuality refers to a system of references within a text that allude to other texts. In *Grease*, for example, 'Love is a Many-Splendored Thing' is an intertextual reference to the 50s film and to previous renditions of the song. Bennett and Woollacott use the hyphenated form 'to refer to the social organization of the relations between texts in specific social conditions of reading' (45). Elaborating on their definition, Klinger explains that 'a social theory of reading must shift the orientation toward intertextuality from that which is textually incorporated, to that which excorporates the text by activating and appropriating its elements' (Klinger 7). As an example, consider the case of an American viewer watching *Grease* in the spring of 2012, in the midst of widely circulating rumours in gossip magazines and other media that John Travolta is a closeted homosexual (see, for example, 'John Travolta's Former' for a summary of the rumours). Watching his performance of machismo during the all-male dance routine for 'Grease Lightning'—part of which involves him riding atop a car engine and thrusting his hips while suspended in the air—may induce the viewer to interpret the film as a parody. The intertextual link to the gossip magazines could not possibly be embedded in the film, but it is 'activat[ed] and appropriate[ed] by its elements' (Klinger 7) to produce a new reading, specific to 2012.



If the Travolta example seems rather crudely obvious, it is because, like Fiske's aforementioned study of how Australian aboriginals interpreted *Rambo*, it relies on transposing the text outside its original spatiotemporal context. In such cases, one can easily distinguish between the 'textually incorporated' reading and the reading that 'excorporates the text'. The two readings, however, become reciprocal when considering discourses and practices that circulated at the time and place that a film was produced, released, and received by audiences. In this case, text and context become intrinsic and inseparable parts of what constitutes a film. A consideration of Danny Zuko's Italian-American masculinity will illustrate this point.

### **Danny Zuko's Italian-American Masculinity**

As a conclusion to this chapter, I employ the methodological principles outlined above to examine how text, context, and intertext interact in *Grease* to represent Danny Zuko as an Italian-American man. If we consider *Grease* outside its sociocultural context, then Danny's ethnicity appears narratively and thematically unimportant. A historically qualified reading, however, can open the film to new meaning. The brief discussion that follows is not meant to be a conclusive, but suggestive of the need for a historically informed study of Hollywood's representation of Italian-American masculinity in the 70s.

*Grease* does not dwell on the visual and aural signifiers of Danny Zuko's ethnicity. In fact, he is never referenced directly as Italian-American in the film. The closest the film comes to mentioning a character's Italian-American background directly is when Sonny, one of the T-Birds, swears in Italian—calling Principal McGee 'puttana' (prostitute). Yet, any viewer with a rudimentary familiarity with Hollywood's Italian-Americans should be able to recognize Danny and several of the T-Birds as Italian-American Guidos. In Peter Bondanella's taxonomy of Italian-American stereotypes, the Guido is a cross between the Romeo (the Latin lover) and the Dago (the lazy labourer) (57). I examine the Guido stereotype further in chapter six, but the basic characteristics are easily recognizable in *Grease*. Danny and his friends have two-syllable shortened first names; they often refer to their cravings for pizza and salami sandwiches; and they spend their free time repairing cars, a suggestion of blue-

collarism that corresponds with Hollywood's tendency to restrict Italian-Americans to the working class. A more historically specific suggestion of ethnic origin is the casting of John Travolta as Danny Zuko. Travolta's stardom in the late 70s relied almost exclusively on his portrayal of Italian-American Guidos—as Vinnie Barbarino in *Welcome Back, Kotter* and Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*. Danny Zuko is essentially a younger Tony Manero with hair grease and back-pocket comb instead of a round brush and a hair dryer.

Even if Danny Zuko can be easily recognized as Italian-American, his motives and behaviour appear to be conditioned exclusively by his characterization as a 50s Greaser, not his ethnic heritage. Nevertheless, subtle moments in the film gesture toward a more culturally central role for the Italian-American man. Consider, for example, the choreographies for 'Summer Nights' and 'Greased Lightning'. As is commonly the case with all-male choreographies in musicals, the protagonist stands in the middle, surrounded by characters with speaking parts (in this case, the T-Birds), and then a wider chorus of nameless characters (figure 11). This arrangement in *Grease* does not only reflect the narrative significance of the cast, but also a social hierarchy organized in terms machismo and ethnic descent. The men closest to Danny have black, greased back hair and wear the T-Bird leather jacket. As the circle opens up, some men with blond hair can be spotted, but they still project the right Greaser attitude. In the outer margins of the circle are the school's WASP athletes, wearing the school uniform, and Eugene, Rydell's token nerd. The farther one stands from Danny Zuko, therefore, the more he deviates from *Grease's* standard of machismo. To be included among the cool, macho guys at Rydell High, one needs to either be an Italian-American or dress and behave like one.



Figure 11



Figure 12

Danny's position as the natural leader of the T-Birds depends on a constant projection of sexist and over-sexed machismo. Settling into a monogamous relationship with a 'good girl' will automatically challenge this position. Yet, the film's opening scene clearly shows that Danny is genuinely in love with Sandy and is willing to compromise his machismo, as long as his friends do not find out. The 'Summer Nights' scene early in the film graphically illustrates Danny's dilemma. The song's lyrics juxtapose Danny's and Sandy's different versions of their summer together. Sandy describes it to the Pink Ladies as a fairytale romance, whereas Danny brags to the T-Birds about their sexual adventures. We already know from the opening scene, however, that Sandy's version must be closer to the truth. The climactic finale of 'Summer Nights' confirms Danny's genuine feelings for Sandy by isolating him in a medium close-up, away from his friends. Freed from the need to assert his machismo, Danny 'wonder[s] what she's doing now', just as Sandy joins him, superimposed in the same frame, to reach the final high note of 'oh, those su-ummer nights' in unison (figure 12).



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

Considering that Danny expresses his feelings for Sandy early in the film, it comes as no surprise when he overcomes his qualms about what the T-Birds might think and sacrifices his machismo to be with her. Seeing that Sandy is willing to go out with Tom Chisum, Rydell's star athlete, played by Lorenzo Lamas, Danny sheds his

leather jacket and puts on the Rydell gym uniform to impress her. The sequence of Danny trying different sports initially works for comic effect. He lights up a cigarette in the gym (figure 13), tucks the t-shirt into his shorts and rolls up the sleeves to match his usual style, and struggles to keep his cool when paired up against big guy Andy in wrestling. By the end of the sequence, however, the comedy ends and we are left with an exhausted Danny trying to win Sandy's heart. In the film's final scene, Danny shows up at the carnival wearing the Rydell sweatshirt for everyone to see (figure 14). He has transformed from an arrogant Guido into a man in touch with his feelings, who can admit to his friends, 'you know you mean a lot to me, but Sandy does too'. Before he finishes his sentence, however, all eyes turn on Sandy, who arrives at the carnival having undergone a sartorial transformation of her own. From a Sandra Dee lookalike, Sandy switches into a spandex-clad, cigarette smoking crossbreed of a 50s 'bad girl' and a late 70s disco queen (figure 15). Her absurd and narratively unexpected transformation allows Danny to go back to his usual style and end the film driving up in the sky with his machismo intact (figure 16).

In terms of fulfilling the leading couple's romance and giving the film its happy ending, Sandy's transformation seems utterly redundant. As a nerdy jock, Danny would still make a compatible boyfriend for 'good girl' Sandy. Such a conclusion, however, would upset Rydell High's social balance. Sandy's transformation marks a concession to the patriarchal and ethnic social norms of a society where Danny is the norm rather than the exception. Rydell High is populated almost exclusively by Zukos, Rizzos, Kenickies, and Biancies. Even the authority figures of Coach Calhoun and Principal McGee conjure something quite distinct from the usual WASPdom. It is the female Australian immigrant who needs to adjust her style and behaviour to assimilate into Rydell High.

The centrality of Italian-American men in Rydell's ethnic demographics may appear today like a mere coincidence. In the sociocultural context of the late 70s, however, it assumes a heightened significance for the construction and popular appeal of *Grease's* appropriation of the 50s. If Italian heritage carries associations with multiculturalism and diversity in today's American culture, this is primarily because the 70s ethnic revival movement took ethnicity out of the assimilationist melting pot and placed it at the centre of mainstream culture. Italian-American men in particular

experienced the revival as the ability to preserve old-fashioned models of heterosexual machismo, at the same time that WASP men had to compromise masculine hegemony in favour of gender liberation. The following two chapters take on the task of examining more closely the development of those texts, discourses, and practices that inform the construction and reception of Travolta's ethnic Greaser at the end of the 70s.

## CHAPTER TWO: The Revival of Ethnicity

The flavour of the social, political, and cultural discourse of the 70s can be easily obscured today by its ubiquitously recycled fashions and styles. The decade that popularized re-imaginings of the recent past for its own purposes has itself been re-imagined in popular memory. It is impossible to miss platform shoes and bell-bottom trousers, but all too easy to forget how new and politically relevant discussions of white ethnic identity once appeared. We do not easily recall debates over the existence of ethnic communities or arguments over ethnic essences. In terms of both social relevance and everyday usage, concepts like diversity and multiculturalism have overshadowed their forerunner, the 70s revival of ethnicity, an ideologically muddled social movement that managed to garner considerable momentum by the middle of the decade.

This chapter examines the ethnic revival through the discourses that shaped, reflected, and consolidated its social practices. The objective of this investigation is to lay the groundwork for subsequently situating Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men within this broader collection of discourses, texts, and practices that contributed to formulating the meaning of ethnicity in 70s American culture. (The following chapter performs the same task for the question of masculinity and its meaning.) For this purpose, I concentrate primarily on how ethnicity's meaning was formulated outside ethnic communities, among those middle American WASP audiences that flooded multiplexes to watch Italian-American gangsters, boxers, and dancers on the big screen.

The focus on non-ethnic Americans is also dictated by the nature of the ethnic revival movement. In both its origins and expressions, the revival oscillated between the often conflicting aims of limiting its scope to those of ethnic descent and raising popular interest in ethnicity. On the one hand, it explicitly defined ethnicity as a primordial and biologically determined identity, an exclusive privilege for those of ethnic blood. On the other hand, the movement seemed propelled by a centrifugal force, an effort to spread the ethnic fervour to all Americans. In this respect, the revival of ethnicity exemplifies Werner's Sollors's argument that definitions of ethnicity

is American culture have historically oscillated between the two poles of nature and nurture—or, in Sollors's own terminology, along a descent-consent axis. The chapter borrows from Sollors's seminal thesis to posit that the ethnic revival's conflicting aims rendered ethnicity at once proximate and distant, familiar and exotic. It is my contention that these semantic ambiguities can also explain the mainstream appeal of Hollywood's Italian-American heroes.

The discussion in this chapter draws on evidence from an array of popular texts and cultural constructions, ranging from advertisements and magazine illustrations to jokes and slurs. The main focus, however, is on the printed page, where the meaning of ethnicity was tackled openly and directly in the 70s. The revival literature includes academic monographs, reference works, historical surveys, magazine articles, autobiographical accounts, and book-length guides on reconnecting with one's ethnic roots. Although these works are non-fiction, I approach them as no less mediated, encoded, or invented than Hollywood's representations of ethnicity. Data on collective mobilization and the formation of ethnic communities are already widely available in the existing literature and concern me here primarily by virtue of their sheer volume and rate of collection in the 70s. I am interested more in the near obsessive documentation of ethnicity as a culturally significant practice for mainstream America than in the actual numbers and what they document about ethnics themselves. Although the discussion pertains to the ethnic revival as a whole, I do maintain a selective focus on Italian-Americans, which reflects not only the subject of this thesis, but also the fact that Italians were the largest group of Southern and Eastern Europeans that migrated to the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (United States 1).

To ease the transition from film to print, the first section of this chapter uses two case studies more closely related to the key focus of the thesis. The first is *Italianamerican*, a 1974 documentary by Martin Scorsese. The second is an article from the March 1971 issue of *Harper's* on the development of film studies. Considered collectively, this unlikely pair inadvertently highlights the key features of the revival and its ties to 70s Hollywood. The second section traces changes to the meaning of ethnicity through American history. It discusses ethnicity's historical connections to class and race and the revival's origins as a rejection-cum-reversal of the assimilationist

paradigm. The following section examines the revival's attempts to cultivate popular interest in ethnicity. I focus specifically on the ethnic overtones of genealogical quests and the Bicentennial celebrations of 1976. Subsequently, I turn the attention to the academic and popular literature of the 70s and its efforts to define ethnicity and theorize its revival. I consider the views of both advocates and critics of the revival and, in the final section, attempt to reconcile them and explain ethnicity's appeal in the 70s through Sollors's descent-consent paradigm.

### **A Summary of the Revival as a Tale of Ancestors, Meatball Sauce, and a New Mercedes-Benz**

Received at the 1974 New York Film Festival with a standing ovation but never gaining wide release, Scorsese's *Italianamerican* is quite literally a home movie. The film comprises a collection of informal conversations between the director and his parents, Charles and Catherine Scorsese, both second generation immigrants. For nearly the entire fifty minute duration of the film, they sit on the slipcovered sofa in their apartment on Elizabeth Street in New York's Little Italy and recount their family history as their son prompts them gently with questions. Catherine Scorsese, a legendary and subsequently published cook, disappears into the kitchen occasionally to stir a pot of Italian meatball sauce. She teasingly offers snippets of wisdom on how to make an authentic spaghetti and meatball, but the full recipe is not revealed until the film's closing credits. In the meantime, in a mildly competitive but loving banter, the couple weaves a rich tapestry of memories. They reminisce about their parents' migration across the Atlantic, the neighbourhood's olden days, successful and failed business ventures, and interaction with other ethnic groups.

The content of the Scorseses' reminiscences, however, remains unimpressive compared to their present household dynamics. As the informal interviewing process unfolds, Catherine Scorsese emerges as the vivacious matriarch, with carefully honed skills of persuasion over her comparatively reticent husband. The Scorseses' Italianness is to be found in small gestures, the intonation of words, and mundane daily habits. 'Sociological and ethnological abstractions,' writes Robert Casillo, 'take on a special vividness and immediacy in Scorsese's *Italianamerican*' (36). Neither do the Scorseses



think of their family history as exceptional or even worthy of documentation. While they evidently enjoy the attention, they treat the entire filming process as a welcome imposition, a concession to their son's idiosyncrasies, in exchange for a lengthy visit. In this respect, *Italianamerican* exemplifies not only the new surge of interest in ethnicity in the 70s, but also the overwhelming concentration of this interest at the local and family levels. The ethnic revival found its most memorable expressions in such personal projects as charting family trees, discovering local history, and collecting immigration artefacts.

In the film's affectionately comic finale, the end credits begin to roll when Catherine Scorsese remarks 'Is that all for today, Marty? I need to put my furniture back'. The credits reveal that *Italianamerican* was commissioned by the National Communications Foundation and in part financed by a Bicentennial Award from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The film was intended by its sponsors to become part of a series about immigrants and ethnic minorities called *Storm of Strangers*. Though the entire series was never realized, the receipt of formal government endorsement situates it squarely within the ethnic revival movement. Several projects on behalf of ethnic particularity and cultural pluralism received official state recognition and public funding in the 70s.

When Scorsese was asked to make the twenty-eight-minute segment on Italian-Americans, he initially turned down the offer. He later agreed to participate under the explicit condition that he would not rely on archival footage and a traditional documentary format (Casillo 36-37). Scorsese tellingly refuses to edit out the banter between passages of narration, his mother's futile efforts to talk naturally to the camera, or shots of his crew setting up the lights and recording equipment. The inclusion of these elements lends the film its gently comic and heart-warming tone, while avoiding the nostalgic glorification of the Old Country that is so common in similar projects. Scorsese's technique could not be more different from *Grease's* pastel-coloured pastiche of the 50s, but the two films share the same heightened self-consciousness in revisiting the past. *Grease* recreates the 50s through a nostalgic 70s lens; *Italianamerican* goes further back in history, but the focus remains as much on the Scorseses' present circumstances in America as on their Italian roots. As Casillo notes, even the purposeful absence of a hyphen in the film's title 'suggests the

merging of two identities, in which the Italian flows uninterruptedly into the American, but through which the temporal and perhaps ontological priority of "Italian" is asserted too' (40).

Scorsese's emphasis on the connections between past and the present, Italian and American reveals an understanding of ethnicity that evokes Max Weber's discussion of ethnic identification. Weber defines of the ethnic group as one whose members 'entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration' (*Economy* 389). Significantly, Weber does not locate the ethnic group's orientation towards the past exclusively in the shared history of its members, but also in how this shared history is understood, remembered, and subjectively interpreted in the present. Expanding on Weber's definition, Richard Alba introduces the useful distinction between ancestry and ethnicity (*Ethnic* 37). The former concerns the time and place where one's ancestors were born and raised. Finding common ancestry can be a complicated and uncertain process, but it does rely on objective criteria. In contrast, ethnicity is concerned with the way ancestry is subjectively understood in the present and how it affects one's beliefs and behaviour.

Scorsese's interest in ethnicity, as opposed to ancestry, becomes evident every time *Italianamerican* moves outside the Scorsese living room to provide a visual counterpart to the narration, with inserted photographs from family albums, forward tracking shots from the streets of Little Italy, and archival footage relating to immigration. In a more conventional documentary, these visual inserts would act as linkages between the particular story and the broader history of immigration. In the case of *Italianamerican*, however, they offer very little comprehensive information and often do not match the description precisely. We usually do not find out what exactly these inserts show or if they are even directly related to Scorsese's ancestors. Their purpose seems to be to evoke a general atmosphere of pastness, to complement the process of reminiscing rather than to clarify the reminiscences. After every inserted shot or photograph, Scorsese is always quick to cut back to his parents' living room and make them and their conversation the focal point of the film. *Italianamerican's* dominant mode remains centripetal and familial. Though nothing in the film indicates

that the Scorseses are not representative examples of second generation Italian immigrants, their son refuses to treat his family as a metonymic trope.

This cinematic approach itself, however, is representative of a particular moment in the history of American cinema. Scorsese had established a reputation for experimentation before making *Italianamerican*. His 1968 short *The Big Shave* concentrates on a man's prolonged and bloody shave as a metaphor for the self-destructive effects of America's drawn out stay in Vietnam. Indeed, Scorsese's work in the 70s exemplifies, perhaps more than any of the New Hollywood filmmakers on the west coast, the combination of a personal vision and attraction to innovation and experimentation. His personal investment in the subject matter and telling refusal to conceal the process of filmmaking, furthermore, echo the influence of cinéma vérité. *Italianamerican* may not be as overtly politicized as Frederick Wiseman's documentaries from the same period, but it exhibits the same attachment to reality and the formal inspiration from neorealism.

This is the kind of new cinema that Richard Schickel urged his readers to take more seriously when, three years before the release of *Italianamerican*, he wrote the article 'Movie Studies: Read All about It' for *Harper's*. Schickel concentrates on the shortcomings of the popular and academic literature on film, arguing that contemporary film deserves more serious attention. He cites as examples films that would later be theorized under the rubric of the New Hollywood as well as independent films from the vérité movement.<sup>12</sup> Schickel even provides a list of new themes and filmmakers that deserve further analysis. Ethnicity is not part of his list as Hollywood did not full-heartedly join the 70s ethnic parade until the following year, with Coppola's *The Godfather*. Nonetheless, the revival of ethnicity is strangely present on the article's third page. A quarter-page advertisement next to Schickel's writing urges *Harper's* readers to 'Combine Europe with a new Mercedes-Benz' (figure 17). The small print explains that Americans can order their new car at home, pick it up in Europe, and enjoy 'the advantages of touring in [their] own car'. Mercedes's offer is one of several promises of bargain journeys to Europe adorning magazine and

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<sup>12</sup> In the years after Schickel's plea, work on 60s and 70s films would proliferate, but his overarching claim rings sadly true even today: 'Between the doltish evocations of nostalgia [in popular criticism] and the scholarly mumble, there ought to be some civilized middle ground where we can all meet' (24).

newspaper pages in the 70s. The same issue of *Harper's* includes similar advertisements from travel agents, each specializing in a separate region or country and never failing to highlight operative words like 'ancestors' and 'heritage'. For those unable to afford a literal reconnection with their European roots, other advertisements offer the metaphorical equivalent in a bottle of imported wine, a jar of authentic Italian sauce, or a pack of European cigarettes.



Figure 17

These offers would strike a sensitive chord with the descendants of Southern and Eastern European immigrants, people like Charlie and Catherine Scorsese. Indeed, the Scorseses did take a trip to Italy in 1972 to visit the birthplaces of their parents and meet their relatives. Their belated honeymoon, as Catherine Scorsese describes their trip, served the same purpose that shooting the documentary did for their son. Both are attempts to reconnect with their ancestral past and acknowledge its formative influence on the present. Trips to Europe also provide some insight into the social class dynamics underpinning the revival of ethnicity. The readers of *Harper's* and the potential buyers of a Mercedes car may not be exclusively ethnic, but they are

predominantly middle class. Revisiting one's ethnic heritage required a certain amount of free time and material comfort. First generation immigrant labourers striving to make a living for their families in a new country would have had little time and money to devote on reconnecting with their ethnic heritage. Only after working their way up the social ladder for two or three generations were white ethnics able to spend their savings on a luxury car or a pilgrimage to the Old Country.

*Italianamerican's* concentration on genealogy, the emphasis on the process of reminiscing, and the film itself as a state-sponsored project capture succinctly the spirit of the ethnic revival. Whether through travelling, filmmaking, cooking, or even driving in a new car across Europe, the descendants of earlier European immigrants in the 70s were purposely searching for their ethnic roots. The term revival, however, suggests an earlier suppression of ethnicity. Hence, before exploring the expressions of the ethnic revival further, it is necessary to take a step back and consider the antecedent condition that propelled a revival of ethnicity.

### **Ethnicity, Race, and Class in the Melting Pot**

If one wants to trace the history of white ethnicity in American culture, it would be hard to find a more appropriate starting point than Israel Zangwill's 1908 play about the lives of immigrants in American society:

There she lies, the great Melting Pot—listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth—the harbour where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to pour in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething! [...] how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame! (184-85)

Zangwill, a Jewish immigrant, provided in *The Melting-Pot* the most lasting metaphor for the place of immigrants and their descendants in the U.S. The play ran for months on Broadway and its title entered everyday discourse as an easily recognizable expression of faith in American homogeneity. The idea of melting as a metaphor for assimilation can be traced back 1782, when J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur, a French settler in New York, attempted to answer the question 'What is an American?' in *Letters from an American Farmer*. 'He becomes American', De Crèvecoeur writes, 'by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all nations

are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world' (643). More than a century later and in the midst of a new wave of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Zangwill added the evocative image of a melting pot, literalized graphically on the cover of the play's programme as hundreds of tiny human silhouettes forming the vapour flowing out of the pot to surround the Statue of Liberty (figure 18). For the first half of the twentieth century, the melting pot offered an undisputed paradigm of assimilation, with both sociological orthodoxy and popular wisdom agreeing that ethnic Americans can and should assimilate into the Anglo-American prototype.

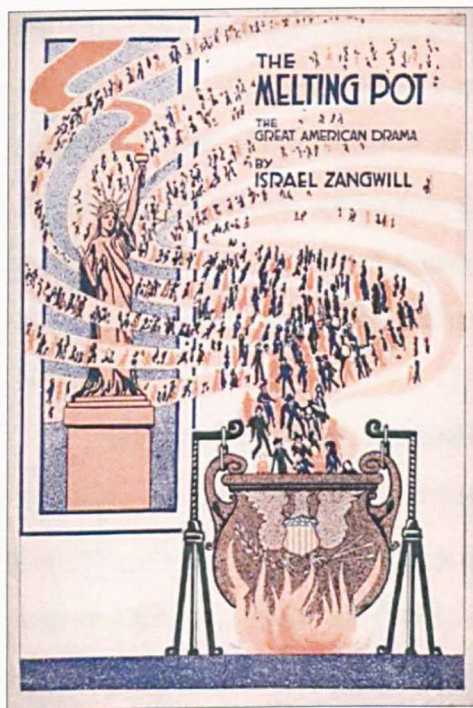


Figure 18

As it is usually the case with group membership, the melting pot was founded as much on laws of inclusion as on laws of exclusion. The ability of Southern and Eastern European immigrants to assimilate into the American norm was guaranteed by the exclusion of African Americans. While European religions, customs, traditions, and languages melted into a homogeneous white American folk, skin colour remained an unmeltable signifier of Otherness. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to assume that such neat distinctions between race and ethnicity, blackness and whiteness pre-

existed and conditioned the melting pot paradigm. As Matthew Frye Jacobson reminds us, these terms did not carry the same meaning in the nineteenth century as they do today. Hebrews, Celts, Slavs, Iberics, Teutons and Mediterraneans constituted different racial categories between the two poles of African blackness and 'pure' Anglo-Saxon whiteness. The meaning of American whiteness has been repeatedly and deliberately renegotiated to counter the presumed threat of blackness. 'As races are invented categories,' Jacobson writes, 'Caucasians are made and not born' (*Whiteness* 4). The naturalization laws of 1790 limited citizenship to 'free white persons', which included Italian and other Southern European immigrants. The mass influx of European immigrants from 1840 to 1924 prompted a more restrictive legislation and a reinterpretation and fracturing of whiteness. By the mid-1920s, with the increase in the migration of African Americans to the north and west, the imminent fear of blackness led to the dominance of the (white) melting pot and the gradual dissolution of distinctions within whiteness and the consolidation of a unitary Caucasian race (Jacobson, *Whiteness* 8-9). To miss the fluidity of race, therefore, would be to reify a monolithic sense of whiteness, which was an invention of the first half of the twentieth century.

Throughout these developments, Italian immigrants remained, as Thomas Guglielmo puts it, 'white on arrival' (31), a privilege that guaranteed them access to material resources denied to African Americans. They had access to citizenship, could vote, own land, serve as juries, and marry whom they wished. Nevertheless, in practice, Italian-Americans' credentials were not the same as those of Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, or even Jewish descent. 'It was not just that Italians did not look white to certain social arbiters,' Jacobson explains, 'but they did not *act* white' (*Whiteness* 57). 'Italians were not always white', Jennifer Guglielmo concurs, 'and the loss of this memory is one of the tragedies of racism in America' (1). Louise DeSalvo studies Ellis Island immigration papers to find out that naturalization officials recorded Italian immigrants' colour as 'white', their complexion as 'dark', and their race as 'Italian' (25).<sup>13</sup> Once granted citizenship, they often accepted work coded as black by local customs and were excluded from certain buses, schools, and movie theatres.

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<sup>13</sup> The boundaries of American whiteness remain malleable today. As Dyer argues, 'north European whiteness has been hegemonic', while the whiteness of Southern and Eastern European peoples is often

Italian immigrants were not only defined in terms of racial difference, but also in terms of social stratification. The overwhelming majority found work as construction and factory workers, before some of them moved to become grocers, shopkeepers, and small business owners. Why, then, did the first half of the twentieth century not witness a greater degree of proletarian solidarity between first generation European immigrants and their African American blue-collar brothers and sisters? Why did such a spurious criterion as skin colour prove stronger than income disparities? In his history of working class whiteness, David Roediger finds the answers to these questions in the nineteenth century and the extension of the franchise to include yeoman farmers and artisans. Borrowing his premise from Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, Roediger argues that 'whiteness was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline' (13). Whiteness provided a non-monetary social privilege or, to borrow Roediger's terminology, a 'compensating wage' that balanced against poverty. Alexander Saxton similarly finds that white workers 'claimed their own birthright in racism as a means of reducing the economic and social distance that separated them from the upper class' (385). Despite their shared economic predicament with black workers, white workers found in racism a means for establishing an allegiance with those above them on the social ladder.

Although Roediger and Saxton concentrate primarily on the experience of white workers of Anglo-Saxon descent in the nineteenth century, their findings can usefully illuminate the experience of Eastern and Southern European immigrants in the early twentieth century. They too were new to the American labour market and became absorbed into its lower ranks. First generation Italian-Americans in particular remained poor and working class longer than other European immigrants. This meant that they lived for longer in blue-collar neighbourhoods, often alongside African Americans and Latino Americans. Robert Orsi suggests that this geographical and social proximity resulted in anxiety for Italian-Americans to assert a white identity and claim the rewards of whiteness much more forcefully and aggressively (313). This anxiety became embedded in Italian-American culture and found expression as racial

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'grudgingly' acknowledged while that of the Latin Diaspora of the Americas 'less assuredly' (*White* 12-13).



prejudice, confirming bell hooks's argument in *Black Looks* that racism is not just a discourse, but it is linked to the material and cultural practices that reinforce and perpetuate racism. Jonathan Rieder's research into Brooklyn's Italian-American communities in the 70s and 80s demonstrates that Italian-Americans often distance themselves through a narrative of self-righteousness about their struggles in America, which results in prejudices against other communities within their social class, primarily Puerto Ricans and African Americans (66).

Rieder's findings concern specifically Brooklyn's Italian-Americans and correspond with stereotypical representations of the Italian-American immigrant community as an enclosed urban enclave, usually in New York, populated by blue-collar men and devotedly Catholic housewives. It ought to be noted, however, that much diversity exists between Italian-American communities in different regions. The Italian-American community in Tampa's Ybor City, for example, shows a strong tradition of distrust towards the Catholic Church and friendship ties with the area's Cuban population, including collective union mobilization. The 2003 anthology *Are Italians White?* suggests a complex relationship of collaboration, intimacy, hostility, and distancing between Italian-Americans and other ethnic and racial communities. *Are Italians White?* also reflects a relatively new effort in Italian-American studies to come to terms with the community's history of racism. The official Italian-American line on the issue has been dictated by the anti-defamation rhetoric of political lobbies, primarily, but not exclusively, The Order Sons of Italy in America. Representations of Italian-Americans have commonly been condemned as instances of prejudice that do not correspond to reality. During the last decade, however, an increasing number of Italian-American scholars have argued for the importance of the community owning up to its racist outbursts (see, for example, Gardaphé, T. Guglielmo). Columbus Day, for example, has for decades been an issue of contention among Italian-Americans, who see it as an earned celebration of ethnic pride, and Native Americans, who regard it as an offensive celebration of their ancestors' massacre. Criticism of Columbus Day has in recent years surfaced from within the Italian-American community, especially from organizations with academic ties, which want to distance themselves from expressions of self-righteous ethnic particularity.

If the invention of the Caucasian race allowed white ethnics to freely claim the privileges of whiteness, then the decision to exit the melting pot and revive ethnicity appears irrational. Why would someone like Martin Scorsese, whose parents and grandparents experienced hardships for sounding and behaving ethnic, but who could himself choose to let go of ethnicity and fully enjoy the benefits of assimilation, choose instead to revisit his ethnic heritage? Hansen's Law provided at the time a simple and popular explanation for the decision of white ethnics to voluntarily exit the melting pot. Marcus Lee Hansen, a historian of Swedish descent, developed his formulation of generational succession in 1938 in an address to the Augustana Historical Society. Hansen's proposal can be summarized in the axiom 'what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember'. Relying on observations of his Scandinavian colleagues for evidence, Hansen proposes that first generation immigrants are necessarily bound to ethnicity by linguistic, financial, and psychological constraints. The second generation strives to assimilate and shed off its ethnic identity. Depending on the theorist, the reasons for the second generation's assimilation can be any combination of personal preference, social oppression, and the absence of constraints that prevented their parents' assimilation. The third generation, however, redevelops an interest in the value of their ancestors and reverses the assimilationist trend of the second generation. The simplicity and almost intuitive logic of Hansen's proposal allowed it to be easily appropriated and applied as a law to the experience of different immigrant communities. Will Herberg was the first to popularize Hansen's Law in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955). During the 70s, Hansen's Law provided the scholarly basis for explaining the revival of ethnicity, or, at least, the massive increase of academic interest in ethnicity, a topic to which I return in the following section. As Jacobson puts it, 'Hansen's Law in action is in fact what the ethnic revival is widely presumed to have *been*' (*Roots* 3).

The explanatory value of Hansen's Law has been almost irrevocably refuted since it was first proposed (see, for example, Sollors, *Beyond* 215-17). It relies on easily disproven hypotheses about the ability to separate generations and reduces the complex record of immigration into a singular experience. To cite the example at hand, Martin Scorsese's parents were second generation immigrants, but willingly participated in *Italianamerican* and even spent their savings to travel to Italy. What

remains significant in Hansen's Law, however, is the implicit suggestion of a link between one's socioeconomic position and ethnic identification. Herbert Gans, one of the earliest critics of the ethnic revival, pointed out that it is not mere coincidence that Hansen's sample of third generation immigrants comprised exclusively his fellow historians. Generational differences according to Gans are not intrinsically significant, but only a rough measure of differences in social standing (xiii). When Hansen observed that his third generation colleagues had developed an interest in ethnicity, the causally significant variable was not generational succession, but social elevation, which happened to manifest as a change across generations. In the case of Martin Scorsese's parents, their reconnection with ethnicity came with retirement, as they could not afford to revisit their roots while working and raising a family. To rephrase Hansen's Law based on Gans's critique, it is the socioeconomically secure immigrant who wishes to remember what his less secure ancestors wished to forget.

The relation between ethnic identification and upward social mobility also offers some insight into the different expressions of the revival. Revived ethnics did not necessarily alter their social and political behaviour based on their ethnic heritage. Rather, the revival remained restricted within the boundaries of what Gans calls 'symbolic ethnicity', 'a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the Old Country; a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior' (xx). Alba describes how a revived Italian-American could choose to reconnect with ethnicity:

The individual who consciously identifies as Italian-American can interpret this identity in terms of a fondness for opera, a love of Italian cuisine (which now can be carried over to a high-status northern Italian cuisine quite unfamiliar to his ancestors and probably served to non-Italian guests), or a desire to combat the stereotypes of Italian Americans as Mafia-linked. (*Italian American* 25)

Considered in a broader historical context, symbolic expressions of ethnic allegiance are not an isolated phenomenon, but constitute a typical example of post-materialism. As formulated by political scientist Ronald Inglehart at the beginning of the 70s, post-materialism refers to the increased pursuit of non-material goods in post-industrial societies. Young adults in the 70s grew up during the post-World War II economic boom and had not experienced war and poverty. Even during periods of recession and unemployment, most lived well beyond the subsistence level. With these formative

experiences, the post-war generation values such 'goods' as free time, environmental consciousness, psychological well-being, and reconnection with one's ethnic heritage.

In addition to the opportunities afforded by post-materialism, the descendants of immigrants had a more pressing reason to embrace their ethnic heritage in the 70s, even if only at the level of symbolism. The melting pot was neither as solid nor as welcoming in the 70s as it had been at the beginning of the century. Before the revival of ethnicity, Zangwill's vision of American homogeneity had already received its first blow with African Americans' struggle for civil rights. Beginning in the mid-50s with the first desegregation laws and culminating in the late 60s with the Black Power movement, the civil rights struggle demonstrated that assimilation was not the only path to inclusion. The inherently inassimilable African Americans asserted their indisputable social presence in the U.S. through the salience of group experience and standing. Other communities did not take long to set similar goals and use the civil rights movement as an organizational template. Such diverse social movements as women's liberation, the Hippie sexual revolution, the gay rights movement, and the anti-war movement consistently declared their indebtedness and moral allegiance to the black struggle.

The revival of ethnicity in particular was from the start couched in the language and demands of the civil rights movement. In December 1976, for instance, a group of Italian-American faculty at NYU lobbied to be recognized as an affirmative action category in hiring and promotion purposes (Phillips 42). Such demands expressed the belief that white ethnics also deserved recognition and reparation for having suffered under the rule of Nordic whiteness. Leaders of the revival commonly cited examples of first generation immigrants having been treated the same or worse than African Americans. Richard Gambino noted in 1973 that Italian immigrants were employed 'at wages generally less than those paid to blacks, the people at the lowest level of the economy' (78). Nevertheless, it is imperative to emphasize that the revival of ethnicity was not and could not be a struggle for rights and liberties. White ethnics suffered institutionalized violence and disenfranchisement more sporadically and to a significantly smaller scale than African Americans. In addition, it was primarily the first generation of European immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century that had experienced such discrimination. When their children and grandchildren exited the

melting pot in the 70s, they indisputably enjoyed all the rights and liberties that African Americans had only recently gained. Consequently, revived ethnics often turned to the experience of their ancestors to justify their cause. Gambino, for example, illustrates the 'popular opinion' of Italians by selectively quoting a Louisiana trade union secretary describing Sicilians at the beginning of the twentieth century as 'illiterate and tending to be unruly and used only for hard manual labor, having had no training nor education and not being adaptable for scientific pursuits nor for diversified or intensified agricultural pursuits without close attention' (78). By the time Gambino made this point in 1973, however, the melting pot paradigm had already secured better wages for Italian-Americans, if only at the expense of suppressing ethnic identification.

This retrospective impulse to seek justice for prejudice against first generation immigrants reveals white ethnics' urgency to disassociate themselves from white privilege. When they first entered the melting pot, whiteness was an unquestionable privilege. The civil rights movement, however, attacked white privilege as the grand evil ailing American society. By exiting the melting pot and asserting their difference from WASPs, white ethnics could simultaneously plead their innocence to the actual and symbolic charges facing white America. Jacobson effectively describes the revival as 'an impulse whose energy derived from a distinctly "white" set of grievances and entitlements, but whose central tendency was to disavow "whiteness" in favor of group narratives that measured their distance from WASP mainstream' (*Whiteness* 275). Much of the ethnic revival's political discourse revolved around the claim that reparations for the suffering of African Americans came at the cost of perpetuating the suffering of white ethnics by including them in hegemonic whiteness. As Daniel Leab noted in 1979, white ethnics' 'conventional wisdom holds that these white ethnics believe that they have "paid the costs" of American society's attempts to redress black grievances' (267). In the 1971 bestseller *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, Michael Novak, a leading public figure of the ethnic revival, begins his prologue with an anecdote that exemplifies revival politics:

One day on a platform, an American Indian was telling a group of Polish nuns and me what our ancestors did to *his* ancestors. I tried gently to remind him that *my* grandparents (and theirs) never saw an Indian. They came to this

country after that. Nor were they responsible for enslaving the blacks (or anyone else). They themselves escaped serfdom barely four generations ago—almost as recently as the blacks escaped slavery. (xx)

Novak's example relies on a just-off-the-boat logic that rightly demands distinctions within whiteness, but ignores all the everyday privileges that white ethnics enjoyed simply by virtue of being regarded Caucasians.

This conflict between the felt personal identity of non-whiteness and the ascribed public identity of whiteness often resulted in a competitive and sometimes overtly hostile attitude towards the civil rights movement. Tensions began early in the 70s with the attempted assassination of Joseph Colombo on 28 June 1971. Colombo was the head of the Italian-American Civil Rights League, which allegedly provided a guise for his involvement in organized crime. He was also the person responsible for successfully campaigning against the inclusion of direct references to the Mafia and the Cosa Nostra in *The Godfather*. While giving a speech on Italian Unity Day at Columbus Circle, Colombo was shot by Jerome Johnson, an African American street hustler. Colombo survived the shooting with severe injuries; Johnson was shot to death by an unidentified bystander immediately afterwards. The Italian-American Civil Rights League found in Colombo a Martin Luther King figure and the entire ethnic revival movement used the incident as evidence of African American prejudice against white ethnics.<sup>14</sup> 'Did blacks', Novak wondered, 'think Colombo was their enemy? Couldn't they distinguish a fellow sufferer under Nordic prejudice from a WASP?' (5).

Novak's response to the Colombo shooting reveals the same reasoning that underpins Gambino's reliance on the experience of first generation immigrants to find examples of prejudice. Both Novak and Gambino play down the differences between Italian-Americans and African Americans by associating white supremacy exclusively with blood-soaked Nordic Americans. This eagerness to claim for white ethnics a guilt-free shade of whiteness provided the revival with a didactic inclination, a desire to educate America that white ethnics are not just white. It is precisely this centrifugal outlook that distinguishes the ethnic revival from the civil rights movement. The latter

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically enough, the unofficial record of the incident shows a more optimistic picture of cooperation between Italian-Americans and African Americans. Rumours at the time held that the shooting was ordered by rival Mafia boss Joe Gallo, who developed ties to African American mobsters while in prison and later used them to recruit Johnson.

started with an inward focus on the African American community, demanding specific rights and liberties. Only after these goals were met did the black struggle expand to include demands for cultural recognition. The revival of ethnicity was from the very start as much about ethnics exiting the melting pot as it was about non-ethnics acknowledging and even celebrating their exit.

### **'A Glorious Patchwork-Quilt of a Fourth'**

The revival's expansive outlook shaped not only its goals and rhetoric, but also its cultural expressions. While white ethnics were exiting the melting pot and turning their heritage into a badge of pride, the ethnic fervour swelled far beyond ethnic communities, making ethnicity an accessible, popular, fashionable, and even profitable commodity. The revival gained momentum as it crossed paths with two key events in the 70s, the nation's Bicentennial celebrations in 1976 and the television broadcast of the miniseries *Roots* the following year. Neither of these two events originated within or was addressed specifically toward white ethnic communities. In fact, both would seem to be distinctly non-ethnic. The Bicentennial celebrated the founding of the United States of America, an event that took place a century before the first wave of Southern and Eastern European immigration. *Roots* is an adaptation of Alex Haley's 1976 bestseller, an autobiographical African American family history. Nevertheless, these two events unwittingly conspired to fuel the revival of ethnicity and provided platforms for even non-ethnics to partake in the ethnic fervour. Considered collectively, they demonstrate the revival's origins in the civil rights movement and offer insight into how the new meaning of ethnicity was negotiated in mainstream American culture.

The Bicentennial was a peculiar occurrence, calling for a celebration of America at a time when America provided little to celebrate about. In practical terms, the stagnating economy prohibited any unnecessary spending on grand celebrations. But even in terms of cultural appropriateness, celebrating America after the political turmoil of the 60s and in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal seemed inappropriate, if not outright hypocritical. Two months before the July celebrations *The New Yorker* commented that Americans 'don't seem

to know how to celebrate'. 'Our history began so grandly,' the magazine explains, 'and it doesn't seem so grand anymore. We seem to have been confident two hundred years ago. The world was newly minted then. Now it is older, and complex almost beyond comprehension' (Drew). Christopher Capozzola describes the Bicentennial as an unusual moment of self-reflection in a cultural climate dominated by denial and psychic withdrawal. Instead of incessant flag-weaving, the national holiday 'prompted debates over the meaning of American history and American identity' (Capozzola 34). The mixture of headlines in the 5 July issue of *The New York Times* effectively captures the Bicentennial atmosphere. The front page story declares that 'Nation and Millions in City Joyously Hail Bicentennial', but immediately below there is a reference to 'A Day of Picnics, Pomp, Pageantry and Protest.' In the inner pages, the picture becomes gloomier, with one headline claiming that 'Americans [Are] Finding New Direction is Vital', while another warns that 'Foreign Nations' Reaction to Bicentennial is Mixed'. In the same issue, James Wooten reports that 'the President's speech, quietly spoken, evoked only limited interruptions of modest applause' (18). Another article reports that 'outside the official observances of the 200<sup>th</sup> celebration of freedom there is an undercurrent of uncertainty about what succeeding Fourth of July hold for future generations of Americans' (Nordheimer 17).

Bicentennial celebrations were also thwarted by the absence of a shared national mythology that would rally Americans around the flag. The Plymouth myth of origin could only apply to part of the nation's population, the descendants of the very first Northern European immigrants. For everyone else, this founding myth was at best irrelevant and at worst offensive. For the descendants of African slaves, the story of origin in America was one of struggle for emancipation and enfranchisement. For Native Americans, the story of the first European pilgrims was one of violent suppression and genocide. Eastern and Southern European immigrants were simply absent from this founding myth. Their history as American citizens began three hundred years after the first pilgrims landed and more than two hundred miles away from Plymouth, at Ellis Island. For most of American history, these diverse group narratives had been suppressed under the hegemony of the Plymouth myth. They gradually found a voice in the two decades leading up to the Bicentennial and competed to be heard in the national celebrations.



The 10 May 1976 issue of *The New Yorker* illustrates the fragmentation of national celebrations in a satirical mock reportage on how different communities were planning to celebrate the Bicentennial. Among them is a plan by African American and Native American students to recreate the conditions on Thomas Jefferson's slave plantations, including a harvest meal high in cholesterol for whites (Trillin and Koren 34). Though the example is fictional, it effectively captures the plurality of conflicting national mythologies in 1976. In fact, many commentators did not share *The New Yorker's* humorous stance, but anticipated massive protests against celebrations. Frank Rizzo, the mayor of Philadelphia, the city where the Declaration of Independence was signed, and the epicentre of commemorative events in 1976, asked for fifteen thousand federal troops to preserve calm in the city. Rizzo was concerned not only about reactions against the celebrations, but also about turmoil between the city's ethnic and racial groups. I return to Rizzo and Philadelphia's ethno-racial tensions in chapter five with the discussion of *Rocky*, which incorporates in its narrative the links between the Bicentennial, race, and ethnicity.

On 4 July 1976, America witnessed neither the violent protests that Rizzo anticipated nor the grand military parades of 1876. Most Bicentennial events took place at the local and regional levels, with celebrations of America becoming celebrations of cultural pluralism. A *New York Times* headline on 5 July 1976 describes the previous day's celebrations as 'A Glorious Patchwork-Quilt of a Fourth' while another reports that 'Ethnic Diversity Adds Spice to the Holiday'. 'In small towns and great cities across the land,' the newspaper reports, 'Americans marked their Bicentennial with a diversity that was itself the principal tribute to the occasion' (McFadden). In New York City celebrations centred in Lower Manhattan, where the main attraction involved a warship armada, which was assembled by Battery Park before sailing up the Hudson. Nevertheless, it was the unofficial motley collection of ethnic festivals that lent the area its celebratory vibe:

The Turks were at Water and Wall Street [...] Down the Street at 1 Wall, the Armenians [...] The Irish Festival, at 77 Water Street. [...] India was on John Street [...] the Chinese held a dragon alongside Police Headquarters and the Municipal Building [...] The South street Seaport, open and bouncing, was surrounded by three blocks of the Italian Festival [...] Strollers alongside Water Street were taken to the Urals, the Mediterranean, Northern Europe and Asia.

In four blocks from Hanover Square to Pine Street, Greek, Ukrainian, Slovak, Polish, and Korean festivals drew thousands of watchers and eaters. (Ferretti 22)



Figure 19

The Bicentennial also provided an opportunity for indulging in another 70s novelty, the newfound interest in recent or experienced history. *Grease's* nostalgic vision of the 50s belongs to a broader cultural trend of appreciating folk art and material culture. When overlapping with the Bicentennial, this trend manifested as a growing interest in collecting Americana artefacts, researching family genealogies, and discovering one's roots. Those excluded from the grand national narrative, Capozzola explains, 'could find in local history and genealogy a place for themselves in America's history in its celebratory Bicentennial year' (39). To commemorate the Bicentennial, *Redbook* provided its female readers with eight pages of suggestions 'to observe the early-American integrity, simplicity and creativeness', fittingly printed as an insert on rough-textured paper and illustrated with antique-looking ink sketches (figure 19). Suggestions include a patchwork wedding dress, available at Saks from 260 dollars and custom made from old family handkerchiefs and tablecloths, and Tiffany's fifty dollar version of a seventeenth century bosom bottle, a flask with water meant to preserve the flowers adorning a woman's bust. Indeed, popular interest was partly fuelled by

commercial exploiters who readily provided pieces of history at a price. As early as 1972, *Harper's* reported that 'commercial exploiters of the Bicentennial [are] giving the public things it wants', including replica muskets for 585 dollars and liberty bells duplicates for 870 dollars (Neville). Genealogy also proved a bonanza for publishers and bookshops specializing in the subject. Books like *The Handy Book for Genealogists* (1971), *Searching for Your Ancestors* (1973), and *Finding Our Fathers* (1977) suddenly found a massive new audience. *Time* magazine claimed in 1977 that 'the Joy of Genealogy bids fair to supplement cooking and sex as a major energy source for U.S. publishing mills' ('White Roots' 43) while *Harper's* reported the following year that 'Keepers of the vital statistics records in European towns and villages find themselves inundated with requests for birth, baptism, marriage, and death certificates from Americans engaged in searching for their roots' (Greeley, 'After Ellis' 27).

The catalyst of the genealogy craze came in January 1977 with the television broadcast of *Roots*. The miniseries won nine Emmys, a Golden Globe, and was followed up with the sequel *Roots: The Next Generations* in 1979. *Roots'* final episode remains until today the third highest rated American primetime television broadcast on Nielsen's ratings (Gorman). Alex Haley's research into his family history took him back seven generations and more than three hundred years to Kunta Kinte, who was captured into slavery in 1776. *Roots* begins with Kunta Kinte's enslavement and ends in 1867, with his descendants still struggling to sustain their family in America. As an epilogue to the final episode, Haley appears on camera to link the generational dots up to himself and describe how he developed the desire to research his family history from the stories his grandmother told him as a child. Haley explains that he only managed to conduct his research and write *Roots* after retiring from a career in the coastguard. The origin of *Roots* echoes the same criticism often levied against the revival of ethnicity, that the interest to reconnect with one's history is just a postmaterialist luxury, a hobby based on the prerequisites of free time and secured income.

At a time when more than thirty percent of African Americans earned below the poverty level (Simon and Abdel-Moneim 1-2), it should come as no surprise that Haley found his most loyal followers among white Americans. Coming in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the widespread appeal of *Roots* demonstrates the

readiness of white American audiences to embrace an African American story simply as an American story, or, as the book's subtitle calls it, *The Saga of an American Family*. Though the miniseries drops the subtitle, its reception and appropriation in popular culture reveal that it was primarily the familial drama, rather than the slave narrative, that appealed to audiences. Shortly after the airing of *Roots*, widely circulating publications, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, published articles with titles such as 'Everybody's Search for Roots', 'Climbing All Over the Family Trees', and 'The Boom in Ancestor Hunting'. *Time* reported in 1977 that officials at the National Archives and the New England Historic Genealogical Society were experiencing an unprecedented rise of public interest in genealogy. White ethnics in particular found in *Roots* the inspiration to research their own past. According to *Time*, 'the TV series impelled thousands of kin seekers to ferret through attics, trunks and old boxes of letters in pursuit of clues to their origins'. The magazine cites 'expert estimates' from archivists and historians to claim that 'amateur genealogy now ranks as the third favourite national hobby, after stamp and coin collecting'. *Time* even coins the terms 'ancestrology' to describe the new hobby and compiles a list of practical advice for budding 'philoprogenitors' ('White Roots' 43).

*Roots* may have catalyzed the interest in genealogy, but it did not singlehandedly cause the phenomenon. In fact, genealogical quests among white ethnics had been underway for a decade before the publication and airing of *Roots*. Even in practical terms, the history of immigration three or four generations in the past was simply much more accessible than either the history of slavery or that of the first Anglo-Saxon pilgrims. Groups like the Chicago Irish Ancestry Workshop predated the broadcast of *Roots*, as did the how-to guide 'Interviewing Italian Americans about Their Life Histories', published in *Italian Americana* in 1976 (Rizzo 99). Neither was Haley the only author to publish his quest for roots. Some of the decade's bestselling books also searched for family ethnic histories. Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976) traces the journey of East European Jews across the Atlantic; Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat* (1975) provides an autobiographical narrative of the author's Armenian ancestry; Gambino's *Blood of My Blood* (1974) combines autobiography with sociological analysis of the Italian-American experience; Gregory Dunne's *True*

*Confessions* (1977), a crime novel, paints a portrait of Irish-Catholic life in Southern California just after World War II.

Television was also quick in seizing the opportunity to profit from the popularity of ethnicity. Until the late 60s, ethnicity was the exclusive preserve of a handful of lovable but isolated oddballs on American television. In early 1960 Carl Reiner's autobiographical pilot episode about an unmistakably Jewish comedy writer ended up becoming the ethnically neutral *Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-66). According to Oscar Katz, once head of CBS programming, Dick van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore were given the lead roles specifically to 'de-Jewishize and Midwesternize' the show (cited in Gitlin 185). The secondary character of Buddy Sorrell, identified as Moshe Selig when he has his belated bar mitzvah in the 'Man and Boy' episode, proved the only surviving trace of Reiner's original ethnic vision. By the late 60s and early 70s, popular programming revelled in ethnic particularity in shows like *Arnie* (1970-72), *Columbo* (1971-78), *All in the Family* (1971-79), *Bridget Loves Bernie* (1972-73), *Kojak* (1973-78), *Rhonda* (1974-78), and *Welcome Back, Kotter*. As Bernie Steinberg put it in *Bridget Loves Bernie*, 'I don't believe this. I've lived with you people all my life. Now why is everyone all of a sudden being so Jewish?' The advent of the miniseries and the made-for-TV movie generated serious treatments of ethnic subjects, which, in addition to *Roots*, include *Holocaust* (1978), *The Triangle Factory Fire Scandal* (1979), and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1980). In 1979, *Studs Lonigan*, James T. Farrell's novel trilogy about Chicago's Irish-American community during the Great Depression, was also adapted into a miniseries, with a billing to become the 'Irish Roots' (Greeley, 'After Ellis' 27).

The American government did not remain immune to the rising popularity of ethnicity. Among the major developments was the establishment of the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program in 1972. The program was established as an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Title IX). Funding under its auspices reached 2,375,000 dollars in 1974. In 1977, the Carter administration made Geno Baroni, a Catholic priest, head of Neighbourhood Affairs at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Baroni was the first Catholic priest to reach such high government rank. The government's increased sensitivity to ethnic affairs is evident not only in the appointment itself, but also in the acceptance of Baroni's

overtly ethnic agenda for the management of urban neighbourhoods. Baroni had been an outspoken supporter of the ethnic revival, having founded the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs in 1971 and become the first president of the newly established National Italian-American Foundation in 1975. *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* is perhaps the most important government-sponsored work on ethnicity. It lists no less than 106 ethnic groups in the U.S., prompting the fitting title 'Now, Roots for Nearly Everybody' in *Time's* review. The entry on the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program quotes from its authorizing act the reasoning for its foundation:

In recognition of the heterogeneous composition of the Nation and the fact that in a multiethnic society a greater understanding of the contributions of one's own heritage and those of one's fellow citizens can contribute to a more harmonious, patriotic, and committed populace, and in recognition of the principle that all persons in the educational institutions of the Nation should have an opportunity to learn about the differing and unique contributions to the national heritage made by each ethnic group. ('Ethnic Heritage' 343)

It may not be easy today to appreciate how bold, fresh, or simply unfamiliar words like the above would have once appeared, especially coming from the U.S. government. The multiculturalism rhetoric has been so widely adopted that it has lost some of its edge. Connecting American patriotism to ethnic pride has become a staple in political discourse, regardless of particular ideology. It is equally easy to look back at the 70s and consider the Bicentennial and *Roots* as connected steps in a predetermined and seamless progression to multiculturalism. This seamlessness is not so much incorrect as misleading. It carries the risk of inflating disparate cultural moments with shared meaning and missing the fact that ethnicity was not only more popular, but also more controversial in the 70s. These two impulses are intriguingly combined in the large body of written discourse on ethnicity.

### **Theorizing Ethnicity**

During the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant social demand for assimilation rendered obsolete the need to describe and theorize the sense of closeness or allegiance to an ethnic group. Scholars conceptualized ethnic affiliations as 'expectancies', and the expectation was that under modern, urban, and industrial

conditions, they would vanish, yielding to universal identifications, particularly social class. As late as 1966, Talcott Parsons, the Harvard sociologist who used analytical realism to propose a general theory for the study of society, can assert with confidence:

The universalistic norms of society have applied more and more widely. This has been true of all the main bases of particularistic solidarity, ethnicity, religion, regionalism, state's rights and class. [...] Today, more than ever before, we are witnessing an acceleration in the emancipation of individuals of all categories from these diffuse particularistic solidarities. ('Evolutionary' 349)

Even as Parsons was making this statement, however, class conflict was gradually being replaced by other variables in the general academic turn to new behaviouralism. The proliferation of ethnic studies in the 70s can be regarded as part of this broader trend, along with a growing interest in gender, religion, race, and language. Indeed, by 1977 Parsons cannot but reverse himself and admit that 'full assimilation' in terms of ethnicity being 'absorbed within the single category of "American" is very little the case' ('Some Theoretical' 53). As is often the case with new disciplines, however, studies of ethnicity were not isolated within universities, but grew out of a synergy between academics and those with a vocational or personal investment in the field.

Ethnicity had been absent prior to the 70s, not only symbolically but also from actual usage. The noun 'ethnos' and the adjective 'ethnic' might not have been part of everyday language, but both enjoyed an unambiguous place in dictionaries. 'Ethnicity', the derivative noun suggesting that there is a particular condition or quality to being ethnic, was a new term in the 70s. Gunnar Myrdal, the Nobel Laureate economist and sociologist of race relations, commented in *Center Magazine* in 1974, 'In recent years books and articles have appeared stressing "ethnicity"—a word I do not find in my dictionary'. Indeed, the term does not appear in the 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but made its appearance in the 1972 *Supplement*, which defines ethnicity as 'ethnic character or peculiarity' and notes that it was David Riesman who first used this definition in a 1953 article for *American Scholar* on intellectual freedom. Ethnicity is included in *Webster's Third New International* in 1961, but did not find its way into the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* in 1966 or the 1969 edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. It did, however, make it into

the 1973 edition, where it is defined as '1. The condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group; 2. Ethnic Pride'.

Forerunners to the revival of ethnicity appeared in the early 60s. Jacobson finds the first evocative moment of an ethnic revival in the summer of 1963 when, amid much fanfare, John F. Kennedy 'returned' to Ireland after his clan's century-long absence from the green fields of County Wexford. Kennedy's Ireland visit lent stateliness and circumstance to his policy on liberalizing immigration, succinctly captured in the title of his book, *A Nation of Immigrants*. Kennedy wrote the first draft in 1958, while still a senator, and subsequently revised it after gaining the presidency, as part of his call on the Congress to liberalize immigration statutes. He was assassinated before completing the revision and the book was first published posthumously in 1963, with a photograph from his Ireland visit adorning the dustcover. Citing Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* in the first sentence of his introduction, Kennedy proceeds to propose that immigrants' contributions to the socioeconomic life of the nation epitomize Tocquevillian liberty. The book describes the history of immigration as an intrinsic part of American history, as opposed to the history preceding all that is American, as assimilationists would have it.

Though Kennedy's immediate aim was the revision of current immigration policy, rather than the assimilation of earlier immigrants, the mere acknowledgment that the birthplace of one's ancestors can be relevant to one's selfhood was a bold statement in the early 60s. Calling America a nation of immigrants was taken up as a direct attack on the melting pot and became, in Jacobson's apt metaphor, the first step in transferring the locus of American consciousness 'from Plymouth Rock to Ellis Island' (*Roots* 7). Only a few years earlier, Will Herberg, a prominent sociologist, had asserted with astonishing confidence that 'the ethnic group [...] had no future in American life' (23). 'Ethnic pluralists', declared Herberg, 'are farthest afield than assimilationists [...] backward-looking romantics out of touch with the unfolding American reality' (20). For Kennedy, however, ethnic pluralism is and ought to remain the reality of American society. 'Immigration', he writes, 'gave every American a standard by which to judge how far he had come and every new American a realization of how far he might go. It reminded every American, old and new, that change is the essence of life, and that American society is a process, not a conclusion' (68). As part of the president's



immigration policy, *A Nation of Immigrants* affirmed that there was nothing shameful or un-American about ethnicity.

The most influential precursor to the revival came in 1963, with the publication of *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) by Nathan Glazer, a Harvard sociologist, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democratic politician and popular public speaker. Sollors describes *Beyond the Melting Pot* as 'the end of an era', the single most important work that 'paved the way for the revival of American ethnic identification' (20). Glazer and Moynihan's title refers not only to the claim that the melting pot has outlived its usefulness, but also to the more radical contention that it has never existed. As the authors bravely announce in the first page of their preface, 'the point about the melting pot is that it did not happen' (v). *Beyond the Melting Pot* uses six sociological case studies of ethnic groups in New York City to argue that ethnic identification persists, demanding attention, understanding, and accommodation. Italianness, Jewishness, Greekness, and Irishness are sociologically meaningful categories and, as Glazer and Moynihan's successors in the 70s would make explicit, the most important determinants of social behaviour.

Organized scholarly efforts to define and theorize ethnicity started in the late 60s, at such meetings as the National Consultation on Ethnic America held at Fordham University in June of 1968 (Ryan 2). Within the next ten years university catalogues would fill with courses on ethnic studies, usually offered through the departments of politics, sociology, and English. Within the overall increase in studies of ethnicity, immigration received particular attention. Not unlike Kennedy in *A Nation of Immigrants*, scholars before the 70s concentrated on the political controversies surrounding immigration and its prohibition. Studies could be easily divided into two broad categories, depending on their stance on what was usually referred to as the issue of foreign influx. During the 70s, however, immigration studies became both more popular and more diverse. New areas of exploration included regional histories, early urban enclaves, and language patterns. Ethnicity even intrigued psychoanalysts who provided their own explanations for the revival. In *Troubled Roots*, Andrew Rolle (1980) fuses history and psychoanalysis to provide a 'full-scale psychohistory of the immigration experience' of Italian-Americans (xi). Howard Stein and Robert Hill (1977)

similarly offer 'a psychosocial study of the White Ethnic Cultural Movement' in *The Ethnic Imperative* (xi).

The growing number of university departments, courses, journals, research groups, and academic organizations studying ethnicity is most evident in the need for reference sources to document them. One of the earliest bibliographical essays on ethnicity was published in 1970 in an edited volume comprising literature reviews on various subfields of American history. It was written by Rudolph Vecoli, one of the first sociologists to concentrate almost exclusively on ethnicity. Vecoli calls ethnicity 'A Neglected Dimension of American History' in the subtitle of his essay and regretfully reports that few historians choose to examine ethnicity or write American history from the perspective of ethnicity. Despite the pessimism of his title, Vecoli does provide some evidence that ethnicity was beginning to gain more attention. The mere fact that his essay was included in the same volume alongside established subfields of history is emblematic of the growing interest in ethnicity. Indeed, in 1979, Vecoli published another essay, 'The Resurgence of American Immigration History', as a response to his initial report. 'Ten years later', he writes,

we are inundated by a virtual flood of books, articles, and dissertations dealing with the roles of race, nationality, and religion in American history. Conferences, learned papers, and courses on ethnic themes proliferate at an amazing rate. (46)

Vecoli cites more than seventy-five monographs on immigration that appeared in the 70s. He alone published more than twenty articles through the decade, establishing himself as an authority in the field.

Chief among reference works on ethnicity is the aforementioned *Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups*, published in 1980. In the ten years leading up to its publication, however, numerous smaller scale bibliographies and encyclopaedias were published. In 1970, Jack Kinton published *American Ethnic Groups and the Revival of Cultural Pluralism*, a bibliography of the available literature divided by ethnic group. Five revised editions of Kinton's bibliography were published by 1980, with the addition of the subtitle *Evaluative Sourcebook for the 1970s*, to keep track of recent work in ethnic studies. William Høglund compiled a bibliography of doctoral dissertations on immigration and ethnicity from 1789 to 1983, which lists 3,534 titles. Of them, 1,810 were written in the 70s alone, nearly twice as many as in the 50s and

60s combined. In 1976, Wayne Charles Miller compiled the *Comprehensive Bibliography for the Study of American Minorities* with 29,300 entries and a preface explaining that this number 'in no way approaches definitiveness'. In his preface to *Immigration and Ethnicity: A Guide to Information Sources* (1977), Vecoli concurs that 'to attempt a bibliography of the immigration and ethnicity literature at this time is like taking a snapshot of an avalanche. It inevitably will be dated the moment it appears' (x).

Academic interest in ethnicity was not isolated from popular expressions of the revival. Work on ethnicity emerging out of university departments often situates itself within the broader phenomenon of the revival. Vecoli attributed the scholarly reorientation of interest in ethnicity to 'a basic reorientation which has taken place in the larger society' (*Resurgence* 46), while Høglund similarly described it as 'an index of the growing ethnic awareness among Americans' (xiii). The 1975 anthology *Ethnicity*, edited by Glazer and Moynihan, includes contributions not only by academics, but also a Catholic priest (Andrew Greeley), the director of an ethnic organization (Donald Horowitz), and a public opinion expert (William McCready). Moynihan himself would be elected to the U.S. Senate the following year. In addition, common sources of funding and the establishment of government or government-supported organizations provided linkages across institutions and disciplines, particularly for studies pertaining to immigration and genealogy.

Like much of the work in the field, Kinton's bibliography received government support and its fifth edition was published by the America Bicentennial Ethnic Center. Similarly, Lubomyr R. Wynar and Lois Buttlar's 1978 *Guide to Ethnic Museums, Libraries, and Archives in the United States* received federal funding under the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program of the U.S. Office of Education. The same organization also published the encyclopaedic directories for *Ethnic Newspapers and Periodicals* (1972) and *Ethnic Organizations* (1974). The Ethnic Heritage Studies Program was only one of several new bodies assisting ethnic studies. The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia joined the search for ethnic-oriented documents and publications while the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota was by the end of the decade well launched in its effort to collect literary records of East and South European immigrants.

Between the wide popularity of a television series and the very particular appeal of a scholarly thesis lay numerous local history libraries, magazine articles, community organizations, television talk shows, and public lectures on ethnicity that addressed diverse social groups and mixed audiences. Greeley summarized in the November 1978 issue of *Harper's* the different expressions of the revival, treating the increase of academic studies on ethnicity and its expressions in popular culture as part of the same phenomenon. 'Courses on ethnic studies', he writes,

have spread like contagious diseases through college catalogues. Community organizations with ethnic motifs have appeared all over the country, wrestling with HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development, founded in 1976] for the soul of America's threatened cities. Good-sized paperback bookstores have shelves lined with books on 'ethnicity'. Dissertations are pouring out of the sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, history, English, and even journalism departments in the great universities. Chambers of commerce in large and even medium-sized American cities have busily compiled lists of the 'ethnic' restaurants, including many that didn't know they were ethnic but are now perfectly delighted to have the tourist trade (even trade from their own city) wash up on their doorsteps. ('After Ellis' 27)

Greeley himself belongs to a small group of highly prolific and vocal public intellectuals, whose work on ethnicity provided the glue holding together the various expressions of the revival. Authors like Vecoli, Novak, Schrag, Gambino, and Greeley became ethnicity's self-appointed spokesmen in the 70s. Eschewing the earlier focus on immigration in studies of ethnicity, their work concentrates on defining, theorizing, and often promoting the revival of ethnicity. Many of them pursued academic careers, but some were journalists, lawyers, politicians, even clergymen. Their books, commonly published as pocket-size glossy paperbacks, circulated outside both ethnic communities and academia, to the broader upper middle class readership of publications like *Harper's*, *Newsweek*, and *The Nation*. With evocative titles such as Peter Schrag's *The Decline of the WASP* (1970), Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1971), and Greeley's *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* (1971), revival advocates announced to mainstream America the dawn of a new ethnic era.

Though never formally joining forces, ethnicity's spokesmen were tied together in a network of publications, organizations, and vocational posts concerning ethnicity. They contributed articles to the same magazines, delivered speeches at the same fora,

cross-referenced and prefaced each other's monographs, and were endlessly quoted as authorities in the mass media. The publication of Schrag's *The Decline of the WASP* in 1971 provides an indicative example of this network. A sociologist specializing in issues of education, Schrag was at the time editor of *Change*, a new magazine devoted to problems of higher education. His earlier book, *Village School Downtown* (1967), studied education politics in Boston. Schrag was already established in his own field and turned to the study of ethnicity during the 70s, with an interest specifically in its revival. *The Decline of the WASP* proposes that white ethnics are replacing WASPs as the holders of cultural cachet in America. The book was targeted not only towards academics and those with a professional interest in the topic, but to any reader interested in current affairs. *Saturday Review*, for which Schrag served as editor, published a favourable review of *The Decline of the WASP* and subsequently provided a quote for the dustcover of the second paperback edition. As a forerunner to the book's publication, furthermore, Schrag contributed an article under the same title to the April 1970 issue of *Harper's. Commentary* reviewed the book alongside Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* that was published in the same year, noting that they collectively provide 'a comprehensive picture of the ethnic fever' (Alter 70).

Revival advocates are also responsible for inventing the term 'revival'. They used the word interchangeably with similar denominators, such as 'resurgence', 'rediscovery', 'renaissance', and 'new ethnicity'. Considering that ethnicity was an unfamiliar concept before the 70s, all these words are semantically redundant and misleading. Nevertheless, adding a word with the prefix 're' next to ethnicity gave a semblance of an organized movement and, more importantly, provided self-evident proof to the claim that ethnicity had always been the defining identity for descendants of immigrants. In fact, a common discursive strategy was claiming to be shocked and perplexed by the sudden centrality of ethnicity. 'What has been termed a resurgence of ethnicity', writes Vecoli, 'is rather the eruption into public view of passions and attitudes which have long existed submerged in the private worlds of ethnic lives' ('Born Italian' 123).

The one area of disagreement among ethnicity's spokesmen is who exactly should be considered ethnic. The word is still used in everyday discourse to encompass anything and anyone who differs by religion, language, and culture from the

descendants of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant settlers. Clothing and food, for instance, are ethnic if they are visibly non-Western European or non-mainstream. If we apply a similar negative definition to the American population and regard as ethnic all non-WASPs, then more than sixty-five percent of Americans in 1973 were ethnic (Weed 19). The *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* adopts this broad definition to list all racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups as ethnic. Things are more complicated in studies of immigration, including Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants*, where earlier Western European immigrants (English, German, and Dutch) are also listed as ethnic groups but African Americans are excluded as involuntary immigrants. In their introduction to *Ethnicity*, Glazer and Moynihan explore different definitions and uses of ethnicity, only to conclude that 'one senses the term is still on the move' (5).

Advocates of the ethnic remained open to the diversity of definitions. Andrew Greeley defines ethnicity in terms of Catholicism, which excludes, among others, Greeks, Slavs, Armenians, and Jews. In *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, Michael Novak does include non-Catholic Christians, but excludes Catholic Irish-Americans and Jews, arguing that both groups are more thoroughly assimilated than Americans from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, these authors do not appear particularly interested in defending their definitions or debating those of others. In the preface to the paperback edition of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, Novak willingly concedes to the inclusion of other ethnic groups. 'I wish', he writes, 'I had said more about the Irish [...] and the Scandinavians—and Germans—and Hasidic Jews—and many others' (xix). As often as not, an author's concentration relies on personal knowledge and experience rather than strongly held beliefs on who constitutes an ethnic—Greeley, a Catholic priest, writes about Catholics; Richard Gambino, an Italian-American, concentrates only on Italian-Americans.

The only common denominator in definitions of ethnicity among advocates of the revival is the assumption that ethnics are invariably white. In some cases, ethnicity is explicitly qualified as white, as in the case of Perry Weed's *The White Ethnic Movement and Ethnic Politics*, Greeley's *Why Can't They Be Like Us?: America's White Ethnic Groups*, and the collection of essays *White Ethnics*, edited by Joseph Ryan. Even when left unstated, however, whiteness is implied by the absence of the word

ethnicity before the 70s. Before coming into usage, ethnicity had already been shaped by the precedent of having once been redeemed as white and allowed to join the melting pot. The exclusion of African Americans from the melting pot as well as the existence of an earlier 'revival of race' in the civil rights movement determined that the ethnic revival would be a white revival. The unstated whiteness of ethnicity exemplifies a tradition of naturalizing whiteness by treating it as a non-race. In a survey of discourses on whiteness, Dyer discovers white supremacy in its representational invisibility, which manifests most tellingly in the habit of indicating all racial identities except whiteness. The phrase 'An Asian colleague and I', for example, immediately signifies me as white. The underlying 'assumption that white people are just people' encodes the white race as the natural standard and every other race as a deviation that warrants special mention (Dyer, *White* 2).

While insisting on the whiteness and non-racialness of ethnicity, the revival literature simultaneously describes ethnics as the victims of racially motivated violence under the supremacy of Nordic and Anglo-Saxon whiteness. Revival advocates rely on evocative descriptions of immigration hardships and the violent suppression of ethnic identities. Their prose is peppered with rhetorical questions, truisms, and metaphors of looking beyond, changing chapters, and turning pages. They alternate nonchalantly from social critique to prophecy and promise, drawing evidence primarily from personal anecdotes. Novak is particularly notable for his sensationalism and axiomatic language. He labelled his work with such titles as 'The Ethnics v. The System' and 'The Seventies: The Decade of Ethnics'. Long before today's EU crisis, Novak used the pejorative PIGS and reclaimed it as a badge of pride. 'I am born of PIGS', he declared in *Harper's*, 'those Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Slavs, non-English-speaking immigrants, numbered so heavily among the workingmen of this nation. [...] The PIGS are not silent willingly. The silence burns like hidden coals in the chest' ('White Ethnic' 44). As a reader commented in a letter to the editor published in the magazine's following issue, the article 'demonstrated more the identity crisis of Mr. Novak than of those he calls the ethnic Americans' (Lombardi).

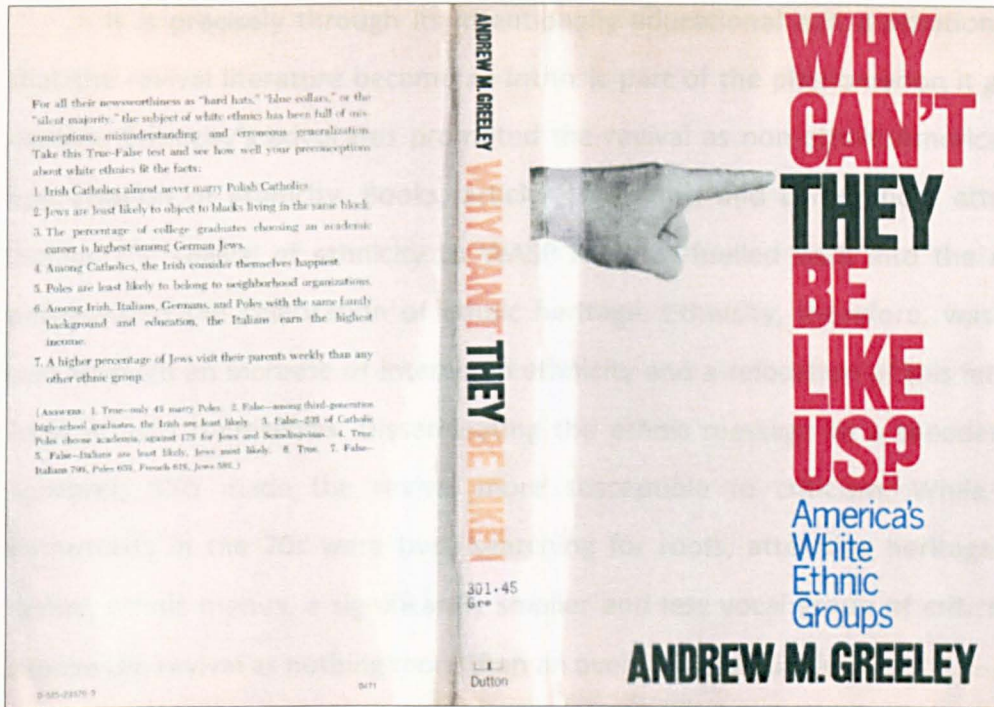


Figure 20

The revival literature does not actually call on ethnic communities to resurge, but aims to inform, educate, and even recruit non-ethnics. Studying the revival exclusively through this literature one gets the sense of extreme urgency to appreciate ethnicity. Revival advocates commonly address a mainstream WASP audience with autobiographical accounts of growing up ethnic that aim to introduce middle America to the celebration of ethnicity. 'The point of the book', explains Novak in his prologue, 'is to raise consciousness about a crucial part of American experience. Its aim is to involve each reader in self-inquiry' (*The Rise* xv). Similarly, the first person plural pronoun in Greeley's *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* refers to the book's WASP readers, while white ethnics become the misunderstood and finger-pointed 'they' on the dustcover illustration (figure 20). Greeley himself belongs to 'they' and offers an insider's response to what he assumes to be the question troubling 'us'. The back of the dustcover clarifies the relations between the book's author, subject, and intended readers. Instead of the usual synopsis and appraisal, it attempts to lure non-ethnic readers with a quiz on the ethnic experience. 'Take this True-False test and see how well your preconceptions about white ethnics fit the facts', promises the blurb.



It is precisely through its intentionally educational and promotional function that the revival literature became an intrinsic part of the phenomenon it attempts to explain. Ethnicity's advocates promoted the revival as non-ethnic America's growing appreciation of ethnicity. Books, articles, speeches, and conferences attempting to explain the revival of ethnicity to WASP America fuelled back into the revival and perpetuated the celebration of ethnic heritage. Ethnicity, therefore, was revived in part through an increase of interest in ethnicity and a relocation of this interest away from ethnics themselves. Disseminating the ethnic message to a broader audience, however, also made the revival more susceptible to criticism. While ethnicity's enthusiasts in the 70s were busy searching for roots, attending heritage fests, and tasting ethnic menus, a significantly smaller and less vocal group of critics sought to expose the revival as nothing more than an over-inflated bubble.

### **Exposing the Ethnic Myth**

The revival's zealous efforts to raise awareness outside ethnic communities not only attracted more supporters, but also prompted questions about the sudden centrality of ethnicity in American culture. If the revival manifested most evidently in a new appreciation for the term ethnicity and an increased interest in studying it, then sceptics were quick to ask what was in fact being revived. If the movement was aimed at non-ethnics, then how exactly did the lives of ethnics themselves change? If the meaning of ethnicity was negotiated primarily within a small circle of public intellectuals, then how did it affect ethnic communities? Was there an increase in ethnic mobilization or communal solidarity? Did ethnicity become a more significant causal variable in determining social outcomes? If one turns to the empirical record to answer these questions, as critics of the revival did in the 70s, then one is compelled to recognize that ethnics did not experience the revival in any countable way. This position, however, raises the more pressing question of why so many cultural practices and discourses coalesced around a non-empirical phenomenon.

The evocative title of *Beyond the Melting Pot* led many to quickly proclaim Glazer and Moynihan the forefathers of the revival. Nevertheless, *Beyond the Melting Pot* develops a distinctly different argument from the revival literature. Supporters of

the revival concentrate on the unique character of each ethnic group and conceptualize ethnicity as the single most important identity affecting character, behaviour, and allegiances. In contrast, Glazer and Moynihan view ethnic communities as interest groups and ethnicity as one of several variables that can affect them. In fact, in the first edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot* in 1963, Glazer and Moynihan argue that the causal significance of ethnicity in social group formation is declining. 'Religion and race', they clearly observe, 'seem to define the major groups into which American society is evolving as the specifically national aspect of ethnicity declines' (314). In their extended prologue to the 1971 edition and their introduction as editors to *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (1975), they are more willing to concede that the role of ethnicity is becoming more significant. 'The hope of doing without ethnicity in a society', they assert, 'may be as utopian and as questionable an enterprise as the hope of doing without social classes' (Introduction 5). What is particularly interesting in Glazer and Moynihan's change of mind in the 70s is that they do not actually refute their original argument. In 1963, they approached the topic from a sociological standpoint and argued that New York's ethnic communities were organized along the lines of social class and religion rather than ethnicity. In 1975, they do not observe a revival of ethnicity, but the failure of their prediction for its effacement.

Comparing the predictions of the ethnic revival literature with the movement's scale, course, and outcomes after the 70s, it becomes obvious that the movement never evolved into a significant social force. The promise of ethnicity becoming the dominant identity for the descendants of immigrants never came to fruition. In fact, census results provide compelling evidence that the causal links between ethnicity, personal identification, and social behaviour have been steadily weakening during and since the 70s. Intermarriage, language loss, religious conversion, and declining participation in communal activities have gradually dissolved the sociological significance of ethnicity. As early as 1979, James Crispino reported a steady decline in Italian identification and activities across all generations (96). In a 1985 study subtitled *Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*, Alba discovered that, although his respondents of Italian ancestry were somewhat more likely to emphasize their ethnic identity than those from other ethnic groups, eighty-five percent of his sample was married to spouses with no Italian ancestry (185). More recently, Micaela Di Leonardo has revisited ethnic

community demographics in the 70s to conclude that 'in reality, American white ethnic populations [...] lived in ethnically heterogeneous and shifting urban and suburban neighborhoods' (173).

Gunnar Myrdal was among the first to challenge the revival, noting in 1974:

Ethnic writers have concentrated on an abstract craving for historical identity, but they have not clarified by intensive study what cultural traits are implied. [...] I am afraid, therefore, one must characterize this movement as upper-class intellectual romanticism.

Myrdal's comment echoes Herbert Gans's aforementioned critique of Hansen's Law, which was also published 1974, as a forward to Neil Sandberg's *Ethnicity, Acculturation, Assimilation*. Gans criticizes Hansen for mistaking a class-based phenomenon for generational succession. Considering that Hansen based his theorem on a study of his peers, Gans concludes that only academics and intellectuals choose to reconnect with their heritage (xiii). Orlando Patterson follows Myrdal's and Gans's lead in *Ethnic Chauvinism* (1977), a book devoted to debunking the ethnic revival. With enough boldness and zeal to match those of ethnicity's advocates, Patterson proposes that ethnic heritage is sociologically irrelevant. His position relies on the principle that human behaviour is driven by rational, interest-led choices. Given that the place where one's ancestors were born is a purely coincidental variable, symbols of allegiance to an ethnic group are insignificant in determining behaviour. Ethnicity is simply a commitment that one consciously chooses or rejects depending on one's interests.

Whereas Patterson criticizes the revival from a theoretical perspective, Stephen Steinberg's *The Ethnic Myth* (1980) takes on the task of 'demystifying ethnicity' using empirical data. Steinberg argues that the traits labelled 'ethnic' are more directly related to class, locality, and other social conditions. He accuses ethnicity enthusiasts of getting caught up in the ethnic fervour of the moment and failing to see that the empirical record does not match their claims. The revival for Steinberg is a self-fulfilling prophecy from a group of authors who revived ethnicity simply by announcing its existence and insisting on theorizing it. In doing so, 'they became part of the phenomenon they were writing about, especially since their ideas were given wide currency in popular books and journals' (49).

The disagreement between advocates and critics of the revival can be partly attributed to a difference in the outcome that each side attempts to explain. The

former measure the revival in terms of subjective personal identification, whereas the latter look for concrete evidence of social change. The revival literature never explicitly denies that ethnicity was revived primarily in terms of usage rather than actual social change. It concentrates on personal feelings and morality, with highly selective use of empirical data. Novak eschews empirical evidence altogether and conceptualizes ethnicity as a 'felt personal power', a form of identification experienced at a deeply personal level. In his analysis, feelings take precedence over social structures, laws, housing covenants, and legal codes. To be ethnic for Novak is to experience a yearning to embrace one's heritage, regardless of whether one acts on this yearning (*The Rise* 85). Greeley's *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* is the most empirically oriented analysis from an advocate of the revival, packed with tables and charts on the ethnic experience, ranging from 'voting habits' to 'attitudes on courtship practices' (200, 205). Steinberg provides a compelling critique of Greeley's methodology and the accuracy of his data, but, even assuming that the method is sound and the data accurate, the outcome that Greeley attempts to explain is a change in attitudes and opinions. Greeley justifies the revival on the grounds of the descendants of immigrants' being more prone to identify themselves as ethnic. There is no evidence in *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* that causally links these changes to changes in social action and interaction.

Critics of the revival quickly pointed out that the emphasis on feelings constitutes a discursive strategy to conceal the movement's uneasy relationship with issues of class and race. For Patterson, the revival of ethnicity is a deliberate attempt to depoliticize social class and shift the attention away from economic inequalities. Advocates of the revival are chauvinistic, as the title of Patterson's book claims, for supporting the capitalist elite's efforts to fragment the working class. In a combined review of Greeley's and Patterson's books in December 1977, *The Nation's* Carey McWilliams asserts that Patterson's major contention with the revival does not concern class, but race. McWilliams presents Patterson's thesis as the attack of an African American author against a white movement that threatens to split the representatives of white privilege in parts. If the revival defined ethnicity as a socially experienced identity, then white ethnics would emerge as no less white than WASPs in areas such as housing, education, and employment. The empirical record would have

made it impossible to disassociate white ethnics from white hegemony. If, however, being ethnic simply means feeling ethnic, then white ethnics immediately differentiate themselves from WASPs and cannot be held accountable for the repercussions of white privilege.

If the revival was indeed a chauvinistic scheme to depoliticize social class and race, then one would expect these linkages to remain concealed and visible only to the discerning eyes of critics. The empirical record, however, suggests that they surfaced openly in the revival literature and other cultural expressions of ethnicity. Greeley's *Why Can't They Be Like Us?* alludes to the revival's politics vis-a-vis the civil rights movement in the comment 'what blacks have done is to legitimate ethnic self-consciousness' (18). Micaela Di Leonardo calls this comment a 'moment of unusual insight and honesty' (186). A closer look, however, will reveal that it is neither unusual nor particularly insightful. When critics in the 70s called the revival a reaction against the civil rights movement, they were not exposing a hidden agenda, but reiterating a dominant view. A collection of essays on ethnicity edited by Peter Rose was published in 1972 with the subtitle *The Ethnic Experience and the Racial Crisis*. It was in fact quite common to begin an account of the ethnic revival with a summary of the civil rights movement. Francesco Cordasco introduces his 1974 bibliography of Italian-American resources by observing:

The new interest in ethnicity derives from the civil rights movement of the last two decades, and the Black consciousness which accompanied it: in a very real sense, the emergence of a white ethnic consciousness (Italian, Irish, Jewish, Slavic, etc.) is to be understood as a reaction to the special 'Minority' status accorded over the turbulent 1960s to Blacks. (i)

Neither are such insights confined within academic circles. As early as 1969, Peter Schrag drew similar connections in *Harper's*:

Suddenly there are demands for Italian power and Polish power and Ukrainian power. Black power is supposed to be nothing but emulation of the ways in which other ethnic groups made it. ('The Forgotten' 31)

The 1973 anthology *White Ethnics* is subtitled *Life in Working-Class America*. The subtitle is meant to offer clarification, not particular insight. 'Working class status is a recurring reality for this ethnic population', Ryan explains in his introduction, 'and will be brought into the discussion by many contributors' (3). Perry Weed begins his

contribution to Ryan's volume with a list of epithets commonly used to describe white ethnics: 'backlash workers, hard hats, pigs, anti-intellectuals, white racists, the silent majority, lower middle class, Wallaceites, middle America' (17). Of all these slurs, only 'pigs' alludes to the early years of immigration and the perception of ethnics as filthy. 'Hard hats' and 'anti-intellectuals' denote working class status; 'lower middle class' was still understood as an ironic euphemism for working class in the 70s; and 'backlash workers' refers specifically to those workers who disobeyed trade union guidelines. 'The silent majority' and 'middle America' are terms popularized during Nixon's election campaign. 'Wallaceites' is a synonym for 'white racists', referring to supporters of the segregationist Alabama governor and presidential candidate George Wallace. With the exception of 'pigs', therefore, all epithets speak to the connections between race, class, and ethnicity in popular culture.

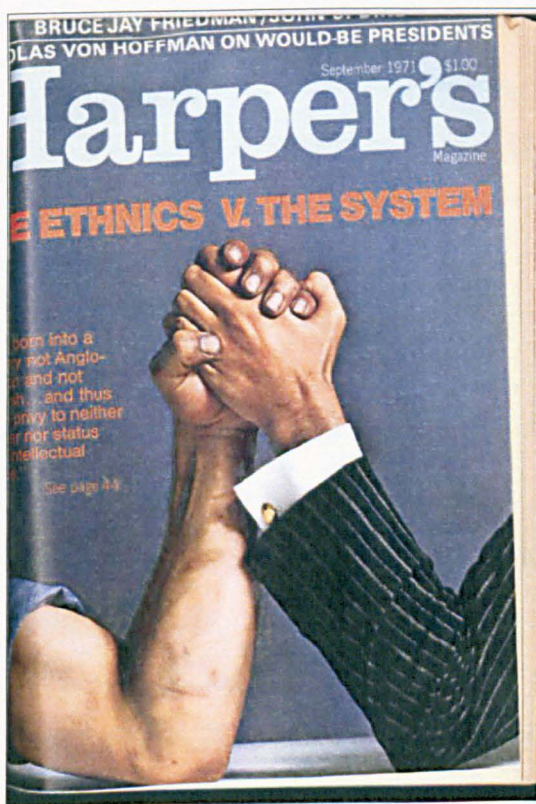


Figure 21

The same connections are evident on the cover of the September 1971 issue of *Harper's* (figure 21). The cover provides an illustration for Novak's article 'White Ethnic' and features a close-up of an arm wrestling match, which the headline explains

as a fight between 'the ethnics' and 'the system'. Though no faces are visible, it takes little effort to identify the two sides. The long-sleeved arm, cufflinked wrist, and well manicured hand are a purposely caricaturistic portrayal of the system. The system is fashionably dressed, expensively bejewelled, and carefully groomed, suggesting a combination of high income and the absence of physical labour. The arm representing the ethnics, however, bears no signifiers of ethnicity. There is no religious jewellery, traditional clothing, or even tomato sauce stains on the sleeve to signify a particular culture, religion, or ancestry. Neither is the ethnic hand's skin darker to suggest a distinction between Nordic and Southern European whiteness. The only visible signifiers concern social class, not ethnicity. The rolled up denim sleeve, the bulging bicep, the scratched and bruised forearm, and the dirty fingernails clearly belong to a man engaged in physical labour, the stereotypical blue-collar worker of popular imagination. The struggle between ethnics and the system is portrayed as the age-old class struggle between proletarians and capitalists. The substitutability between the working class and white ethnicity, therefore, was so transparent and widely acknowledged that a popular magazine could rely on it for its cover illustration without fearing that it would cause confusion or make some profound statement about the revival's ulterior motives.

Critics of the revival may indeed be right that ethnicity was not revived in any countable way for ethnics. Ethnic mobilization did not increase and ethnic communities were not strengthened. But their explanation of the revival as an elite-driven manipulative scheme fits just as uneasily with the empirical record. The revival's cultural expressions openly acknowledge ethnicity as an extension, substitute, reaction, or reversal of other identities, particularly race and class. Regardless of its origins, the revival of ethnicity produced discourses, styles, and behaviours that became embedded in 70s culture. Indeed, its fruition outside ethnic communities is an intriguing sociological phenomenon in its own right. Instead of retrospectively dispelling the ethnic surface to expose intentions, a more analytically fruitful approach would be to concentrate on explaining the reality of their presence in 70s American culture. As Glazer and Moynihan put it, 'a new word reflects a new reality and a new usage reflects a change in that reality' (Introduction 5).

### Consent, Descent, and the Space In-between

In an essay in *Time* in March 1977, Stefan Kanfer entertains the possibility that the new fascination with ethnicity may have nothing to do with ethnicity itself. Kanfer suggests that the revival could be just another symptom of the Zeitgeist, another expression of 'anxiety for stability and identity', no different from any other 'Me' Decade obsession. In the penultimate paragraph of his article, Kanfer wonders, 'Are genealogists living off the fad of the land? That the search for roots is another exercise in ethnic narcissism?' Kanfer's questions may echo the usual criticism of the revival, but he proceeds to answer them with an unequivocal 'no'. While he agrees that the revival is indeed a symptom of the Zeitgeist, he insists that it is unlike any other symptom. 'Ethnicity', he writes, 'stresses the importance of genetics over environment'. It is a more meaningful source of identity because it answers the question 'who are you' rather than 'what do you do?' Kanfer even cites Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene* in support of his argument. Dawkins's 1976 bestseller popularized the theory that all human behaviour is pre-designed by heredity. Though Kanfer does not explain how exactly ethnic genes determine identity and behaviour, his reasoning expresses a popular faith in the 'blood is thicker than water' principle. This definition of ethnicity as a genetically determined identity shaped 'the new reality and new usage' that Glazer and Moynihan identified in the revival, even as sociological evidence indicated no significant change among ethnic communities.

Werner Sollors provides in *Beyond Ethnicity* two useful concepts for understanding the new meaning of ethnicity that circulated in the 70s. Sollors proposes that ethnicity in American culture has traditionally oscillated between the two poles of consent and descent. Relations of descent are defined by blood or nature and are generally considered unalterable by nurture. Consent relations are defined by law, marriage, contract, or any other form of choice. The same binary can also be expressed in terms of hereditary and contractual relations, biological and self-made, primordial and ascribed. The choice of vocabulary is not as important as the heuristic value of consent and descent in appreciating how ethnicity has been historically conceptualized in America.



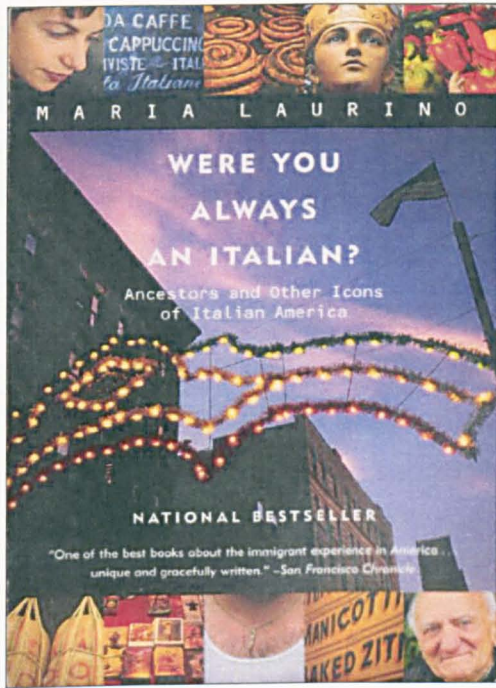


Figure 22

The idea of assimilation is the very definition of consent: American self-determination championing over European laws of heredity and blood. In addition, the assimilation established a tradition of absolute trade-offs between consent and descent. As immigrants became more American, they automatically became less Italian, Irish, Armenian, or Polish. Consent also dominates today's multiculturalism discourse, but the zero-sum game has become less rigid. Pluralism and diversity rely on the assumption of a harmonious coexistence of identities. *Were You Always an Italian?* Maria Laurino asks, without a hint of irony, in the title of her 2001 book, while the subtitle promises an exploration of *Ancestors and Other Icons of Italian America*. Once the quintessence of descent, ancestors have now become one of many icons of ethnicity. A picture of an old man, presumably the ancestor of the subtitle, features on the bottom right corner of the cover (figure 22), next to other pictorial representations of Italian-American ethnicity: the statue of a saint, a man's hairy chest, red peppers, a sign for baked ziti. Ethnicity is located in symbols, images, fashion, and food. Even the idea of ancestral descent is consensually mediated through the iconic image of a world-weary old man.

The revival of ethnicity marks a period of transition from the absolute trade-offs of assimilation to the fluid boundaries of multiculturalism. On the one hand, the

movement fashioned itself as the triumph of descent over the melting pot's forcefully imposed consent. It relied on its presumed kinship to the civil rights movement to propose that the relationship between birthplace and ethnic identity is analogous to that of genes and racial physiognomy. The sense of allegiance to an ethnic community was understood to run in one's blood and determine one's character, values, and actions. 'Italian ethnicity', Gambino explains, 'comes with the blood if not through it. Its components are unique and strong' (375). *Harper's* similarly asserted in May 1978:

Five biological denominators currently lend themselves to civil rights campaigns and the assertion of group identities: sex, sexual preference, age, race, and ethnic origin. [...] All in all, there's virtually no facet of human biology—sex, color, age, ethnic heritage—that isn't currently gaining strength as a denominator of social fragmentation. (Phillips 41-42)

Even book titles, such as Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* and Gambino's *Blood of My Blood*, predispose readers to recognize ethnicity as a biological essence that cannot be suppressed by the forces of assimilation. Revival advocates often begin their books and articles with an appeal to the authority of their own descent. They repeatedly claim to be writing from experience, rely on personal anecdotes for their evidence, dedicate their books to their ancestors, and even claim to be fulfilling an ethnic duty by contributing to the revival literature.<sup>15</sup> 'The book represents *my* view of *my* people', claims Gambino in the preface of *Blood of My Blood*, 'by checking the objective record with my own experience, I have tried to heed the warning of an old Italian saying, *traduttore, traditore*—translator, traitor' (vii).

The definition of ethnicity in terms of descent granted Italian-Americans a prized source of stability and security in the 70s. Italian-Americans did not need to take Erhard Seminars Training, join cults, become vegetarians, or follow any other of Tom Wolfe's 'plugging in' devices to ride through the disappointments and anxieties of the 'Me' Decade. Their ancestors' place of birth automatically guaranteed them both a meaningful source of identity and a way to differentiate themselves from the mainstream—or, to be more precise, the guilt-ridden *white* mainstream. Indeed, the notion of descent brings again to the forefront the revival's ties to questions of race. In

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the exact opposite practice seems to dominate studies of ethnicity today. Scholarly authority is commonly established through personal detachment. Peter Bondanella feels the need to clarify in the introduction of *Hollywood's Italians* (2004) that he is only half Italian and has not received an Italian-American upbringing (9-10).

the immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement and the challenges to white hegemony, Italian-Americans could claim an inalienable and primordial right to be regarded as a separate category within whiteness. Micaela Di Leonardo describes Italian-Americans' cultural position in the 70s as being halfway between the guilt-ridden absolute whiteness of WASPdom and the racial Otherness of African Americans. In Di Leonardo's apt metaphor, the ethnic revival had 'a distinct flavor of a Three Bears analogy':

White WASPs were 'too cold'—bloodless, modern, and unencumbered—and blacks 'too hot'—wild, primitive, and 'over'cumbered—white ethnics were 'just right'. For a hot minute in the 1970s, Italian-Americans commandeered Baby Bear's chair. (177)

On the other hand, the revival's complex relation to the civil rights movement also suggests that sitting on Baby Bear's chair could have been an act of consent, not a predisposition of descent. Although the revival claimed for ethnicity a likeness to race, it was no more than a decade earlier that the descendants of European immigrants were still considered incontestably different from the descendants of African slaves. The melting pot guaranteed ethnics' assimilation on the condition of African Americans' exclusion. Assimilation was based on white America's willingness to believe that immigrants could forgo descent, regardless of whether assimilation was consensual or enforced. The lack of a similar willingness to redeem racial difference created a hierarchy of identities along a consent-descent axis, with ethnicity being closer to the middle than race. This double standard blurred distinctions between consent and descent, suggesting that ethnic descent is more easily redeemable than racial descent. Even before the term ethnicity entered usage, therefore, it was understood as an adjustable identity, in comparison to the unquestionably irredeemable identity of race.

The very idea of a revival implies agency, choice, and self-determination—hardly the attributes of genetic determinism. The proposal that a genetically determined identity needs to be revived seems to be inherently oxymoronic. It suggests that something permanent and inescapable can be lost or interrupted. The revival literature often struggled with this question, but not so much to resolve it as to conceal its inconsistencies. In the essay he contributed to the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, Novak entertains the idea that nurture may affect ethnic

identity more than nature. 'Ethnic identity', he writes, 'persists among individuals; it appears, by being passed on in unconscious, tacit ways in their early nurture'. Just as he gestures towards consent, however, he proceeds to clarify that 'the laws of such transmissions are not well understood' ('Pluralism' 779). In his prologue for *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, Novak again emphasizes that ethnicity 'is a matter of *cultural transmission*, from family to child. *The new ethnicity is a form of historical consciousness*'. In the paragraph immediately preceding this sentence, however, he describes ancestry as a kind of metaphysical connection. Referring to ethnic practices, he writes, 'These are gifts. They are roots. They are our material, our concrete limits, our purchase on a finite, real, *earthy earth*' (xviii). Novak may admit that ethnicity is not a matter of biology, therefore, but he still remains vague on the question of whether one is born or becomes ethnic.

Vecoli's aforementioned bibliographical essay from 1970 reveals the same ambiguities. He defines ethnicity as 'group consciousness based on a sense of common origin' (70). The word 'sense' remedies the absoluteness of 'common origin' and overtly gestures towards consent. It remains unclear, however, what the exact nature of this sense is and, more pressingly, if common origin is indeed a necessary condition for a sense of common origin to emerge. Later in the essay, while explaining why ethnic studies has not received enough attention, Vecoli writes:

The second- and third-generation scholars do assimilate the academic ethos; they dedicate themselves to the life of the mind and the rule of reason. As emancipated intellectuals they reject the narrow parochialisms and tribal loyalties of their youth. (81)

Vecoli does clarify that he is 'not suggesting that historians of ethnic origin should necessarily devote themselves to the study of their ethnic groups' (83). Yet, in the two pages between this disclaimer and his initial statement, Vecoli concentrates almost exclusively on criticizing Italian-American scholars who have refused to work with ethnicity. While not going as far as to argue that Italian-American scholars are obliged or destined to study ethnicity, his analysis clearly implies that descent makes them the natural candidates for the job.

Vecoli's comments, furthermore, demonstrate that questions of ethnic consent and descent are ultimately questions of inclusion and exclusion in the revival. Sollors illustrates this point with the example of a lecture delivered in 1976 by Robert Di

Pietro, a specialist in ethnic literature, at an academic panel. Subsequently published in *MELUS*, Di Pietro's lecture focuses on Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and its place in American literature. 'Even though I am hurt that Mario Puzo had to write a novel as potentially defaming to Italian Americans as *The Godfather*', Di Pietro declares, 'I admit that every page of it touches me in a way that *Tom Sawyer* could never do' (2). As evidence of his ancestral predisposition to appreciate *The Godfather* more than other readers, he offers the example of one sentence from the novel's first chapter: 'Her name, too, was outlandish to their ears; she called herself Kay Adams' (Puzo 12). Di Pietro points out that the form 'to call oneself' is a literal translation of the verb 'chiamarsi', which is commonly used in Italian to introduce someone's name. Di Pietro proceeds to argue that Puzo intentionally uses this literal translation to emphasize the ways Italian-Americans appropriated the English language and developed distinct linguistic tropes. Consequently, readers who are familiar with the Italian language and Italian-American culture will be better suited to understand Puzo's ethnic voice. 'I can only conjecture', Di Pietro writes, 'how readers not familiar with this Italian expression are interpreting the passage. Perhaps they find in it some doubt that the girl's name is really Kay Adams' (3). It seems highly unlikely, however, that the non-Italian reader of Puzo's novel would actually be in doubt on whether her name is Kay Adams. As Sollors points out, the idiom 'to call oneself' is not unique to the Italian language and certainly not unheard of in English (12).

Much more problematic than Di Pietro's particular example is the reasoning that underpins his argument. In claiming that he can only conjecture how a non-Italian reader would interpret the sentence 'she called herself Kay Adams', Di Pietro implies that literary critics should stick to literature within their respective ethnic groups. Nevertheless, his speech continuously gestures to a broader readership and urges his audience of literature scholars—not his fellow Italian-Americans—to appreciate Puzo's mastery. He essentially tries to educate non-Italians on how to appreciate *The Godfather* by elaborating on how they are inherently predisposed to never fully appreciate it. In so doing, Di Pietro mimics the outlook of the revival as a whole: limiting ethnicity to ethnics and simultaneously reaching outward to include WASP America in the celebration of ethnicity.



Figure 23

This interplay of inclusion and exclusion also surfaces in the revival's cultural practices. While advocates of the revival eloquently described the profoundness of blood relations and ethnic essences, the actual experience of the revival was not limited to those of ethnic descent. Everyone could get a taste of ethnicity in Catherine Scorsese's meatball sauce or take a trip to Europe in a new Mercedes-Benz. Another quarter-page advertisement in-between Schickel's treatise on film studies confronts *Harper's* readers with the question 'Does Italian wine go with Shish Kebab?' (figure 23). Not only is the answer an emphatic 'yes', but the importers of Bolla even offer to give readers the recipe for the Middle Eastern dish that goes so well with their Italian wine. If the flavours, fashions, and styles of ethnicity were available and easily accessible to everyone, could non-ethnic Americans find in them some of the stability, rootedness, and meaning that ethnics found in their descent? After all, as Schrag admits, 'for every Greek or Italian there are a dozen American-Americans who are past ethnic consciousness and who are as alienated, as confused, and as angry as the rest' ('The Forgotten' 30). For as long as the revival remained on the fence on the question of consent and descent, ethnicity remained simultaneously an enviable privilege for the few and a popular heritage fest for everyone to enjoy.

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The aim of this chapter has been to set the groundwork for subsequently situating Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men within the wider collection of texts, discourses, and practices, where the meaning of ethnicity was negotiated in the 70s. In lieu of a definitive conclusion, therefore, I would like to end the chapter by opening up the discussion to include these representations. Although I have intentionally avoided discussing the presence of ethnicity on the big screen, studies of the revival never fail to mention cinema as one of its greatest expressions and as proof of ethnicity's appeal in the 70s. Just as it became fashionable in the 70s to read about immigration history, try ethnic cuisines, and attend ethnic festivals, so did ethnic-themed films become popular. Nevertheless, to limit these films to just another piece of evidence justifying the popularity of ethnicity would be a gross understatement.

As a popular medium of fictions, Hollywood cinema carried the potential to participate in the revival's debates and make creative use of its ambiguities. In the interplay of whiteness and racial difference, Hollywood found Caucasian heroes with the appeal of a racial Otherness. In the definition of ethnicity as a connection to one's ancestral past, it found a vehicle for resurrecting the social mores and ideologies of earlier times. In the uses of ethnicity as a source of security and meaning, it found a fruitful space for constructing fantasies and utopias. In the revival's oscillation between exclusivity and inclusion, it found the opportunity to simultaneously glorify and exorcize Italian-American men.

Yet, Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men are not just reactions to a history of ethnicity unfolding independently of them. Once audiences received Hollywood's fictionalized revived ethnics, their impressions and interpretations fuelled back into the revival to challenge, shape, and consolidate the meaning of ethnicity. Chapters four, five, and six explore this reciprocal relationship between the ethnic revival, Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men, and the broader cultural valence of ethnicity. Before then, the following chapter considers the meaning of masculinity in the 70s and its own connections to issues of class, race, and ethnicity.

## CHAPTER THREE: 'Psyching Out the New Macho'



Figure 24

On 17 February 1975, five months after Nixon's resignation and two months before the fall of Saigon, *New York* magazine devoted two pages to 'Psyching Out the New Macho', a humorous take on recent changes to the meaning of masculinity in American culture. *New York* presents twelve pairs of pictures as exemplary juxtapositions of old and new macho. The first pair, for instance, juxtaposes Humphrey Bogart, the epitome of the strong silent type, against the feeble, ranting Woody Allen (figure 24). Apart from the pictorial juxtapositions, *New York* alludes to old and new macho distinctions in some probably unintentional connections to the cultural context of the mid-70s. From the highly topical publication date, in the midst of some of the decade's most significant events, to the underlying assumption that the meaning of masculinity is indeed susceptible to socio-political developments, *New York* offers a view of 70s masculinity as a shifting site of signification. Indeed, the magazine was hardly alone in its quest to locate the meaning of masculinity in the 70s. Articles, books, surveys, organized events, public fora, and, most memorably, a loosely structured social movement known as men's liberation attempted to explain what is different about American men in the 70s.

This chapter uses *New York's* account of old and new macho as a springboard to examine the various discourses coalescing around masculinity in the 70s. As in the discussion of ethnicity in the previous chapter, my aim is not to retrospectively



evaluate the correctness of 70s definitions of masculinity, but to explore what limitations and opportunities they allowed for Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men. Hence, I am equally interested in the various meanings assigned to masculinity and in the processes used to formulate these meanings, many of which remained frustratingly ambiguous or conveniently inconclusive. Two such moments of ambiguity are particularly illuminating and set the parameters of this chapter's investigation. Combined with the new meanings of ethnicity, they rendered Italian-American masculinity a particularly appealing object of cinematic representation in the 70s.

The first ambiguity concerns *New York's* implicit assumptions about gender as a sociocultural construct. In its attempt to locate changes to the meaning of masculinity in new styles and social norms, *New York* seems to reject the faith in an ontological masculine essence. Judith Butler conceptualized gender in the 1990s as a performed, ascribed, and often imposed social function. Butler's influential work has been variously praised, critiqued, and appropriated, but most studies of gender today would agree that gender is neither fixed nor determined exclusively by biological differences. In the case of *New York's* take on the new macho, it is equally important to appreciate the implications of this understanding of gender as it is to historicize it as an early example. During the 70s, several masculine models emerged claiming cultural currency, including black masculinities, gay masculinities, and feminist masculinities. Yet, even as mainstream culture accepted the diversity and fluidity of masculine models, it simultaneously sought to alter and incorporate them within a unitary model of old macho patriarchal hegemony.

The second ambiguity concerns the deliberateness of this process. *New York's* attempt to 'psyche out' masculinity alludes to the decade's obsession with pop psychology and personal development, but also shows an understanding of gender as an exclusively psychological concept. Men's liberation, the movement responsible for the most organized efforts to redefine masculinity in the 70s, conceptualized patriarchy as a limiting state of mind that affects both men and women equally. While acknowledging the oppressiveness of patriarchy, the movement turned men from its propagators into its victims, proposing that they are as much entitled to liberation as women. In a brief introduction to 'Psyching Out the New Macho', John Mariani alludes

to this ambiguity by referring to the new macho as a strategy. Behind the eagerness to update the meaning of masculinity, American men's attempts to come to terms with feminism in the 70s reveal a parallel effort to preserve old macho authority and hegemonic privileges, even while adopting new macho styles.

Discourses on masculinity in the 70s overwhelmingly centre on the role of feminism and the women's movement in prompting a crisis of masculinity. The chapter begins by examining this crisis and its sources, both within and outside the women's movement. Subsequently, I turn to the anti-feminist backlash of the early 70s and to the emergence and structure of the men's liberation movement. Finally, I consider the movement's early death at the end of the decade and replacement with the more overtly conservative men's rights movement. Although the chapter follows a rough chronological order, I do not attempt to provide a coherent cultural history of masculinity in the 70s. Rather, my aim is to show that diverse cultural phenomena reveal the same anxieties and fears about the fate of old macho. The chapter's concluding section brings ethnicity back into the discussion to examine the cultural status of Italian-American men in the 70s.

### **Feminism and the Crisis of Masculinity**

It is all too easy to deduce from *New York's* sharp distinction between old and new macho that American men lived a life of bliss before the women's movement came to stir things up. John Mariani introduces the pictorial juxtapositions as 'examples of how macho has changed since the good old days' (40). Whether criticizing, celebrating, or simply reporting on changes to the meaning of being a man, the popular press in the 70s agreed with *New York's* observation that masculinity faced a *sui generis* crisis. The feminist struggle rendered masculinity a less privileged social category, a more vulnerable personal identity, and a more difficult concept to decipher. It takes but a cursory glance at American history, however, to realize that masculinity's good old days are themselves a new macho invention, a nostalgic projection of 70s concerns onto a masculine past that suffered its own share of crises. Neither is feminism responsible for singlehandedly causing the 70s crisis. The decade's history abounds with challenges to American men, both symbolic and literal, many of which are directly

traceable back to structural changes that American society had been experiencing since the early post-World War II period. The women's movement provided the immediate impetus for renegotiating masculinity, but it also served as a scapegoat, an easily identifiable object of attack for disgruntled men.



Figure 25

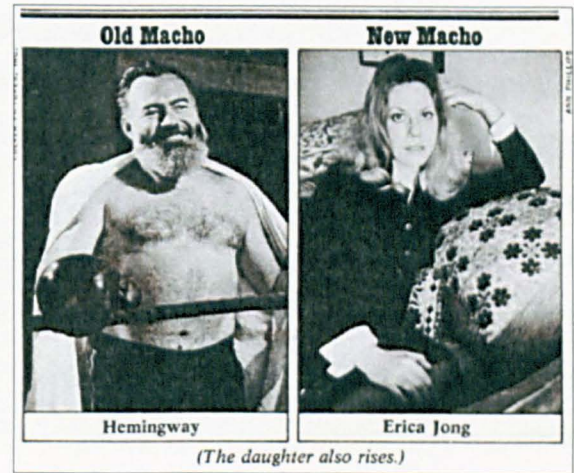


Figure 26

Most pairs in *New York's* selection of old and new macho images allude to the impact that feminism and the women's movement have had on American patriarchy. The 'well built' Marilyn Monroe, for example, poses in a revealing strapless gown as the diamond-studded trophy of old macho men. She is compared to the 'well bred' Glenda Jackson, who poses in a buttoned-up, square-shouldered jacket and an *à la garçon* haircut (figure 25). Monroe's smile satisfies old macho sexual desire; Jackson's smile demonstrates feminist contentment at having rejected the Monroe stereotype. Another pair of pictures sets Ernest Hemingway against Erica Jong (figure 26). The elderly Hemingway is clad in old macho boxing regalia, while Jong, dressed in a 'manly' dark suit and leaning on a flower-patterned cushion, looks like the epitome of second wave feminism. The accompanying caption warns *New York's* readers that 'The daughter also rises'.

If old macho means looking up to Ernest Hemingway, copying the style of Humphrey Bogart, and desiring Marilyn Monroe, then the first thing to note is that the old macho man is also a white, heterosexual man. As a description of American society, the term 'patriarchy' may unwarrantedly suggest the supremacy of a gender

identity that supersedes all other identities. The boundaries of male hegemony, however, have always been defined by sanctions both against women and against men who do not fulfil its standards, particularly regarding whiteness and heterosexuality. I have already discussed in the previous chapter how white supremacy relies on the naturalization of whiteness as a non-race and ranks raced masculinities by their level of degradation from the white standard. Gay men are ranked according to a similar, if not more rigid, hierarchy. For most of American history, distinctions between gender and sexuality have been practically nonexistent. Homosexuality was considered the failure to abide by one's biologically determined gender role and carried the double stigma of social transgression and medical disability. Consequently, a man who diverged from the patriarchal model of machismo risked being labelled effeminate and gay—with the two terms being practically synonymous.<sup>16</sup> By the 70s, the civil rights and the gay rights movements had already brought to the forefront alternative models of being a man. African American and gay men left the countercultural fringes and gained increased visibility in the mainstream, raising questions about the supposed hegemony of the white heterosexual patriarch. (I return to explore these challenges to patriarchy further in chapters five and six, through the representation of race in *Rocky* and sexuality in *Saturday Night Fever*.)

Even before the plurality of competing masculine models in American culture, patriarchy had not always been a secure space for American men. If the old macho ideal comprises professional success, self-determination, social authority, and emotional composure, then a crisis of masculinity seems to be an inherent feature in any modern industrialized society, not just 70s America. The old macho man thrives in preindustrial environments, where land ownership, individual effort, and physical labour determine his worth. Industrialization shifts the economic basis from the rural farm to the urban factory, from independent artisans and craftsmen to assembly line workers, from self-sufficiency and localized economic exchanges to nationwide trade. A modern economy introduces intermediaries (mass production units, expanded trade

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<sup>16</sup> Female homosexuality posed an even more perplexing paradox for patriarchy. If a gay man failed his nature by voluntarily embracing the weaker, feminine role, a gay woman would have to somehow exceed her nature and elevate herself to the status of manliness. The perceived irrationality of female empowerment, coupled with the equation of sex with penetration, rendered lesbianism an impossibility and a non-entity.

markets, banks, stock exchange markets, and trade unions) that break the continuity between a man's labour and his income. With the advent of industrialized capitalism, farmers, cowboys, and independent traders become wage earners that sell their labour to other men. As the Great Depression proved so devastatingly in the 30s, American men were no longer fully in charge of their selfhood. For reasons that had nothing to do with their own ability to produce income, thousands were left without work and unable to fulfil their roles as breadwinners.

The post-World War II economic successes of the U.S. briefly resurrected traditional masculine ideals of empowerment and autonomy. Fresh from helping the nation in a victorious war, American men returned to civilian life with relatively high-paying, stable jobs. The gross national product and average family income more than doubled, while unemployment steadily declined, reaching four percent in the 60s. Even as it was experiencing the economic boom, however, the American economy also underwent another transition, from industrialism to corporatism. With the decline of the American manufacturing industry, the sources of capital shifted from labour to sales, service provision, and marketing. The shift to advanced capitalism promised the growing white-collar middle classes a suburban bourgeois haven. Yet, to paraphrase Marx's aphorism, the bourgeoisie proved to be the gravedigger of its own masculinity. If an industry-based economy intervenes to separate a man's worth from his income, a post-industrial, service-based economy eliminates masculine physical labour from the equation. Wilson Sloan's 1955 bestseller *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and its film adaptation the following year, with Gregory Peck in the eponymous role, portray the bleak prospects of the business sector man. The title of Sloan's book entered the vernacular as a description of the discontented office worker, who is forced to conform to a hectic and emasculating lifestyle.

In *Hearts of Men*, Barbara Ehrenreich traces the roots of the 70s crisis of masculinity back to the early 50s, long before the feminist movement gathered momentum. Ehrenreich notices that, despite the challenges of corporate life, American men in the 50s conformed to the breadwinner ethic, the expectation to marry young, become established in a white-collar job, buy a house, and commit to being the sole providers for their families. The breadwinner ethic, Ehrenreich argues, is founded on a fundamental instability. It expects men to earn an income and then

share it with their wives (14-20). The terms of the bargain arguably make sense as a way to divide labour in preindustrial and early industrial economies. The physically stronger men work the fields or operate heavy machinery, while women take care of the household. The breadwinner ethic, however, seems completely nonsensical in a post-industrial economy, where physical strength has no direct relation to income. Why would an office worker agree to share his salary with a woman who is equally capable of performing the same job to earn an income? Though men were not legally forced to do so, conformity was supported by an enormous amount of moral and religious sentiment, expert opinion, public bias, and even academic wisdom. Maladies ranging from psychological immaturity and sexual impotence to alcoholism and suicide were considered the direct outcomes of deviance from the breadwinner ethic. Working hard to provide for one's family, Ehrenreich concludes, became the new signifier of manhood, substituting for self-subsistence and physical labour.

Developments in medical science in the 50s raised even more alarming concerns for the white-collar man. For the first half of the twentieth century, popular and scientific orthodoxy upheld masculinity as the standard of health. Pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause served as evidence of female biological frailty. Demographic data, however, gave men less of an advantage. In 1920, the life expectancy of women was two years longer than that of men, increasing to eight years by 1970. During the 50s, medical opinion shifted from biology to psychosocial explanations to justify men's poor health, endorsing the popular fear that social conformity and familial responsibility were killing men. On 9 May 1955, *Life* magazine published an article by Robert Wallace entitled 'A Stricken Man and his Heart', which tells the story of a middle class male with 'an experience that thousands face annually'. Wallace describes the man as an ordinary, middle-aged family man with a white-collar job in Manhattan. He 'worked under pressure' and sometimes 'did not readily shake it off when he went home'. 'He liked to fish, occasionally played golf', but had little time to practise either; 'he rarely drank more than one cocktail a day, smoked about one pack of filter-tipped cigarettes daily and rarely engaged in sudden, violent exercise' (143). While commuting to his suburban home on the evening train, after an eleven-hour workday, the man suffered 'a classic heart attack' (152). The diagnosis was high cholesterol, but Wallace suggests that there might have been something lurking

beneath the man's uneventful lifestyle that caused the heart attack. The following year, Dr. Hans Selye, an endocrinologist, offered scientific validity to Wallace's suspicions in *The Stress of Life*. Selye defined stress as a physiological condition and a possible cause of heart attack. A man who works hard in the office and sacrifices his weekend fishing trips to provide for his family may be putting his health in danger.

Men's resistance to their roles as breadwinners started in the early 50s. Ehrenreich finds examples of 'men's flight from commitment' in such diverse cultural moments as the founding of *Playboy* magazine in 1953, the Beat generation of the 50s, and the counterculture of the 60s. Hugh Hefner and Jack Kerouac may share little in terms of ideology, but both are men who refused to conform to the breadwinner ethic. 'The gray flannel rebel resented his job. The playboy resisted marriage. The short-lived apotheosis of male rebellion, the Beat, rejected both job and marriage' (Ehrenreich, *Hearts* 52). In the eyes of the family-oriented norm, however, reactions against conformity remained the exclusive domain of hedonists, deviants, and losers. The breadwinner ethic may have been unfavourable to machismo, but it was still affordable for white-collar men in the 50s and 60s. Economic prosperity allowed these men to provide for their families and sustain blissful suburban havens, even at the expense of stress and heart disease. It was not until the 70s that opposition to the breadwinner ethic surfaced in mainstream culture, following a change in the terms of the bargain. As the 70s dawned, the American economy stopped growing. 'The saga of the "Me" Decade', writes Tom Wolfe, 'begins with one of those facts that is so big and so obvious (like the Big Dipper), that no one ever comments on it anymore. Namely: the 30-year boom' (30).

The de-industrialization of the American economy did not only create men in gray flannel suits, but also many unemployed workers who did not possess the skills to transition to a service sector economy. Along with growing unemployment, the transition into a corporate economy also resulted in a balance of trade deficit. As more and more goods were no longer produced at home, American imports exceeded exports for the first time at the beginning of the 70s. The stagnating economy reached a new nadir with the 1973 energy crisis. Oil prices increased by 250 percent, inflation topped, and the new term 'stagflation' was invented to describe the unprecedented combination of high prices and slow growth. In this climate, many unemployed

labourers had to accept white-collar jobs that paid less than the blue-collar jobs they gave up. The de-masculinized white-collar man is often imagined as a highly paid clerk suffering from existential angst. As Beth Bailey points out, however, 'the vast majority of the new jobs created in the service sector paid less than the jobs they replaced, and by 1976, according to one estimate, only forty percent of the nation's jobs paid enough to support a family' (109).

The decade's political upheavals, furthermore, shook the mettle of the U.S. in areas that had traditionally been reliable sites of masculine authority: political management, military might, and international leadership. In a period of less than ten years, the nation witnessed the Watergate scandal, the Iran hostage crisis, the end of three presidencies in disgrace (Nixon, Ford, and Carter), and the military defeat in Vietnam. In *The Male Machine* (1974), Marc Feigen Fasteau summarizes the links between political corruption and the crisis of masculinity. 'The absence of moral restraint in the original Watergate crimes', Fasteau writes,

grew instead out of something deeper—the market mentality ingrained in the American male character. If every aspect of a man's self-esteem [...] turns on competitive success, then everything else—fair play, representative government, constitutional guarantees of basic freedoms, respect of the law—will be subordinated to the pursuit of victory. (193-94)

In July 1975, the cover of *Harper's* featured the headline 'Last Days in Saigon' against the fitting background of a tattered and bleached out American flag, photographed in an ironically grandiose close-up from the reverse side (figure 27). The overturned national symbol could also serve as an appropriate illustration for the only other headline featured on the same cover: 'Masculinity: Wraparound Presents 60 Points of View'. 'Wraparound' is the general title of a series of articles in *Harper's*, each one featuring a multi-page collage of opinions on a particular topic. The masculinity 'wraparound' comprises brief articles, quotes, proverbs, and other axioms from contemporary writers and famous historical figures, ranging from George Bernard Shaw to Joseph Goebbels. *Harper's* decision to explore the meaning of masculinity in an issue devoted to the last days in Saigon unwittingly highlights the associations between the two topics. By the time the Vietnam War was over, it had drained America of much of its masculine power. On a literal level, it cost the lives of thousands of American men (yet, still only a fraction of Vietnamese casualties). On a



metaphorical level, the defeat of American men by men deemed racially inferior struck equal blows to American foreign policy and masculinity.

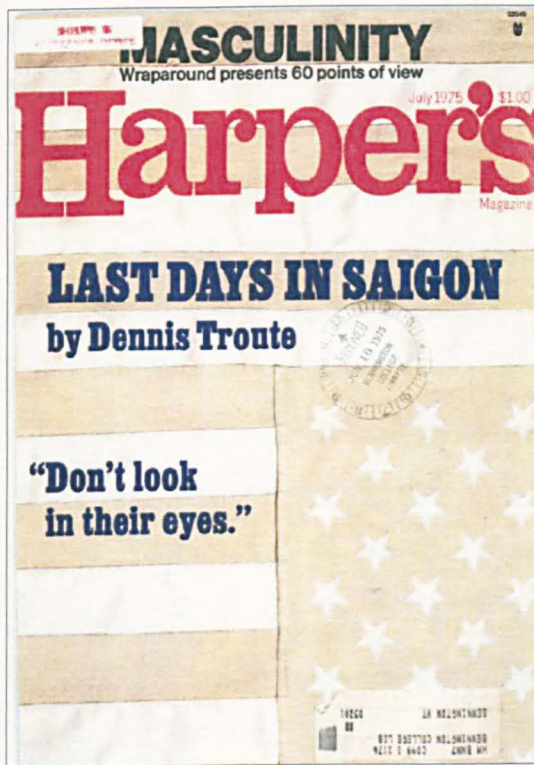


Figure 27

While *Harper's* presents its wraparound as an open platform to discuss the meaning of masculinity, and despite the unintentional connections to the withdrawal from Saigon on the magazine's cover, none of the wraparound's sixty points of view actually mentions the Vietnam War. The main issue of contention concerns the repercussions of the women's movement on masculinity. Feminism had already become one of the most prevalent social and political forces since the early 60s, gaining inspiration in the context of the New Left, the civil rights movement, and the anti-war movement. The lion's share of feminist activism in the 70s centred on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which would incorporate in the constitution the clause that 'equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex'. ERA was targeted against gender discrimination in all those political, civil, and social areas that were simply not covered by electoral rights. The first draft dates back to 1923, but campaigning did not start

until the mid-60s. The 70s started with a victory for feminism, as the amendment was passed by both houses of Congress in 1972, but the battle for legal ratification ended in failure in 1982. Nevertheless, the process of campaigning provided new momentum to the feminist movement, which expanded its outlook to a broader range of social, cultural, and personal issues. The struggle for constitutional changes brought smaller victories in such areas as family relations, reproductive rights, social and workplace etiquette, and sexuality (Schulman 168-71).

The feminist movement in the 70s found its most succinct expression in the claim 'The Personal is Political', borrowed from the title of Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay. Hanisch wrote the essay as a response to criticism from feminism's leftist circles that women's therapy groups are apolitical and undermine the movement. Her position is that feminist hard-liners are driving women away from the movement by demanding that every woman become a political activist. 'There are things in the consciousness of "apolitical" women', Hanisch writes, 'that are as valid as any political consciousness we think we have'. 'The Personal is Political' has been widely appropriated as a slogan and often used to justify many more concessions to feminism's political roots than Hanisch, who is not actually responsible for her essay's title, could have envisioned in 1969. Her essay voiced a desire for feminism to break away from the countercultural margins, which dates back at least to the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Regardless of any ideological divisions that a broader constituency may have brought, feminism entered the 70s as a force to be reckoned with. Known variously as the women's rights movement, second wave feminism, women's liberation, or derogatorily as women's lib, feminism found new popular expression in areas ranging from local consciousness-raising groups to the highly publicized campaign against the Miss America pageant.

A particularly revealing pair of pictures in *New York's* account of old and new macho brings to the fore the operative role of feminism, both in renegotiating the meaning of masculinity and in overriding the contribution of other factors to the crisis of masculinity. *New York* juxtaposes *The Washington Post's* former and current publishers, with the explanation that one 'helped launch L.B.J. [Lyndon Baines Johnson]' whereas the other helped sink R.M.N. [Richard Milhous Nixon]' (figure 28). The comment refers to the decline in people's trust in the government and the

collapse of state authority. It alludes to gender indirectly, suggesting that Watergate and Nixon's resignation marked the failure of America's patriarchally ordered political system as a whole. The old and new macho distinction is much more pronounced, however, in that *The Washington Post's* former publisher is a man (Phil Graham) and the current publisher is a woman (his wife, Katharine Graham). She succeeded her husband after his suicide in 1963, following a marriage troubled by his infidelities and clinical depression. At the time, Graham was the only woman leading a newspaper and did not formally assume the title until 1979.



Figure 28

*New York's* decision to represent the new macho in the image of a successful woman and to associate her authority with the collapse of state authority can be variously interpreted as offensive or empowering for the women's cause. Regardless of the magazine's intentions, the choice of Katharine Graham as an example of new macho is founded on the assumption of a direct correlation between feminism and the crisis of masculinity. It is an assumption that lies at the heart of men's efforts in the 70s to deal with the death of old macho and understand what new macho held in store. Feminism provided the immediate impetus to renegotiate the meaning of masculinity, but also became a scapegoat for all other political, economic, and social factors contributing to its crisis.

## Defending Masculinity

Whereas *New York* approaches the crisis of masculinity with satirical detachment, many other responses to feminism in the early 70s are eager to defend the preservation of old macho. In his introduction to *Harper's* aforementioned wraparound on masculinity, Robert Shnayerson describes feminism as a 'comeuppance, some jolting challenge to [men's] insouciant power'. 'Dealing with angry women', Shnayerson writes, 'is good training for dealing with angry nature' (3). The mention of nature is neither accidental nor entirely metaphorical. The Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the economic crisis challenged masculinity by obstructing the expression of American patriarchal might. Feminism, on the other hand, posed more of an ontological threat. In its demand for gender equality, it questioned long-held assumptions regarding sex role divisions and the naturalness of gender power discrepancies. In his suggestion that feminism is unnatural, Shnayerson represents a prevailing climate of hostility and suspicion in the early 70s. The defenders of patriarchy did not see feminism as a set of demands to be negotiated, but as an obstruction to be corrected.

The idea that a change in the meaning of femininity can symptomatically challenge the meaning of masculinity has a solid sociological foundation in studies of gender. As Connell argues, 'the relationships within genders are centred on, and can be explained by, the relationships between genders' (183). The dominant paradigm in explaining relations between men and women in the 70s was provided by sex role theory. Developed by psychologists during the three previous decades, sex role theory concentrates on the socialization processes that place women in expressive roles and men in instrumental roles. The theory was particularly progressive at the time for proposing a partial break from biological essentialism. Indeed, as Michael Messner indicates, 'some early feminist scholars took up the language of role theory to begin to illuminate the limits and pressures that narrowly defined sex roles' (257).

Nevertheless, the paradigm fails to accommodate potential changes to sex roles, resulting in the perpetuation and normalization of gender inequality. 'The language of sex roles', Messner explains, 'implies a false symmetry between the male role and the female role, thus masking the oppressive relations between women and

men' (258). Symmetry suggests that roles are fixed and mutually exclusive. Men are strong, determined, and cool-minded to balance off women's feebleness and sentimentality. In consequence, any changes or challenges to sex roles, such as those proposed by feminism, operate in a zero-sum game. The 'gains' of one sex are necessarily 'losses' for the other. Karl Bednarik's *The Male in Crisis*, published in the first English translation in 1970, exemplifies the logic and limits of sex role theory. Bednarik, an Austrian sociologist, argues that men's aggressive nature drives them towards drugs, crime, and disease, whereas women's natural role is to provide men with 'moralistic constraints' against these maladies (21-22). If men and women stick to their natural roles, then both will feel content and social harmony will be maintained. Feminism for Bednarik is dangerous because it upsets the natural balance of society. If women start acting in accordance with feminist doctrines, Bednarik concludes, then they will be unable to fulfil their natural role and chaos will ensue.

In 1971, Norman Mailer provided one of the most scathing and widely read critiques of feminism in 'The Prisoner of Sex'. An autobiographical memoir and self-proclaimed 'portentous piece' (92), the essay constitutes Mailer's formal response to feminist criticism of his earlier work. It was initially published in *Harper's*, occupying almost the entire March 1971 issue, and later in the same year as a book. Referring to himself in the third person, Mailer unleashes a biting outburst of genuine frustration and unqualified insults against the likes of Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, and Valerie Solanas. Mailer adopts a satiric form of Socratic rhetoric, beginning by conceding to what he presumes to be feminist demands, while simultaneously ridiculing them *reductio ad absurdum*:

So let woman be what she would, and what she could. Let her cohabit on elephants if she had to, and fuck with Borzoi hounds, let her bed with eight pricks and a whistle, yes give her freedom and let her burn it, or blow it, or build it to triumph or collapse. Let her conceive her children, and kill them in the womb if she thought they did not have it, let her travel to the moon, write the great American novel, and allow her husband to send her off to work with her lunch pail and a cigar. [...] Yes, he [i.e. Mailer] thought that they may as well do what they desire if the anger of centuries was having its say. (92)

Mailer essentially argues that women have lost all common sense after gaining too much, too soon. He exposes the excessiveness of feminist demands by placing

abortion (legalized two years after 'The Prisoner of Sex'), professional self-determination, and bestiality in the same basket. His conclusion predicts that the mother instinct will eventually prevail over feminist hysterics and women will seek 'that man in a million who could become the point of the seed which would give an egg back to nature, and let the woman return with a babe' (92).

Not unlike the ethnic revival discourse and its claims for genetically determined ethnic essences, attacks on feminism in the 70s tapped into the popularity of biological essentialism and resorted to pseudo-Darwinistic arguments for natural distinctions between men and women. Mailer's final gesture to biology and the suggestion that feminist demands contradict nature exemplifies the tendency of sex role theory to fall back on the categorical dichotomy of fixed male and female roles. It takes only a short regressive leap for two roles defined as socially fixed and mutually exclusive to be labelled natural. Steven Goldberg's *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (1973) provides an indicative example. Goldberg marshals a highly selective sample of anthropological and biological evidence to claim that women's liberation runs counter to both social and natural stability. The male, according to Goldberg, possesses a 'biological aggression "advantage"' that has deterministically defined his universal domination across species and cultures (105). It is only natural, therefore, that human males have been in positions of authority, which women are biologically unable to attain. 'The evidence indicates', Goldberg posits, 'that women follow their own physiological imperatives and would not choose to compete for the goals that men devote their lives to attaining'. Hence, women pursue 'gentleness, kindness, and love', while men look to them 'for refuge from a world of pain and force, for safety from their own excesses (233-34).

Conservative political theorist George Gilder similarly argues in *Sexual Suicide* (1973) that aggression, competition, and violence are biologically hardwired into men. The only way to control these masculine urges and prevent anarchy and chaos is through heterosexual matrimony and patriarchally ordered households. Feminists threaten to 'subvert the entire society' with their 'preposterous idea that we are all just individual "human beings"' and their 'increasing insistence of divorce, desertion, illegitimacy, and venereal disease' (5-6). Gilder summons copious statistical data linking unmarried men to social maladies ranging from 'burglaries and drunken driving'

to 'aimless copulation', 'uncontrolled promiscuous homosexuality', 'masturbation and pornography'. Gilder concludes that women need to leave the public sphere if men are to be rescued from 'a Hobbesian life—solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (10).

Peter and Barbara Wyden's defence of patriarchy targets both the women's and the gay rights movements. In *Growing Up Straight* (1968), the Wydens provide anxious parents with a set of early warning signs of homosexuality in their sons. They conceptualize heterosexuality as the inevitable by-product of growing up in a patriarchally ordered household, with rigidly defined sex roles. (It is ironically fitting that Peter Wyden's marriage to his co-author was his second of three attempts to create such a household.) Their book provides a typical example of equating any deviation from the patriarchal standard as a sign of feminization and homosexuality. 'Prehomosexual' boys, they suggest, are often raised in families where the mother is 'close-binding, intimate and overpowering, rather than warmly affectionate' and the father is 'pleasant but detached and ineffectual, [...] dominated by his wife' (102). A wife who 'insists that [her husband] wash the dishes' (163) risks producing 'unhealthy emotions' in both her husband and her children. The husband may suffer 'de-masculinization' while the child 'may get the idea that the parents' natural roles have somehow become reversed. And *that* conclusion can then become one of the factors pre-disposing the child toward homosexuality' (163).

Patricia Sexton's *The Feminized Male* (1969) provides an indicative example of an attempt to defend biologically determined gender roles from an allegedly feminist perspective. On the one hand, Sexton echoes Goldberg and Gilder in her argument that men who diverge from the patriarchal norm risk turning to 'drugs, withdrawal, and extreme deviance' (198). She locates the challenges to masculinity not only in the women's movement, but in practically every social and cultural movement of the 60s: 'the shortage of male heroes and the entry into the vacuum of minstrels, musicians, Beatles, Rolling Stones—as well as an assortment of demented anti-heroes' (197). On the other hand, Sexton agrees with the feminist demand for women's entry into the workforce. Women's entrapment in child rearing and early education, she argues, overexposes young boys to the sensitivity and weaknesses inherent in female biology and drains them of their masculine virility. Sexton's fundamentally inconsistent

proposal for protecting boys relies on men maintaining their roles as patriarchs and women abandoning their roles as stay-at-home mothers.

Sexton picks out 'the computer, in particular, loom[ing] ahead as a feminizer of males' (201). The computer stands synecdochically for the effects of advanced capitalism on masculinity, but Sexton describes its impact in the language of feminization. By completely eliminating physical labour, computer programming may produce 'males who seem shriller than most shriek-like women' (201). In a more humorous take on the crisis of masculinity, Tom Wolfe's 'Honks and Wonks' (originally published in the inaugural issue of *New York* magazine on 8 April 1968) draws a similar distinction between the street masculinity of New York's working class 'wonks' and the masculinity of 'prep-school honks'. Preppies are less masculine because of a class structure that shields them from physical expressions of machismo, such as manual labour and street fights. Wolfe isolates the distinction in speech patterns. When preppies try to talk tough they simply reveal their fake claims to masculine credentials. 'It doesn't matter how many worlds they have conquered or how old they are. As soon as they open their mouths, a bell goes off in the brains of most local-bred New York males: *sissy*' (204).

An effort to discredit feminism is the common thread running through early responses to the women's movement. Whether arguing that women's demands are laughable, unnatural, or dangerous to the social order, they all share the assumption that feminism is simply women's misguided folly. Their dismissive logic often predicts that feminism will inevitably reveal its unnaturalness and drive itself to exhaustion. Thus, the proposed plan of action is to maintain faith in patriarchy, resist feminist indoctrination, and wait for the women's movement to self-destruct. As the 70s progressed, however, they held in store a double disappointment for critics of feminism. Not only did their predictions for the self-destruction of the women's movement prove wrong, but patriarchy started facing an organized attack from within.

### **Liberating Masculinity**

The persistence and dispersal of feminism prompted a nascent male liberation movement that flourished by the middle of the decade. Men's lib, as the movement



was soon dubbed to counterbalance women's lib, saw feminism as a critical perspective to redefine masculinity, and less a call for men to become advocates of women's causes. In the true spirit of the 'Me' Decade, the movement found its most memorable expression in personal development seminars and self-advancement guides for men. Schulman effectively sums it up as 'a motley assemblage of drum-beating retreats, New Age-style group therapy, men's health magazines and cosmetics, poetry readings, and celebrations of primal masculinity' (183). Underpinning men's lib narcissism, however, was a depoliticized interpretation of gender, which allowed liberated men to call themselves feminists and embrace new styles and behaviours, while conveniently avoiding the more contentious issue of abolishing patriarchy.



Figure 29

The first formal call to liberate men came in 1970, when Jack Sawyer, a psychologist and former anti-war and civil rights activist, published 'On Male Liberation' in *Liberation*, a small but respected radical magazine. Sawyer's essay boldly begins by declaring that 'Male liberation calls for men to free themselves of the sex-role stereotypes that limit their ability to be human' (25). The following year, men's liberation appeared in *Life* magazine as part of a multi-issue survey on the 'Woman Problem'. *Life* reports that American men are beginning to realize the oppressiveness of social requirements against displaying their emotions, being gentle, nurturing, and vulnerable (B. Farrell 50-59). Many of these men began joining groups and attending

consciousness-raising meetings to voice their anxieties and seek liberation. One of the first and most prolific groups was the East Bay Men's Center, located in Berkeley, California. The Center is responsible for *Brother: A Male Liberation Newspaper*, which ran from 1971 to 1976. The front page of its inaugural issue features stills from Muybridge's *The Human Figure in Motion* (1890), frontal and profile images of a naked man walking at ordinary speed, as an ironic comment on the equation of humanity with manhood and the rigid social prescriptions for the masculine ideal (figure 29). *Brother* proposes to strip men of all social prescriptions. A contributor identified only as Michael N. describes liberation as a corporeal cleansing for men: 'And now for the first time we were puking and gagging out the sweet torture of being men trapped in the unfulfillable role [...] that carried the rights and prerogatives of being on top in the "natural order of things"' (*Brother* 4).

By the middle of the decade, male liberation blossomed into what *The New York Times* called 'an unorganized but significant movement' and 'a force to be reckoned with' (Hammel). A conference organized in 1974 to teach group building techniques was attended by 350 leaders of local men's groups. They ranged from the members of an all-male commune in Michigan to a group of middle-aged widowers from New Jersey and three engineers from Florida trying to start a new group (Hammel). Beyond the actual members of liberation groups, *The Times* estimated that the movement includes all those men who may not have even heard of male liberation, but actively seek escape from the social expectations of being male. In the movement's favourite expression, men embraced their feminine sides and adopted behaviours, styles, and norms that had previously carried the stigma of effeminacy. In the name of liberation, a man could abandon the traditional standard requiring him to look tough and indifferent about his appearance. 'Male narcissism', Henry Allen observed in a 1978 article for *The Washington Post*, 'has more than come out of the closet. It has prospered, burgeoned, overborn'. In their stylistic and sartorial choices, liberated men expressed a newfound sensitivity, opting for soft hues and the ubiquitous earth-tone polyester. Others picked up new hobbies, such as cooking and decorating. The 70s even saw the publication of a *Men's Lib Cookbook*, which attempted to break 'the male image of barbecuing a two-inch porter-house' with such liberated masculine recipes as 'Steak, Daddy-O' and 'Adam's Apples' (Lewin and Lewin

5). It is precisely this promise of new benefits and freedoms that allowed the movement's constituency to grow. Liberated men did not have to join rallies, change their political views, or even call themselves feminists. Any man could be liberated by simply letting go of traditional machismo and adopting a more diverse and often more fun lifestyle.

In addition to the influence of feminism, men's liberation benefited inadvertently from the growing visibility of gay men in American culture. If feminism prompted men to reconsider the boundaries of machismo, the question remained of how far liberation could go without raising suspicions of sexual deviance. A member of a liberation group from Berkeley expressed these fears to *Life* in 1971: 'That fag thing is really a hassle for a man. It makes all minds of really sensitive guys waste their lives trying to fulfil a heavy image of a man's life' (B. Farrell 53). The gay liberation movement helped ease such concerns, not so much through its efforts to end discrimination, but simply by virtue of its existence. The movement gathered momentum in the summer of 1969, following a series of violent demonstrations against a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village. The Gay Liberation Front was formed immediately afterwards and homosexuality gradually assumed a more concrete and often geographically localized identity. Four years later, the successful campaign to persuade the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its list of diseases contributed to what Ehrenreich calls the 'ethnicization' and 'depathologization' of homosexuality (*Hearts* 126-30). The fear of homosexuality as a contagious disease was gradually replaced by its perception as a condition specific only to an identifiable group of men. Though doubtful if this new attitude did anything to alleviate homophobia,<sup>17</sup> it did allow more freedoms to heterosexual men. Homosexuality ceased to be an indeterminate Otherness, hidden in potentially every heterosexual man. Thus, while Sexton and the Wydens warned against the threat of homosexuality for young boys, the boys' fathers could reject macho toughness without the fear of being labelled gay.

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<sup>17</sup> The percentage of Americans who thought sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are always wrong did not fall below sixty-seven between 1973, when the National Opinion Research Center first asked the question, and 1980 (Mayer 383).

The gay liberation movement is also responsible for some of the early writings on men's liberation and can offer insight into the development of the latter's ideology. Calls to liberate men in the early 70s arose out of the diverse social forces of the 60s, including gay rights, the anti-war movement, union politics, and the civil rights movement. The first issue of *Brother* announces itself as a free and ideologically neutral platform for any man to express his opinion. The only piece referring specifically to men's liberation as an organized movement is a reprint of Sawyer's 'On Male Liberation'. The rest of the paper's content comprises reports, articles, and poems on a range of social issues, sometimes only tangential to men's liberation. Though some contributors express an openly leftist perspective, most content is not overtly political. In subsequent issues, *Brother* assumed a more radical stance, rejected liberal feminism, and sided with those feminists who actively sought to dismantle patriarchal institutions. The ideological shift is clearly reflected in the change of subtitle, from *A Male Liberation Newspaper* to *A Forum for Men against Sexism* (Messner 271). Soon, the newsletter was printing critiques of capitalism, militarism, sexism, and homophobia. By 1975, *Brother's* editors clearly declared their 'commitment to integrating [their] understandings about class oppression and exploration with the anti-sexist position that *Brother* has taken' (cited in Goldrick-Jones 43). Throughout the 70s, *Brother* and the Berkeley group remained faithful to the movement's countercultural origins. They openly attacked patriarchy, rejected the language of sex roles, and adopted the more politicized language of gender relations. In a 'Statement on Rape', the East Bay Men's Center clearly locates feminism in terms of social power discrepancies. 'Sexism is a system where one sex has power and privilege over another. In a society, such as ours, where men dominate women, this system can be called male supremacy' (East Bay Men's Center 137).

Although in 1971 *Time* magazine associated the men in Berkeley with all expressions of male liberation ('And Now' 54), it would soon become clear that they were a localized minority. The male liberation that came to dominate mainstream culture stood for a politically neutered, if not overtly conservative, sense of liberation, which found its most organized and coherent expression in a selection of guidebooks written in the mid-70s. The first to pave the way was Warren Farrell with *The Liberated Man* (1974), a book about *Freeing Men and Their Relationships with Women*, as its

subtitle explains. An NYU graduate and former political science teacher, Farrell started as a member of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and an outspoken advocate of ERA. In addition to being a prolific writer and public speaker, Farrell organized liberation workshops and, most famously, beauty pageants for men, aimed at raising awareness of women's objectification at similar events. *The Liberated Man* was soon followed by the publication of similar guides, including Marc Feigen Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (1975), Jack Nichols's *Men's Liberation: A New Definition of Masculinity* (1975), and Herb Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male* (1976) and *The New Male* (1979). Investing in the popularity of Erhard Seminars Training and using the language of human potential and advancement, these works exemplify Michael Kimmel's apt description of male liberation as 'a curious mixture of social movement and psychological self-help manual' (280).

Farrell borrows Betty Friedan's language to argue that men are trapped in the 'masculine mystique' and are 'emotionally constipated' (3). This diagnosis, however, is only the first objective of *The Liberated Man*, which also aims to work as a laxative treatment for its male readers. Farrell opens the book with a thorough eleven-page questionnaire meant to assess male readers' 'feelings toward women and masculinity'. Male readers are instructed to 'take the questionnaire before and after [they] read the book to see if [they] have modified [their] thinking' (xi). A comprehensive scoring mechanism helps readers assess their degree of liberation on matters ranging from crying in public to abortion. Following a 'Personal Introduction' describing the inspirational story of Farrell's own liberation, *The Liberated Man* introduces readers to the 'Human Vocabulary', asking 'that articles written about this book use this vocabulary accompanied by the definitions in italics' (xxxii). Farrell proposes the terms 'attaché' (roughly the equivalent of today's 'partner') and 'living friend' (a housemate with whom one shares a 'sexual or deeply emotional' relationship), but also a new set of genderless pronouns. 'Te' replaces 'he' and 'she', conjugated as 'tes' in the possessive and 'tir' in the objective. In the true spirit of sex role symmetry, Farrell borrows 'one letter from both the masculine and the feminine gender of the old pronouns' (xxxii).



Figure 30

One of the participants in Farrell's second 'Boy America' pageant in 1975 was Alan Alda, whose public persona in the 70s epitomized the style and ideology of the liberated man. Clad only in a swimsuit and a 'Boy California' sash, Alda joined other celebrities in front of a panel of women judges (figure 30). Alda's image in the 70s was largely shaped by his role as Hawkeye Pierce in the television series *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972-83), which catapulted him to immediate stardom. Probably the first outspoken pacifist in uniform to feature on primetime television, Hawkeye became, in the words of Jason Bonderoff, Alda's 1982 biographer, 'truly an extension of Alan himself' (63). *Redbook* describes Hawkeye as 'essentially the same person [as Alda], with certain characteristics heightened and emphasized' (Edmiston 182). Like the founders of men's therapy groups, Alda had a background in feminism, political progressiveness, and the anti-war movement. Throughout the 70s he served as the spokesperson for the *ad hoc* group Men for ERA and was a member of the National Commission for the Observance of International Women's Year. 'I've always been a feminist', he confessed in an interview, 'even as a little kid I was aware that it was silly that women were supposed to grow up to be nurses and men to be doctors' (Edmiston 182). Margaret Heckler, the republican congresswoman with whom Alda co-chaired a presidential subcommittee on ERA in 1976, told *Redbook* that Alda 'typifies what is best about the Women's Movement and the attitude of the enlightened men who support it. In everything he does there's a great spirit of sharing and generosity. And he's a delight to be with—just a delight' (Edmiston 182). Loretta Swit, Alda's co-star in *M\*A\*S\*H*,

credited him for making her a feminist. 'I think of Alan as a teacher', she told *People* magazine, 'he is so involved in women's lib and has helped me to have confidence in myself. He is a gentle, kind man, and I owe a lot of my transformation into a liberated person to him' (cited in Bonderoff 120).



Figure 31



Figure 32

Much more than Alda's support for the women's movement, it is his gentleness and delightfulness that made him a role model for male liberation. His public persona encapsulates the abandonment of any radical or leftist overtones that the movement may have had and its full entry into the hetero-normative mainstream. In 1971, *Life* magazine accompanied its aforementioned report on men's liberation with a picture of long-haired, sandal-wearing men holding scruffy signs and picketing to 'End Compulsive Masculinity' outside the Playboy Club in San Francisco (figure 31). Ten years later, Alan Alda campaigned for ERA in Washington, D.C. in a suit and tie. Alda posed smiling for a picture while embracing his wife and daughters, all wearing printed ERA sashes around their shoulders (figure 32). Beneath the sartorial differences lies a more fundamental ideological distinction. As men's liberation entered into the mainstream and expanded its constituency, it adopted a skewed version of feminism

that reduced the women's movement to a quest to spread feminine gentility. Alda unwittingly sums up the movement's manifestly sexist ideology in an interview in the July 1976 issue of *Ms.* magazine. 'Where men work without women,' he declared, 'there is just a little less warmth, a little less laughter, a little less relaxation'. 'Working for women's rights, talking with women, associating with them, becoming *friends*' will offer men true liberation and even allow them 'the courage to stick a flower on their desks' (Alda 93).

Far from compromising patriarchy and machismo, Alda's brand of feminism seamlessly combines liberation with traditional patriarchal family values. *Redbook* concludes his profile with the realization that 'for him the key relationship is marriage. "It's through the marriage relationship, or the life partner relationship, that one can understand all behaviour", he says' (Edmiston 182). Alda famously rejected the Hollywood lifestyle in favour of maintaining a stable household for his three daughters in New Jersey, from where he commuted to Los Angeles to film *M\*A\*S\*H*. Bonderoff praises him for 'remaining zealously middle-class in a working environment that freely offers every variety of hedonistic pleasure possible' (171). In a speech at a 1975 Chicago benefit for ERA, Alda described feminism as a prerequisite for his suburban marital bliss. Referring to the subjugation of women's rights, he remarked that 'Everybody suffers when you squash one half of the population. How can you have a happy life with someone who is swatted down like a gnat' (cited in Bonderoff 216). In another instance, he declared being 'at a loss for conversation with men who are swinging bachelors' and unable to 'find anything to say to people who don't have children—or at least care about them' (cited in Bonderoff 172).

The dispersal and appropriation of Hippie culture in the 70s can shed more light on men's liberation and its gradual entry into the hetero-normative mainstream. The Hippies predated liberated men in adopting an androgynous style and proposing a softer version of masculinity. Ehrenreich compares the Hippies to the Beats, the respective archetypes of rebellion in the 60s and 50s, to discover an ideologically significant 'change from "hard" to "soft," from the "tough leather" of motorcycle jackets "towards nudity," from boots to bare feet' (*Hearts* 107). The Beat word for un-beat is square, which implies a certain cognitive disadvantage, the inability to be initiated into the world of jazz and coolness. The opposite of Hippie is straight or



uptight, suggesting more of an emotional condition. Richard Herskowitz describes Beat coolness as 'a form of macho posturing', a continuous assertion of masculine toughness through a state of impenetrable internalization. The Beats' leather jackets, boots, and dark glasses give sartorial expression to this armour of coolness. Even a cigarette or a saxophone mouthpiece can act as a plug that protects the male body from penetration. The Hippie mindset and style, however, rely on openness and adjustability, a willingness to connect with and be penetrated by nature.

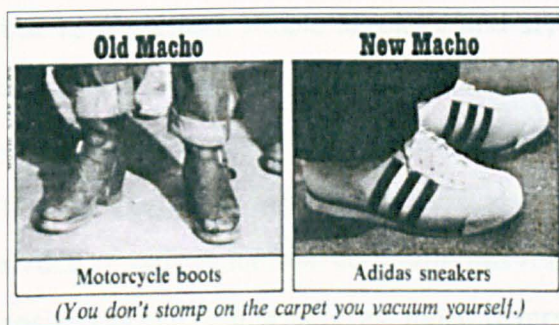


Figure 33

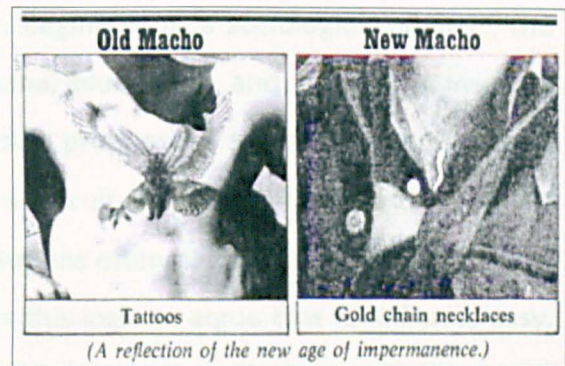


Figure 34

While liberated men followed the Hippies in rejecting the behavioural and sartorial armours of toughness, they also brought the Hippie openness out of the countercultural fringe and into the mainstream. In *New York* magazine's juxtaposition of old and new macho, Hippie macho can serve as an intermediary step. Consider, for example, one pair of pictures that juxtaposes motorcycle boots with adidas sneakers (figure 33). Hippie sandals can illuminate this transition. As a substitute for boots, sandals allow a connection with nature that rejects the notion of machismo as impenetrable armour. Sneakers are similar to sandals in providing comfort and breathability, but they do not need to be made in a commune workshop and worn on grassy ground. They are a branded and fashionable product that the liberated man can wear in his middle class home. As *New York's* caption explains, 'You don't stomp on the carpet you vacuum yourself', referencing men's increased involvement in household chores. Another pair of pictures juxtaposes tattoos with gender-neutral gold chain necklaces (figure 34). A tattoo is a permanent marker of coolness, representing manly resolve, strong-mindedness, and the ability to withstand pain.

Hippie beads can explain the shift to gold chain necklaces. Adorning your body with beads suggests a fluidity and impermanence that an old macho man would only expect from women. New macho gold chains reveal a similar willingness to embrace feminine attributes, while also substituting the primitiveness of plain beads with the refinement of a precious metal.

The entry of the Hippie counterculture into the mainstream found its unintentional manifesto in Charles Reich's 1970 bestseller *The Greening of America*. Reich employs the word 'greening' as a reference not only to ecological consciousness, but to the entire Hippie ideology and style. Beginning as a sociological analysis, the book evolves into a paean to rock, marijuana, blue jeans, and communal living. A paragraph printed on the front of the dustcover prophesizes a forthcoming revolution that 'will originate with the individual and with culture, and will change the political structure only as its final act'. Whereas revolutions often begin with violent changes in social and political structures, Reich reverses this logic to argue that rebellion is easy, cost-free, and no longer associated with political radicalism. The new rebel does not need to quit his job or join a commune, but simply to change his sartorial choices. 'A boy', Reich explains 'does not feel he has to dress in a certain way or "he will not be a man"; he is not that anxious or concerned about his masculinity' (236). Men's suits 'hide the fact that one man may be muscular, another flabby, one soft, one bony, one hairy, another smooth' (236). Jeans, on the other hand, 'express the shape of the legs, heavy or thin, straight or bowed' (236). An American WASP man, therefore, can easily unbend and become a rebel without losing his middle class benefits, by simply taking off his suit and adopting a more androgynous dress style.

Not only did *The Greening of America* predict with striking accuracy the style of the liberated man, but it also catalyzed the 70s trend towards politically neutered modes of liberation. Whereas the liberation movements of the 60s found expression in ideological and often physical violence, the all-encompassing term 'greening' refashions liberation as a matter of style. Reich's book found fertile ground in a culture that had already experienced more than its fair share radicalism, violence, and passion. Four years after *The Greening of America*, Daniel Yankelovich published the findings of his public opinion survey in *The New Morality: A Profile of American Youth in the 70s*. Yankelovich discovers that countercultural values are gradually working 'their way

from the Forerunner college group to the career-minded college majority of college students and then to upper-middle-class older people in urban settings, and then to the mass of the populations' (10). The dispersal of the counterculture, however, was necessarily accompanied by its dilution. Yankelovich's poll reveals that both college and non-college youth in the first half of the 70s opposed social change through violence, demanded the restoration of law and order, and favoured 'the marriage of new social values and career goals' (55-57).

In 1970, Reich championed his green revolution as a peaceful means for social change. Yet, his prediction for a revolution proved incorrect. Middle America embraced the green lifestyle as a simulacrum, divorced from the ideology of rebellion it was supposed to signify. Men's liberation followed a similar path after the decision of the Berkeley group to disassociate themselves from the like of Sawyer and Farrell. The former remained truthful to their radical feminist ideology, but never evolved into a significant social force. The latter brought the movement into the mainstream and widened its constituency, but radicalism paid the price of popular appeal. The liberated man changed his clothes and habits, abandoned sexist language, became more sensitive, and even called himself a feminist, but he never rebelled against patriarchy.

### **From Liberation to Backlash**

Tom Wolfe devotes a special section of the 'Me' Decade essay to 'the *homo novus*, the new man, the liberated man'. He describes men's liberation as just another expression of narcissism and decadence, a symptom of 'the much-dreamed-of combination of money, free time, and personal freedom' (30-31). If we consider how superficial the movement's brand of liberation was, Wolfe's criticism seems entirely warranted. Yet, we should not be too quick to dismiss men's liberation as an inconsequential 70s folly. This approach carries a twofold risk. Firstly, it fails to recognize the politics underpinning the movement's seemingly apolitical surface, what *New York* magazine insightfully referred to as the strategy of new macho. Secondly, Wolfe's argument underappreciates the connections between this strategy and the anti-feminist backlash that arose by the end of the 70s.

Wolfe's explanation of 70s culture can have a levelling effect. It places in the same basket such diverse cultural phenomena as second wave feminism, mass suicides, Eastern meditation, and, in his most memorable example, self-determination against hemorrhoids. In its original publication in *New York* magazine, the 'Me' Decade essay includes a picture of Germaine Greer with the caption '*Being a woman* was elevated to the level of drama' (figure 35). While caustically identifying the narcissistic impulse underpinning some expressions of second wave feminism, Wolfe underappreciates the fact that, unlike other cries of 'Me', feminism is rooted in centuries of institutionalized suppression of women's rights. Indeed, Wolfe's critique comes very close to Mailer's aforementioned assertion that feminism is so ridiculous that women will simply grow out of it. It will be recalled that the revival of ethnicity literature often expressed a similar abasing tendency in equating the gravity of white ethnics' demands with those of African Americans. If an Italian-American rebels against white hegemony or a WASP man against the limiting effects of patriarchy, they seek to liberate themselves from an oppressiveness that is primarily rooted in discursive and cultural practices. Regardless of whether their liberation is sincere or simply an expression of narcissism, it remains fundamentally different from the liberation demands of African Americans and women, which are rooted in a long history of physical, social, political, and economic oppression.



Figure 35

Even accounting for Wolfe's generalizations, the particular case of men's liberation would seem to deserve his criticism. As a symptom of gay liberation, the movement unleashed the closeted narcissism of heterosexual men; as part of the greening of America, it provided middle class, WASP men with a convenient way to become rebels; as a response to feminism, it allowed men to rid themselves of some of the guilt associated with patriarchy. It will be recalled that revived ethnics were similarly criticized for escaping into white ethnicity as a means of placating the guilt of white privilege. Revival advocates, however, readily responded that ethnicity did not suddenly appear in the 70s. The descendants of immigrants were born ethnic, but the demand for cultural assimilation suppressed their ethnicity. Liberated men had more trouble following a similar line of defence. In both its discourses and practices, men's liberation was from the start situated as a response to feminist accusations against patriarchy. Hence, Wolfe's critique of the movement as a narcissistic effort to avoid the guilt of patriarchy seems warranted.

The narcissistic surface, however, need not necessarily imply political and social irrelevance. In his almost prophetic introduction to *New York's* account of new macho, Mariani identifies a certain deliberateness in liberated men's attempt to renegotiate masculinity, what he calls 'a new strategy'. Mariani cites an anecdotal discussion at a social gathering, where he overheard a man defending the death of machismo:

[The man] said that the old macho had simply been a defence which men had erected to protect themselves from their fears that they could not experience profound love, either emotional or sexual. The Women loved it. [...] The man had made himself the hero of all the women present. What could be more macho? He had evolved a personal strategy for dealing with macho and it worked. (40)

Ironically enough, the man's strategy for preserving machismo involves defending its death. A heterosexual man can impress women and enjoy romantic, and implied sexual, success by eschewing traditional expressions of heterosexuality in favour of a softer version of machismo. By conceding to feminist demands, agreeing that masculinity is in crisis, and accepting his emasculation, the man in Mariani's example is simultaneously ensuring the preservation of male hegemony. The new macho man 'achieves his neomachismo by denying macho. A Wolf in sheep's clothing' (Mariani 40).

If emasculation can be a courting tactic, could it also be a strategy for the preservation of patriarchy? Beneath the pop psychology rhetoric and the declarations of allegiance to feminism, men's liberation relied on the politically loaded assumption of sex role symmetry, the notion that sexism oppresses both women and men equally. On the one hand, the idea of symmetrical costs corresponds with feminist ideology in identifying patriarchy as the source of social problems. Indeed, men's liberation initially appeared to some observers as simply the expansion of feminism's constituency to include men. *The New York Times* described the movement in 1974 as 'scarcely more than a toddler, still staying close to the sometimes reassuring, sometimes overwhelming presence of its mother: the women's liberation movement' (Hammel). On the other hand, sex role symmetry can also serve as a convenient discursive tool for proposing an equal share of responsibilities and mutual compromises in facing the repercussions of patriarchy.

Shnayerson's introduction to the aforementioned *Harper's* wraparound on masculinity offers an indicative example of how sex role symmetry can be used to defend patriarchy. Writing from the presumably distanced position of a moderate observer, Shnayerson rejects all extreme positions that isolate men from women:

We're against sexual enclavism, whether it's the superfeminist variety or the macho world of men without women. We're against a weakening of sexual roles, especially the fashionable trend towards hermaphroditism. We assume that true sexuality requires even stronger men and stronger women, joined in common effort and experience and completion. (3)

Apart from the blatantly homophobic defence of 'true sexuality', Shnayerson's appeal to masculine cool-headedness and pragmatism reveals a fundamentally gendered perspective. Even the use of the plural pronoun, evoking *Playboy's* royal 'we', suggests an impulse to write on behalf and in defence of all men. Much more than his rhetorical devices, however, it is the content of Shnayerson's argument that contradicts his self-declared progressiveness. Completely ignoring the historical sources of feminism in patriarchal power discrepancies, Shnayerson concentrates exclusively on its present repercussions. Feminism emerges out of his introduction as an externally imposed and undeserved obstacle, which, in the name of presumed fairness, requires mutual compromises from men and women.

Though Shnayerson would hardly constitute a role model of male liberation, the same implicit desire to rescue patriarchy is evident, though more tactfully concealed, in the movement's core discourse. 'From the outset', argues Messner, 'there were obvious strains and tensions from the movement's attempt to focus simultaneously on men's institutional power and the "costs of masculinity" to men' (256). Farrell's emphasis on men's emotional development and self-realization demonstrates both a sincere attempt to respond to feminist demands and a persistent avoidance to deal with institutional power relations. Consider, for example, his argument that 'the advent of women into the market of "men's jobs" can be seen not as competition, but as the lessening of the need to compete' (169). Farrell shifts the attention from the reasons for women's absence from the job market towards the new opportunities that their entry creates for men. The suggestion is that men should agree to equal employment opportunities because of the potential benefits to them, not because the demand is intrinsically fair. Similarly, men should reject patriarchy for turning women into 'sex objects', but only as long as it also turns them into 'security objects' (Farrell 272).

Fasteau takes Farrell's reasoning a step further in *The Male Machine* to absolve men of all responsibility for misogyny. In a chapter entitled 'The Roots of Misogyny', Fasteau goes back to the upbringing of young boys and their lessons in identifying and repressing 'feelings of vulnerability and dependence' as feminine qualities. Nevertheless, instead of examining the social institutions responsible for boys' early nurture, and presumably for the roots of misogyny promised in the chapter's title, Fasteau concentrates almost exclusively on men's emotional development and the formulation of what he calls 'a dehumanized image of masculinity' (40). Men emerge out of Fasteau's analysis less as those who practice misogyny and more as those upon whom misogyny has been imposed by an unidentified social force.

Jack Nichols follows a similar approach in *Men's Liberation*, where he devotes an entire chapter to explaining how men are trapped in patriarchally prescribed sex roles. The oppression of patriarchy, Nichols explains, creates expectations for men to be independent, strong, and unemotional. Patriarchy, therefore, may trap women in expressive tasks, but only by simultaneously trapping men in instrumental tasks. It creates scared and cautious men, who repress their sensitivity and gentleness out of

fear of appearing un-manly. When men seek liberation, therefore, it is to free themselves from the same sex role categories that constrain women. 'Tomorrow', Nichols concludes, 'men will look back on the 1970s and remark on the constrictions affecting their sex. In future decades today's male role will be remembered as a straitjacket' (56). In a subsequent chapter entitled 'Ladies: A Few Words about Manipulators', Nichols explains to his female readers that men are not the ones to blame for their oppression. Rather, Nichols blames 'dominance as a value' for having 'impeded [men's] awareness' (228). For a book that begins with the stated intention of breaking 'the masculinist stereotype' (11), *Men's Liberation* ends with a passionate plea to break 'hierarchies and structures'—which are intriguingly left unidentified, but supposedly turn men into 'rigid, plodding, spiritless serfs' (323).

As the 70s progressed, the anti-feminist impulses within men's liberation developed into explicit criticism of feminism for limiting men's potential. With the secession of the Berkeley group, the movement was deprived of an openly anti-sexist, pro-feminist voice and entered the 80s as a men's rights movement. It found its prominent expression in mythopoetic masculine therapy, a network of workshops and self-growth manuals aiming to heal the victims of feminism. The publication of Robert Bly's *Iron John* in 1990 provided the men's rights movement with a manifesto and a bible. An utterly undecipherable amalgam of Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, pop psychology, tribal rituals, and new age spiritualism, *Iron John* calls on men to reconnect with what Bly calls 'the magnetic field of the deep masculine' (3). Whereas most anti-feminist impulses during the 70s either dismissed feminism as irrelevant or presumed to embrace it, Bly unabashedly declares that feminism is dangerous for men. 'In the seventies', Bly explains, 'I began to see all over the country a phenomenon that we might call the "soft male"' (2). In his typical new age jargon, Bly describes soft men as 'lovely, valuable people', who 'lack energy' and tend to be 'life-preserving' rather than 'life-giving'. He also notices that 'you often see these men with strong women who positively radiate energy' (3). With a crude deductive logic, Bly concludes that strong women have sucked the energy out of liberated men and turned them into sad men.

Despite Bly's stated intention to reverse the harmful effects of the 70s on masculinity, there is much more continuity between responses to feminism in the early 70s, the mainstream strand of male liberation, and the men's rights movement. In the



1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*, Susan Faludi traces the anti-feminist impulses of the Reagan era back to the 70s. 'The critical New Right groups', she writes, 'all got under way within two years after the two biggest victories for women's rights—Congress's approval of the ERA in 1972 and the U.S. Supreme Court's legalization of abortion in 1973' (263). This is the same time that Mailer, Gilder, and Sexton published their ardent pleas to preserve sex roles divisions. Less than a decade later, in 1981, Bly started leading his famous weekend retreats for men. As David Savran puts it, 'minus the cynicism and vitriol, [Gilder's] *Sexual Suicide* remains an unambiguous precursor of *Iron John*' (173). Men's liberation may appear like a rare feminist outburst sandwiched in the few years in-between, but *Iron John's* most evident connection to the 70s is to be found in men's lib literature.

Nichols, in particular, takes a full mythopoetic plunge at the end of *Men's Liberation*. Beginning with an epigraph by Gautama Buddha, the book's concluding chapter identifies 'the philosophical roots of men's liberation' in the likes of Walt Whitman and Tao Tzu, a mystic philosopher of ancient China (311). Farrell himself traversed the trajectory from men's liberation to men's rights during the 70s and 80s. His arrival at the anti-feminist side is dramatically reflected in the titles of his books; from *The Liberated Man* in 1974 he moved to *The Myth of Male Power* in 1993, in which he asserts that feminist organizations promulgate sexism. Farrell defended this position again in the 2007 book *Does Feminism Discriminate against Men?: A Debate*, arguing against his co-author James Sterba.

Men's liberation skewed feminist ideology and refashioned social problems as psychological problems. It focused overwhelmingly on the personal and ignored the political. In 1976, Tom Wolfe could not but dismiss the movement as just another excuse to shout 'me'. With the benefit of hindsight, however, it becomes obvious that the movement was neither apolitical nor inconsequential. The new macho strategy underpins such seemingly diverse expressions of masculinity as Mailer's scornful attack on feminism in 'The Prisoner of Sex', Farrell's instruction manual for liberation, Alan Alda's sensitive side, and Bly's mythopoetic workshops. Whether intentionally attacking feminism or genuinely believing in their interpretation of feminism, they all constitute different attempts to renegotiate the meaning of masculinity, while preserving as many of its patriarchal privileges as possible.

## Italian-American Men

While analyzing the roots, expressions, and responses to the crisis of masculinity in 70s America, it should already be apparent that the discussion above has not in fact been about all American men. Both advocates and critics of men's liberation would agree that the movement was limited to white, heterosexual, and predominantly middle class men. *The New York Times* described the attendees of the 1974 conference on men's liberation as 'overwhelmingly white, middle class, generally well-educated' (Hammel). In the words of *Life* magazine, the average liberated man is 'a healthy and intelligent young white American male' (Farrell 50). In an impressively concise assemblage of stereotypes, Patricia Sexton summarizes the connections between class, masculinity, and race in *The Feminized Male*. 'Sissies', she writes,

are mainly white, middle-class youths (almost never working-class), and they contain many adults, especially religious professionals, in their ranks. The object of worship is rarely a really *manly* black man, but an ersatz, feminized, malevolent one, resembling in many ways the fascistic Brown Shirts or the leather-jacketed homosexuals of *Scorpio Rising*. (5)

The social and racial demographics of men's liberation demonstrate its origins as a response to the combined racial, social, and sexual challenges facing American patriarchy. From the uncontested cultural hegemony, middle class, heterosexual, white men found themselves answerable for the repercussions of their hegemony in the 70s. The civil rights and women's movements were the first to launch their attacks in the 60s with accusations of racism and sexism. Gay liberation soon followed with charges of homophobia. As *Life* put it, 'not only was black beautiful and sisterhood powerful—now it was also groovy to be gay' (Farrell 53). The elderly, the disabled, the vegetarians, the nudists, and several other groups followed their lead throughout the 70s—not all with equally valid claims to victimhood. Thus, the former cultural hegemony were eager to discover that part of their identity that could distinguish them from the mainstream. As Kimmel puts it, 'if middle-class white men couldn't beat'em, perhaps they could join blacks, gays, and women in the ranks of the oppressed' (264).

In this climate, Italian-American men found themselves in an advantageous position. Whereas men's liberation appealed to psychological self-advancement,

ethnicity offered a more legitimate and readily available means for disassociating themselves from white privilege. In 1981, novelist Edward Hoagland described his own predicament in *The New York Times Book Review*:

I had arrived in New York from humble origins. That is, I was a WASP with an Ivy League education and a lawyer for a father at a time [...] when it was important for a young writer in the city to be an 'ethnic' whose father was a bartender and to have gone to City College. (36)

Ethnic descent allowed one to claim a distinct shade of whiteness that eliminated the need to make up for the oppression of African Americans under white hegemony. In fact, as advocates of the revival repeatedly stressed, white ethnics had endured the oppression of WASP supremacy as much as African Americans. The revival discourse, furthermore, invested in the popularity of biological determinism to conceptualize ethnicity as a primordial identity. Simply by virtue of being born ethnic, Italian-Americans differentiated themselves from the WASP mainstream. Ethnicity granted them immediate access to the ranks of the oppressed. In consequence, Italian-American men did not have to indulge in voluntary victimhood, embrace their feminine sides, compromise masculine hegemony, or otherwise apologize for their privileges. While WASP men searched for the meaning of new macho, Italian-American men could cling onto patriarchy and raise the ethnic banner in defence of masculinity.

The following three chapters examine how Hollywood invested in the privileges of Italian-American ethnicity to resurrect traditional masculinity and render it believable and attainable in 70s contexts. If the 70s Italian-American man is remembered as a ruthless Mafia boss, a determined boxer, or a hyper-macho disco dancer, it is because Hollywood saw the old macho potential in him. Despite claims for unbroken ancestral bloodlines and ethnic essences, the image of Italian-American masculinity in 70s popular culture is a construct, a shared myth emerging less out of ethnic and more out of masculine fears and anxieties. Alan Alda's public persona in the 70s is a case in point. Even though he stood for male liberation, bourgeois family values, and, by implication, WASPdom, he was in fact born Alphonso Giovanni Giuseppe Roberto D'Abruzzo, the son of an Italian-American father and an Irish-American mother. He grew up mainly with his father and stepmother, also a second generation Italian immigrant. Bonderoff mentions in his biography that Alda 'still enjoys taking over the kitchen occasionally. Whenever the family enjoys an Italian-style

dinner, Alan cooks the pasta himself, using recipes that he learned from his father and stepmother, who are both skilful cooks' (165). Bonderoff's brief reference to Alda's ethnic heritage exemplifies the practices of the ethnic revival. As described in the previous chapter, cooking ethnic food and dining at ethnic restaurants provided a popular and convenient way to reconnect with one's roots. Yet, Bonderoff mentions Alda's involvement in the kitchen as evidence of his willingness to break gender stereotypes, not to reconnect with his heritage. Alda could just as well have been a proud Italian-American in his personal life, but his star persona evoked middle class manners, pacifism, male liberation, and, by association, WASPdom. He reminded nothing of Hollywood's Italian-American men in the 70s. Those roles were already taken by Pacino, Stallone, and Travolta—or, rather, Corleone, Balboa, and Manero.

**PART II**

**Mafiosi – Palookas – Guidos**

## CHAPTER FOUR: *The Godfather*

The story is fiction, the work of its author, Mario Puzo, but it was suggested by fact and by the lives of a few violent men. [...] I try to avoid any stereotypes in the film so that mannerisms and home life and the feeling of the people are as authentic as I could remember from my own upbringing in an Italian-American home. [...] I hope no one will let this story or these characters in any way reflect on the whole of the Italian people. I think that would be unfair. Let me take you now to *The Godfather: Part I* and let me continue with *The Godfather: Part II*.

A brief clip of Francis Ford Coppola delivering these lines preceded the first television broadcast of *The Godfather* in 1974. The clip was shot in the editing room, while Coppola was working on *The Godfather: Part II*. In addition to advertising the forthcoming film, the introduction marks a concession to pressures from anti-defamation lobbies, which attempted to ban the broadcast for promoting the offensive stereotype of Italian-Americans as gangsters. Coppola's implicit apology relies on a distinction between three groups of people: 'the few violent men' represented on the screen as fictionalized versions of real men, 'the whole of the Italian people' as holders of the authentic and lawful ethnic experience, and all the non-ethnic Americans who watched *The Godfather* and could potentially misunderstand Coppola's intentions. The connections and differences between these three groups provide this chapter's area of exploration.

It will be recalled from chapter two that a similar combination of breaking stereotypes, promoting the authentic ethnic experience, and shaping the impressions of non-ethnic Americans underpinned many expressions of the ethnic revival. In the case of *The Godfather*, however, the meticulous attention to ethnographic verisimilitude seems to work as a vehicle for perpetuating the gangster stereotype. In effect, what Coppola asked from television viewers in 1974 was to distinguish between the Corleones' crimes and all their ethnic codes, rituals, dialects, and customs—or, to paraphrase one of the film's most memorable lines, to leave the gun aside as a stereotype and take only the cannoli as authentic. More pressingly, the disclaimer ignored what critics, commentators, and even Coppola himself had been positing since 1972: *The Godfather* is not just an Italian-American gangster story, but an allegory for American society and capitalism in the 70s.

Focusing primarily on the examples of Vito and Michael Corleone, this chapter situates their representation as Italian-American gangsters in the 40s and 50s within 70s discourses on ethnicity and masculinity examined in the previous two chapters. This historically informed understanding of Italian-American masculinity provides a fresh perspective for explaining the interplay of stereotypes and authenticity in *The Godfather* and for renegotiating the film's connection to American society and capitalism. I examine how their representation as Italian-American gangsters in the 40s and 50s is shaped by 70s discourses on ethnicity and masculinity. Through this exploration, I advance two interrelated arguments. Firstly, the Corleones can be seen as a fantasy of patriarchal family values surviving through the crises of the 70s and coexisting harmoniously with corporate capitalism. Secondly, the 70s understanding of ethnicity as a primordial connection to the Old Country forms a historically specific subtext that reinforces *The Godfather's* fantasy.

In developing these arguments, the chapter begins with a brief review of the capitalism debate in *The Godfather* literature, focusing specifically on identifying its key parameters and points of convergence and divergence. Subsequently, I examine *The Godfather's* relation to the ethnic revival movement and the contentious issue of whether the film achieves an authentic representation of ethnicity. The third and fourth sections, entitled '*La Via Vecchia*' and '*La Via Nuova*' respectively, explore the two facets of the Corleone crime syndicate: a traditional Sicilian family and a profit-driven American business. The fourth section examines the links between the two and attempts to synthesize existing views within the capitalism debate. In the final section, I analyze Michael Corleone's trip to Sicily as an anachronistic and condensed ethnic revival that redeems his crimes and renders the combination of business and family a believable fantasy.

Before proceeding with the discussion, a disclaimer of my own is in order. Strictly speaking, *The Godfather* is only the title of the 1972 film. Although this film is the primary focus of this chapter, I also draw on examples from *The Godfather: Part II*. To avoid confusion, I use *The Godfather* as a reference to both films and indicate the source of particular examples with *Part I* and *Part II*. The discussion as a whole applies to both films, as well as the entire *Godfather* saga of the 70s. Indeed, the numerous transmutations and imitations of *The Godfather* exemplify the methodological position

outlined in chapter one, that 'the text' is merely the epicentre in a cultural cycle of production, reception, and appropriation that constitutes a film.

### **'The Mafia as a Metaphor for America'**

In the autumn of 1972, shortly after the release of *Part I*, Francis Ford Coppola was asked in an interview with *Sight and Sound* if he 'accept[s] Brando's interpretation of the film as a parable of corporate life in America?' (Coppola 217). Brando's exact comment was that the Mafia is 'the best example of capitalism that we have' and that his character, Vito Corleone, is 'like any ordinary business magnate' (cited in Gambino 304). Coppola's response was,

Brando got that from me. I always wanted to use the Mafia as a metaphor for America. If you look at the film, you see that it's focused that way. [...] Basically, both the Mafia and America feel they are benevolent organizations. Both the Mafia and America feel they have their hands stained with blood from what it is necessary to do to protect their power and interests. Both are totally capitalistic phenomena and basically have a profit motive. (Coppola 223)

Coppola reiterated this position two years later, while being interviewed on his decision to make a second *Godfather* film, a prospect he had repeatedly rejected earlier. In justifying his change of mind, Coppola explained that he was disappointed to discover that audiences did not understand his intentions. Instead of recognizing the Corleones as capitalist monsters, they found them alluring and applauded their actions. Thus, Coppola yielded to the pressure of making *Part II* with the explicit aim of exposing the Corleones for the ruthless, capitalist criminals that they really are. 'This time', *The New York Times* quoted him as saying, 'I really set out to destroy the family. Yet I wanted to destroy it in the way that I think is most profound—from the inside. And I wanted to punish Michael' (Farber).

Whether Coppola's intentions met the rendezvous with audience reception remains an open question. Even if one could answer it with any degree of certainty, it requires taking a stance on the much broader and contentious debate on authorship and intentionality. Coppola's reading of his films concerns me here by virtue of being possibly the first in a long series of interpretations that see *The Godfather's* portrayal of the Italian-American Mafia in the 40s and 50s as a metaphor or an allegory for



American society in the 70s. Since 1972, the debate over what American audiences in the 70s found so enthralling in Corleones has not ceased. Did they see a skewed mirrored image of American capitalism or a pre-capitalist utopia? Was that image distressing or appeasing? *The Godfather's* trajectory in the public sphere is peppered with numerous attempts to answer these questions.<sup>18</sup>

Some film critics in the 70s seemed deeply conflicted over *The Godfather's* meaning. Pauline Kael found the Corleones to be unlikeable characters. 'These gangsters *like* their life style,' she commented, 'while we—seeing it from outside—are appalled' ('Alchemy' 138). It is hard to tell who is included in Kael's 'we', but to argue that the entire audience or even all readers of *The New Yorker* found the Corleones appalling seems like a gross exaggeration. In his survey of popular response to the film, David Ray Papke concludes that the film's indictment of violence 'seems to have gone virtually unrecognized in the nation's movie houses' (6). Writing for *Commentary*, William Pechter expressed a combination of admiration and disappointment with *The Godfather*. On the issue of whether the film supports or criticizes American ideals, Pechter concluded that 'it is rather more like a criticism of them, but a criticism of a peculiarly bland and muffled kind' (172). Interestingly, Pechter ultimately resorted to the audience to resolve his confusion. Foreshadowing Coppola's disappointment with viewers' inability to appreciate his intentions, Pechter stated that if there is any critique of capitalism in *The Godfather*, it is 'to be found less in the content of the film than in the phenomenon of our response to it: in our ability to accept gangsters as embodiments of such values' (172).

Since 1972, interpreters have not stopped pondering the relationship between *The Godfather* and American capitalism. Although *The Godfather* literature is by no means concerned only with this issue, it does commonly surface in the form of explicit or implicit assumptions. Regardless of particular thematic concentration, analyses of *The Godfather* can be categorized based on each author's position or assumptions on two key questions of the capitalism debate. The first concerns the film's portrayal of

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Coppola's own responses have not been entirely consistent. Responding to another question in the same interview for *Sight and Sound*, Coppola drew a clear distinction between the Mafia and the American system, almost completely reversing his original statement. 'When the courts fail you and the whole American system fails you,' he stated, 'you can go to Don Corleone. [...] I think there is a tremendous hunger in this country, if not in the world, for that kind of clear, benevolent authority' (223).

the Corleone family. Some interpreters consider the Corleones to be the paradigmatic American capitalists, while others consider them to be non- or anti-capitalists. Camon, for instance, focuses on the Corleones' ethnic heritage to argue that they are pre-capitalist farmers, running their crime syndicate as Sicilian peasants run their families. Hess, on the other side, argues that the Italian-American Mafia, as portrayed in *The Godfather*, allegorically resembles the operation of American business. The second question concerns the film's ideological stance on America and capitalism. Regardless of which social category the Corleones belong to, literally or metaphorically, does *The Godfather* support or criticize capitalism? Depending on the analyst, support can range from purposeful indoctrination (see Jameson) to complicit acceptance (see Dika, 'Representation'). Criticism can range from overt condemnation (see Hess) to a general inquisitive attitude (see Pechter). Opinions also vary on the question of intentionality. While some authors attribute responsibility for *The Godfather's* meaning to Coppola (see Gardaphé), others consider the film to be 'a product of its time' that inevitably incorporates the dominant cultural beliefs, irrespective of the filmmakers' preferences and intentions (see Messenger).

If we imagine the two dividing lines in the debate as two intersecting axes, then four main positions regarding *The Godfather's* relation to capitalism emerge, illustrated diagrammatically in figure 36. On the right side of the vertical axis are those interpretations that consider the film a critique of capitalism. Divided further by the horizontal axis, the bottom right quarter includes the interpretations of Hess, Simon, Russo, and Man, who posit that the film criticizes American capitalism by portraying the Corleones as capitalists. The top right quarter includes the interpretations of Camon, Giles, and Casillo, who argue that the film achieves a similar critique of capitalism, but through the portrayal of the Corleone family as the superior anti-capitalist alternative. The same distinctions can be drawn for the left side of the vertical axis. On the bottom left quarter are interpretations such as Messenger's and Dika's, which view this supportive attitude toward capitalism emerging by example, through the metaphorical portrayal of the Corleones as capitalists. On the top left quarter are those who view the same favourable attitude emerging by opposition, through the portrayal of the Corleones as the agrarian alternative. The top left quarter is also the least populated one, although it does include (albeit with significant

qualifications that I discuss later in this chapter) one of the most widely cited readings of *The Godfather* by Fredric Jameson. It also includes part of Biskind and Ehrenreich's interpretation, which distinguishes between Michael Corleone as a capitalist (bottom left quarter) and Vito Corleone as a pre-capitalist (upper left quarter). To my knowledge, Thomas Ferraro is the only scholar who explicitly rejects one of the dividing lines. He locates the Corleones right on the horizontal axis (as simultaneously capitalists and anti-capitalists), but his interpretation of *The Godfather*, which I discuss further below, leans more towards the left side of the vertical axis.

		Outlook on American capitalism	
		supportive	critical
Portrayal of the Corleones	non- or anti-capitalists	Supports capitalism through an unfavourable portrayal of the Corleones as non- or anti-capitalists	Criticizes capitalism through a favourable portrayal of the Corleones as non- or anti-capitalists
	capitalists	Supports capitalism through a favourable portrayal of the Corleones as American capitalists	Criticizes capitalism through an unfavourable portrayal of the Corleones as American capitalists

Figure 36

Not only is *The Godfather* one of the most prolifically analyzed films, but its release in 1972 coincides historically with the popularity of semiotics and text-centred approaches in film studies. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the film has received more than its fair share of analytic scrutiny. Indeed, the quantity and diversity of interpretations support David Bordwell's claim in *Making Meaning* that 'We need no more diagnoses of the subversive moment in a slasher movie, or celebrations of a "theoretical" film for its critique of mainstream cinema, or treatments of the most recent art film as a meditation of cinema and subjectivity' (213). Is another exploration

of *The Godfather* as a metaphor for capitalism equally unneeded? My theoretical and methodological qualms with Bordwell's rejection of interpretation should already be apparent from the discussion in chapter one. Although Bordwell rightly rejects unqualified interpretations that rely exclusively on the subjective taste of the interpreter, interpretation is not inherently opposed to qualification. In the case of *The Godfather*, I propose that a historically specific understanding of ethnicity can provide such a qualifying principle in interpreting the film's relation to American capitalism.

### ***The Godfather* and the Ethnic Revival**

So when I, radical Hippie freak and closeted young gay man, walked into that Pennsylvania movie theatre in 1972 [...] the last thing I expected was to see myself. But, as would be true of so many Italian Americans, I felt an immediate shock of recognition as I watched Coppola's Corleones. These were the most Italian Italians I'd ever seen in an American movie. The opening scenes are set in 1945, years before I was born. But it didn't matter. I knew these people, and their world. (De Stefano 98)

Writing in 2006, George De Stefano, an Italian-American journalist and culture critic, recalls his first viewing of *The Godfather* in 1972 as an almost uncanny experience. Beyond the particular Mafia story, De Stefano recognized an authentic portrait of his own life, which triggered the revival of his forgotten or suppressed ethnic identity. Although De Stefano rightly argues that his experience 'would be true of so many Italian Americans', *The Godfather* has received at least as much criticism as praise from the Italian-American community. Ethnic revival advocates in the 70s found it hard to ignore the fact that *The Godfather's* authentic-looking Italian-Americans are also ruthless gangsters. The conflicts between authenticity and stereotyping conditioned *The Godfather's* troubled history with the ethnic revival movement.

The opening sequence of *Part I* immediately plunges viewers into the richness of Italian-American culture. The sequence centres on the wedding celebration for Don Corleone's daughter, Connie, and serves as an introduction to the members and associates of the Corleone family. Its narrative function, however, does not wholly justify its twenty-minute duration. Elaborately staged al fresco, the sequence comprises a series of vignettes, which, according to Coppola's introduction to the

film's television broadcast, are meant to give an authentic picture of 'the mannerisms and home life and the feeling of the people'. Coppola relied on his own childhood memories from family weddings to find the appropriate images and sounds for the sequence. They include the bawdy sound of 'La Luna Mezzu O Mari', relatives dancing the tarantella, a young girl stepping on the shoes of an old man to learn the dance steps, the newlyweds collecting envelopes of money in the borsa, young men swearing in Italian and competing for the bridesmaids' attention, a couple of others asking to be thrown a sandwich with spiced capicola meat wrapped in paper (figures 37-40). Even the pronunciation of capicola as 'gobbagoal', in the dialect of Southern Italian immigrants, as De Stefano notices (99), speaks to the film's efforts to represent the authentic ethnic experience.

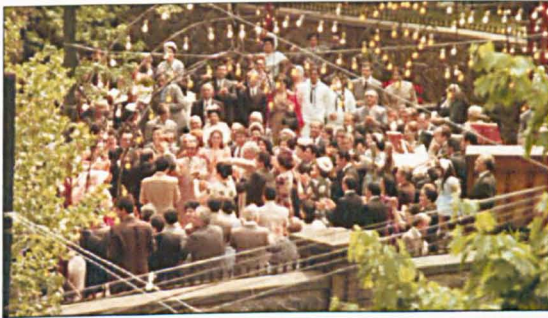


Figure 37



Figure 38



Figure 39



Figure 40

Based solely on the *Godfather's* rich portrait of Italianness, the film had all the potential to become a banner for revived ethnics. For Pellegrino D'Acerno, the Corleones' generational narrative encompasses the entire Italian-American immigrant experience. He describes *The Godfather* as the Italian-American equivalent of what Alex Haley's *Roots* is for African Americans or Elia Kazan's *America, America* (1963) for Greek-Americans (570). Nevertheless, *The Godfather* is evidently not just a

fictionalized *Italianamerican*. It is also one of the most explicitly violent gangster films that 70s audiences would have ever seen. 'In many ways', Joseph Papaleo wrote in 1978,

*The Godfather* finished us off because it was the most authentic portrayal (and the first made by knowledgeable Italian-American craftsmen). Italian-Americans were asked to laugh with *Godfather* parties, the bumper stickers reading 'Mafia staff car', and many other games. (94)

The involvement of Italian-Americans in the film's production aggravated the community's disappointment. Puzo and Coppola crafted a widely praised and immensely successful film, but their autobiographical input seemed to affirm the view that there is something inherently criminal in Italianness. If Italian-Americans portray themselves as gangsters, then the stereotype must be true.

Even before its release, *The Godfather* ran into trouble with Italian-American anti-defamation organizations. According to Biskind's account, the Italian-American Civil Rights League 'made life miserable for Coppola' by blocking access to major shooting locations (157). The League secured an agreement from Al Ruddy, the film's producer, to omit the terms 'Mafia' and 'Cosa Nostra' from the script. It also succeeded in having Macy's stop selling *The Godfather Game*, a board game inspired by the film.<sup>19</sup> The Order Sons of Italy in America joined the protests against *The Godfather* with a letter that leaked to the press in March 1971, threatening the release of the film with six-fold opposition strategy, ranging from economic boycotts to demonstrations (P. Cowie 39-40). Formal protests continued throughout the 70s, with the release of *Part II* and the televised versions of the films. In addition to the aforementioned disclaimer preceding the broadcast of *Part I* in 1974, the Italian-American Civil Rights League successfully campaigned for the inclusion of a written disclaimer before each episode of NBC's *The Godfather: A Novel for Television* (1977), the rearrangement of the two *Godfather* films in chronological order to form a

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<sup>19</sup> Ironically enough, the League was headed at the time by an actual Mafia boss, Joseph Colombo, which, according to Cowie, could explain some of the less formal boycotting methods against *The Godfather*, including life threats against Ruddy and violence against the property of Paramount employees (40). Colombo's shooting, during a rally for the Italian-American Unity Day in June 1971 (an incident discussed in more detail in chapter two), coincided with the filming of *The Godfather* at the Regis Hotel, only a few blocks away from Columbus circle.

television miniseries.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Coppola's disclaimers established a precedent for the placement of similar warnings proclaiming the filmmakers' self-absolution in the representation of ethnicity (Cortés, 'Italian-Americans' 107).

Although *The Godfather* did not become an emblem for revived Italian-Americans, protests against the film constitute an exemplary case of ethnic revival politics. They reveal the movement's heightened sensitivity and increased leverage on issues of stereotyping. To be sure, complaints against stereotyping are not a novelty of the 70s. Gardaphé dates formal protest against the image of Italians as gangsters at least as far back as a letter by New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia protesting *Little Caesar*: 'Mr. Hays would not dare to produce such a picture with a Jew as that character—he would lose his job if he did' (Gardaphé xii). Nevertheless, with the revival of ethnicity and the increased presence of Italian-Americans in film and other media, there was simply more material worthy of formal protest. More importantly, the 70s witnessed a change in the content of complaints. Until then, the demand was for Italian-Americans to be represented as the decent, law-abiding citizens that they really are. Such representations would send out the message that there is nothing inherently peculiar about Italian-American ethnicity. The revival, however, relied on the principle that white ethnics are not just like other white Americans. The demand was revised, therefore, to include not only the elimination of negative stereotypes, but also the inclusion of positive ethnic characteristics. Films should not just represent Italian-Americans as good American citizens, which would suggest that civic compliance requires assimilation, but also as proud ethnics.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas Italian-American viewers could potentially measure *The Godfather's* authenticity against their personal experience, most audiences would have been unable to verify the source of each image and sound. In the context of the ethnic

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<sup>20</sup> The disclaimer reads, '*The Godfather* is a fictional account of the activities of a small group of ruthless criminals. It would be erroneous and unfair to suggest that they are representative of any ethnic group.'

<sup>21</sup> This new demand guides the anti-defamation agenda until today. The Order Sons of Italy in America has compiled a list of 'Positive film Portrayals of Italian-Americans: 1972-2003'. The only 70s film on the list is *Serpico* (1973), accompanied by the description 'Al Pacino as the heroic, real-life undercover detective'. Other positive portrayals include 'Cher and Nicolas Cage in an Italian-American love story' in *Moonstruck* (1987) and 'Meryl Street as an Italian housewife in Iowa who sacrifices her happiness for her family' in *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995). *The Godfather* is mentioned in the introduction to the list as the inspiration for the more than 260 Mafia films made during the same thirty-year period (Cerro).

revival, however, ethnic signifiers carried intrinsic meaning and cultural cache, irrespective of verifiable accuracy. As Vera Dika posits, 'this very notion of "authenticity" is part of the film's construction, part of its symbolic surface, its weave of illusion' ('Representation' 79). Following the film's financial and dramatic success, many enthusiasts, including Coppola and Puzo, made ever greater claims for authenticity. Publicity material, film reviews, and analyses referred to the sheer abundance of codes and signs of Italianness as self-evident proof that the end product deserves to be labelled 'authentic'. An article in *Time* magazine on 13 March 1972, before the film was released, described it as 'an Italian-American *Gone with the Wind*', emphasizing that Coppola was chosen to direct the film because of his own ethnic heritage. The same article quoted Paramount executive Robert Evans stating that '[Coppola] knew the way these men in *The Godfather* ate their food, kissed each other, talked. He knew the grit' ('Show Business: The Making'). Puzo's contribution was similarly used to justify the film's authenticity. 'I suspect', wrote Cawelti in 1975, 'such will turn out to be Puzo's major contribution to the mythology of crime: through his own rich and complex knowledge of the Sicilian ethnic background' ('New Mythology' 338).

On the other side, those dissatisfied with *The Godfather's* use of the gangster stereotype questioned Puzo's and Coppola's familiarity with Italian-American culture. Robert Johnson complained in 1977 that Coppola's films were 'only partially realistic' and that Gay Talese's *Honour Thy Father*, a nonfictional account of the decline of the Mafia, is 'by far, the more convincing' (109-112). Critics eagerly pointed out that Puzo had never been to Sicily and never conducted any in-depth research into the Sicilian Mafia until after the release of the film. As a result, both the novel and the film overemphasize the attachment of Italian-American gangsters to their families and their connections with Sicilian gangsters. In addition, the films' production history reveals that the assemblage of Italian-Americans in the film's cast and crew was largely the outcome of contingencies and coincidences. Coppola himself was allegedly the fourth choice of director for the film in a list that paid little attention to ethnic heritage.

Ironically enough, questioning the film's authenticity brings it closer to ethnic revival politics. It will be recalled that the movement's critics in the 70s posited that it is merely a revival of general interest in ethnicity, without an accompanying



measurable change among ethnic communities. By the same token, *The Godfather's* representation of ethnicity deserves the line of defence outlined in chapter two. Just like the revival was a symptom of cultural forces much broader and often only tangentially related to ethnics themselves, *The Godfather's* intricate mix of authenticity and stereotypes is a construct, meant to satisfy the needs of a much broader viewership, not to document the ethnic experience. The more fruitful question, therefore, is not whether *The Godfather's* representation of ethnicity is factually accurate, but what purposes it served by being perceived as such and labelled authentic.

The following two sections examine two antithetical responses to this question. The first interprets *The Godfather's* authentic-looking ethnic milieu as the polar opposite of American capitalism in the 70s and a metaphorical remedy for America's social and moral maladies. The second focuses more on the business-like operation of the gangsters who inhabit this ethnic milieu and interprets *The Godfather* as the allegorical reflection of American capitalism.

### ***La Via Vecchia***

Whatever happened to Gary Cooper? The strong, silent type. That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do. Tony Soprano uses these words to express his distrust of psychotherapy in the pilot episode of *The Sopranos*, shortly before he storms out of his first session with Dr Melfi. The mention of Gary Cooper is only the first in a plethora of intertextual references that justify David Pattie's apt description of the series as a 'postmodern Mafia tale' (144). Incessant self-reflexivity and continuous citations of popular culture, especially representations of the Mafia in film and television, are perhaps *The Sopranos'* most noticeable characteristic. In this media-saturated universe, Tony, Paulie, Silvio, Pussy, and Christopher live in the shadow of the Corleones. They return to *The Godfather* to find a paradise lost, a world populated by the last of the strong, silent types. When Tony is asked in the second episode to pick his favourite scene, he chooses Vito's return to Sicily from *Part II*. What he likes about the scene is not Vito's pursuit of revenge, as one would expect from a fellow gangster, but the authentic look of Sicily,

the sound of crickets, and the old houses. In essence, Tony is attracted to the Corleones' ability to maintain a connection to their agrarian land of origin and abide by the values of *la via vecchia*, the old Sicilian ways. Their household is based on distinctly ethnic bonds of kinship, blood rituals, patriarchal family ties, and cultural loyalty. This section discusses the interpretation of *The Godfather* as a nostalgic vision of *la via vecchia* and the Corleone men as a 70s version Hollywood's strong, silent types.

At the southern end of the Mezzogiorno, Sicily trained its inhabitants in harsh living conditions. Political scientist Robert Putnam traces Southern Italy's slower rhythm of political and economic development (in relation to the more advanced north) back to the twelfth century. Sicily was at the time the centre of a Norman kingdom run by feudal and autocratic structures, which prevented the development of a strong civic society. Sicily's medieval past produced a legacy of political disenfranchisement and practically nonexistent social justice, which, in Putnam's account, lasted until the late twentieth century (121-37). These conditions gave rise to a different world outlook than that of Western Europeans, or even northern Italians. Sicilians distrusted centralized government and valued the most immediate institutional unit: the patriarchally ordered family unit. As Gambino explains in *Blood of My Blood*, *la via vecchia* is founded on '*l'ordine della famiglia*, the unwritten but all-demanding and complex system of rules governing one's relations within, and responsibilities to, his family, and his posture toward those outside the family' (3-4).

Additionally, the centuries of subsistence farming dominating the Sicilian economy fostered a primal bond between the Sicilian and his land. The farmer cultivates the land, the land yields crop, crop becomes food, food nourishes the farmer, the farmer keeps cultivating the land, and so the cycle continues. If we introduce more farmers and a larger patch of land into this cycle, then an agrarian economy is formed, the concept of ownership emerges, and the physical bond also becomes an economic one. As in all agrarian societies, labour, land, and food were often traded directly in Sicily, instead of being assigned a monetary value. *La via vecchia*, therefore, is inherently suspicious of mediated exchanges, centralized production, and frivolous spending. By Sicilian standards, it is hardly surprising that Vito preserves sober habits and has no appreciation for the display of luxury. Instead,

the Corleones prefer to show their wealth in the abundance of food, family, and friends.

But how can the Corleones abide by such principles in a capitalist society? When we first meet them, it is 1946 and they live in suburban Long Island. This is a time when the melting pot paradigm reigned supreme, demanding that immigrants assimilate into the American norm, if they were to have a chance at making it in America. This paradox is rendered obsolete, however, when considered through the lens of the 70s ethnic revival. *The Godfather* corrects the assimilationist ethos of the post-World War II era retrospectively, by having the Corleones experience their Sicilian roots as an immutable, genetically determined identity, a definition of ethnicity that emerged two decades after the events portrayed on screen. As discussed in chapter two, the revival considered the sense of allegiance to an ethnic community to run in immigrants' blood and determine their character, values, and actions. Even if one chose not to join the ethnic community and identify oneself as American, these choices would not affect the essence of ethnicity, which was destined to resurface and demand recognition. In fact, this was the definition of the revival offered by its advocates: the massive resurfacing of ethnic identities after decades of involuntary choices.

Ancestral bloodlines facilitate the Corleones' corporeal connection to Sicily and the continuation of *la via vecchia* across space and time. As Gardaphé indicatively puts it, 'Sicily becomes for Don Corleone what the planet Krypton is to Superman: a legendary place of origin, the experience of which elevates him to the status of a hero' (36). Land and blood become visual and thematic motifs in *The Godfather* and give expression to the primordialist understanding of ethnicity. From the warm, earthy hues of the film's colour palette to the inclusion of entire segments filmed in Sicily, *The Godfather* grounds the Corleones firmly on Sicilian soil. In addition, both the familial and vocational ties of the Corleones centre on blood. Blood is not only the outcome of Mafia crimes, but also the structuring principle of its organization into families. As Camon explains, the Mafia found fertile ground to flourish in Sicily because economic struggles centred on land and its ownership. The Mafia's first large-scale business was the protection of the Sicilian *latifundio*, the vast landed estates that the local farmers worked but over which they had no ownership rights. Members of the dispossessed

class were recruited by the landowners to protect by means of prevarication an antiquated status quo (Camon 61). Thus, the land to which a Mafioso belonged was also his defining identity. *The Godfather* literalizes this principle by assigning to Vito the name of his birthplace when he migrates to America. The detail is not revealed until *Part II*, which goes back to Vito's childhood. The immigration officer at Ellis Island mistakenly changes his name from Andolini to Corleone, his village in Sicily. The incident was inspired by real events and contributes to the film's overall appeal to authenticity. Yet, it also has broader symbolic resonance as recognition by bureaucratic, capitalist America that a Sicilian can never let go of Sicily.

The ability of *la via vecchia* to condition the Corleones' life in America provides the most compelling piece of evidence in support of analyses that see them as pre- or anti-capitalists. Contrary to Coppola's stated intention, interpreters including Cawelti, Camon, and Russo argue that the film criticizes the evils of capitalism by emphasizing the virtues of non-capitalists. Sicily bequeathed the Corleones an appreciation of the tragic absurdity of life, an alternative to the Protestant ethic of individualism and progress. 'From a sociological standpoint', Camon posits, 'the Mafia represents in fact a confluence of aristocratic and proletarian interests' (60-61). Cawelti similarly argues that the film presents 'the glory days of closely knit traditional authority' and invites its viewers to 'vent their rage at the managerial elite who hold the reins of corporate power and use it for their own benefit' (*Adventure* 78). In Ferdinand Tönnies's classic distinction, the Corleone household under Vito resembles a synecdochic condensation of *Gemeinschaft*, a community governed by familial and personal ties, favouritism, and reciprocity.

Before moving to the exterior of Don Corleone's house and the festivities for his daughter's wedding, the film begins with Bonasera narrating his riveting story of injustice directly to the camera. We first hear his voice delivering the film's famous first line, 'I believe in America', and immediately afterwards his dramatically lit close-up fades in (figure 41). Bonasera's declaration of faith in America, in an accent that immediately reveals his Italian roots, introduces the tension between American and Sicilian values that underpins the entire film. Bonasera begins his story describing how he raised his daughter 'in the American fashion', with each new fact affirming the assimilationist ethos of his opening declaration. He allowed his daughter to go to the

movies, stay out late, and have a non-Italian boyfriend. For Russo, Bonasera ‘plays the Italian for whom the Promised Land was named’ (258). Even his first name, Amerigo, underscores his desire to embrace Americanness. In contrast, his surname (translating as good evening), his profession (undertaker), his plea (vengeance), and his appearance (black tie and suit) foreshadow the grim conclusion of his unconditional faith in America. Bonasera proceeds to explain that one night his daughter’s boyfriend and one of his friends attempted to rape her. Their families bribed the court to let them go unpunished, and Bonasera was left with no option but to turn to the Mafia.

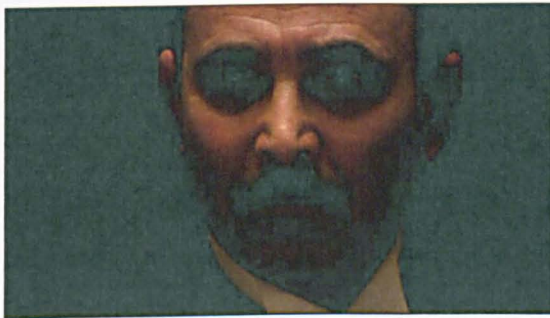


Figure 41



Figure 42

As Bonasera narrates his story, a slow, steady zoom-out expands the frame to disclose the back of an unidentified listener (figure 42), whom the subsequent reverse shot reveals to be Vito Corleone. The visual device clearly defines the spatial dynamics between Bonasera and the Don, gradually abandoning Bonasera’s close-up and his position of faith in America, until we realize that our spectatorial perspective has been located behind the Don’s desk all along. As Robert Kolker puts it, ‘the movement of the camera that opens the film is not a withdrawal *from* but a withdrawal *into*’ (161). For D’Acerno, it is the first instance in what he calls the ‘godfathering of the spectator’, a series of narrative and stylistic devices that invite viewers to align their sympathies with the Corleones (571). The Don responds to Bonasera’s request as an advocate of Sicilian family values. He agrees to help Bonasera in exchange for his loyalty and friendship, as opposed to the payment that Bonasera offers.

By the end of their conversation, Bonasera goes through a series of realizations that negate his opening declaration of faith in America. He understands that America has betrayed him and regrets not having asked for the Don’s help or sought his

friendship in the past. Before leaving his office, Bonasera suppliantly bends his head, addresses him as Godfather, and kisses his hand. The symbolic ritual seals Bonasera's declaration of allegiance to the god-like Don as well as the renunciation of his faith in America and its corrupted legal system. Far from being a capitalist boss, Vito emerges in *The Godfather's* opening scene as the remedy to capitalist malaise, a benevolent, charismatic leader, in the Weberian sense. He rules his household through the sheer force of his presence, with both business and family leadership centred on him. He talks and moves with a leisurely but assured pace, while everyone respectfully waits for him to finish his sentences. In Biskind and Ehrenreich's fitting description, Vito is 'a father in the biblical sense' (207).

Biskind and Ehrenreich's mention of fatherhood is not coincidental. As Gambino points out, *la via vecchia* relies on strict gender role prescriptions. Italian-American men, he explains, 'have little respect for the type of man connoted by the Spanish term *machismo*'. The 'proud peacock' and the 'cock on the walk' are frowned upon. Instead, the respected Sicilian man is *l'uomo di pazienza*, a man of patience and self-control, who possesses *maschio*, masculine qualities, but never indulges in the superficial display of masculinity (129-30). D'Acierno draws a similar distinction between gangsters and Mafiosi (571). The gangster is volatile and hot-blooded, whereas the good Mafioso is monogamous, wise, and virtuous. He prefers self-composure and understatement over aggression and exuberance.

D'Acierno's Mafioso and Gambino's *uomo di pazienza* are closer to the strong, silent types that Classical Hollywood found in cowboys and spies—or, to rephrase, in WASP rather than ethnic men. It is indeed hard to imagine an Italian-American man as a respected, emotionally composed patriarch in Classical Hollywood. These roles were reserved for all-white Anglo-Saxons or clearly de-ethnicized American men. As the 70s dawned, however, WASP heroes were becoming extinct. New mores softened Hollywood's Gary Coopers and the liberated Alan Alda became the new model of the respected family man. The popular press in the 70s noticed and often lamented the extinction of WASP heroes. Although they are not always called 'strong, silent types', they are invariably identified as WASP. In 1970, Peter Schrag reported in *Harper's* 'The Decline of the WASP' as a precursor to his book that was published the following year under the same title. Schrag's definition of the WASP is 'part Leatherstocking, part

Teddy Roosevelt, part John Wayne, with a little Ben Franklin thrown in for good measure—frontiersman, cowboy, soldier, entrepreneur’ (*The Decline* 13). Three years later, in the same magazine, Florence King wrote a loving obituary to ‘the good ole boys’, the WASP men of the South (78). In 1980, Daniel Sembroff Golden began his analysis of ‘Italian Images in American Film’ by situating his subject matter in relation to the decline of Hollywood’s WASP heroes. In his introduction, Golden describes ‘the frail mortality of the archetypal American heroes of old—the WASP loners of impeccable chivalry and integrity, moving through a landscape of big sky and grand moral gesture’. Golden does proceed to note, however, that ‘with the eclipse of John Wayne, Henry Fonda, and Jimmy Stewart, we witness a new cadre of Oscar nominees and recipients with names like Pacino, Scorsese, Coppola, De Niro, and Cimino’ (73).

The phenomenon that Golden describes can be explained in the context of the overlapping crises of masculinity and white privilege in the 70s. With the civil rights and the women’s movements gaining increasing recognition and a firm rooting in America, WASP men could no longer parade around their masculine and racial hegemony. At this time of enormous stress and uncertainty for American whiteness and patriarchy, the Italian-American man can comfortably and believably fill the shoes that Hollywood had previously reserved for WASP men. Vito’s cinematic ancestors benefited neither from white privilege nor from heroic masculinity. In consequence, he is bound neither by guilt nor by responsibility to give up patriarchal authority. Patriarchy does not appear dated, reactionary, or prejudiced when embodied by the Italian-American man. Don Corleone refashions it as an ethnic attribute, an inherent part of his unbroken connection to the motherland and *la via vecchia*. His ethnicity performs an exculpatory function on masculinity that is much closer to 70s ethnic revival politics than to the assimilationist ethos of the late 40s.

The choice of Marlon Brando for the role of Vito Corleone plays no small part in the film’s resurrection of the strong, silent type. Brando became a box-office star and highly respected actor during the 50s. In 1951, he starred as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, recreating the role that had previously established him as a Broadway star. Two years later, he became the iconic motorcycle gang leader in *The Wild One*. In 1954, he won the Academy Award for his portrayal of down-at-heel boxer Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront*, a film to which I return in the following chapter

with the discussion of *Rocky*. By the middle of the 50s, Brando was the undisputed symbol of young, rebellious, and rough American masculinity. In 1972, however, Brando had not only lost his youthfulness, but *The Godfather* ages him further, turning him into a dying old man. Notwithstanding his deteriorating health, Don Corleone remains physically imposing and commands the Corleone household with what Ryan Gilbey accurately describes as 'an inventive mix of majesty and disintegration' (7).

The story of Brando's refusal to play Vito in *Part II* has been repeated so many times that it no longer constitutes a proper Hollywood anecdote.<sup>22</sup> Coppola readjusted the script for the second film to eliminate Brando's scenes and, instead, we only see Robert De Niro in the role of Vito as a young man. With his more slender figure and sharper facial characteristics, De Niro looks nothing like the young Brando of the 50s. He does bring to the film, however, an Italian name and some intertextual associations with gangsterism. (His most notable film role before *The Godfather* was that of Johnny Boy, the small-time Italian-American gambler, in Scorsese's *Mean Streets*.) *The Godfather* quite literally tells audiences that Italian-Americans in the 70s are what Brando was in the 50s. At a time when the young rebels of the 50s were maturing into middle-aged family men and the Hippies of the 60s were transmuting into liberated men, *The Godfather* proposes that youthful machismo need not necessarily age into emasculation.

Despite its Sicilian origins, Vito Corleone's brand of masculine authority spoke to contemporary fears and anxieties in 1972. Arthur Schlesinger commented in the May 1972 issue of *Vogue*:

The film shrewdly touches contemporary nerves. Our society is pervaded by a conviction of powerlessness. *The Godfather* makes it possible for all of us, in the darkness of the movie house, to become powerful. It plays upon our inner fantasies, not only the criminal inside each of us but our secret admiration for men who get what they want, whose propositions no one dares turn down.  
(54)

While divorce rates in America were peaking, Don Corleone holds a stable household; while people's trust in government and corporate authority plummeted, he enjoys the respect of both his friends and rivals; while the Vietnam War split countless fathers

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Cowie provides a brief history of Brando's feud with Paramount (90). Coppola offers his own version in the 'director's commentary' of *The Godfather: Part II* DVD.



and sons, he reunites with his son, Michael. As Pauline Kael reported in her review of *Part II*, 'many people who saw *The Godfather* developed a romantic identification with the Corleones; they longed for the feeling of protection that Don Vito conferred on his loving family' ('Fathers' 64). From his childhood days in Sicily, when he vows to avenge his mother's murder, to the first time we encounter him in his office, promising justice to Bonasera, to the day he dies in a tomato patch and becomes symbolically reunited with the Sicilian land, Vito Corleone abides by a clearly defined value system and heeds the moral sense of his family. In his cultural history of the 70s, Frum comments that 'the audiences that thronged the theatres were cheering Don Corleone without irony' (13-14).

Nevertheless, to cheer for Vito Corleone and *la via vecchia* in 1972 is simultaneously to cheer against the recent victories of the women's, the civil rights, and the gay liberation movements. Traditional masculinity in the 70s was not only challenged by the Vietnam War, government corruption, and the economic crisis, but also by the emergence of alternative masculine models in mainstream culture. African American men, gay men, and self-proclaimed feminist men were already demanding and gaining cultural recognition and, more gradually, acceptance. The Sicilian model of manhood, however, relies on a rigid hierarchy. As we learn early in *Part I*, men who fail to be *uomini di pazienza* are considered weak and effeminate men. One of the guests at Connie's wedding is Vito's godson, Johnny Fontane, a famous singer and budding Hollywood actor (essentially a fictionalized young Frank Sinatra). Johnny's career has reached a stalemate after a studio head refuses to give him a part. With tears in his eyes, he pleads with his godfather to tell him what he should do. In an unusual burst of anger, the Don slaps Johnny on the face and instructs him fiercely, 'You can start acting like a man'. Vito fears that his godson will turn into 'a Hollywood *finocchio* who weeps and begs for pity, who cries out like a woman'. In comparing his godson to a woman and a *finocchio* (the equivalent of the English 'faggot'), Vito relies on the simple logic that a man who cries and loses self-control is not only a weak man, but also an effeminate man.

Vito Corleone's patriarchy, furthermore, is completely incompatible with the changes to gender power dynamics brought by feminism in the 70s. The good Sicilian Mafioso honours and respects his wife, but keeps her in the kitchen and out of his

business. Vito's wife is a prime example of a proper *donna di seriatà*, a virtuous woman (Gambino 160). She exhibits all the prudence and seriousness needed to take on the responsibilities of raising *la famiglia*. She supports her husband and sons and never questions them about business, even when business results in the murder of one son and the disappearance of another. Her position in the family is perhaps best reflected in the fact that she is never given a name. In both the novel and all films, she is only known by her function, as Mama Corleone.<sup>23</sup> On the opposite side of the spectrum, Connie Corleone's deteriorating marriage exemplifies the potential threats to *la via vecchia* when gender norms collapse. Carlo, her husband, is unfaithful both to her and to the family business. Connie usually responds to his abuses by shouting hysterically and smashing china, an equally unacceptable behaviour in *la via vecchia's* social order. It is in the name of this order that Michael, who takes on the family leadership after his father's death, arranges for Carlo's murder and Connie's return to his paternal protection. Although, by feminist standards, the suppression of Connie's female voice is as demeaning as her mother's voluntary silence, a female voice of any kind is simply not an option in *la via vecchia*.

*The Godfather* does offer an attractive trade-off to its rollbacks on feminism: a functional and closely knit family headed by a loyal patriarch. 'If that family, a male hierarchy, is created on the backs of acquiescent women,' Haskell wonders, 'wasn't there almost a sigh of relief, in a moment of flux and ambivalence, at having all women subordinate rather than some rising, some falling?' (17). It does not take much imagination to picture a young Tony Soprano exhaling this sigh of relief in 1972. Don Corleone not only continues the tradition of Hollywood's strong, silent types, but he is also a fellow Italian-American gangster. He maintains the ways of the Old Country and stands tall against the corruption of American institutions and the emasculating forces of the 70s. Yet, Tony Soprano is hardly representative of all American audiences who saw *The Godfather* in 1972. A middle class, WASP man would not share Tony's familiarity with Italian-American culture and organized crime. Neither would he as readily ignore the liberal and liberated sensibilities of the 70s and cheer for the Corleones.

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<sup>23</sup> She has been retrospectively assigned the name Carmela in a DVD special feature entitled 'The Corleone Family Tree'.

In one of the most influential interpretations of *The Godfather*, Fredric Jameson offers some useful insights into how the Average (WASP) Joe could share this sigh of relief. Jameson agrees that the film's portrayal of a socially integrated Italian-American patriarchy resonated with contemporary social concerns in the 70s. His more radical contention, by which he differentiates his position both from Coppola's, Camon's, and Cawelti's, is that this portrayal constitutes a deliberate ideological manipulation of the viewer in favour of American capitalism. Jameson arrives at this interpretation using Marx's definition of reification as the transference of social relations or ideologies into an object. For example, Marx describes money and commodities as 'the direct *reification of universal labour-time*, i.e., the product of universal alienation and of the supersession of all individual labour' (72). Jameson updates this position by incorporating the idea of utopia as a necessary condition in the transference of ideology:

The works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be manipulated. (144)

In the case of *The Godfather*, Jameson locates the proposed utopia in the portrayal of *la via vecchia*, 'in the message projected by the title of the film, that is, in the family itself, seen as a figure of collectivity and the object of Utopian longing, if not a Utopian envy' (146).

Whereas other scholars find in *The Godfather's* ethnic utopia the antidote to American capitalism (and, by implication, a criticism of it), Jameson finds a calculated attempt by the Hollywood culture industry to divert attention away from the real sources for social concern, which are rooted in income disparities. 'The function of the Mafia narrative', Jameson explains,

is indeed to encourage the conviction that the deterioration of daily life in the United States today is an ethical rather than an economic matter, connected, not with profit, but rather 'merely' with dishonesty, and with some omnipresent moral corruption. (146)

By turning *la via vecchia* into an enviable patriarchal utopia, *The Godfather* admits that American society suffers by comparison, but simultaneously reinterprets America's problems as ethical rather than economic ones. The by-products of capitalism (weak

family bonds, corruption, and immorality) are presented as the causes of America's problems and capitalism is absolved. Thus, Jameson would agree with Frum that audiences in 1972 'were cheering for the Corleones' and with Haskell that they shared a 'sigh of relief', but not because they recognized in *la via vecchia* the much-needed antidote to capitalism. What *The Godfather* offered to cheering audiences was simply a sweetened version of the same capitalist poison. Jameson goes as far as to situate *The Godfather* within 'an organized conspiracy against the public [...] to exercise a wanton and genocidal violence at the behest of distant decision-makers' (145).

Notwithstanding any *a priori* objections one may have to Jameson's view of Hollywood as a disseminator of capitalist ideology, the application of this view on *The Godfather* brings to the fore a shared weakness in interpretations that place exclusive emphasis on *la via vecchia*. Whether one agrees with Camon, Russo, and Cawelti that *la via vecchia* is represented as a genuinely benign and ethical system or shares Jameson's opinion of *la via vecchia* as a tool in capitalist indoctrination, the assumption is that *la via vecchia* is an all-encompassing reality for the Corleones. For both the reification and the critique of capitalism to succeed, the Corleones would need to remain fully immersed in their ethnic utopia. Any connections to American capitalism would need to be either completely absent or carefully concealed. Far from this, a closer look reveals that the Corleone crime syndicate operates as much in *la via vecchia* as it does in *la via nuova*, the new, modern, and explicitly capitalist way.

### ***La Via Nuova***

The discussion above has concentrated on that part of the literature situated in the upper half of the diagram in figure 36, the view the Corleone family compound as an ethnic haven, a panacea for everything that ailed America in 1972. This view, however, ignores the fact that *la via vecchia* is only one side of the Corleone household, the side that dominates when Vito is head of the family. Vito, however, is gunned down halfway through *Part I* and spends the remainder of the film confined to a hospital bed. In the meantime, the narrative focus shifts to Michael and his rise to Mafia boss. *Part II* follows a non-chronological order that juxtaposes Vito's days as a fresh immigrant and budding Mafioso in America against Michael's efforts to expand the

family business. Michael's accession to Godfatherhood reveals the dark underside of the Corleones, the business deals, financial exchanges, extortions, and murders that allow the Corleones to live in their pastoral utopia. It would be misleading, however, to boil down *The Godfather* to a conflict of generations, to the story of a benevolent Sicilian patriarch and his capitalist American son. Although Michael has evidently more trouble than his father maintaining *la via vecchia* in America, *la via nuova* is present in Vito's household from the very beginning. It is this side of *The Godfather* that interpreters cite as proof that the Corleones are essentially American capitalists in Sicilian disguise.

Written in 1976, Hess's is the first detailed analysis of *The Godfather* as a reflection of American capitalism, through the lens of a Mafia history. For Hess, the Corleones are neither Sicilian farmers nor old-world European aristocrats, but American capitalists par excellence. A closer look at the opening sequence of *Part I* offers substantial evidence for an allegorical reading of the Mafia as capitalist business. Once his meeting with Bonasera is over, Vito places his hand paternally on his shoulder and escorts him to the door. Vito smiles and nods at Bonasera's 'grazie' and appears genuinely content with the outcome of their conversation, just as he appeared genuinely offended earlier, with Bonasera's offer to pay for his services. Immediately afterwards, once the office door is shut, but still in the same shot, Vito loses his smile, turns his head to the other side, and gives succinct guidelines on how the Bonasera job should be carried out. 'Give this to Clemenza,' he instructs Tom Hagen, 'I want reliable people, people who ain't gonna get carried away'. Vito looks tired and even irritated at the back-to-back meetings he has scheduled. Bonasera has been just another obligation, one of several demanding customers queuing outside the Don's office. While the meeting did not yield immediate profit, having an undertaker in his debt is a greater asset in Don Corleone's line of work.

In terms of operations, therefore, the Corleone business runs as smoothly and efficiently as any good capitalist firm. Indeed, Vito holds the largest market share in the oligopoly of Italian-American crime syndicates. Declarations of respect and kisses of hands are merely a branding strategy, no more genuine than a warm handshake or a gift bag after a corporate meeting. The fact that the Corleone business is crime literalizes the common metaphorical description of capitalists as ruthless, bloodthirsty

criminals. 'All those tender, moving family scenes', writes Hess, 'are immediately crushed by the needs of "business", Coppola's word for capitalism in film' (82). One could go through the entire film and perform a similar allegorical substitution of terms. Every henchman could be described as an employee, every kiss as a business contract, every bribe as an investment, and every murder as the elimination of competition. Yet, the most compelling piece of evidence that the Corleones are more American than Italian is not to be found in the way they conduct their business, but in the way they run their family, the sacred locus of power in *la via vecchia*.

Like all capitalists, the Corleones enjoy prosperity and familial bliss at the expense of their socially destructive vocation. Despite their agrarian Sicilian roots, the base of the Corleones' aspirations is essentially bourgeois. Vito wishes to make himself respectable through his children and refuses to take the family picture without all of them present. Not unlike Bonasera did with his daughter, Vito raised Michael 'in the American fashion' and sees in him the potential to fulfil the American ideals of success and upward mobility. When we first meet Michael, he dresses, speaks, and behaves like a fully assimilated second generation immigrant. He has opted for an Ivy League education (instead of work for the family), for military service under the American flag (instead of crime serving the honour of the Corleone family), and for a WASP fiancée and a New York City apartment (instead of an Italian wife and a Long Island house next to his parents). In Werner Sollors's terminology, Michael has conceded to let go of his ethnic descent and believes that this choice has more power to determine his selfhood than ethnic heritage. Michael shows up at his sister's wedding in uniform and insists that Kay appears in the family photograph, implicitly demanding that his family accept his assimilation into the middle class, WASP mainstream. After explaining to Kay what his father and brothers actually do for a living, he apologetically differentiates his own position: 'That's my family, Kay, it's not me.'

Michael becomes involved in the family business when he happens to be present during an assassination attempt against his father. Vito is in the hospital, heavily injured after an earlier assassination attempt organized by the drug baron Sollozzo. While Michael visits his father, he thwarts a second attempt by McCluskey, a corrupted politician and Sollozzo's associate. Michael volunteers to execute a retaliation scheme that involves the double murder of Sollozzo and McCluskey. With

blood on his hands, Michael enters on a trajectory to become the new Don, a process I discuss subsequently in this chapter. At a highly suggestive moment, Tom Hagen informs Vito that it was Michael who avenged the attacks against him. Vito is still weak after months in the hospital and unable to respond to the news verbally, but Brando's expressive face captures his reaction (figure 43). A Sicilian Mafioso would be proud that his son successfully continued the *vendetta* and proved his manhood. Yet, Vito does not react to Tom Hagen's news as an Italian Mafioso, but as an American father who laments his son's lost potential. He mentioned earlier that he does not wish for Michael to enter the family business, but to become a judge or a senator, to climb a step further up the social ladder than his father. Brando's face, therefore, registers neither pride nor contentment, but regret, sorrow, and sadness.

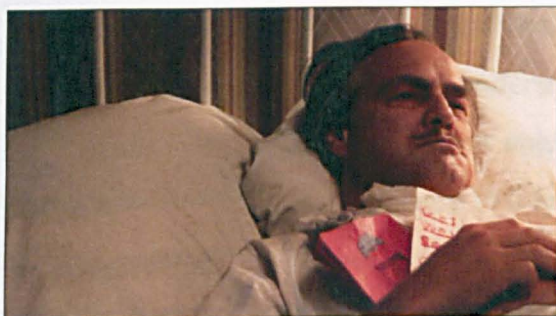


Figure 43

Although Hess does not discuss this moment, Vito's reaction illustrates his argument effectively. Hess finds in *The Godfather* an accurate portrayal of the vicious cycle of capitalism, the inevitable transformation of bourgeois virtue into capitalist evil. The film does not target its critique at the villainous individual, the ruthless boss, or the corrupted corporation. If anything, Michael Corleone deserves our sympathy in the same way that all tragic figures do, for being caught up in circumstances that leave them no choice but to commit an unethical act.<sup>24</sup> Michael faces the impossible dilemma of committing murder or betraying his father. For Hess, Michael embodies 'the basic contradiction in capitalism between the luminous bourgeois ideals of peace,

<sup>24</sup> Coppola makes tragedy and destiny the central themes of *The Godfather: Part III* (1990), complete with a performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana* within the film. The frustrated Michael expresses his inability to escape his destiny in the oft-quoted (and oft-parodied) line, 'Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in'.

freedom, opportunity, love, and community and the harsh brutal realities of the irrational economic system which encourages these ideals and feeds off their unobtainability' (85). *The Godfather*, therefore, critiques the inherent ability of the capitalist system to crush all hope for betterment and use it as fuel for its preservation and perpetuation. Michael's brightness and talents could have allowed him to escape from the family business, but, in a system where one's success is measured by someone else's loss, Michael is destined to a life of crime and violence. The world-weary Vito seems to secretly await Tom Hagen's news and shows no sign of surprise. Instead, he gestures to be left alone and turns his glance to the side, mourning in silence for his son's lost potential.

Vito is gunned down at a particularly volatile moment in the family business. Sollozzo's assassination attempt is a response to Vito's rejection of an offer to provide protection for his political associates. The Don does not want to get the family involved in drug trafficking, but he fails to understand the dynamics of the emerging narcotics market. His rejection of the offer not only propels the two assassination attempts, but also leaves the Corleones exposed to a hostile takeover bid from the Barzini-Tattaglia consortium, which does not share his moral qualms. When Michael takes over, after Vito's death, he realizes that their business cannot survive in the new environment. Vito solution was to propose a gentlemen's agreement between the heads of all Mafia families. Michael's solution, implemented in *Part II*, is to establish a monopolizing conglomerate and turn himself from family business boss to CEO, with headquarters relocated to Nevada. If, in Weber's typology of authority, Vito rules by charisma, then Michael must stand for legal-rational authority. Michael abandons his father's model of centralized, personal leadership and opts for bureaucracy and a network of pseudo-legal firms.

Although the transition of power from Vito to Michael takes place narratively in the late 40s, its dynamics correspond with socioeconomic changes that would not become pronounced until the 70s. The move from New York to Nevada exemplifies the shift of American political and economic power from the Rustbelt to the Sunbelt, from the urban, industrial centres of the Northeast and Midwest, to the new cities of the South and Southwest. (I return to the decline of the Rustbelt in the next chapter, with the examination of *Rocky's* portrayal of Philadelphia.) The geographical shift is only the



most apparent symptom of a much broader transition in both the U.S. and in Western Europe, namely, the shift from industrial to advanced capitalism. Though the precise chronology and causality of the transition is still debated, the general consensus is that it lasted several decades and would have been in their infancy during the immediate post-World War II period depicted in *The Godfather*. It was not until the 70s that the decline of heavy industry and the rise of corporations created a balance of trade deficit for the American economy and led to a rapid increase in unemployment for industrial workers. It was also during the 70s that the economic changes had noticeable effects in American society and culture, including the aggravation of the crisis of masculinity described in chapter three and the decline of urban ethnic enclaves described in chapter two. The Corleones, however, seem to experience the transition to advanced capitalism earlier and in a more condensed timeframe. When Michael relocates the family business to the Sunbelt and breaks it up into a network of firms, his actions resonate with distinctly 70s fears that corporations are taking over America and destroying its north-eastern urban centres. Vito's charismatic leadership and interpersonal relationships would have probably failed in the world of corporations and conglomerates. It is indeed hard to imagine that any number of severed horses' heads would have deterred the Barzini-Tattaglia competition or stopped global drug trafficking.

The story of a first generation Sicilian father attached to the ways of the Old Country and his second generation son who embraces capitalism corresponds with the history of Italian-American immigrant communities in the 40s and 50s. As a summary of *The Godfather*, however, this bi-generational story is problematic. Don Vito Corleone is already running his crime syndicate as a well-oiled capitalist machine before his son takes over. The film anachronistically infuses into the Corleone business the dynamics of another transition in American society, from industrial to advanced capitalism. Nevertheless, recognizing the Corleones' relationship to the history of American capitalism does not resolve the larger debate. If, as we have seen above, *la via vecchia* is an attractive and comforting sight for middle class, WASP men in 1972, then what feelings does *la via nuova* conjure? More pressingly, does *la via nuova* ultimately prevail over *la via vecchia*?

## Business and Family

Any attempt to extrapolate between the different interpretations of *The Godfather* needs to start with the acknowledgement that the films provide adequate evidence to support diverse views. To ignore the sheer amount of representational attention and narrative time allocated to Sicilian family traditions would be as myopic as to disregard the business-like operation of the Corleone family. Indeed, competing interpretations centre on prioritizing the evidence provided in the film, not on disputing each other's claims. Camon, for example, acknowledges that the Corleones are businessmen, but argues that 'profit and power are just means to an end' (59). Vito's ultimate aim is to support his family, not accumulate material possessions. Camon finds in this contradiction 'the crux of the Mafioso's identity: he must be able to connect these two polarities, to hold them together as if they were meant to fit' (59-60). On the other side, Hess describes this connection as hypocritical and cites it as evidence that *The Godfather* critiques American capitalism by exposing its contradictions.

Nevertheless, words like 'contradiction', 'polarity', and 'dichotomy' do not quite capture the relationship between business and family in *The Godfather*. Thomas Ferraro focuses specifically on this relationship to argue that business and family are jointly necessary and mutually reinforcing conditions for the Corleones. 'The family', he argues,

is what makes the Corleones such good illegitimate capitalists, putting the organization into organized crime; crime is what makes them such good family men, keeping the boys in line and the women secure, providing incentive, self-discipline, ideological justification, and emotional payback. ('Blood' 110)

Though Ferraro develops his argument primarily from a conceptual perspective, the same reciprocity between family and business is evident in Coppola's narrative devices, particularly in the use of time and space. To this end, it is useful to revisit once more the opening sequence of *Part I*, Connie's wedding reception.

The sequence is structured around constant crosscutting between the interior of the house, where a series of men pay their respects to the Don, and the garden outside, where the wedding reception takes place. Vito's study is clad in wood panelling, leather chairs, and dark shadows (figure 44). Coppola frames characters in dramatic, carefully constructed close-ups and medium close-ups, creating a stable and

centred space that highlights the gravity and organization of the business. The festive chaos outdoors underscores the Corleones' rejection of capitalist rationality in favour of familial bonds. The garden is bathed in sunlight and filmed mostly in deep focus long shots, with the main action staged in the middle ground, as characters walk in and out of the frame, seemingly at random, in the foreground (figure 45). Crosscutting between the two spaces highlights their differences and boldly introduces the Corleones as both the embodiment of and the solution to capitalist corruption.



Figure 44



Figure 45

Yet, the wedding sequence does not expose the Corleones as hypocrites, but presents business and family operating in a harmonious coexistence. The episodic structure and leisurely rhythm invite viewers to put aside concerns with following a causal chain of events. Instead, in each scene of the wedding reception we meet different members of the family, observe different wedding customs, and are made privy to different conversations between Don Vito, his advisers, and the guests asking him for favours. This narrative structure yields a sense of spatiotemporal fluidity and renders the coexistence of business and family a natural aspect of the Corleone household. Although subtle ellipses condense the wedding reception down to twenty-five minutes of plot duration, the absence of strict narrative linearity gives the impression that the sequence encompasses the actual duration of the wedding reception. Hence, Vito's dual roles as capitalist American and a Sicilian family head become part of a seamless simultaneity. The wedding reception, furthermore, takes place within the protection of the Corleone compound, with a tall fence and several guards keeping the press and police outside. The interior of the compound, however, remains a unified, open, and permeable space. While Vito is in the study, the garden is

visible from the window in reverse shots. Vito navigates the interior and exterior of the house with gracefulness and nonchalance, embodying the dual roles of Godfather and father of the bride simultaneously. As he tells Bonasera at the very beginning of the sequence, a Sicilian cannot refuse a favour on the day of his daughter's wedding.

The maintenance of family values within capitalist conditions establishes the Corleones' seductive halo from the very beginning. On the one hand, the transference of *la via vecchia* to America does carry an inherent appeal, but it is ultimately an unattainable utopia for anyone other than Italian-Americans. Middle class, WASP men in 1972 could only indulge in its pleasures while watching it on screen, but they could never dream of passing the ethnic threshold of the Corleone compound. On the other hand, *la via nuova* by itself would negate the pleasures of ethnic authenticity. Whether one finds in it a critique or affirmation of capitalist ideology, its ultimate message is that the Corleones are like every other American and their ethnic rituals are just a surface. Vito follows a third path, which rejects the understanding of Italianness and Americanness as mutually exclusive. Not only does he relocate *la via vecchia* to America, but he even expands it to accommodate capitalism and bourgeois values. Under his paternal leadership, the Corleones enjoy a prosperous life in suburban Long Island, while remaining proudly ethnic in their values and lifestyle. It is precisely this reciprocity, rather than the conflict, between *la via vecchia* and *la via nuova* that renders the Corleones so appealing. Vito's familial, ethnic haven is financed by the income of a successful American business, which, in turn, functions according to Sicilian laws of kinship. The criminal Italian-American family is not attractive for living in a distant utopia, as Jameson argues, but for claiming a distinct geographical and social topos within American capitalism.

Michael Corleone's rise to power provides more challenges to the survival of *la via vecchia* in *la via nuova*. The seamless duality of business and family proves much harder to maintain in conditions of advanced capitalism. His problems become apparent immediately following Vito's death. Michael eliminates his competitors and establishes his monopoly while he baptizes Connie's child, in one of the most elaborate and celebrated sequences of *The Godfather*. Like the wedding reception sequence, the baptism sequence focuses on a traditional family ritual and uses parallel editing to bring in the business aspects of the Mafia. Comparing the two usefully brings to the

fore the differences between Vito's and Michael's abilities to combine business and family.



Figure 46



Figure 47



Figure 48



Figure 49

Appropriately following Vito's funeral, the baptism sequence is structured as an elaborate series of crosscuts between the religious ritual and the executions of the four heads of the rival families. Parallel editing, however, goes far beyond the basic implication of temporal simultaneity. A series of graphically matching close-ups from the christening ritual and the preparations for the murders establishes metaphorical and causal associations between the two acts, ultimately attributing agency for the murders to Michael. While becoming godfather to Connie's child, Michael is himself initiated into the role of Mafia Godfather. A shot of Michael's and Kay's hands undoing and removing the baby's bonnet (figure 46) is edited with a shot, from the same angle, of an assassin's hands following the same movement to grab and disassemble a gun (figure 47). A close-up of the priest dipping his fingertips in a balm (figure 48) and turning to anoint the baby's mouth is likewise mirrored in a close-up of a barber squishing a handful of shaving foam in his palm (figure 49) and proceeding to spread it on the face of one of the killers.

The baptism sequence incessantly impels us to recognize the links between the contrasting images of tenderness and violence, family and crime, sacrament and sin. The rapid series of shots depicting the actual killings is intercut with the culmination of the religious ritual and Michael's renunciation of Satan, ironically underlining Michael's responsibility for the murders. Unlike his father, Michael seems unable to bridge the contradictions of the Godfather duality. Whereas crosscutting in the opening sequence makes Mafia business and family values the mutually reinforcing parts of the Corleone household, in the baptism sequence this coexistence is revealed as hypocritical and sacrilegious. Vito conducted Mafia business and granted favours *because* of his daughter's wedding; Michael performs his Mafia business *despite* participating in a family ritual.

Once more, therefore, we are faced with a father-son contrast. Biskind and Ehrenreich develop this argument most forcefully, describing Vito and Michael as polar opposites. Whereas the former stands for 'patriarchy suffused with rustic *Gemeinschaft*', the latter 'represents authority without love, power unchecked by feudal restraints' (207). Vito becomes the Don of Little Italy and introduces a just and equitable protection system that favours poor immigrant families. In contrast, Michael turns the family business into a nationwide monopoly, with ties to Europe and Latin America, but ends up breaking the family apart and killing his own brother. Yet, as tempting as it may be to see in *The Godfather* the archetypal battle between father and son, I would like to provide an additional reading, one that sees Vito and Michael as more alike than different.

Even as *The Godfather* loads the burdens of corporate capitalism on Michael's shoulders, it also provides him with the means of maintaining the business-family duality. The visual grandeur of Coppola's cinematic style protects Michael from being too easily labelled a capitalist monster. Even Hess, in his discussion of the Corleones as ruthless capitalists, cannot but agree that 'few films have created such beautiful images in order to show the corruption and perversion of the system' (85). What Hess underestimates, however, is the relationship between the film's visual beauty and its subject matter. The Corleones' crimes cannot be easily isolated from the visual means that portray them on the screen. Michael's murderous ploy is so inventive in its conception and so masterfully executed that it becomes almost as admirable as it is

shocking. The elaborateness of the montage and Nino Rota's mellifluous score transfer some of their grandeur to Michael and conceal his hypocrisy. As Gilbey notes, 'even the crosscutting between the baptism of Michael and the murders being carried out at Michael's behest is a touch too masterful to be properly appalling' (6).

In addition to being visually striking, crosscutting in the baptism sequence is also rather manipulative in the way it invites audiences to witness Michael's crimes. Whereas temporal ellipses in the opening sequence are concealed, so that story and plot durations appear to coincide, the baptism sequence is structured as a series of visually striking but narratively fragmented images. The preparations for the killings and the victims' actions right before being killed are shown in very brief shots that appear unrelated to each other. We have encountered the heads of the rival families only once before, sitting around the table at Vito's meeting, and now see them in the midst of everyday activities that conceal their faces—going through a revolving door, exiting a lift, lying face-down on a massage table. It takes an attentive second viewing to mentally rearrange the sequence and recognize which assassin corresponds to which victim, how each murder has been planned, and who these five victims actually are. Although crosscutting creates suspense for the impending murders, only after the sequence is over do we realize that we have been watching one group of men preparing to kill another.

The entire baptism sequence, furthermore, seems to exist in a narrative void. The plot offers no indication before the sequence that Michael is planning the murders. On the contrary, he informs Tom Hagen during Vito's funeral that he has decided to christen Connie's child and asks him to call a meeting of the five families. Michael's attempt to deceive his consigliere, and prevent his likely disagreement with his plan, also has the effect of misleading the audience. Along with Tom Hagen, we move from the funeral to the baptism with the impression that Michael intends to continue his father's attempts for peace between the five families. The part of the story that links the funeral to the baptism, and includes Michael's practical arrangements with the assassins, is omitted from the plot and can only be inferred in retrospect. It is not until the final scene of *Part I* that *The Godfather* attributes clear responsibility for the murders to Michael. Tom Hagen, Peter Clemenza, and Rocco

Lampone address him as Don Corleone in the final moments of the film, thus recognizing his new status after the day's achievements.

The immediate effect of the baptism sequence, therefore, is a muffled narrative causality that conceals Michael's brutality. This lack of clarity, however, is compensated with the overall affective impact of the sequence. Ethical concerns are largely overshadowed by the visual grandiosity and epic scale of the sequence. Michael may operate in a different capitalist environment than his father, but *The Godfather* makes certain that he has an equally solid defence for his crimes. It is, however, a defence that lasts for the duration of the particular sequence and relies on concealing rather than justifying his crimes. Consequently, the baptism sequence in itself is inadequate proof that Michael manages to continue the business-family reciprocity established by his father. Vito achieved it by bringing *la via vecchia* into *la via nuova*, but Michael has already rejected his ethnicity. Before he puts his business plan in operation in the baptism sequence, therefore, Michael first needs to reconnect with his ethnic roots, complete with a narrative detour to Sicily.

### **Michael's Roots**

By the time Michael executes his rivals and establishes his monopoly, he is no longer the all-American college graduate and war veteran we meet at the beginning of the film. But neither is he a man who has yielded to the pressures of the system and become a bloodthirsty capitalist boss, as Hess argues. Michael has undergone a different transformation before becoming Godfather, from assimilated immigrant to revived ethnic. It will be recalled that the revival of ethnicity faced the challenge of explaining why immigrants waited until the 70s to reconnect with their heritage. Revival advocates commonly responded by citing Hansen's Law, 'what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember'. The first hour of *Part I* follows Hansen's Law to the letter. It is 1945 and Michael, the son of an immigrant in his mid-20s, wishes to forget his ethnicity. His children will reach adulthood by the 70s and, if the



Law proves correct, they will remember their ethnic heritage.<sup>25</sup> It was already the 70s, however, when *The Godfather* reached audiences and Michael seems to enjoy some contextually assigned foresight. When the time comes for Michael to become involved in the family business, *The Godfather* collapses time so that he undergoes an anachronistic, bi-generational transformation in less than a month.

Any viewer even vaguely familiar with Hollywood conventions should be able to tell from the opening sequence of *Part I* that Michael will be playing a more significant role in the story than his brothers. In terms of screen time allocation, amount of dialogue, and number of close-ups, Michael is picked out and privileged from the crowd at the wedding reception. Equally significant is the fact that, of all of Vito's sons, Michael is the one closest to the masculine ideal of *l'uomo di pazienza*. Sonny is Vito's eldest son and his rightful successor. As the film opens, Sonny is already the family underboss and shows all the masculine strength and authority required for the job. Yet, he has none of their father's patience and self-restraint. Sonny is too strong, too resolute, too violent, and too macho to handle the family business. While Vito needs his help during the wedding reception, Sonny is too busy cheating on his wife with the bridesmaid in the bathroom and smashing the cameras of reporters. Sonny's hot-headedness later costs him his life. In a fit of rage after finding out that Carlo has betrayed the family, he rushes unaccompanied out of the Corleone compound and straight into an ambush. His death leaves Fredo next in line for the family leadership, but Fredo is too weak for the job. He gets drunk during the reception and ridicules himself. A man who can neither exercise self-restraint while consuming alcohol nor handle its effects afterwards is simply less of a man by Sicilian standards. Tom Hagen shows the ideal combination of determination and self-control, but he is an adopted son and can only elevate himself up to the rank of consigliere. *L'ordine della famiglia* gives undisputed precedence to relationships of blood.

Despite Michael's attempts at assimilation and Vito's aspirations to see him one day become a judge, the ethnic revival agenda predicts that Michael's heritage is destined to resurface, negate his assimilation, and shape his future. His Americanness

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<sup>25</sup> In applying Hansen's Law to explain Michael's character development, I am relying on its popularity as an explanation of the revival and the general acceptance of its validity in the revival literature. I have outlined my objections to Hansen's Law in chapter two.

is the product of education, a contract with the U.S. army, and the adoption of bourgeois manners and speech. These are only acquired characteristics of identity that cannot conceal the genetic mark of his Italian descent. Coppola allegedly objected to the studio's choice of Robert Redford for the role of Michael because he did not look adequately Italian (P. Cowie 23). Instead, he opted for the largely unknown Al Pacino, whose appearance would highlight the tensions between descent and consent in Michael's character. If Robert Redford appeared on screen in a military uniform, holding Diane Keaton's hand, audiences would immediately recognize the Wild West hero of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). Al Pacino's jet-black hair and olive-brown skin, however, are noticeably, if not stereotypically, ethnic. His facial characteristics make the uniform, the bourgeois manners, and the WASP fiancée stand out as deliberate choices that contradict his ethnic genes. Hence, Michael is not perceived as an American war veteran, but as an Italian man in American drag.

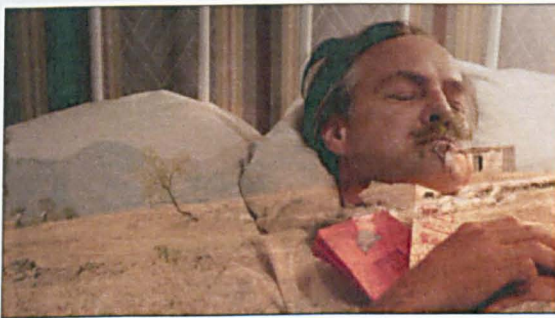


Figure 50



Figure 51

The film first moves to Sicily after the aforementioned incident when Vito returns from the hospital and Tom Hagen informs him that it was Michael who killed Sollozzo and McCluskey. Still unable to walk or talk, Vito rests in his bed, while the rest of the family is having lunch downstairs. Vito turns his glance to the side in a medium close-up, slowly closes his eyes, and a more melodic arrangement of the film's theme score cues in a slow dissolve into the Sicilian landscape (figures 50 and 51). The gradual transition, the music cue, and Vito's closed eyes give the impression that we are experiencing both a spatial and a temporal distancing. Sicily is introduced as a dream sequence or a flashback to Vito Corleone's childhood. This is the Sicily of barren, golden-brown hills and pale blue skies, of buildings with rusty balcony railings and

decaying stucco facades. Sicily is the birthplace of *la via vecchia*, an island inhabited by wise old men sitting in silence outside coffee shops, coy young women walking around in groups, and rifle-carrying young men, always ready to defend their honour.

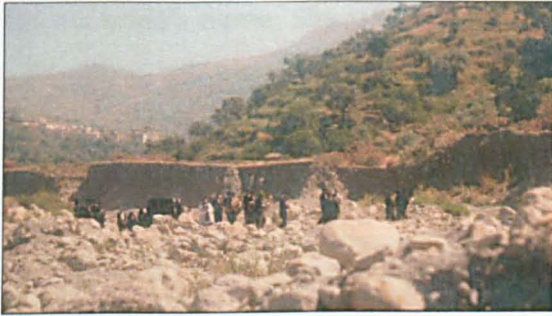


Figure 52



Figure 53

Immediately following the establishing shot of the Sicilian landscape, Michael Corleone enters the frame and we realize that this is in fact not a flashback. Yet, the same uncanny sense of pastness continues throughout the Sicily segment, as if Michael has travelled back in time for a crash course in the principles of *la via vecchia*. Michael encounters an idealized image of Sicily, viewed through the nostalgic lens of immigrant imagination. Sounds and images seem filtered through Vito's earlier experience of Sicily when he was a child. Indeed, when *Part II* takes us back to Vito's childhood, Sicily looks exactly the same as when Michael visits, an isolated island with a feudal social structure, untouched by modernity. The second film includes two segments filmed in Sicily. The first is set in 1901, when the nine-year-old Vito is forced to migrate to America, after Don Ciccio kills his mother (figure 52), and the second twenty-four years afterwards, when Vito returns to seek revenge and kill Don Ciccio (figure 53). When Michael visits Sicily in 1946, only a grown tree in Don Ciccio's yard shows the passage of time and a few scattered images of soldiers allude to World War II. In every other respect, Sicily remains the same throughout the *Godfather* saga, a sepia-tinted pastoral idyll that exists to facilitate immigrants' reconnection with their roots.

While on the island, Michael delves deep into *la via vecchia*. From a New Yorker engaged to a WASP woman (figure 54), Michael transforms to a happily married Sicilian farmer and exchanges his military uniform, suits, and overcoats for a vest, walking stick, and flat hat (figure 55). One need look no further than the arrangements

for Michael's wedding in Sicily to appreciate the patriarchal mores of *la via vecchia*. Michael falls in love upon laying eyes on a beautiful young woman and immediately visits her father to ask for her hand in marriage. The two men reach an agreement, arrange a date for the wedding, and only afterwards does Michael remember to ask for his bride's name. She is called Apollonia, which seems to enchant Michael almost as much as her beauty. He utters her name slowly, as if appealing to its ancient origin to evoke Sicily's Roman past.

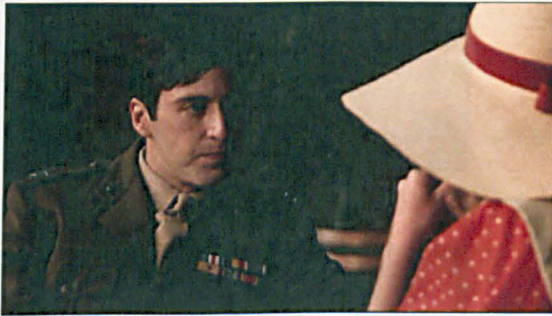


Figure 54



Figure 55

Considering the more relaxed rhythm of life in Sicily, it seems all the more striking how much Michael manages to do in so little time. With a rough calculation of ellipses, the first scene in Sicily (from the aforementioned dissolve from Vito's bedroom to the first cut back to New York) has a narrative duration of no longer than a few hours. Within this timeframe, Michael meets Don Tommasino, an associate of the Corleones who offers him protection, visits his father's village, falls in love, and arranges his wedding. During his wedding, Michael still has a bruised eye, a reminder that it was not that long ago when McCluskey punched him outside the hospital, an incident that occurred at least a couple of weeks before Michael escaped to Sicily. Michael will have the same bruise until his final day on the island, an indication of how brief his stay is. The metaphorical suggestions of travelling back in time and the speed of Michael's acculturation in *la via vecchia* underline the deeper purpose of his exile. As if anachronistically experiencing the 70s roots craze in 1946, Michael wants to physically reconnect with his ancestral roots. This reconnection will offer him the strength to face the evils of corporate capitalism and the breakdown of the family unit. As discussed in chapter two, the revival of ethnicity found popular expression in literal

and metaphorical journeys back to the motherland. These heritage quests had both a didactic and a therapeutic purpose in the 70s. Ethnic roots provided a source of meaningfulness and certainty, a remedy to the decade's cultural, political, and social volatility.



Figure 56 (MILAN)



Figure 57 (VENICE)



Figure 58 (ROME)



Figure 59 (PALERMO)

Michael's return to Sicily can be usefully compared to Charlie and Catherine Scorsese's trip to Italy, as they describe it in *Italianamerican*. As Catherine Scorsese flips through their holiday album and explains, 'this is Milan, this is Venice, this is Rome, this is Palermo', the corresponding photographs alternate in full screen (figures 56-59). 'Anything that we saw, we took a picture', she claims. Nevertheless, she was evidently not very impressed with Italy's sights. She rushes through photographs of the tower of Pisa, has trouble remembering the names of most landmarks, and finds the nude statues in Palermo's Piazza Pretoria 'just crazy', pretending with childlike coyness to be embarrassed that she posed next to one for a photograph. The photographs that linger in full screen show the Scorseses' dinners in different Italian cities. The sequence of nearly indistinguishable dinner scenes suits both the comic tone and the recurring

food motif of *Italianamerican*. Beyond the comedy, however, portraying their journey as a series of dinners highlights its primary purpose. Like Michael Corleone, the Scorseses are second generation immigrants visiting the birthplace of their parents for the first time. They largely ignore the tourist sites and devote most of their time locating and getting to know their relatives. Dinners provide both a friendly setting for their meetings and a chance to taste authentic Italian food. Considering the revival's emphasis on the corporeality of ethnicity and the centrality of Catholicism in Italian-American culture, the consumption of food can also be seen as a symbolic communion with the motherland. Just like Michael Corleone seals his corporeal connection to *la via vecchia* by consummating his marriage with Apollonia, the Scorseses accomplish their own connection by consuming the produce of the Italian land.

Michael's stay in Sicily ends with Apollonia's violent death. One of Michael's guards has betrayed him and allied with his enemies to booby-trap his car. Apollonia uses the car to learn how to drive, a sign of industrialization that has invaded *la via vecchia*, and gets killed by the bomb meant for her husband. With his wife dead and his hiding place no longer secret, Michael returns to America. The next time we see him, Michael seems to have undergone yet another transformation. He is not dressed like a Sicilian farmer anymore, but neither does he appear to be the American soldier and college graduate that we first met. Looking sterner and less youthful in a dark suit and bowler hat, Michael has matured into an Italian-American Mafioso. By travelling back to his land of origin and symbolically to a preindustrial past, Michael has gone through the same formative experiences as his father and is ready to become the new Don.

In a brief conversation with Kay upon his return, Michael displays his new comfort with his hyphenated identity. From someone who could confidently affirm 'That's my family, Kay, it's not me', Michael shifts his loyalties to the side of his family. In response to Kay's astonishment upon hearing that he now works for his father, Michael tells her that his 'father's no different than any other powerful man; any man who's responsible for other people, like a senator or a president'. 'Do you know how naive you sound?' Kay wonders, 'senators and presidents don't have men killed'. 'Who's being naive, Kay?' Michael replies, and implicitly accepts that a Mafia Don is no less ruthless or monstrous than any other figure of authority in American capitalism.

Yet, Michael's ruthlessness and monstrosity are justified and pardoned by his attachment to *la via vecchia*. Ethnicity neither conceals nor sugar-coats his murders, extortions, and corruption, but it does transform them from American crimes into Italian acts of familial and masculine honour.

In comparing his father to presidents and senators, Michael also underlines his own status as the future Don. Soon after this conversation with Kay, he will be called to put his ethnic crimes in the service of advancing the family business in America. While Italianness justifies his criminality, Americanness allows him to refashion it as an intrinsic part of American business. Michael Corleone is not a sociopathic individual in the margins of society, but a family man, a respected member of his community, and a corporate boss who successfully makes the transition from industrial to advanced capitalism. At a time that America was losing faith in government authority and exhibiting an overt distrust toward corporations, Michael Corleone brings an ethnic moral code into this elite world. His actions may be no less criminal than those of presidents, senators, and corporate bosses, but at least he combines them with masculine honour, patriarchal authority, and familial values.

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At the end of *Part I* Kay goes into Michael's office and confronts him about Carlo's murder. Michael concedes to answering one question about his business, under the condition that this will be the first and last time she asks. They move closer, facing each other, and Kay mumbles, 'Is it true?' Michael looks into her eyes and calmly replies, 'no'. Their conversation is one of the few instances that *The Godfather* resorts to the classic shot-reverse-shot arrangement. Not only does the editing device highlight the confrontation, but it also impels us to choose a side. For Glenn Man, the choice is obvious:

I would argue that it is the last sequence of the film that is more effective in shattering the romanticization of Michael [...]. What makes the ending effective in exposing Michael is the apparatus's construction of him as the object, not subject, of the sequence. Over-the-shoulder shots situate Kay as the subject, with Michael in the background under scrutiny. Though Kay would believe

Michael's lie that he did not order Carlo killed, the apparatus is successful in barring Michael's hypocrisy and heartlessness. (117)

Man's analysis relies on the semiotic principle that over-the-shoulder shots objectify the one who is being looked at and transfer agency to the one who observes. Even assuming this to be dogmatically true, the scene includes an equal number of over-the-shoulder shots from both Kay's and Michael's positions.

More problematic than any semiotic inconsistencies, however, are the ethical and ideological assumptions underpinning Man's argument. If Michael lies to Kay, Man suggests, then he is automatically a hypocrite. This principle, however, can only apply to the Michael we meet at the beginning of the film, the bright Ivy-Leaguer on a path to become a judge or a senator. If that Michael grew up to become a bloodthirsty corporate boss, who kills his brother-in-law and then lies to his wife about it, then *The Godfather* would indeed come close to criticizing the inherent evils of the capitalist system. It would have 'shatter[ed] the romanticization of Michael' (Man 117) and 'crushed' the 'tender, moving family scenes' (Hess 82) to disclose the darker side of American bourgeois values. Michael, however, becomes this bloodthirsty corporate boss only after reconnecting with his ethnic origins. Reconnecting with his ethnicity allows Michael to moderate the immorality and brutality of his crimes, turning them into admirable, honourable, and even ethical acts by Sicilian standards. When he kills Carlo, it is because he betrayed Connie's honour and the family's trust. When he lies to Kay, it is to keep her out of his business, as *la via vecchia* dictates. As a WASP woman, Kay is unable to understand these values. A proper *donna di seriatà* would never dare ask her husband about his business. As an *uomo di pazienza*, Michael shows patience with Kay's disrespectful inquisitiveness, but has no option but to lie and show her the way out of his office.

If *The Godfather* does not indict capitalism, is Jameson right in arguing that *la via vecchia* is just an ethnic gloss to render capitalism more palatable for the masses? Both *The Godfather* and the particularities of American culture in the 70s call for a more nuanced interpretation. On the one hand, the suggestion that audiences in the 70s would not recognize the reification of capitalism beneath the ethnic utopia contradicts both the overt references to business deals and corporate corruption in the film and the widespread claims in the popular press that saw the Mafia as a



metaphor for America. On the other hand, with the Vietnam War reaching a point of exhaustion, trust in the government declining, and liberation from patriarchy posing as the next best thing, capitalism was only one aspect of America in need of reification. Capitalism is not *The Godfather's* hidden ideological agenda, but a necessary condition in the fantasy that social integration and patriarchy can survive and function in corporate America. To phrase it in Jameson's terminology, the ethnic utopia does not reify capitalism but exists harmoniously within it. The traditional Sicilian family is not a sacrosanct institution on the margins of America, but central, successful, proudly ethnic, and, under Michael's leadership, unabashedly corporate.



Figure 60



Figure 61

The final images of *Part I* are framed from Kay's perspective, looking back into Michael's office as his subordinates pay their respects and recognize his new status as Godfather (figure 60). It may be tempting to interpret this image as favouring Kay's perspective and isolating Michael in the background, behind two doorways, into his self-enclosed bubble of corruption. In the film's last shot, however, the camera moves back into Don Corleone's office looking outside at Kay (figure 61). Tom Hagen slams the door and turns the screen black, leaving Kay isolated and the viewer in the company of Michael Corleone. For all those middle class, WASP men, who in 1972 were looking for a way to resist liberation and cling onto their cultural hegemony, Don Corleone's office must have been a privileged and comforting space to inhabit. They are left in the company of a white American capitalist, who can also rely on the left side of his hyphenated identity to keep patriarchy alive.

## CHAPTER FIVE: *Rocky*

Halfway through Oliver Stone's *Any Given Sunday* (2000) a montage sequence juxtaposes Jack 'Cap' Rooney's weight lifting regimen with Willie Beamen's music video advertising a protein shake. Rooney is the star quarterback of the Miami Sharks who struggles to get back in shape after an injury and reclaim his position. Beamen is the talented young newcomer who has replaced him and catapulted himself to immediate fame. The sequence ends with Rooney's wife, Cindy, instructing her exhausted husband, with genuine concern and slight sarcasm, 'Yo, Rocky, enough, you're gonna hurt yourself'.

Despite the twenty-five years separating *Any Given Sunday* from the first *Rocky* film and the shift from boxing to football, the mere mention of the name Rocky readily evokes associations with courage, exhaustive training, and fearlessness in the face of superior adversaries. The Philadelphia club boxer's preparation for a Bicentennial fight against the heavyweight champion, Apollo Creed, stands out as one of the most memorable montage sequences in Hollywood history, not least for its triumphant score, Bill Conti's 'Gonna Fly Now'. Every *Rocky* sequel reproduces an extended and often exaggerated version of the sequence, while similar ones have become a staple in sports films. *Rocky* has also been so incessantly copied, adapted, and parodied<sup>26</sup> since 1976 that its hero has become a cultural icon, the archetypal American underdog.

It is precisely Rocky's function as an archetype that explains Cindy's sarcastic intonation of the instruction to her husband. She wants to remind him that too much exercise is more likely to injure him than turn him into Rocky, no less than it can turn him into Hercules or Superman. Rocky may not be god-like or superhuman, but he belongs to the same pantheon of mythic heroes.<sup>27</sup> Even in the original film, before sequels and popular imagination blew Rocky's legend out of proportion, his moral

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<sup>26</sup> To cite but a few examples: Eddie Murphy recreates Rocky's famous climb up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art as a parody in the 1996 *Nutty Professor* remake. Toni Collette also sprints up the Rocky steps as an exhausted dog walker in *In Her Shoes* (2005). Reebok invested in the recognizability of Rocky's training montage for a 2003 television commercial starring Allen Iverson. Will Smith put on Rocky's training shoes twice, in a 1994 episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and in the 1999 music video for 'Freakin' It'. More recently, YouTube has provided a platform for hundreds of budding Rockys to share their imitations and parodies.

<sup>27</sup> Although retrospective associations with Rambo, Sylvester Stallone's second alter ego, certainly gesture towards superhuman qualities.

universe is founded on simplistic binary oppositions that one is more likely to encounter in myths and fairy tales: the humble club fighter vs. the arrogant champion, the underdog vs. the favourite, the courageous individual vs. the calculating team, the working class man vs. the corporate man. Rocky starts as a self-declared 'bum from the neighbourhood' and manages in less than six months to become a credible contender for the heavyweight championship, find new meaning in his life, and start a relationship with his future wife, Adrian. *Any Given Sunday* constructs a less idealistic moral universe for professional football. Unlike Rocky, Cap Rooney has been a motivated and skilled athlete all his life, but, to no fault of his own and despite all his efforts and determination, will be replaced by the rising newcomer. Being called Rocky is not so much a compliment as a reality check, a reminder of the fictiveness of the Rocky myth and the pragmatism of his own circumstances.

*Any Given Sunday* may not share *Rocky's* moral simplicity, but one binary opposition remains unaltered and renders Cindy's comment particularly fitting. Like Rocky Balboa, Cap Rooney is the undeserving *white* victim and, like Apollo Creed, Willie Beamen is the media-obsessed *black* victimizer. *Rocky's* representation of race has come to define its trajectory in popular culture, to the extent that it surfaces as a subtext to a brief comment in a 2000 film that otherwise shows no intention of propagating racial stereotypes. Beginning with Stallone's highly publicized inspiration for *Rocky's* script in a biracial superfight between Muhammad Ali and Chuck Wepner, extending to a highly selective adoption of Ali's political rhetoric in the portrayal of Apollo Creed, and escalating after the film's release with accusations of racism in the press, *Rocky's* heroic whiteness seems inseparable from Apollo's villainous blackness.

The racist overtones of *Rocky's* rags-to-riches story provide this chapter's territory of exploration. This is an admittedly well-trodden territory that allows little room for diverse interpretations. In what is perhaps the first scholarly treatment of *Rocky*, three years after its release, Daniel Leab summarizes what is today the consensus in the literature: '*Rocky* captures a particular mood of the Bicentennial, which saw the reaffirmation of many traditional values, including racial prejudices that seemed rejuvenated' (269). Whereas *The Godfather's* relationship to American history is grounded in simultaneous valourization and criticism, multilayered allegory, and competing interpretations, *Rocky* straightforwardly proposes that white America can

escape from cynicism and hopelessness (Rocky's state of mind at the beginning of the film) by rising up to the challenge of black empowerment (Apollo Creed).

This chapter does not propose a radically different interpretation of *Rocky*, but reconsiders how the dominant interpretation corresponds with the cultural history of the 70s. My investigation begins with the recognition of a seeming paradox. The ease with which *Rocky's* ideological allegiances can be retrospectively boiled down to a simple take-home message carries the risk of suggesting that white Americans in 1976 would just as easily embrace them. The combination of an unashamedly racist ideology with a nostalgic resurrection of the American Dream does not immediately appear like a recipe for the most successful film of 1976. At a time when the civil rights victories were becoming firmly rooted in American social structures, an explicitly demonized African American character would upset white audiences' liberal sensibilities and pretensions. Consequently, my guiding research question is not whether racist overtones do exist in *Rocky*, but how and why they can credibly exist in the most profitable film of 1976. Therein also lies the contribution of Rocky's Italian-American masculinity.

The chapter argues that the Italian-American man at the film's centre renders its Horatio Alger story more credible and its racism more palatable. Rocky is white enough to fit the stereotype of the 'honest, hardworking American', while his distinctly ethnic whiteness allows the film to establish a nostalgic connection to an imagined simpler moral universe, a 50s proletarian utopia, where the American Dream can believably flourish. Within this setting, *Rocky* advances a new and more nuanced racist ideology, one that includes self-concealing mechanisms and maintains pretences of tolerance and acceptance. Instead of advocating the subjugation of African Americans, the film shifts the attention to the white pugilist as the undeserving victim of the black champion's overblown empowerment. Following the ethnic revival principles, Italian-Americans have never enjoyed white privilege and are not responsible for reparations to African Americans. With the benefit of this protection, *Rocky* oscillates freely between the politics of white victimization and a self-gratifying liberalism of applauding civil rights

The chapter's first two sections explore *Rocky's* attachment to the Bicentennial and the American Dream respectively. They both feature prominently in the narrative,

but also surface through representational devices, intentional and symptomatic intertextual references, and the film's circulation in the public sphere. The third section concentrates on the role of the Italian-American man in resolving the conflicts arising from the film's parallel efforts to give a realistic picture of the bleak Bicentennial atmosphere and resurrect the American Dream. Subsequently, I turn the attention to the representation of Apollo Creed as a vehicle for establishing allegorical, generic, and intertextual links to the civil rights movement. The final section turns again to Rocky's ethnic masculinity and its part in concealing and symbolically resolving the racial, social, and gender tensions he encounters in his rise to success.

### **'November 25, 1975, Philadelphia'**

Released a few months after America celebrated its Bicentennial, *Rocky* exhibits a heightened awareness of its historical context. Superimposed against the film's opening shot, the title 'November 25, 1975, Philadelphia' claims a topos of authenticity for the story that will unfold (figure 62). Philadelphia is the city where the Declaration of Independence was signed, where the Liberty Bell was first rung, and where most commemorative events took place on 4 July 1976. 'November 25' takes audiences almost exactly one year before the film's official release. *Rocky's* story will span the seven months between 25 November 1975 and 4 July 1976, culminating in a Bicentennial boxing fight between Apollo Creed, the newly enfranchised African American champion, and Rocky Balboa, a descendant of Christopher Columbus. It will be recalled from chapter two, however, that the Bicentennial climate was far from celebratory. Two hundred years after the Declaration of Independence, America offered little reason for celebration. In the two years leading up to the Bicentennial, the nation experienced its highest rate of unemployment, its first military defeat abroad, a shocking political scandal, and the first resignation of a U.S. president. Instead of grand parades and displays of patriotism, the Bicentennial was celebrated in an atmosphere of disappointment and reserved hope for a better future.



Figure 62



Figure 63

*Rocky* evokes this atmosphere from the very beginning. The backdrop to the date-and-place title in the opening shot is a close-up of a painted image of Jesus holding the chalice. As the camera pulls out and downwards, it reveals the image to be an old mural on the dilapidated wall of the 'Resurrection Athletic Club' (figure 63). Below the mural, two sweaty boxers fight in a makeshift ring, swarmed in a cloud by cigarette smoke and a cacophony of bet exchanges from the disorderly horde of onlookers. In a typical New Hollywood juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, the Christian imagery on the wall provides a stark contrast to the violent and monetary exchanges taking place below it. *The Godfather*, as we have seen, constructs its baptism scene around the same themes. With its fading colours and peeling paint, the mural of Jesus stands as a sad reminder of the building's olden days, when it was possibly a church, a place of faith, and Philadelphia was still a gleaming modern metropolis and a symbol of American progress.

By the time of the Bicentennial, however, Philadelphia had already seen many of its residents move to the suburbs, while the proposed Bicentennial world fair that would revamp the city never took place. The city had already become part of the Rustbelt, the long strip of urban industrial centres spanning from the Midwest to the Northeast. As early as 1961, Jane Jacobs documented the nation's urban decline in *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. In 1969, Kevin Phillips linked the decline to political developments in *The Emerging Republican Majority*. It was Kirkpatrick Sale in 1975, however, who famously traced America's move from industrial production to a service sector economy in geographical terms—from the Rustbelt to the Sunbelt, the nation's southern rim, from Florida to Southern California.

Hollywood in the 70s turned its gaze with fascination at the declining metropolis for its themes and symbolism. Films like *The French Connection* (1971) and *Serpico* find stories of crime and police corruption in the derelict inner city neighbourhoods. In the case of *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *The Warriors* (1978), the Rustbelt becomes an allegorical reflection of psychological estrangement. As *Rocky*'s narrative progresses, we witness the effects of the Rustbelt reflected in the life of its eponymous hero. Rocky Balboa is one of the two boxers fighting below the mural of Jesus, but the sign 'Resurrection' can only serve as an ironic comment on his circumstances. Rocky is a thirty-year-old club fighter who has never managed to break into professional boxing. He participates in organized fights to subsidize the scant living he earns from working as a strongman for Gazzo, the Italian neighbourhood's loan shark. *Rocky*'s early scenes in the shipping wharves and the Fishtown neighbourhood frame Rocky in the midst of abandoned cranes and rusty train coaches. When he goes to collect money from Gazzo's debtors, the film takes the opportunity to show Philadelphia's deserted dockyards, garbage-infested streets, and abandoned shops (figure 64). Tom Milne praised *Rocky* in 1976 for 'turn[ing] Philadelphian exteriors into something very close to a series of Magritte paintings: extraordinary nocturnal landscapes of strangely dislocated urban geometry [...] in which the human figures seem estranged' (78).

*Rocky* is not the first film to explore the connections between the Italian-American boxer and working class malaise. The film rehearses the well-established stereotype of the Italian-American man as the Palooka. Ham Fisher popularized the stereotype in his comic strip *Joe Palooka*, created in 1919, which featured a lovable but crude and somewhat inarticulate boxer with fists of iron and a heart of gold. The word was defined in 1927 by *The Ring*, the most important boxing periodical at the time, as 'a tenth rater, a boxer without ability, a nobody' (cited in Bondanella 93). Classical Hollywood played an instrumental role in perpetuating the stereotype. *Rocky*'s predecessors include *Golden Boy* (1939) and the Rocky Graziano biopic *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956). Even in a film like *Kid Galahad* (1937), where the leading character is not Italian-American, the boxing world is populated predominantly by Italian-Americans. 'Ethnic identification', explains Grindon in his history of the genre, 'intersected with class difference, characterizing the boxer as a poor worker selling

physical labor in an industrialized economy which found little value in his skills' (55). Loic Wacquant similarly locates the sport's attachment to the ethnic working class 'not only in the physical nature of the activity but also in the social recruitment of its practitioners and their continuing dependence on blue-collar or unskilled service jobs to support their career in the ring' (502).



Figure 64



Figure 65

The prospects of blue-collarism are even grimmer for Rocky and the other boxers at the Resurrection Athletic Club. These are not talented athletes who find time after work to pursue their passion for the sport, but disillusioned labourers of the Rustbelt. Club boxing is not just a way to release testosterone, but their primary source of income. Indeed, Rocky shows less passion and anger inside the ring than when he later loses his locker at Mickey's gym to Dipper, a young and more promising contender. Rocky's dual occupation as a boxer and a strongman, furthermore, exemplifies Bondanella's claim that both the Mafioso and the Palooka are essentially different articulations of the stereotype that restricts Italian-American men to the lower ranks of the working class (96). Like crime, boxing offers the potential for someone who is uneducated and unskilled to earn an income. Indeed, at the beginning of the film, Rocky seems to have more promising career prospects in gangsterism. Considering that he is well past his prime as a boxer, he could have easily developed into a full-time gangster in the context of a different film.

Paulie, Adrian's brother and Rocky's only friend, represents mid-70s working class angst better than any other character in the film. Paulie has reached middle-age, but is still single and shares an apartment with his sister. He has a job at the slaughter house, but is left unemployed halfway through the film. Paulie turns to drinking and



spends most of his time bullying Adrian, being a horrible friend to Rocky, and doing seemingly everything possible to alienate the only two people in his life. We get a glimpse of insight into Paulie's character and behaviour in a brief shot of a framed photograph in his apartment depicting a young man in military uniform (figure 65). Although *Rocky* never clarifies if Paulie is indeed the man in the photograph and why he is in uniform, it takes only a small inferential step for 1976 audiences to recognize in Paulie a cynical but traumatized Vietnam War veteran. It was only a year before that the last American soldiers returned from what was widely perceived as a meaninglessly prolonged war. Many received no reward or compensation and possessed no skills or training to find employment. Like many real life examples of soldiers returning from Vietnam, Paulie joins the Rustbelt's already overpopulated working class and ends up an unemployed and abusive alcoholic.

*Rocky's* scene of quiet contemplation before the fight and the instances of social



Figure 66

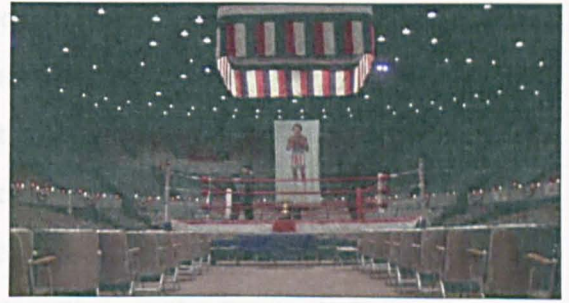


Figure 67

*Rocky's* scene of quiet contemplation before the fight and the instances of social

A year before *Rocky's* release, a commentator in *The New Yorker* wondered if noble American ideals are merely 'a cover for self interest and greed', before proceeding to suggest that 'the two-hundredth anniversary be a time of silence. Some people might want to call it a time of mourning for great ideas—ideas that, though they seemed splendid once, are now regarded as unsightly, socially undesirable, or bad for business' ('The Talk'). *Rocky* succinctly captures this climate of mourning in the brief scene of Rocky's visit to the boxing arena before the fight with Apollo. Accompanied by a melodic piano orchestration of Conti's score, the scene offers both Rocky and the audience a few moments of quiet contemplation before the climactic fight. The extreme long shot of the vast empty arena, decorated in red-white-and-blue bunting, with rows of perfectly aligned empty chairs, resonates with concerns about

the emptiness and pointlessness of grandiose national celebrations (figures 66 and 67). Such contextual associations become all the more pronounced when the fight's promoter joins Rocky in the arena. Rocky notices that his poster has him wearing the wrong colour shorts, which prompts the promoter's dismissive comment, 'It doesn't really matter, you are gonna give them a great show anyway'. A few moments later, Rocky confesses to Adrian, 'I can't beat him. It don't matter; all I want is to go the distance'. Rocky's Fourth of July realization speaks not only to his own circumstances, but also to a broader concern in 1976 that the nation had not actually gone the distance to deserve a Bicentennial show.

### **Resurrecting the American Dream**

Rocky's scene of quiet contemplation before the fight and the instances of social commentary in the first half of the film lay claim to a documentary-like attachment to the present. As the narrative progresses, however, *Rocky* becomes less interested in documenting America's Bicentennial angst and more in offering a remedy to the nation's loss of hope. Underneath the contemporary language and physicality of boxing, *Rocky* finds an old-fashioned tale of one man's struggle to beat the odds, a restatement of a nearly forgotten American faith in self-reliance, individualism, and courage. What the film ultimately proposes is nothing less than a resurrection of the American Dream—for what is Rocky if not an honest, hardworking American, who grabs an opportunity and manages to turn his life around?

The Declaration of Independence famously states that 'all men are created equal' and have inalienable rights to 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness'. The American Dream is rooted in this doctrine. It expresses a faith in the individual's ability to secure a better future, regardless of past origins or present circumstances. When Apollo proposes the Bicentennial fight, he never envisions that Rocky will be a formidable opponent. His goal is to stage a spectacular and profitable Bicentennial show, while bolstering his popularity as the champion who gave a chance to an underdog. Immune to Apollo's ulterior motives, however, Rocky discovers the loftier meaning of the national anniversary. In no subtle analogy, Rocky's inspirational rise from failed club boxer to near champion is prompted by American history and

culminates in a celebration of America. Stallone spelled out *Rocky's* attachment to the American Dream in an interview with *The New York Times* shortly after the film's release: 'I've really had it with anti-this and anti-that, that silver cloud always has to loom. I want to be remembered as a man of raging optimism, who believes in the American Dream' (Klemesrud).

Stallone's reference to manhood is not just a coincidental use of gendered language. The American ethos of individualism and upward mobility has traditionally been a masculine ethos: a man who fails in building a career, buying property, and becoming a breadwinner for his family is a failed man. It will be recalled from chapter three that 70s popular discourse typically articulated the so called crisis of masculinity as a crisis of American values. Stallone contributes to this discourse in associating the decline of American patriotism with the absence of masculine role models. 'Where are all the heroes?', he wonders, and immediately proceeds with the alarming realization that 'even the cowboys today are perverts—they all sleep with their horses' (Klemesrud). Stallone's crude reasoning may rely on more than a tinge of homophobia, but it accurately reflects the near extinction of patriotic men from the big screen in the 70s. A brief look at Hollywood's output in 1976 will illustrate this point. *Rocky* was the year's highest grossing film, followed by *A Star is Born*, *King Kong*, *All the President's Men*, *Silver Streak*, and *The Omen*. *All the President's Men* joined *Rocky*, along with *Network*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Bound for Glory*, as the year's nominees for the best picture Academy Award. With the exception of *Rocky*, the all-American model of heroic masculinity is completely absent from these films. *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle is particularly notable for representing the violent upside of American machismo. *All the President's Men* and *Bound for Glory* come somewhat close to the archetype, but machismo is undermined by their protagonists' display of men's lib sensitivities and choice of non-physical vocations—journalism and music respectively.

Boxing provides *Rocky* with an effective vehicle for resurrecting both heroic masculinity and the American Dream. As we have seen in chapter three, popular culture has commonly turned to the warriors and cowboys of preindustrial societies for readily available examples of heroic masculinity. Unconstrained by the requirements of civil life, these men rely almost exclusively on the projection of physical might to assert their self-determination. The boxing ring offers a controlled

space within the contemporary social order for the revival of primal, physical masculinity. As Leger Grindon characteristically puts it, 'the boxer, stripped bare in the face of his opponent, harks back to man's primitive origins before even his skill as a tool maker distinguished him' (66). Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque provides further insight into the mechanics of this reconnection to past masculine values. Like the medieval carnival, boxing facilitates a symbolic reversal of social hierarchies. Through a hedonistic consumption of food and drink, the plebeian participant at the medieval fair gets to behave like a king. The excessive violence of boxing similarly allows the post-industrial man to reign over other men.

While boxing allows *Rocky* easy access to a world of primal masculinity, Rocky's American Dream does not occur only at the level of gender metaphors. The film follows a rags-to-riches storyline, popularized in the boxing genre through such films as *Kid Gallahad*, *Golden Boy*, and *Somebody Up There Likes Me*. When Rocky manages to go the distance against the heavyweight champion, his masculine achievement is also a vocational one, a chance to break into the better-paid league of professional boxing. Equally revealing are *Rocky's* moments of deviation from the generic tropes. *Rocky* does not unfold as a suspenseful series of victories and losses, as is commonly the case in sports films, but follows the hero's lonely preparation for a single fight, which he actually loses. Whereas *Somebody Up There Likes Me* has Graziano parading around the neighbourhood in a Cadillac convertible after winning the championship (figure 68), Rocky's lasting impression is of a man struggling to succeed, both in and out of the ring. It will not be until the end of the first sequel that Rocky gains the championship. His defeat at the end of the 1976 film affirms the cliché that the journey matters more than the destination, a shift of emphasis in traditional renditions of the American Dream, which, however, fits more suitably in the cultural context of 1976. In this respect, *Rocky* also echoes Susan Jeffords's argument about the representation of masculinity in Vietnam War films from the same period. What 'distinguishes Vietnam representation from earlier periods in U.S. cultural expression' is a shift of emphasis to 'how we performed rather than that we lost' (5). *Rocky* resembles these films in proposing the hero's manly rebirth without an attendant demand for triumphant victory.



Figure 68



Figure 69



Figure 70



Figure 71

*Rocky* appropriately ends with an abrupt, dramatic freeze frame that does not allow Rocky to celebrate (figure 69). Even if he was allowed the time, Rocky is severely injured and unable to comprehend the split decision that resulted in his loss. As the opening of *Rocky II* (1979) reveals, the fight with Apollo sends him to the hospital and risks ending his career before it properly starts. Yet, the first film does give him a chance to celebrate the much more meaningful achievement of taking charge of his life. Rocky's celebration comes before the final fight, when he manages to jog up the seventy-two stone steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. When he first started training, Rocky could not complete his routine without falling out of breath. Professional and personal success required that he quit smoking, build up his body mass, and increase his stamina. It is still dark outside when Rocky goes out for yet another run and, in no subtle symbolism, the light of the new day shines through as he effortlessly sprints up the steps and raises up his hands in triumphant slow motion (figure 70). At the same time, 'Gonna Fly Now' reaches a crescendo and the camera swivels around to frame Rocky against the panoramic Philadelphia cityscape. Philadelphia's wintry, deserted streets have been an unbending obstacle that could not be tamed, but only conquered, through courage and self-discipline. The steps

finally become a pedestal for Rocky, rendering a monumental quality to his achievement (figure 71).



Figure 72



Figure 73

Rocky's personal and professional success would not be sufficient to complete his American Dream without the accompanying romantic fulfilment. Adrian initially appears on the screen as an unattractive and withdrawn thirty-year-old who forlornly lives with and looks after her brother. We first see her in the cluttered pet shop, hiding behind her glasses and framed behind bird cages (figure 72). In the best tradition of Hollywood's golden age, Rocky takes her out, takes down her hair, takes off her glasses, takes her to bed, and Adrian is transformed into a graceful and attractive young woman (figure 73). The American Dream, however, demands that Adrian be much more than a girlfriend. The house with the white picket fence, the epitome of a patriarchally ordered American household, requires a housewife to be complete. Feminine sexuality needs to be restricted within the family, as entirely maternal. Adrian will not assume this role until *Rocky II*, when she voluntarily retires from her job at the pet shop to become a housewife and mother to Rocky's son. The promise of Rocky's marital and familial fulfilment, however, occurs in the final moments of the first film. In the chaos that follows the end of the fight, with the crowd swarming into the ring and demanding a rematch, Rocky's only concern is to find Adrian. He incessantly cries out her name and she, as if sensing his need from the other end of the arena, finds her way into his arms. Only then does the music reach a climax, the image of Rocky holding Adrian freezes, and the end credits begin to roll. If the fight proved Rocky's masculine strength and determination, Adrian's presence is required as the trophy to his accomplishment. As Pauline Kael noted in her review, *Rocky* 'represents

the redemption of an earlier ideal—the man as rock for woman to cleave on’ (‘Stallone’ 154).

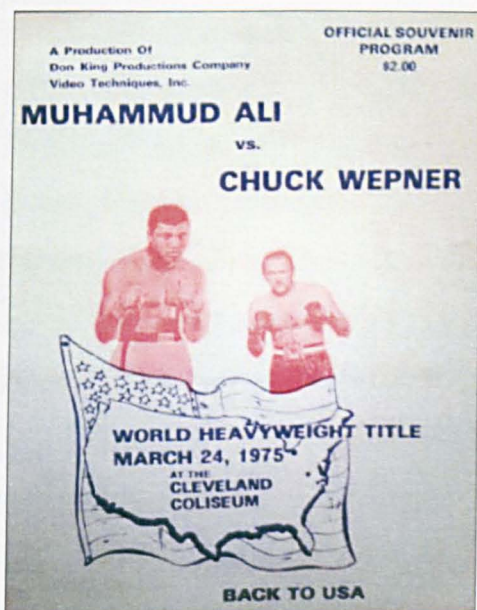


Figure 74



Figure 75

*Rocky's* plot provides only half of the film's attachment to the American Dream. The other half comprises a meta-narrative of real and fictional American Dreams that defined the film's circulation in the public sphere. Stallone was inspired to write the screenplay after attending the March 1975 fight between Muhammad Ali and Chuck Wepner for the heavyweight championship (figure 74). Wepner, known as the Bayonne Bleeder, was predicted to go only three rounds. Not only did he manage to knock Ali down, but, unlike Ali's previous opponents, almost went the distance, with the fight being stopped nineteen seconds before the end of the fifteenth round. Stallone saw in Wepner's success a reaffirmation of America's faith in self-reliance and courage, qualities that inspired him to create *Rocky*. 'That night', he explains,

I went home and had the beginning of my character [...] a man from the streets, a walking cliché of sorts, the all-American tragedy, a man who didn't have much mentality but had incredible emotion and patriotism and spirituality and good nature though nature had not been good to him. (Stallone 19)

In the context of a film that insists on claiming a documentary-like attachment to real events and places, it takes little effort to recognize the similarities between the Apollo-Rocky fight and the Ali-Wepner fight from the previous year. The most obvious

reminder is the casting of Apollo Creed in the unmistakable mould of Muhammad Ali. While reserving the discussion of Apollo's likeness to Ali for later in the chapter, it ought to be noted that the film's premiere coincided with a massive new wave of media attention to Ali, following his return to the ring in 1974 and the reinstatement of his boxing licence, which had been suspended after his refusal to serve in Vietnam. Ali himself publically endorsed the film and his fictionalized representation as Apollo Creed. A few months after the film's release, Stallone and Ali co-presented the award for best supporting actress at the Academy Awards (figure 75). In a brief comic skit preceding the presentation, a presumably angry Ali walked on the stage shouting 'I'm the real Apollo Creed. You stole my script'.

If Stallone drew his inspiration from Muhammad Ali to portray Apollo Creed, he modelled Rocky on himself and his own pursuit of the American Dream. An unemployed actor and aspiring writer in 1975, Stallone was struggling to make ends meet. Before deciding to pursue a career in Hollywood, he had spent some time backpacking in Europe. In an incident that Stallone recounts in at least two interviews at the time of the film's release, he was hired to chaperone a group of girls on a trip from the American College of Switzerland to Paris, where he boarded them in a cheap hotel and pocketed the rest of their accommodation budget (Hamill 13, Stallone 10). His petty crime may not be exactly comparable to Rocky's work for a loan shark, but it suggests a similar formative experience and street-smart wisdom. After watching the Ali-Wepner fight, Stallone completed the script in three and a half days. *Rocky* was his last chance to make it in Hollywood, just like the fight with Apollo Creed is Rocky's last chance to become a professional boxer. 'I took my story', he recounts in the *Official Rocky Scrapbook*, 'and injected it into the body of Rocky Balboa because no one, I felt, would be interested in listening to or watching or reading a story about a down-and-out, struggling actor/writer' (Stallone 19). Producers liked the script and envisioned a young actor like Burt Reynolds, Al Pacino, or James Caan as Rocky. Stallone, however, insisted on playing the title role himself. 'I'd rather bury [the script] in the backyard and let the caterpillars play Rocky', he told *The New York Times* (Klemesrud). In a tense bargaining game with the studio, Stallone rejected offers of up to 265,000 dollars, risking that the offer would be withdrawn altogether. 'Something down inside, or wherever our real conscience lives', Stallone recounts, 'told me that the money meant



nothing. [...] *The movie is about not selling out. The movie is about going the distance. The movie is about that million-to-one shot. Don't become a hack'* (Stallone 20). Finally, he sold the rights to the film for a mere fraction, under the condition that he would play the title role.

It is all too easy to question the authenticity of Stallone's personal story of going the distance. The similarities to his character are a little too obvious, the Horatio Alger overtones too pronounced, and the rejection of 265,000 dollars too self-sacrificial for the story to be true. It may well be the case that Stallone retrospectively adjusted his autobiographical input to form a more coherent and attractive narrative. Regardless of its possible fictiveness, or, perhaps, because of it, Stallone's story became the foundation of the film's publicity campaign. He may have opted against making Rocky an actor/writer like himself, but he certainly had no hesitation in sharing his story with the public. Asked in an interview if there are any autobiographical elements in *Rocky*, Stallone replied:

Rocky had drive, and intelligence, and the talent to be a fighter, but nobody noticed him. Then the opportunity knocked, 'Hey, there's Rocky, he's good.' That's what happened to me. The fact that we both went the distance when given the opportunity, that's the main parallel. (Klemesrud)

The press thrived on details of the struggling artist with only 106 dollars in the bank, who spent part of it to buy a BIC ballpoint and a lined notebook, whose wife Sasha was the only person believing in him and spent three sleepless nights by his side typing his manuscript—not unlike Adrian would have done for Rocky.

Beginning with pre-release hype and escalating after *Rocky's* success at the box-office, publicity material insisted on drawing attention to the script's real life origins. Even moviegoers with no interest in boxing would have probably stumbled upon an article, a review, or one of Stallone's numerous interviews recounting the story of the film's script. Stuart Byron devoted a 1977 article in *Film Comment* specifically to the film's publicity campaign, describing it as 'singularly modern' for motivating audiences to want to see the film, as opposed to *telling* audiences about the film. The cover story of *The Village Voice* on 8 November 1976 exemplifies Byron's argument. More than two weeks before the film's premiere, the paper introduced *Rocky* in its headline as 'The Sylvester Stallone Story' and proceeded to inform its readers that 'preview audiences have been ecstatic', while predicting that Stallone 'will win the Academy

Award' (Hamill 12). Stallone's interview with Pete Hamill in the same issue is edited to resemble a screenplay, beginning with his childhood, continuing with his time in Europe, and then in Los Angeles as a struggling actor and writer. Even before the film was released, therefore, publicity prepared audiences to expect both Rocky's and Stallone's stories.

Stallone, furthermore, projected a public persona that was an extension of his character in the film. He spoke in Rocky's growling voice in television interviews and used the same slow, outreaching hand gestures, idly bending his shoulders to one side when making a point. He even adopted some of Rocky's charming inarticulateness, prompting *Time's* effective description of him as an 'intellectual caveman' ('Show Business: Italian'). More importantly, Stallone shared his character's worldview and faith in the American Dream. Asked about his intentions when writing the script, Stallone took the opportunity to comment on the state of the nation: 'I believe the country as a whole is beginning to break out of this [...] anti-everything syndrome [...] this nihilistic, Hemingwayistic attitude that everything in the end must wither and die' (cited in Leab 265). In another interview, he described *Rocky's* nostalgic overtones as an attempt 'to give people those visions they had when they were younger and everything seemed more playful and they were all more vulnerable. The all-American thing' (Hamill 12).

The one area where Stallone and Rocky evidently differ is in their talents for self-promotion. Whereas Rocky repeatedly proves his clumsiness with the media, Stallone is closer to Apollo Creed in exploiting his popularity and charm to publicize the film. 'A seemingly untiring Stallone', Leab writes, 'made himself available for interview after interview by representatives of every branch of the media' (264). So ubiquitous was Stallone's presence in the media that one commentator claimed that *Rocky's* creator 'had granted more interviews than any American short of Lillian Carter' (Rich, 'Rocky'). Andrew Sarris went as far as to proclaim Stallone 'the *auteur* of Rocky' and limit John G. Avildsen's directorial contribution to 'merely the *metteur-en-scene*'. In much less favourable terms, *The New York Times'* Vincent Canby wrote that 'Mr Stallone is all over *Rocky* to such an extent it begins to look like a vanity production'.

With the retrospective knowledge of how Stallone's public persona developed through the 80s, it is all too tempting to share Canby's sarcasm and disregard

Stallone's self-promoting statements as the musings of a mediocre actor who weight-lifted his way to stardom. It ought to be noted, however, Stallone was at the time a fresh and promising writer and actor; his name and appearance had not yet been scarred by over-exercise, over-exposure, parody, and other abuses. *Rocky* was the only basis on which to evaluate his talents and personality. He would not start making *Rocky* sequels for another three years and would not become Rambo for another six. In fact, Stallone declared at the time that his future plans included a film about Edgar Allen Poe. 'It will once and for all get me out of the goon category', he asserted (Hammil 15). While it is more common today for Stallone's name to appear alongside those of Schwarzenegger and Willis, in the 1970s he was often compared to Chaplin and Welles, as the third person in Oscar history to be nominated in a single year as both actor and screenwriter. Even before the film's release, *The Village Voice* proclaimed, 'The word is everywhere: Stallone is a star. A new star. As big as Brando, maybe. And a writer, too. Maybe even a director. The picture will be huge' (Hammil 12). *Time* hailed him as 'the next Mitchum, Brando and Pacino rolled into one'. With the year's highest grossing film and the best picture Academy Award under his belt, looks that reminded of a young Brando, and a seemingly unforced Everyman charm, Stallone was a promising new Hollywood star living the American Dream alongside his fictional alter ego.

Considering how overtly *Rocky* displays its ideological attachment to the American Dream, how firmly it connects it to the nation's Bicentennial, and how widely Stallone's American Dream circulated in the public sphere, it comes as no surprise that reviewers readily identified in *Rocky* a barely concealed allegorical message of hope for America. *Time* explained *Rocky's* cultural relevance in less than a hundred words:

*Rocky* is a slum fairy tale, its plot is simple even by Hollywood standards. A broken-down neighborhood fighter, who boxes, 'because I can't sing or dance,' is picked as a last-minute replacement to fight the heavyweight champion of the world, mainly because the champ sees the promotional possibilities of the hero's moniker: 'the Italian Stallion'. The hero produces a rousing fight and, of course, finds love. The movie is funny, unpretentious and relentlessly upbeat, sort of what *Mean Streets* would have been if Frank Capra had made it. Its only

message—endure, reach your potential, be a man—is enough to give machismo a good name. ('Show Business: Italian')

Nevertheless, the straightforwardness of Rocky's take-home message begs a question of believability. To believe in the American Dream in 1976 is to believe that one can singlehandedly overcome socially imposed obstacles—including the peaking rates of unemployment, government inefficiencies, and increasing corporate power. Of course, *Rocky* is neither the first nor the last Hollywood film to top the box-office with a vision of hope at a time of dismay. In the two years after *Rocky's* release, the top grossing films were *Star Wars* (1977) and *Grease*, both of which have commonly been interpreted as idealized American utopias. Yet, *Rocky* seems to perform a more complex feat than the standard Hollywood fantasy. Rocky's inspirational story does not enjoy the protection of a fictional or period setting. Neither do the generic tropes of the boxing movie lend themselves to fantasy as readily as those of science fiction and the musical. More pressingly, *Rocky* seems to undermine its own fantasy. The film plants the dated ideals of manly courage, self-determination, and hard work in the infertile soil of a contemporary narrative that incessantly reminds audiences of everything that prevents them from flowering. The question of believability, therefore, is not why American audiences in 1976 felt the need to believe in the American Dream, but why they believed specifically in *Rocky's* Bicentennial Dream.

### **An Italian-American Dream for the Bicentennial**

The American Dream is primarily a dream of progress and development. It relies on the idea of reinvention through hard work. By the same logic, however, one is wholly responsible for one's failures. A free American who fails to succeed cannot put the blame on ignoble birth, discriminating laws of kinship, or unequal opportunities. By the time *Rocky* reached audiences, however, the political turmoil of the 60s had already revealed the dark underside of this dream. Feminism, the civil rights movement, and other political causes exposed the American Dream as a tool of social elevation and familial bliss exclusively at the hands of white men. Despite all their courage and efforts, many Americans simply did not have an equal chance at overcoming socially imposed poverty, discrimination, and unemployment. Andrew Sarris ends his review of

*Rocky* with a rhetorical question that critiques the film's comforting but false promise: 'It may even be socially beneficial to promote hard work, Horatio Algerino style, as the *sine qua non* of the American Dream. But do we really believe *Rocky*, or do we merely want to believe it?'

Sarris does not specify why audiences willingly indulge in *Rocky's* fantasy of hope, but his description of *Rocky* as a Horatio Algerino story suggests one possible explanation. There is no indication in Sarris's review that the addition of the Italian-American ending should be taken as anything more than a witty play on words, but it seems more than a coincidence that his only other mention of ethnicity appears again alongside a reference to the American Dream. 'The American Dream', Sarris writes, 'has resurfaced in Ethnic Drag'. Of course, *Rocky* is not the first time that the American Dream surfaces in ethnic drag. American mythology abounds with tales of Italian and other Southern and Eastern European immigrants arriving at Ellis Island as poor farmers or unskilled labourers and managing to create a new life for themselves and their families. The American Dream offered immigrants the opportunity to compete in a democratic marketplace, become the sole benefactors of their labour, own property, and gradually move up the social ladder. In practice, however, the history of immigration did not always meet the rendezvous with the American Dream. For all their hard work, most first generation immigrants did not manage to break from the ranks of the working class or buy their own house. But even if they made it in America, their success often came at the cost of giving up ethnic identification. The story of an Italian immigrant pursuing the American Dream in the first half of the twentieth century is simultaneously the story of that immigrant tearing apart his ethnic drag and replacing it with the all-American Caucasian uniform.

*Rocky's* American Dream in 1976 is a fundamentally different experience from that of his ancestors. The ethnic revival movement abolished the prerequisite of assimilation in becoming a full American. *Rocky* is the Italian Stallion, an ethnic man completely comfortable with his hyphenated identity. He takes pride in his boxing moniker, lives in a predominantly Italian-American neighbourhood, and never tries to conceal his ethnic accent or mannerisms. When he embarks on his quest for the American Dream, *Rocky* rightly wonders if he is too old to break into professional boxing, if it is worth devoting all his efforts to a fight he is predicted to lose, and if

starting a relationship with Adrian in the midst of his preparation is a wise decision. All these concerns seem valid at a time when the American Dream appeared more like a chimera. Unlike earlier immigrants, however, Rocky never questions his suitability as an ethnic candidate for the American Dream.

If anything, the sheer amount of popular attention coalescing around white ethnics in the 70s lends a semblance of contemporary relevance to Rocky's American Dream. It will be recalled that the ethnic revival often manifested in searches for genealogical roots, collections of Americana artefacts, and an overall interest in the recent or experienced past, particularly at the time of the Bicentennial. In this prevailing mood of nostalgia, revisiting the American Dream's outdated model of success becomes a fashionable gesture of ethnic pride. Rocky's ethnicity, furthermore, tones down associations between the American Dream and white privilege. As spokesmen for the ethnic revival repeatedly asserted, WASPs were solely responsible for suppressing the liberties of non-whites, including their exclusion from the American Dream. While reserving a fuller discussion of race and racism in *Rocky* for the second half of this chapter, it does not seem too hasty or provocative a claim that a Germanic or Anglo-Saxon Stallion would not be as warmly embraced in 1976.

While the ethnic revival infuses new life into the American Dream, the 70s redefinition of ethnicity as a primordial connection to one's origins provides a stepping stone into a world of simpler and more familiar values. *The Godfather* literalizes this connection by setting a 70s story in the past. Boxing allows *Rocky* to establish a similar connection on a symbolic level. As Woodward explains, the world of boxing is founded on stories of past legends. Professional boxers seldom look up to their contemporaries as role models, but live in the shadow of their predecessors and their heroic feats. Identifying with past heroes allows boxers 'to create their own legends through fantasies of triumph' (13). Rocky Balboa is modelled on the legend of Rocky Marciano, the Italian-American heavyweight champion from 1952 to 1956. In addition to borrowing Marciano's name and ethnicity, *Rocky* includes a series of direct references to the champion, which invite audiences to consider the fictional character as the real champion's successor. In a scene early in the film, Rocky walks into his apartment and greets his pet turtles 'How you doin', Moby Dick'. The greeting could apply equally well to Marciano, whose boxing moniker was the White Whale. Indeed, Marciano is present

in the room in the form of a poster, which provides the only piece of decoration in Rocky's apartment. Rocky assembles his own trophies below the poster, a reminder that his victories are measured against and overshadowed by Marciano's legend (figure 76). Once he accepts Apollo's challenge and starts training for the Bicentennial fight, Rocky also starts taping newspaper and magazine clippings mentioning his name around the poster, symbolically coming closer to his role model.



Figure 76

All the intertextual connections to Marciano allow *Rocky* to bring an outdated success story into a recognizably contemporary setting. During the 50s, Marciano exemplified the special bond between the ethnic, working class boxer and the derelict urban space. Marciano grew up in Brockton, one of the small cities scattered around Boston that inevitably became part of the Rustbelt. 'It is generally understood in some less-than-precise way', writes Rotella,

that Brockton made Marciano, hardening him for the work of prizefighting and inculcating the fundamentals of toughness so deeply that not even the celebrity and fortune he enjoyed as champion could tempt him to lapse from the faith. (175)

*Rocky* follows Marciano's legend to suggest that the harshness of Philadelphia's working class may in fact be necessary for Rocky's training. The city provides Rocky with the formative experiences that instil in him the courage, innocence, and determination required to rise up to Apollo's challenge. Instead of lifting weights and practising with a punch bag in a gym, Rocky jogs around the neighbourhood holding bricks in his hands, and, most famously, punches raw meat in the slaughter house ice box. His proverbial training methods make inventive use of urban adversity and ground his success squarely within a working class ethos.

There are, however, significant distinctions between Rocky Balboa's and Rocky Marciano's attachments to the working class. Marciano established his connection to Brockton at a time when trade unions were still holding strong in the Rustbelt. Being an Italian-American man from the Rustbelt in the 50s immediately denotes blue-collarism, but not any particular social difference from Irish, Slavic, Greek, or other white workers. Marciano was not known as the Italian Stallion, but as the Rock from Brockton and the Brockton Blockbuster. Ethnicity would not be revived as a defining identity until the 70s. When *Rocky* uses Rocky Balboa and Rocky Marciano's ethnic kinship to infuse a 50s proletarian ethos into the American Dream, the film is essentially engaging in historical anachronism. In fact, as we have seen in chapter two, leftist critics of the ethnic revival typically conceptualized it as a capitalist ploy to break up the unity of the working class. If *Rocky* is any evidence to go by, the virile union struggles of the 50s are certainly absent from Philadelphia's working class, which emerges as a poverty-stricken, but strangely apolitical space. The film shows the symptoms of unemployment, violence, and illegality on the desolate cityscape, but we never actually witness the gang fights, the crimes, or the unemployment lines. As Rocky leaves Mickey's boxing club to return home, he passes by a group of young people warming by a fire at the corner of a street. Rocky greets them, shakes hands and goes on his way, as they continue chatting and singing around the fire. Philadelphia's blue-collar workers seem to have discovered the sweet uses of adversity. If there is an element of social commentary, it is that poverty and unemployment foster a stronger sense of ethnic community.

The same selective appropriation of the 50s is evident in the representation of Rocky's masculinity. Stallone stated in an interview that he envisioned 'Rocky as a simple man, a man he can identify with, a man who doesn't curse and who likes America, a man who's a real man' (Klemesrud). In the absence of such real men in the 70s, the film constructs Rocky as a patchwork of older macho archetypes and movie bits. 'Rocky is the embodiment of the out-of-fashion pure-at-heart', observed Pauline Kael, 'his macho strut belongs with the ducktails of the fifties' ('Stallone' 154). His black leather jacket, plain white shirts, leather gloves, and black hat project an image of Beat generation coolness (figure 77). Contemporary reviewers saw in Rocky glimpses of Marlon Brando's macho coolness, especially in his role as the down-at-heel boxer Terry



Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (1954). Rocky's perception of himself as 'just another bum from the neighbourhood' echoes Malloy's famous regret 'I coulda been a contender'. If *Rocky*'s themes remind of *On the Waterfront*, Stallone's looks brought to Roger Ebert 'shivers of recognition reaching back to *A Streetcar Named Desire* [1951]'. In a scene early in the film, at the end of his first date with Adrian, Rocky takes her up to his apartment. Barely contained in his cluttered room, Rocky strips down to black trousers and a white undershirt that shows off his bulging biceps. As he reaches up to the claustrophobically low ceiling, with his mouth slightly open (figure 78), the resemblance to Brando's Stanley Kowalski is unmistakable. As an Italian-American man, Rocky is not bound by the new social etiquette and men's lib niceties that constrain the machismo of WASP men. Even Brando himself aged into an Italian-American man in the 70s with his portrayal of Vito Corleone. If a 70s WASP man gave up earth-tone polyester to adopt Brando's 50s look, the irony would be almost too blatant.<sup>28</sup> Rocky is not simply a white man engaging in sartorial pastiche. His ethnicity grants him access to the norms of a time when macho coolness was still the exclusive realm of heterosexuality.



Figure 77



Figure 78

*Rocky* also adjusts Adrian's behaviour to correspond to Rocky's brand of 50s machismo. While the primary narrative function of her character is to provide a love interest and marital promise that complete Rocky's American Dream, Adrian is not introduced as the stereotypical 50s housewife of popular imagination. *Rocky* ascribes onto her character some stylistic and behavioural elements of a 70s liberated woman. Adrian may not be a model feminist, but she is financially independent and does not

<sup>28</sup> In fact, the leather-clad image of coolness and other iconic costumes of machismo were adopted by the gay clone subculture in the 70s, a topic to which I return in the following chapter.

have prudish inhibitions about premarital sex. Considering that she has spent much of her life being abused by Paulie, Adrian shows considerable strength and determination when she decides to move out of his apartment and claim her independence. In fact, she supports both herself and Rocky while he trains for the fight. Nevertheless, these concessions to women's liberation prove to be depthless ascriptions, meant only to give the appearance of a contemporary moral universe. Once she becomes romantically involved with Rocky, the film bypasses the question of female desire and falls back on a retrograde sexism. Adrian is conveniently restricted to the stereotype of the coy spinster who transforms into a supportive girlfriend. In her implausible combination of sexual liberation and adherence to patriarchy, Adrian appears to be a 50s housewife that has turned into a 70s liberated woman without ever experiencing the process of liberation.

Rocky's ethnic masculinity provides the seams holding together the contradictory elements in Adrian's portrayal. Her motives and actions appear consistent because they constitute immediate reactions to Rocky's behaviour. There even seems to be a detectable moment in her transformation, the night after Rocky's first experience with punching meat in the slaughter house. Up to this point, their relationship operated in what appeared to be a harsh but realistic social milieu. Rocky was the disillusioned club boxer and Adrian his live-in girlfriend. Rocky's experience in the slaughter house, however, bolsters both his machismo and his determination in pursuing the American Dream. He has taken a symbolic temporal leap back to the days of men who bring home the bacon and women who obediently serve them. Indeed, Rocky returns home after his training with a packet of meat and instructs Adrian to cook it. Adrian wants to have sex, but Rocky rejects her advances, following his coach's misogynist wisdom that 'women weaken the legs'. Adrian insists, but Rocky is adamant: 'I'm serious, why don't you make the meat?' At that moment, when her boyfriend refuses to have sex and she voluntarily retires into the kitchen, Adrian follows Rocky's leap into the past. If *The Godfather* deals with the liberated woman by slamming the door of patriarchy in her face, *Rocky* goes even further to reverse her liberation. In subsequent episodes of the *Rocky* saga, Adrian will retire deeper into her kitchen as Rocky pursues his macho happiness further. *Rocky II* turns to Hollywood's age-old battle between the alpha male and the family man, with Adrian being called to

act as emotional lever to Rocky's masculine impulsiveness. She pleads with him to give up boxing for the sake of his health, but Rocky simply responds, 'Adrian please don't ask me to stop being a man'.

Adrian is not the only one who changes to facilitate Rocky's pursuit of happiness. The entire city of Philadelphia turns from a harsh corner of the Rustbelt into an ethnic community of friendly and supportive neighbours after Rocky accepts Apollo's challenge. Whereas *On the Waterfront* begins after Terry Malloy takes his 'one-way ticket to Palookaville' to tell a story of union struggle and personal regrets, *Rocky* appropriates the proletarian ethos of the 50s to serve the purposes of a 70s rags-to-riches story. Paulie is conveniently left unemployed right at the moment when Rocky needs a training assistant and finds new purpose and employment in assisting him. The subplot concerning his violent behaviour and drinking problem is gradually forgotten as Paulie becomes Rocky's sidekick, and, in *Rocky* sequels, the eccentric uncle Paulie to his son. Mickey, Rocky's cynical coach, initially appears to have no faith in Rocky's talent and rejects a proposal to help him in preparing for the fight. His cynicism, however, conceals a genuine disappointment at the decline of honest sportsmanship in the 70s. Mickey has seen boxing at its peak in the 50s and worked with the legendary Marciano. Watching Rocky waste his time and talent as 'a leg breaker for some cheap, second-rate loan shark' is simply too painful for Mickey. When he realizes that Rocky is truly invested in preparing for the fight, however, he agrees to train him and gradually becomes a surrogate father for Rocky, until his death in *Rocky III*. 'You kind of remind me of Marciano', he confesses to Rocky, 'you got heart like he did'. Even Gazzo joins Team Rocky and gives him five hundred dollars for his training expenses. From the tough loan shark we first meet, Gazzo unexpectedly turns into Rocky's exuberant sponsor and a source of comic relief in the film. As Sarris sarcastically noted, 'Rocky works for the most benign gangster since Edward G. Robinson entered a monastery in *Brother Orchid*'.

'But do we really believe *Rocky*, or, do we merely want to believe?' It is impossible today to answer Sarris's question with any degree of certainty. Even if we could go back to 1976 and ask American audiences, it may prove to be an analytically fruitless task. *Rocky* would not be the first time that audiences willingly indulge in a recognizably implausible fantasy. Yet, the film manages to make its resurrection of the

American Dream in Bicentennial Philadelphia appear credible and consistent, even if not entirely believable. As a white man, Rocky fits easily into a paradigm of success that has historically been aligned to the perpetuation of white male supremacy. As a revived ethnic, he is not bound by the dominant mores and ideologies of Bicentennial America—the same mores and ideologies that threatened all-American success stories. As an Italian-American man, Rocky inhabits a world that is visibly contemporary, but abides by the moral codes of what is nostalgically imagined to have been a simpler and more familiar past.

### **Apollo Creed**

If Rocky stands for traditional American values and faith in the American Dream, Apollo Creed embodies all the moral decadence, narcissism, and superficiality of the 'Me' Decade that made a celebration of America's Bicentennial so meaningless. With no genuine interest in either boxing or the nation's anniversary, Apollo manipulates popular feelings surrounding the sport and the national occasion for his personal gain. It is only appropriate that we are introduced to Apollo's public persona before we meet him as an individual. While Rocky is in a bar, a television in the background broadcasts an interview with the brash, fast-talking champion discussing his plans for a Bicentennial fight and promising to 'crack' his opponent 'like the Liberty Bell' (figures 79 and 80). Though we do not yet know that Rocky will be his opponent, the film already invites us to share Rocky's Everyman perspective and deprives us of direct access into Apollo's elite world. Yet, Rocky's and Apollo's worlds are not only separated by social standing. As Apollo delivers his performance on television, the evidently annoyed barman turns to Rocky and disgustedly calls Apollo a 'jig clown'. If 'clown' alludes to Apollo's theatrics, 'jig', a tamer version of the epithet 'jigaboo', refers to his race. The association of the African American man with arrogance, moral decadence, and a higher social standing comes to define the character of Apollo Creed. This section examines the textual, intertextual, and contextual signifiers that go into his representation, including the selective appropriation of generic tropes and the evocation of Muhammad Ali's public persona.



Figure 79



Figure 80



Figure 81



Figure 82

The second time we see Apollo, he is again mediated through promotional material. A painted portrait of Apollo on the fight's poster shows him dressed in full championship regalia (figure 81). As the camera pulls away from the poster to offer the first unmediated view of Apollo, we encounter a man who looks and behaves more like a corporate boss than a heavyweight champion (figure 82). Dressed in a fashionable three-piece grey suit and pink shirt, Apollo seems decisively less exuberant and impulsive than before, but equally careful of the image he projects forward. The scene takes place in the office of the fight's promoter, where Apollo meets with him to discuss how to proceed with the Bicentennial fight after his opponent's injury and withdrawal. Their discussion unfolds as a self-congratulatory display of Apollo's authority, exposing Apollo the showman and Apollo the boxer as paper-thin images, carefully sustained by Apollo the corporate man. He sits deep in his office chair in the middle of the room and announces his new vision for the fight, while members of his entourage quietly compete to impress their intimidating boss. Apollo's plan involves giving a chance at the championship to an unknown boxer. He bases his decision neither on good sportsmanship nor a desire to honour the nation's anniversary, but on the immense publicity potential of such a bold and unexpected move. Apollo has no expectation that Rocky will indeed seize the opportunity and pose a real challenge to

his championship, but he does expect that the media will interpret his decision as a gesture of magnanimity, which, in turn, will garner more publicity for the fight.



Figure 83



Figure 84



Figure 85



Figure 86

Apollo's marketing talents and narcissism come to a joint climax right before the final fight. He orchestrates his entrance into the ring as an over-the-top media spectacle cluttered in Bicentennial iconography. In a peculiar reversal of minstrel blackface, African American women dressed as statues of liberty, in full-body silver makeup, lead the procession and later carry the number signs announcing each round (figure 83). Apollo marches into the arena to the tune of 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' dressed as George Washington crossing the Delaware. He even rides atop a parade float decorated with cardboard cut-outs of historical battle scenes (figure 84). When he enters in the ring, he strips down to a sequined Uncle Sam costume and throws money and confetti at the ecstatic crowd as he manically instructs 'I Want You' (figure 85). All through this opening number, Apollo projects an image of calculated over-confidence and arrogance. He pauses after every stunt to allow time for applause, turns to the crowd for affirmation after every teasing gesture against Rocky, and makes sure that his coif remains intact when he switches costumes. As the fight's commentator puts it, 'I have never seen a boxer that concerned about his hair'.

Compared to Rocky's example of masculine composure, self-determination, and hard work, Apollo's parody of hallowed American symbols ridicules the spirit of athleticism, patriarchal supremacy, the values of dignity and hard work, and ultimately the American Dream.

The same values, however, are products of a society founded on white supremacy. Apollo mocks a version of American history that had been experienced, celebrated, and documented by Anglo-Saxons, while Apollo's ancestors were the victims of slavery and prejudice. Considered in this light, Apollo's entry into the ring could arguably be interpreted as a politically empowering act for African Americans, a radical revision of American history through the lens of affirmative action. This interpretation gains weight in the context of the striking similarities between Apollo Creed and Muhammad Ali, the real life champion who projected the same combination of extravagant performances and highly confrontational and controversial politics. Ali eschewed the model of the smoothly integrated African American in favour of aggressive displays of black empowerment and a radical political rhetoric against the white establishment, akin to that of the Black Panther party. In fact, Ali was a friend and associate of Malcolm X and joined him in converting to the Nation of Islam in 1964. Muhammad Ali is a moniker that Ali adopted after his conversion, discarding his birth name, Cassius Marcellus Clay, as a symbol of white tyranny.

In 1966, Ali famously refused to be drafted to serve in Vietnam and used his highly publicized trial as a platform to advance his views against imperialism, racism, and religious oppression. 'No, I am not going ten thousand miles', he declared, 'to help murder, kill, and burn other people to simply help continue the domination of white slavemasters over dark people the world over. This is the day and age when such evil injustice must come to an end' (cited in 'Muhammad Ali' 101). He returned to the ring in 1974 with the Rumble in the Jungle fight, where he regained the championship after defeating George Foreman. In 1975, he defeated Joe Frazier in the Philippines, a fight for which Ali singlehandedly raised anticipation and excitement with his public insults, slurs, and demeaning poems against Frazier. 'It will be a killa, and a chilla, and a thrilla when I get the gorilla in Manila', he declared, inspiring boxing promoter Don King to dub the fight Thrilla in Manila. The following year Frazier, also a Philadelphia native, made a brief appearance in *Rocky*, playing himself as a celebrity guest at the fight.

Frazier enters the ring before the fight to greet the crowd and shake hands with the two contestants (figure 86). Watching him chat with Apollo, Rocky remarks that 'they must be friends'. Rocky's comment suggests that Apollo and Frazier are in the same higher league, but could also function as a sarcastic intertextual reference to the turbulent establishment of Frazier's 'friendship' with the real Apollo in the Philippines.

With Ali's aura swarming over *Rocky* from the origin of the script to popular reception, it is possible to explain Apollo's arrogance in the light of Ali's bold and unapologetic projection of black empowerment. If Muhammad Ali insisted that the fight's promoters find him a 'snow white' opponent, the demand could be perceived as a political statement. If he cannibalized American history, he would be intentionally exposing racial discrimination through caricaturistic correction. Regardless of whether one agreed with Ali's political views and his means of expressing them, it was always clear that they were an intrinsic part of his performance. Therein lies the operative difference between Apollo and Ali. Apollo channels every aspect of Ali's public persona except for his political radicalism. When he chooses Rocky out of a long list of potential opponents, Apollo is not looking to make a political statement, but to stage a profitable show. 'A lot of other people in this country are just sentimental', he explains, 'and there's nothing they'd like better than to see Apollo Creed give a local Philadelphia boy a shot at the greatest title in the world.' With Ali's radicalism omitted, what is left in Apollo is a loud and flamboyant showman, a common 70s stereotype popularized through the pimps of blaxploitation films. Apollo Creed evokes the stereotype all the stronger through the choice of Carl Weathers for the role. Weathers was a footballer who turned to acting in 1974 and was primarily known for his roles in two blaxploitation films, *Bucktown* (1974) and *Friday Foster* (1975).

In the context of *Rocky's* narrative, furthermore, Apollo Creed is the closest we have to a generic villain. Boxing films often position their heroes against villainous coaches, profit-seeking fight organizers, and manipulative promoters that feed on the talent of innocent boxers. We encounter a semblance of this stock character only once in the opening scene of *Rocky*. The nameless fight organizer gives Rocky and Spider their share of the fight's proceeds and then leaves the film. The criminal Gazzo and the cynical Mickey come somewhat close to the stereotype at the beginning of the film, but, after they both declare their support for Rocky, Apollo is left as the only major



character who roots against him. Casting the hero's opponent as the manipulator is not *Rocky's* only deviation from the generic convention. *Rocky* also updates the stereotype to reflect contemporary social concerns. Boxing movies in the 50s presented their villains as bloodsucking capitalist bosses and union enemies. At a time when the media and corporations replaced factory owners as the face of ugly America, Apollo stands for all the superficiality, commercialism, and moral decadence ailing the nation. 'Where usually the boxing film posits the devoted fighter against a world of crass materialists, here the hero is a fighter in a world of show-business' (Yacowar 8). From his flashy fashion to his mockery of patriotic values, Apollo is a quintessentially 'Me' Decade villain.

*Rocky* even resorts to religion to highlight the differences between Rocky and Apollo. Beginning with the opening shot of Jesus looking over Rocky, the film repeatedly reminds us of his Christian faith. The sign 'Resurrection Athletic Club' below the Jesus mural stands as an ironic contrast to Rocky's life at the beginning of the film. Considered in retrospect, however, the sign foreshadows Rocky's character development through the film, a process of regaining faith and being metaphorically resurrected. Through this process, Rocky constantly wears his golden crucifix around his neck. Another wooden crucifix hangs over his bed, while his Rocky Marciano poster is appropriately decorated for Christmas. Although Apollo never expresses any religious views, his overall characterization certainly diverts from Christian morality. His decadent lifestyle, the inspiration from the Muslim champion, and the juxtaposition with Rocky's overt displays of faith suggest that Apollo might not just be un-American, but also un-Christian. The contrast between Rocky's and Apollo's value systems is graphically portrayed in a series of cross-edited shots showing their final preparations before the fight. After wrapping his hands in gauze and practising his punch, Rocky kneels down, bends his head on the bathroom sink, makes the sign of the cross, and prays (figure 87). Apollo, the champion with the pagan name, sits at the end of the massage table, stares intensely into the void, and takes deep breaths (figure 88). While Rocky prays to his Christian (American) god, Apollo opts for self-concentration, a gesture perhaps to the 'Me' Decade obsession with Eastern spirituality. As the film switches back and forth between them, the binary oppositions seem blatantly clear: hero vs. villain, Christian vs. nonbeliever, patriot vs. traitor.



Figure 87



Figure 88

The most apparent binary opposition, however, remains the one between whiteness and blackness. It is indeed impossible to miss the fact that *Rocky's* only major African American character is also the film's villain. Whereas Ali would gather crowds at his every appearance, Apollo is followed only by his employees and the media. As Boddy observes, 'presumably Apollo Creed has the backing of the black community, but we never see any local popular support for him' (363). Apart from Apollo, only a handful African Americans characters appear in *Rocky*, primarily nameless members of Apollo's entourage without any lines of dialogue. The only two other African American characters with minor parts are Dipper, the young boxer who gets Rocky's locker, and Diana Lewis, the patronizingly glib television reporter who interviews Rocky in the slaughter house. Dipper facilitates the injustice committed against Rocky and never reappears in the film. The arrogant and fashionably dressed Diana Lewis seems like a female version of Apollo. She hardly allows Rocky to speak while interviewing him and turns his pursuit of the American Dream into the sensationalist story of an idiotic brute punching raw meat. Whereas every single white character in the film eventually rallies under Rocky's banner, all black characters root against him. At a time when one third of African Americans lived in poverty,<sup>29</sup> *Rocky* portrays them as the holders of power and the manipulators of honest white folk. Considering how selectively Rocky borrows from Muhammad Ali's public persona and how visibly it skews racial demographics, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Rocky lives his American Dream at the expense of demonizing African Americans.

*Rocky* is neither the first nor the last boxing film to segregate the sport along racial lines. The history of the genre and the history of the sport abound with examples

<sup>29</sup> Census results show that the median income for African American households in the year of *Rocky's* release was only fifty-eight percent that of white households (cited in Simon and Abdel-Moneim 2).

of racial prejudice. In particular, *Rocky* operates within the well-established tradition of the great white hope, the pursuit for a Caucasian pugilist who can defeat the black champion. The quest dates back to the time of Jack Johnson, the African American heavyweight champion from 1908 to 1915. Johnson gained his title after defeating the reigning white champion, Jim Jeffries, and went on to scandalize America through his sexual relationships with white women. Jack London, a journalist and amateur boxer, was the first to voice the wish that Jeffries would return from retirement to give Johnson a taste of Anglo-Saxon manhood. London got his wish granted in 1910, but Jeffries was predictably vanquished. London, who provided the commentary for the fight, remarked with equal amounts of anger and disappointment, 'The great white hope. Humiliated, beaten. Betrayer of his race' (cited in Boddy 182). The next month, *Literary Digest* reported that 'there had been a "hot time" in many towns where the outcome of the fight had infuriated the opposing races to a murderous pitch' ('Is Prize-Fighting').

What is fundamentally racist about the great white hope is not only the proposed segregation of the sport, but also the underpinning assumption that athletes from different races are not fighting on equal terms. At the root of every great white hope lies the pseudo-Darwinist assumption that the black and white races are genetically distinct species, with the former being physically stronger and more animalistic, somewhere between beasts and white humans. It seems hardly coincidental that the great white hope tradition started with Johnson, a boxer who threatened both the superiority and genetic purity of the white race. Johnson crushed and shamed white men in the ring and used his ape-like sexuality outside it to dishonour white women. Before the Johnson-Jeffries fight, London described Johnson's skills as a genetic advantage. 'One of Johnson's great assets', he wrote, is 'the art of relaxing' since 'tensing of muscle consumes energy' (273).

The belief in a genetically determined hierarchy of races gained scientific support at the time of Johnson in the context of the eugenics movement. Long before the Nazi experiments for the selective breeding of humans, the American eugenics movement received the backing of the academic community and extensive funding from such prestigious bodies as the Carnegie Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation. Eugenics relies on the assumption that differences in the genetic makeup

of different racial groups determine differences in social behaviour and advancement. Hence, eugenicists attributed the observable economic and social superiority of the West to the superior genetic makeup of Nordic, Germanic and Anglo-Saxon peoples. As a solution to poverty and crime, for example, they proposed plans to protect and expand the biological advantage of these groups. They included such methods as compulsory sterilization of non-white people, laws against miscegenation, and restrictions on immigration (Kevles 193-211). Though less drastic, white America's obsession with finding a great white hope speaks to the same anxiety for maintaining racial distinctions.

Johnson's story received new attention in popular culture with the release of a biopic in 1970. Entitled *The Great White Hope*, the film was adapted from a successful play, but failed to impress either audiences or critics. The film uses its title ironically to criticize the white establishment for railroading Johnson's eventual defeat in the ring. In fact, some contemporary reviewers attributed its massive failure at the box-office to what Boddy identifies as a 'guilt-mongering advertising campaign' and an 'all-purpose accusation and rhetoric' (340). When *Rocky* was released six years later, Andrew Sarris described it as 'the most romanticized *Great White Hope* in screen history'. With the use of italics alluding specifically to the 1970 film, there is more than an implicit suggestion in Sarris's comment that *Rocky* fared better at the box-office precisely because it left irony and accusations aside and opted to embrace the ideology.

Cinema has been playing an instrumental role in perpetuating great white hopes long before the 70s. Like many other boxing fights from 1894 to 1915, the Jeffries-Johnson fight was documented on film. This largely unknown cycle of early boxing movies comprises not only footage from actual fights, but also filmed re-enactments of fights, many of them starring Jack Johnson. Despite widespread popularity, the cycle ended abruptly under the weight of accusations that it undermined the educational role of cinema and promoted a brutal sport to innocent children. Dan Streible studies the discourses surrounding the cycle's end, including congressional debates, to discover a deeper motivation underneath the progressive era rhetoric. 'The determining, if usually unspoken, motivation for this episode of film censorship', Streible argues, was 'a desire to keep images of black empowerment suppressed' (247). Boxing offered one of the few areas where African Americans could

compete and win in equal terms. These victories, however, challenged the dominant faith in the superiority of the white race. By ending the cinematic dispersion of black empowerment, white America attempted to control the social aspirations of black citizens, while keeping both boxing and cinema within the constraints of white Christian morality.

Despite the inglorious demise of early boxing films, interracial fights continued well after 1915 and great white hopes kept resurfacing every time an African American was crowned champion. Even after World War II and the rapid decline in the popularity of the eugenics movement, the assumption for a genetically determined racial hierarchy survived in the world of boxing and its cinematic representations. The white boxer is commonly associated with endurance rather than skill or, as Boddy puts it, the 'belief that survival is more admirable than victory' (360). The assumption that black athletes are more formidable opponents has become an uncontested trope in boxing films and the sports movie genre as a whole. In films like *Kid Galahad*, *Golden Boy*, and *City of Conquest* (1940), Hollywood entraps white boxers in physically dangerous rings where black athletes reign. Their victories are measured by the ability to remain standing in the ring for several rounds while receiving massive amounts of punishment from their black opponents. Even films that arguably display no intention of promoting racism adopt the stereotype that associates black athletes with inborn strength and white athletes with endurance. Jake La Motta's downward spiral in *Raging Bull*, for example, is punctuated along the way by his devastating losses to black fighters. The stereotype also surfaces in this chapter's introductory example, *Any Given Sunday*. Cap Rooney has to exceed himself in training to compete against Willie Beamen, who simply relies on raw natural talent and spends his time shooting a music video.

The great white hope subtext is much more pronounced in *Rocky*, a film inspired by the real story of a white boxer, Chuck Wepner, managing to remain in the ring for almost fifteen rounds against a black boxer, Muhammad Ali. The choice to cast Carl Weathers for the role of Apollo Creed provides another telling example of the film's attachment to the great white hope. Stallone devotes an entire section of *The Rocky Scrapbook* describing how Weathers' natural confidence and inborn physical strength determined his casting:

Well, Carl Weathers came into the office and by this time, I was tired. It was late at night. Carl was very exuberant. Of course he would be. [...] One thing was certain—he wasn't lacking confidence. He was asked to read the role of Apollo Creed opposite me. He had no idea who I was. [...] I decided to play along with the ruse and I said, 'You are right. You should have a real actor but since we're here, why don't we box? Let's see what kind of body you have.' So Carl took off his shirt and needless to say, he was probably one of the finer bodies in the world; it's perfectly sculptured—a natural body that was perfect for the champion. He's a born natural, in fact. (25)

Though Stallone never mentions if and why he wanted a black actor to play Apollo Creed, race becomes a structuring absence in his narration of the incident. Weathers struck Stallone as an ideal candidate for the role not simply because he was confident, exuberant, and athletic, but also because he projected these characteristics as inborn attributes. Stallone's final comment that Weathers is 'a born natural' reveals a clear investment in the stereotype of the black athlete as inherently stronger.

The great white hope also surfaces in the choice of Rocky Marciano as Rocky Balboa's role model in the film. If Ali exemplifies natural talent and confidence, Marciano is famous for stamina and perseverance. 'The standard portrait', Rotella explains, 'has him toiling on through a barrage of his opponents' blows, relying on magnificent conditioning and sheer fighting character to bear him up under terrific punishment' (177). Rotella does clarify that this popular perception is not entirely correct. Boxing aficionados would know that Marciano relied as much on speed and technique as on endurance. Popular memory, however, adjusted Marciano's reality to fit into a more familiar image of the white boxer. Rocky Balboa follows in the footsteps of his role model and specializes in absorbing enormous amounts of punishment. 'You remind me of the Rock,' Mickey tells Rocky, 'you move like him, you got a heart like he did'. Rocky even shares Marciano's weak footwork, which Mickey tries to solve by tying his ankles with a string. 'Marciano', he explains, 'had the same problem and this string cured him'.

Though Marciano withdrew from action in 1956, his legacy as the only white champion to retire undefeated sparked off rumours that he would return to action after Muhammad Ali gained the championship. Fantasies that the Rock would return to give Ali a taste of white manhood began in the late 60s, when Murray Woroner, a Miami boxing promoter and radio producer, uploaded Ali's and Marciano's details on a

computer and produced simulated fights, which he aired as radio plays. Shortly before his death in 1969, Marciano collaborated with Woroner in the filming of *The Superfight: Marciano vs. Ali*. The film was edited to match a computer simulation of a hypothetical fight, with both boxers in their prime. It had a single showing in 1,500 closed-circuit theatres in the U.S. and Europe. Marciano won by knockout in round thirteen in the North American release, whereas Ali won in the European one. In 1971, Norman Mailer presented his own imaginary superfight, this time between Marciano and Frazier. If we consider how overtly *Rocky* borrows from the public personas of Marciano and Ali, then it would not be an exaggeration to attribute part of the film's appeal to the staging of a legendary biracial superfight.

Both popular reviews and scholarly analyses have readily picked up and commented on *Rocky's* racial and racist overtones. *The New York Times* wrote in 1976 that *Rocky* 'explores areas of latent racism that just may not be all that latent' (Canby). With the benefit of hindsight in the 80s, Guerrero identifies *Rocky's* release as 'one of the starting points in the film industry's shift into a rightist cycle of production' (116). The most critical position belongs to Joel Martin, who finds more agency and deliberateness behind the film's 'nasty ideology'. Martin accuses the film of 'help[ing] to bolster key cultural and ideological preconditions of the Reagan era'. 'Among other things, this New Right vision includes an attack on the civil rights movement, glimpses of a race war, and a call for the resubjugation of African Americans' (126-27). Even without the explicitly racist intentions that Martin attributes to *Rocky*, it would be hard to disagree that the film's ideological valances speak to distinctly white fears and anxieties. In *Rocky's* Bicentennial Philadelphia, white folk suffer and African Americans enjoy disproportionate power and visibility.

### **The Politics of White Victimization**

Muhammad Ali's alliterative insults, blaxploitation films, and big afros may appear today rather dated and overeager manifestations of black empowerment. They do represent, however, the firm rooting of the civil rights movement in 70s culture. As Porter writes in his cultural history of race, 'Americans transformed the ways their society was structured along racial lines during the 1970s; they embraced, rejected, or

otherwise negotiated racial identities and mobilized themselves around them in important new ways' (51-52). While racism was by no means obsolete in the 70s, more and more American institutions proclaimed an openly anti-racist stance. In the meantime, white America sought to find new ways of affirming its supremacy, maintaining its privileges, and balancing them with the need for publically declared support for the civil rights movement. A film that rejuvenates racial prejudices would also have to find ways to update and disguise them. Before exploring how *Rocky* tackles the task, I ought to clarify that my intention is not assess the degree of the film's racism or to suggest that some racial prejudices are more racist than others. Every expression of racism against the descendants of African slaves, whether intentional or not, open or concealed, is dangerous and can be justifiably interpreted as a call for subjugation. By the same token, however, simply identifying *Rocky* as a racist film leads to an analytic dead-end. My aim is to situate *Rocky* within discourses on race and racism particular to the 70s, specifically debates over affirmative action and reverse discrimination.

Following the widespread recognition of the civil rights movement as a justified cause, the extreme right witnessed a consolidation of its forces as the only channel for voicing racism explicitly in the public sphere. The history of the 70s is peppered with moments of white backlash and even neo-fascist outbursts, as in the nearly threefold increase in the membership of the Ku Klux Klan during the decade (Porter 66). In politics, racism found its spokesman in George Wallace, Alabama's segregationist governor and thrice presidential candidate, who vowed 'never to be out-niggered again' (Brill 42). 'Sweet Home Alabama', the 1973 hit by Southern rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd, became Wallace's unofficial anthem. In addition to praising Alabama's natural charms, the band defended the South against folk-rocker Neil Young, who in 'Southern Man' criticized the region's legacy of racial violence. Illuminated with the retrospective floodlight of history, individual moments of white grievance in the 70s form a unified narrative that gradually escalated into the neoconservative backlash and Reagan's election in 1980. With a narrower individual spotlight on the 70s, however, the decade emerges more as a period of uncertainty and tension, rather than of smooth and predictable transition. The institutionalization of civil liberties and galvanizing animosity against them often developed in tandem. The civil rights of African



Americans were often undermined in the very policies meant to support them. Nixon's appeal to 'law and order' and to the 'silent majority' during the 1968 presidential campaign, for example, may today appear to be a clear precursor of neoconservatism, but it was publicized as a democratic measure to counter discrimination at the time.

The same uneasy combination of accepting civil rights and expressing white grievance characterizes the decade's cultural output, with such clearly racist outbursts as Wallace's anthem being the exception rather than the norm. In most cases, racism was an undercurrent, concealed under the guise of acceptance and tolerance. The portrayal of Jack Johnson as a victim of racism in *The Great White Hope*, for example, marks one of the first instances in Hollywood's departure from the noble savage paradigm. Even Muhammad Ali thought that Johnson's empowerment was too provocative and claims that he rejected an offer to play the part, despite being in exile at the time and having very limited income. 'A black hero chasing white women', he explains, 'was a role I didn't want to glorify, in real life or on the screen' (Ali and Durham 317). Nevertheless, the depiction of Johnson (renamed Jefferson in the film) is not as provocative or offensive as Ali anticipated. Whereas the real Johnson never shied away from flaunting his empowerment in and out of the ring, the film turns him into a misunderstood hero. As Pauline Kael wrote in her review, *The Great White Hope* 'is so afraid of letting its hero antagonize the audience that instead of having a blonde tucked under each arm, like the actual Johnson, Jefferson is allowed only one dowdy brunette' ('Clobber-Movie' 156). *The New York Times* similarly criticized *The Great White Hope* as 'one of those liberal, well-meaning, fervently uncontroversial works that pretend to tackle contemporary problems by finding analogies at a safe remove in history' (Canby).

*Rocky* appears to lack any such pretensions. If anything, the film continuously reminds audiences that the story is set in 1976 and Apollo's empowerment obstructs Rocky's American Dream. Nevertheless, *Rocky* does take other measures to conceal its racist overtones. Apart from the unnamed barman's reference to Apollo as a 'jig clown' at the beginning of the film, no character expresses racial prejudice against Apollo and nobody else seems to even notice that he is black. The film leaves it up to the viewer to use contextual knowledge and link the dots between Apollo's manipulative behaviour, black empowerment, and Rocky's unfair treatment. Race becomes Apollo's

defining identity through the conspicuous absence of any other information that would explain his character. Most of what we know about Apollo comes filtered through television screens and staged shows. Apollo is just the summation of these performances, a faceless individual with seemingly no interpersonal relations to other characters. Only during the brief scene between Rocky and a barman are we offered a snippet of insight into Apollo's past. After the barman slurs Apollo, Rocky immediately rushes to his defence: 'What are you talking about? This guy's the heavyweight champion of the world. He took his best shot. When was the last time you took a shot?' Rocky's comment suggests that Apollo started as a humble and talented boxer, but, as his fame and fortune increased, he lacked the good judgement and prudence to remain focused on good sportsmanship. Apollo lost sight of what is true and meaningful, and became the 'jig clown' that we meet at the beginning of the film.

Although Rocky's brief comment provides only a tentative explanation of Apollo's behaviour, the association of success with declining morality evokes a familiar Hollywood trope from 30s gangster movies. The gangster accumulates a fortune too quickly and effortlessly to be able to appreciate it and exercise restraint. Thus, he indulges in a wasteful display of material accoutrements—fancy suits, fast cars, lavish houses. As used in the 30s, the trope served as an allegory for failed assimilation. These gangsters were typically first generation European immigrants, often Italian or Irish. Lacking a gradual enculturation into American values, they clung onto the barbarous ways of their primitive lands and took advantage of their new citizenship at the expense of those who granted it to them. In the 70s, however, the children and grandchildren of immigrants, like Rocky, can serve as believable examples of all-American values. In *Rocky*, it is not the new immigrant, but the newly enfranchised African American man that represents the same allegorical substitution of financial gain for citizenship. Apollo lacks the necessary formative experiences as an American citizen to handle his newfound civil liberties, just like he lacks the moral strength to manage his fame and fortune. In this respect, *Rocky* does not propose the subjugation of African Americans, but, as Victoria Elmwood puts it, echoes 'white American anxiety about racial politics and the dominant group's desire to forestall political radicalism of black champs' (58). Apollo's example suggests that African Americans have gained too much, too quickly and do not know how to exercise restraint with their freedoms. As a

result of African Americans' excessive and villainous projection of power, white Americans end up being the new victims of discrimination.

Jacobson finds in the idea of reverse discrimination the distinguishing characteristic of the post-civil rights era. The civil rights era ended for Jacobson when calls for the disenfranchisement of African Americans were replaced by calls to end prejudices against whites. Whether this change is enough to warrant the introduction of the prefix 'post' in front of civil rights remains a matter of contention among students of race in American culture. What is more relevant to this discussion is Jacobson's equally bold suggestion that *Rocky's* premiere can serve as a useful historical landmark for this shift in eras and attitudes. Jacobson bases his argument on the chronological coincidence of *Rocky's* release with the California Supreme Court ruling on the University of California vs. Bakke case. Allan Bakke, a white thirty-two-year-old engineer, and by all accounts a strong candidate, applied for admission to the University of California Davis medical school in 1973 and 1974, but was rejected in both years. After a fruitless appeal to the university, Bakke filed a law suit to the Yolo County Superior Court in 1974, claiming that the university's policy of withholding sixteen percent of admissions for minority students resulted in his unjust rejection. The county court could not determine if Bakke would have been admitted, had it not been for the university's affirmative action programme, and referred the case to the California Supreme Court. On 16 September 1976, a month and a half before *Rocky's* premiere, the university's affirmative action programme was declared unconstitutional. Jacobson argues that the outcome of the Bakke case inevitably coloured American audiences' appreciation of *Rocky*. He even implies that the case had something to do with the film's 'astonishing box-office receipts and much popular acclaim' (*Roots* 97). The story of a hardworking white boxer losing the fight in an unfair split decision that favours the arrogant black champion could not but remind moviegoers of the deserving white applicant, who was unfairly rejected because of an affirmative action programme.

A closer look at the history of the case, however, reveals that most American audiences would have probably been unfamiliar with Bakke when they first watched *Rocky*. While the film enjoyed widespread pre-release publicity and became an immediate success, the Bakke case was not as well-known in the autumn of 1976 as

Jacobson assumes it to have been. It was not until the university appealed the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court that the case started receiving increased media attention. While the case was pending for two years, the dispute gradually reached the pages and airwaves of national media, sparking a whirlwind of campus protests, frenzied lobbying, and fervent debates. *The New York Times* spent less than a column on page nineteen reporting the state court decision in September 1976 (figure 89). On 29 June 1978, the day after the U.S. Supreme Court decision, the same newspaper devoted its front page headline to Bakke and a special section analyzing the decision (figure 90). *Rocky* and the Bakke case may not have unwittingly conspired to catalyze the Zeitgeist and launch a new era, but we should not be too quick to dismiss Jacobson's argument. Regardless of the precise timeline of the court ruling and the film's premiere, Jacobson identifies in both a new understanding of the respective meanings of whiteness and blackness in American culture. It is precisely this 'shared ethos' (*Roots* 98) that constitutes the more analytically fertile aspect of Jacobson's argument and deserves further exploration.

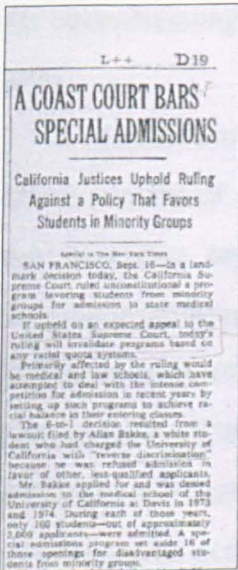


Figure 89



Figure 90

The Bakke case and *Rocky*, as Jacobson rightly suggests, exemplify a new kind of popular discourse on race that revolved around questions of affirmative action and reverse discrimination. The basic statutory framework for racial equality in education and employment derives from the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The constitutionality of

affirmative action policies, however, has been a more contentious case. Racial Quotas and other statistical goals are by their nature non-colour-blind policies. In 1975, Nathan Glazer, the co-author of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, launched one of the earliest attacks on affirmative action in *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy*.<sup>30</sup> Public opinion polls, furthermore, reveal that the American public in the 70s tended to evaluate affirmative action, busing, and other forms of positive discrimination differently from traditional racial issues. For Simon and Abdel-Moneim, 'the public opinion's toward affirmative action appears to be highly affected by the way the question is worded' (74). For instance, asked in the 1972 National Opinion Research Center survey if 'Negroes/blacks should have as good a chance as white people to get any kind of job', ninety-six percent responded that they should (Mayer 366). Support drops when details of specific programs are mentioned or when the question is framed in terms of preferential treatment. In a 1977 Roper Center survey, fifty-four percent of respondents believed that 'special admission procedures and quotas for blacks' should be made illegal. A Gallup survey in the same year phrased the question differently, asking if 'minority groups should be given preferential treatment'. An overwhelming eighty-three percent of respondents opposed the proposal (Mayer 374).

For Jacobson, the popular attention received by the Bakke case and the box-office success of *Rocky* cohere around white Americans' fear that African Americans are receiving preferential treatment at their expense. Nevertheless, Jacobson's argument underappreciates the nuances and distinctions between *Rocky's* and Bakke's expressions of white grievance. Although the Supreme Court ruled in favour of Bakke's admission in 1978, the outcome of the case can hardly be regarded a victory for white privilege. In its attempt to reach a compromising solution, the court limited the scope of affirmative action criteria in university admission, but warned that 'it would be a tragedy if this ruling resulted in all-white classes' (Greenhouse 22). 'The decision', M. Derschowitz, a Harvard Law professor, commented, 'will go down in history not for what it did, but for what it didn't do' (Herbers 22). The front page of *The New York*

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<sup>30</sup> Although Glazer argues his case primarily on legal and constitutional grounds, he devotes an entire chapter on 'The White Ethnic Political Reaction', in which he discusses 'the strong sense of unfairness' and 'perceived differences in culture' that white ethnic groups feel when quotas favour African Americans (195).

*Times* the day after the ruling reflects the prevailing confusion. It features a picture of Bakke smiling contently at the outcome alongside a quote from the Attorney General, commenting on behalf of President Carter, that the decision marks 'a great gain for affirmative action'. The paper's main headline also shows the court's attempt for a win-win decision: 'High Court Backs Some Affirmative Action by Colleges, but Orders Bakke Admitted' (Greenhouse 1). An opinion piece by an unnamed author in the inner pages captures the outcome of the case more effectively in the title 'Who Won?'. The same confusion characterizes other affirmative action cases from the same time. In the 1979 *Weber vs. United Steelworks* case, the court ruled that it was up to the discretion of private employers to use racial quotas. The following year, an explicit ten percent quota was approved for federal contracting. As Frum comments, affirmative action cases in the 70s

created powerful incentives for public institutions and private corporations to lie: to pretend that they were not maintaining quotas when in fact they were, to pretend that those quotas were voluntary when in fact they had been surrendered to under the threat of federal lawsuit. (244)

The contradictions of affirmative action legislation reflect a broader unwillingness and unpreparedness, both from the government and in culture at large, to take a clear stance on the issue of positive discrimination.<sup>31</sup> If the Bakke case is an example of white grievance, its trajectory in the public sphere is also an example of uncertainty and anxiety about what the future holds for white Americans after the civil rights movement.

*Rocky* articulates a more clear and decisive, but less aggressive, version of white grievance. Public discourse on the Bakke case did not centre on his merits as an applicant, but on whether the admission policy itself is constitutional. *Rocky* reverses the dynamic to concentrate primarily on Rocky's virtues, and minimally on the reasons for his victimization. The film does not dwell on whether Apollo has the right to use Rocky for his own gain or whether the split decision is just. Rather, the focus remains squarely on Rocky's character, ethos, and behaviour. This shift of emphasis does not

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, American courts and public opinion are yet to reach consensus on the constitutionality of affirmative action policies. The Supreme Court concluded in 2003, in *Grutter vs. Bollinger*, that the benefits resulting from a diverse student body justify the consideration of racial criteria in university admission. However, the Court decided in *Graaz vs. Bollinger* that 'racial bonus points' to minority applicants are unconstitutional (Simon and Abdel-Moneim 74).

alter Rocky and Bakke's shared predicament, but it does influence the degree to which they can be perceived as agents of a racist ideology. Bakke took the university to court to prove his victimhood and the illegality of the actions performed against him. In so doing, he became, in Jacobson's words, 'a poster boy for white victimization' (*Roots* 107-8). Regardless of the rightness of Bakke's claims, his active agency in pursuing them turned whiteness into his defining identity and his case inevitably became a locus for a broader discussion of racial prejudice in America.

In contrast, Rocky comes across as gentle, decent, and remarkably modest. As the aforementioned conversation with the barman shows, Rocky is the only character in the film with genuine respect and admiration for Apollo. Rocky goes to great lengths to establish Rocky as a caring boyfriend for Adrian, a good friend for Paulie, and a respected member of his community. The opening scene has him fighting in the ring and crashing his opponent, but, as soon as he leaves the boxing club, he transforms into the Robin Hood of the neighbourhood, complete with a green feather on his fedora. On his walk from the club to his apartment, Rocky volunteers to carry inside a drunkard who passed out on the street and then to escort a teenage girl home.<sup>32</sup> Despite working for Gazzo, Rocky remains hesitant when it actually comes to exercising physical violence outside the ring. In an indicative episode early in the film, Rocky refuses to break a man's thumb at Gazzo's instruction. In Hollywood's age-old tradition, the film also turns to animals to show Rocky as loving and caring. He gives a home to Butkus and keeps his turtles, Cuff and Link, next to his parents' pictures and Rocky Marciano's poster. Even Rocky's need for reading glasses suggests a certain sophistication that contradicts the brutality of his profession. Most importantly, however, we get to know and sympathize with Rocky before he becomes Apollo's victim. Rooting for Rocky is not a question of taking a stance on a political issue, but simply choosing the film's hero over its villain.

Rocky's congeniality is all the more noticeable because it diverges significantly from the stereotype of the Italian-American man as a racist bigot. As discussed in chapter two, working class Italian-Americans have historically been associated with an

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<sup>32</sup> Though she does not immediately appreciate Rocky's advice on proper womanly behaviour, she will grow up to become his love interest after Adrian's death in *Rocky Balboa* (2006), the latest and presumably the last instalment in the *Rocky* saga.

asphyxiating ethnic particularism, conservative politics, and outspoken racism, a stereotype that the overwhelming majority of Hollywood's Italian-Americans in the 70s follows. This is particularly true in representations of Italian-American gangsters, whose criminal syndicates are commonly ethnically exclusive. In both *Mean Streets* and *The Godfather*, Italian-American wise guys seem to choose their rivals solely on the basis of Jewishness or blackness. For all his disco flair, even *Saturday Night Fever's* Tony Manero is, as we shall see in the next chapter, a racist bigot. The stereotype of Italian-American racism was even stronger for Philadelphia's Italian-Americans. A British cameraman covering the city's Bicentennial celebrations commented that 'You have to have an "O" at the end of your name to get anywhere in this city.' *The New York Times* reported the comment with the explanation that 'Major Frank Rizzo's office was heavily involved in handling matters' (Charlton). Frank Rizzo, a second generation Italian-American, was Philadelphia's major from 1972 to 1980 and the person in charge of the city's Bicentennial celebrations. With a background as a police commissioner, Rizzo was well-known for his extremist right-wing ideology and favouritism towards Italian-Americans, with rumours of corruption accompanying his term in office. He was mostly known, however, for his hard line against crime and his tolerance for racially motivated police brutality. Rizzo notoriously summed up his attitude to illegality as a plan to 'make Attila the Hun look like a faggot' (Capozzola 41).

Rocky may break away from the stereotype of Italian-American racism, but his ethnicity remains significant both in the construction of his character and in the film's racial politics. Rocky lives in a contemporary-looking Philadelphia at the time Rizzo was major, but his moral universe harks back to the days of Rocky Marciano. *Rocky's* Philadelphia operates on laws of kinship, good neighbourliness, and common-sense justice. It rewards hard work, determination, and dignity. Contemporary debates surrounding affirmative action and black empowerment are as alien to Rocky's mindset as corporate deals and media publicity. In sharp contrast to Apollo's theatrics and sparkly costumes, Rocky walks into the ring accompanied only by three friends. The back of his robe features an endorsement for 'Shamrock Meats', the slaughter house where he trains. 'What the hell is that?' Mickey exhales when he sees it, 'I trained you to be a fighter, not a billboard'. Rocky disarmingly and naively responds that he accepted the offer because he gets to keep the robe. Compared to Apollo's



corporate endorsements, 'Shamrock Meats' is an innocent symbol of a local white ethnic alliance between Philadelphia's Italian and Irish communities.

Rocky's ethnicity, furthermore, allows him a much stronger claim to victimhood than Allan Bakke's. Both men would classify as Caucasian under the UC Davis Title VI admission practices, but, in the context of the ethnic revival, they stand for different shades of whiteness. When he applied for admission, Bakke already enjoyed the combined privileges of social, gender, and racial hegemony. He was an ex-marine and Vietnam veteran, with a university education in engineering and a stable job. With all the social privileges that whiteness had already granted him, it seems only logical that the education of an up till recently disenfranchised group should be given priority over Bakke's wish to get a second degree in medicine. As a WASP man, furthermore, Bakke cannot easily escape from accusations of white privilege. Compared to how much and for how long his ancestors have suppressed the civil rights of African Americans, his rejection under an affirmative action programme appears meaningless. His decision to take the university to court and demand reparation could not but raise counteraccusations of white resentment. As a descendant of Italian immigrants, Rocky does not deserve to pay the costs of white privilege. Ethnic revival advocates repeatedly asserted that Italian immigrants arrived in America after the abolition of slavery and had experienced racial prejudice from Anglo-Saxon and Nordic whites as much as African Americans. Despite both being victims of black empowerment, therefore, Rocky is morally and historically undeserving of this position.

Whereas the Bakke case was ambivalently resolved in a courtroom, the boxing ring allows for a more effective and primal form of justice. Taking up almost a quarter of the film's total duration, the final fight between Rocky and Apollo brings the film's ethno-racial tensions and gender politics to a joint conclusion. When Apollo and Rocky enter the ring, their social, cultural, and ideological differences could not be more pronounced. The sport, however, demands from them to disrobe and rid themselves of all sartorial and stylistic ascriptions that separate them. Confident that Rocky does not pose a real challenge to his title, Apollo devotes the first few minutes of the first round mocking Rocky with bluffs for the enjoyment of the spectators. Rocky takes advantage of his lowered guard to throw a snapping punch that knocks Apollo down. 'He doesn't know it's a damn show', one of Apollo's assistants remarks, 'he thinks it's a

damn fight. Finish this bum and let's go home'. Apollo ignores the suggestion; he has felt Rocky's punch and knows that a quick, easy victory is no longer possible. Neither would Apollo be satisfied with just finishing Rocky. Being knocked down in the first round may have made the spectators' jaws drop, but Apollo is no longer interested in the spectacle of the fight. Rocky's punch challenged his strength and skill as a boxer, triggering his primal masculine instinct for revenge. Round after round, Apollo comes to realize that Rocky is a formidable opponent and abandons his crowd-pleasing histrionics to concentrate on the fight. 'Implicit in Rocky's near-victory', writes Elmwood, 'is the rebirth of Creed's passion for boxing and athletic excellence' (57). By the end of the fifteenth round, Apollo is no longer the costumed showman that entered the ring, but a sweaty, injured, and bruised boxer. 'I ain't stopping at nothing, man', he resolutely asserts, 'ain't gonna be no rematch'.

Apollo's transformation is also reflected in how the event gradually turns from the staged performance that he envisioned into an actual fight. The fight begins with the audible remarks of the commentators and the undecipherable shouts from the crowd punctuating the proceedings. The camera is a privileged observer in the midst of the commotion, juxtaposing shots of the fight, the audience, Adrian waiting in the locker room, and Rocky's friends watching the fight on television. As Creed realizes that Rocky takes the fight seriously, the filming style also changes to highlight the shift from a spectacle to a fight. The commentators' remarks are gradually replaced with the sound of punches and heavy breathing while the camera concentrates more on the fight than its audience. By the end of the fight, Apollo finds his way back to the pursuit of the sport, while Rocky manages to go the distance against the heavyweight champion. In his cultural history of the 70s, Edward Berkowitz suggests that the film's conclusion resolves racial tensions through a mutual recuperation of manhood for Apollo and Rocky. 'Both the Italian character and the black character', writes Berkowitz, 'manage to maintain their dignity. The picture suggests that there is room for both the black champion and the Italian challenger in the world of boxing' (190).

There is, however, no room for Adrian in this conclusion. While Rocky is going the distance and re-introducing Apollo to the values of dignity and hard work (figure 91), Adrian is banished to the locker room (figure 92), watching the fight on a television screen and practising the feminine virtue of patience. Apollo's and Rocky's

mutual remasculinization seals the film's negation of feminist advances and Adrian's transformation into a loyal wife. Her exclusion suggests a compromising solution between women's and African Americans' civil rights. Apollo and Rocky establish a biracial male alliance for the preservation of patriarchy, akin to Susan Jeffords's interpretation of masculinity in Vietnam War films. Jeffords discovers in these films a hierarchic ranking of identities, with race, ethnicity, and social status being subordinated to gender to facilitate all-male alliances. 'The groundwork for regenerating masculinity', writes Jeffords,

is the mythos of masculine bonding. The masculine here represents itself as a 'separate world', one that poses survival—finally the survival of masculinity itself—as depending on the exclusion of women and the feminine, a world in which men are not significantly different from each other and boundaries of race, class, education, age, geographic location, and ethnicity are overcome in favour of [masculine] ties. (168)



Figure 91



Figure 92

*Rocky* differs from Jeffords's thesis, however, insofar as Rocky and Apollo's masculine alliance does not wholly absolve racial distinctions. As Elmwood keenly observes, 'what goes unobserved here is the fact that the dominance into which the champ is welcomed is that same kind of male dominance whose very currency and power depended on white supremacy' (58). Under the guise of becoming a proper man, therefore, Creed concedes to racism, agreeing as it were that he has been emancipated too fast. Rocky's agency in the process of Apollo's transformation suggests that African Americans need white Americans to guide them through the post-civil rights period. Following the Christian conceit running through *Rocky's* narrative, the white victim finds the magnanimity to redeem his black brother from his immoral lifestyle and point for him the way back to the pursuit of the sport. Interracial

male harmony blossoms, but only as long as it is mediated through the good-will of the white man.

If the Bakke case were to be tried in the *Rocky* universe, the court would order the admission of minority applicants, but enrol them in a class designed specifically for underachievers. Bakke and all white male applicants would also be admitted, but women applicants would be rejected and reassigned to the roles of budding doctors' wives. Yet, this allegorical interpretation of *Rocky* as an affirmative action case ignores the fact that Rocky is neither a WASP nor a minority applicant. As a revived ethnic, he is not bound by post-civil rights liberalism, Bicentennial blues, or feminist guilt. Ethnicity allows him to remain detached from such concerns and takes the edge off the racist and sexist overtones of the film's conclusion.

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Allan Bakke was admitted to the UC Davis medical school in 1978 and graduated in 1982. During the four years of his tuition, two sequels were added to the *Rocky* franchise. If the first film plants the seeds of biracial homosocial bonding, its sequels see Rocky and Apollo's friendship blossom. *Rocky II* begins where the first film left off, with Apollo demanding a rematch and challenging Rocky with an orchestrated campaign of public slurs against his manhood and ethnicity, substituting the Italian Stallion with Italian Chicken. Rocky has decided to settle down with Adrian, but the plot leaves him conveniently unemployed, unable to fulfil his role as a breadwinner, and, by implication, emasculated. He finally accepts Apollo's challenge, but this time he is crowned champion in the final fight. Apollo recognizes Rocky's athletic superiority and Rocky pledges allegiance to monogamy by devoting the championship to Adrian and his son.

By *Rocky III*, Rocky gives up his Philadelphia apartment for a villa, changes his leather jacket for a suit, and, through social elevation, symbolically joins the ranks of WASPdom. Apollo resorts to being Rocky's trainer, Adrian's confidant, and uncle Apollo to their son. Male bonding receives one of its most memorable cinematic treatments in the scene of Apollo and Rocky working out together by the beach (figure 93). Mr. T plays Rocky's opponent, who is portrayed as the spitting image of Apollo in

the original film: an arrogant, loud, and misguidedly empowered African American. In comparison, Apollo emerges as a more decent and mature African American man for having accepted his place in *Rocky*'s white, patriarchally ordered universe.



Figure 93

*Rocky* sequels may allow the raced and gendered foundations of Rocky's victories to the surface much more clearly, but their politics of representation are already apparent in the original film. *Rocky* resolves white America's anxieties at the time of the Bicentennial by constructing a skewed version of the present. In *Rocky*'s world, feminist advances are eliminated, African Americans gain controlled civic inclusion, and white male hegemony is preserved. Rocky's hyphenated ethnic identity renders this world credible and conceals the prejudices on which it is founded. White privilege is refashioned as the rediscovery of good old American manhood; sexism looks like the preservation of family values; white victimization never evolves into white resentment. The Italian-American man, therefore, allows white male viewers in 1976 to indulge in a fantasy of rolling back on feminist and civil rights advances, while simultaneously protecting them from the guilt of enjoying the fantasy. After all, *Rocky* is not remembered as a preposterously racist and sexist ploy, but as the inspirational story of a deserving underdog.

## CHAPTER SIX: *Saturday Night Fever*

Agonized as he is, Michael Corleone is still an icy criminal monster; Sylvester Stallone is the goofy brute, the Italian Stallion, in *Rocky*. Only *Saturday Night Fever* provides some hints of escaping this. (92)

The above comment comes from Daniel Sembroff Golden's 'The Fate of la Famiglia', an essay published in an anthology on the cinematic representation of ethnicity in 1980, three years after the release of *Saturday Night Fever*. Golden's criticism of *The Godfather* for portraying Michael Corleone as 'an icy criminal' and *Rocky* for turning its hero into 'a goofy brute' provides a typical example of ethnic image studies in the 80s. Golden's underlying aim is to expose Hollywood's prejudices and demand positive representations of ethnics as intelligent, honest, hardworking Americans. Yet, Golden's comment is surprisingly atypical in finding 'some hints of escaping' negative stereotypes in *Saturday Night Fever*. Since the 80s, criticism against the negative portrayal of ethnicity in *Rocky* and especially in *The Godfather* has gradually been replaced, or at least balanced, by the recognition of the films' artistic merits and lasting popularity with audiences. *Saturday Night Fever's* representation of the Italian-American man, however, has entered popular memory as an easily discernible and crude stereotype.

*Saturday Night Fever's* disco fantasy offered American audiences in 1977 some much-needed escapism from their post-Vietnam, post-Watergate realities. At the heart of this fantasy, however, lies the archetypal Italian-American Guido. If there is a single image that encompasses all the polyester fakery and excess tastelessness of the 70s, this is probably Travolta's swaggering Tony Manero in his white three-piece suit and black body shirt, standing proudly on the disco floor and pointing his right hand upwards. As if to make the stereotype deliberately more perplexing, the film is peppered with fetishizing images of Travolta's naked body and teasing intertextual allusions to homosexuality. The Tony Manero stereotype has been copied, parodied, and caricatured so many times since 1977—not the least by John Travolta himself in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994)—that it is hard to imagine how anyone could find in it the positive representation of Italian-American ethnicity, which both *The Godfather* and *Rocky* fail to provide.

Golden does proceed to identify these positive elements in the more dramatic aspects of the narrative. *Saturday Night Fever* has been so closely identified with the Bee Gees' songs and Travolta's dance moves that it is easy to forget that the narrative is driven forward by violent events, including a gang fight, a rape, and a suicide, that expose the darker side of Brooklyn's Italian-American neighbourhood in Bay Ridge. Unlike the reassuring conclusion of *The Godfather* and the triumphant conclusion of *Rocky*, *Saturday Night Fever* ends on a sombre note, with Tony giving up his disco adventures, growing out of his narcissism, leaving his ethnic community behind, and moving to WASP Manhattan. Golden finds in this conclusion a commendable refusal to follow the stereotype that demands the Italian-American man remain a low-class delinquent.

This chapter explores *Saturday Night Fever's* escapist disco fantasy and the contribution of the Italian-American man to its construction. The discussion, however, centres on explaining two features of *Saturday Night Fever* that seem to contradict this fantasy. The first concerns Tony Manero's narcissism and the insinuations of homosexuality in his representation, which appear to unnecessarily complicate an otherwise familiar portrait of Italian-American heterosexual machismo. The second concerns the film's social drama, which undermines Tony's and the audience's indulgence in disco. Rather than considering these features to be weaknesses or inconsistencies, I approach them as intrinsic parts of the disco fantasy that audiences so readily embraced. I find in them an effort to refashion disco as distant, exotic, and alluring for middle class, WASP audiences, while simultaneously fostering the possibility that it is proximate and attainable. The chapter argues that these narrative and representational balancing acts would be impossible without the discourses underpinning Italian-American ethnicity in the 70s. As an Italian-American man, Tony Manero combines exoticness and normalcy as part of a homogeneous ethnic masculine identity and can comfortably inhabit the incongruous world of *Saturday Night Fever's* disco fantasy.

The chapter's first section traces disco's journey from gay clubs to mainstream popular entertainment at the time of *Saturday Night Fever's* release. Subsequently, I turn the attention to the film's disco dancer and the discourses on gender and sexuality that underpin his representation. Focusing specifically on the scene of Tony's

grooming ritual, I examine the disparate textual signifiers, intertextual allusions, and contextual references that make up his hybrid masculinity. The following section looks at the construction of Tony's ethnic universe in Bay Ridge. I examine the connections between Travolta's star persona, Brooklyn's working class, and the Manhattan-Brooklyn dichotomy that underpins *Saturday Night Fever's* narrative. The final section concentrates on the film's social drama to explain how the escapist adventures of Bay's Ridge's disco king survive the hurdles of a narrative that insists on undermining them and exposing them as dangerous.

### Setting the Record Straight

Disco seems to be the most fitting starting point for any discussion of *Saturday Night Fever*. The Bee Gees soundtrack and Travolta's dancing have defined the film's place in popular memory. One need look no further than today's market for disco-themed party supplies and fancy costumes to realize that *Saturday Night Fever* has become synonymous with disco, if not with the entire 70s pop culture. Yet, disco has also provided the most readily available source of evidence for challenging Tony Manero's heterosexuality. Derek Nystrom begins his recent analysis of the film with the observation that 'the importance of disco to gay male self-understanding in the 1970s is well established' and proceeds to explore how the film overcomes these 'hurdles' and manages to 'craft a heterosexual narrative' (114). Nystrom's comment relies on the assumption of a unitary 70s disco culture that had consistently been associated with homosexuality. A closer investigation, however, will reveal that, disco had already found diverse expressions within the hetero-normative mainstream by the time of *Saturday Night Fever's* release. Disco in 1977 was no more an exclusively gay form of entertainment than *Saturday Night Fever* is an accurate representation of all its expressions.

Disco began in the late 60s as a marginalized form of music associated with cultural difference—including, but not restricted to sexual difference. A 1979 article in *The Washington Post* traces disco's origins back to 'the bayous and backfields of the cultural landscape, the gay clubs and black clubs where long nights of nonstop motion counterpointed the long days of getting by' (Darling). Disco attracted anyone who felt



excluded by mainstream forms of entertainment, primarily gay men and African Americans, but also Latinos, communist students, and former and current Hippies. As Tim Lawrence has recently argued, disco was not so much gay as queer, in an anachronistic use of the term to mean socially subversive ('Disco' 231). Under the mesmerizing, repetitive beat, disco dancers could declare their cultural freedom and centrality. It was also in those underground clubs that the distinctive disco culture developed, with its own rituals, dress codes, and behavioural norms. Disco was never just a music genre, but also a site-specific form of dancing to deejay music. In his 1979 essay 'In Defence of Disco', Dyer affirms that disco is 'more than just a form of music, although certainly music is the heart of it. Disco is also kinds of dancing, club, fashion, film etc.;--in a word, a certain *sensibility*' (20).

Dyer's essay also provides the first scholarly attempt to explain why disco became a liberating form of entertainment and fostered a socially subversive culture. Dyer locates in disco a 'whole body eroticism' that is distinctly different from rock's eroticism, which he indicatively describes as 'thrusting', 'grinding', and 'indelibly phallogentric' (22). Rock music is a predominantly live medium, with an emphasis on the relationship between the performers and the audience. The primary bodies on display at rock concerts are those of the performers, with the audience assuming the role of admiring onlookers. Disco eschews the idea of congregating around a live act and organizes the performance in terms of dancers and recorded, deejay-performed music. This reversal places the bodies of the dancers on display. As Cynthia Novack explains, 'Disco dancers transformed rock dancing's focus on the self as an individual within a group into a display of the self [...]. Their movement style was much more outwardly directed and presentational, posed, and controlled' (111). Disco's repetitive beat and lyrics also contribute to the centrality of the dancer's body. Lyrics are often reduced to bite size syllables that hark back to the primal quality of the voice as an index of corporeal existence. Even full words are often intoned in a physical way, as in Grace Jones's raunchy vocals in 'I Need a Man' and Donna Summer's incessant moaning in 'Love to Love You Baby'. Whereas 'rock's repeated phrases trap you in their relentless push,' Dyer explains, disco 'releas[es] you in an open-ended succession of repetitions' (22).



Figure 94



Figure 95

Nevertheless, Dyer's association of disco with 'an openness to sexuality that is not defined in terms of cock' (22) must have undeniably been a bold argument in 1979, a time when *Saturday Night Fever* epitomized disco culture. Following the film's release, Al Coury, the president of the RSO record label, which released the film's Bee Gees soundtrack, told *Rolling Stone* that the film 'kind of took disco out of the closet' (Henke). A *Newsweek* article similarly credited *Saturday Night Fever* for granting 'disco's ticket to respectability' (Graustark *et al.*). It is indeed hard to imagine a more phallogentric performance of heterosexual machismo than Tony's solo dance for 'You Should Be Dancing' (figures 94 and 95). The song has all the qualities that Dyer finds conducive to 'whole body eroticism'—repetitive beat, falsetto vocals, and a primal cry of 'yeah' after every lyric. Yet, Tony constrains the song's liberating potential into a calculated and purposeful choreography meant to impress female onlookers. When the deejay puts the record on, Tony dumps his partner with a disparaging 'forget about this' and walks around the dance floor to assertively claim the space for himself. His dance combines the flashiest disco moves, variations on 'the hustle', and imitations of easily recognizable acts, such as combing his hair and wiping sweat off his forehead. His choreography suggests self-consciousness and meticulous preparation, not spontaneous liberation. Tony never misses a chance to strike a pose, flirt with girls, and nod in affirmation of his own skill. With lips slightly pursed and minimal facial expressions, he constantly keeps his cool and never compromises the performance. In contrast to Dyer's description of disco as a whole body experience, Tony's move that receives most attention involves the rhythmical 'thrusting and grinding' of his hips in an imitation of sexual penetration.

Dyer's essay defends a very particular version of disco that is clearly reflected in the title of periodical for which he is writing, *Gay Left*. He defends disco's liberating potential against the tendency of leftist criticism to equate any form of pleasure with capitalist infiltration. Attempting to explain how a product of capitalism can remain subversive, Dyer notes:

The anarchy of capitalism throws up commodities that an oppressed group can take up and cobble together its own culture. [...] It is a 'contrary' use of what the dominant culture provides, it is important in forming a gay identity, and it has subversive potential as well as reactionary implications. (21)

This defence, however, applies to the early days of the strictly non-mainstream, non-bourgeois disco that played in underground gay clubs. While these clubs continued to appropriate, subvert, and queer the products of capitalism, a more commercialized and decisively hetero-normative version of disco took over American culture by the middle of the decade. On one side of the spectrum were the gospel-charged disco of the black divas and the sequined gay falsetto of Carl Bean's 'I Was Born this Way'. On the other side were the Bee Gees and John Travolta, projecting an image of whiteness and heterosexuality that made disco safer for WASP audiences. Lawrence holds *Saturday Night Fever* responsible for almost singlehandedly turning disco into 'a space for straight men to display their prowess and hunt for a partner of the opposite sex' ('Disco' 241). 'Above all else,' Lawrence explains elsewhere,

*Saturday Night Fever* established an imaginative framework for the stabilization of discotheque culture. The film evidently came out of an already-functioning suburban culture whose popularity had inspired Stigwood [the film's producer] in the first place, yet in its choice and depiction of that scene *Saturday Night Fever* created a lens through which a discotheque mainstream could come into focus. (Love 307)

As it entered into the mainstream, disco did not actually abandon its association with either the gay or African American communities. What disco lost was the potential for subverting gender, sexual, racial, and social norms. The flamboyant disco costumes, the big afros, and the flashy choreographies that began as expressions of liberation and empowerment were refashioned as empty styles in the hands of the WASP mainstream. As early as 1975, *Rolling Stone* commented:

Black Style is more accessible to whites than it was during the Smoldering Sixties. Gay-bar dance culture is 'hot'. Dancers don't take PCP or anti-get-up-

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Black Style is more accessible to whites than it was during the Smoldering Sixties. Gay-bar dance culture is 'hot'. Dancers don't take PCP or anti-get-up-

our macho drag right up there. Then... something happened. Big macho became Big Macs—more of the counterculture caught up by middle class-and straight—America' (Romesburg). The Village People's pseudo-autobiographical film *Can't Stop the Music* (1980) does not present homosexuality as a social category or even as a sexual identity, but as innocent and fun entertainment for all audiences. The film comprises a series of elaborate music and dance numbers, held together by a skeletal plot that follows Samantha, a retired model, and her efforts to help the Village People rise to fame. The dancing is clad in their usual gay imagery, but at the centre of the film lies the heterosexual romance between the easygoing Samantha and the square Ron (played by Olympic decathlon gold medallist Bruce Jenner). The group's members, who are never actually identified as gay, are assigned to the roles of Samantha's best friends, always ready to offer love advice and comic relief. Gay liberation is reduced a few vague lines of dialogue on tolerance and acceptance, allowing straight audiences to indulge safely in its depoliticized overdose of gay machismo.



Figure 96

Tom Wolfe succinctly captures the status of disco for middle class WASPs in his contribution to the 'In Our Time' column for the November 1978 issue of *Harper's* (figure 96). Wolfe accompanies his illustration of an elderly man dancing on the disco floor with a poem for a caption, which ends,

I grow old the 1970s way:  
 Deaf, but from a Max Q octaphonic beat,  
 Stroked out, but on my own two feet,  
 Disco macho!—for you, my New Cookie. (79)

The man's visit to the disco may not have been the most respectable Saturday night outing, but neither was it an indication of him coming out of the closet. On the contrary, it is considered a macho—albeit desperate—attempt to impress his 'new cookie'. By the end of the 70s, a night at the disco offered easy escapism for anyone feeling oppressed in their everyday life. Mike O'Harro, the founder of the Singles Bar chain and Tramp's, one of America's first and most successful discos, explained disco's appeal in 1979: 'People aren't rebels anymore. They are into 9-to-5, they're into working for a living. At night, they want to escape the humdrum; they don't want pleasure. At disco, you lose yourself in sound and lights' (cited in Darling). *The New York Times* cannot but agree that 'Americans would have given anything for something as mindless and impersonal as disco, an escape hatch from the social responsibilities' (Vare A15). Norma Jean's popular hit '(I Just Can't Wait Till) Saturday' (1978) offers the same explanation more succinctly in the lyric 'All I do is work. I'm no robot. Let's go disco'.

For those unable to actually visit a club, disco also gave rise to 'a \$4-billion-a-year entertainment industry that included, besides the sale of records and tapes, disco clothing, accoutrements, clubs, cruises, skating rinks, and over two hundred dedicated disco stations' (P. Carroll 266). In 1975, WKTU FM became New York's most popular radio station by playing exclusively disco music. There were even disco guides offering advice on how to dance, dress, and behave. *The Official Guide to Disco Dance Steps* (1978), for example, includes an entire chapter on the history of disco, but the closest it comes to mentioning disco's gay origins is through the appeasing affirmation that 'Disco dancing and all its trimmings are no longer the exclusive domain of an avant garde few' (Villari iii).

As disco entered into the mainstream, American culture also experienced a virulent rise in homophobia, the supporters of which readily pointed to the popularity of disco as evidence of a spreading gay threat. The backlash culminated in what became known as disco demolition night on 12 July 1979, a massive destruction of disco records during a baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit

Tigers. Disco demolition had been planned and promoted by Steve Dahl, a deejay for the rock radio station WLUP, in collaboration with Mike Veeck, the promotion manager of the White Sox. Dahl appealed to his listeners to bring disco records to the stadium, offering discounted tickets as an incentive. According to Gillian Frank's account of the event, so many showed up that regular ticket holders were denied admission (276). The attack on disco was essentially an attack on homosexuality, expressed in images of heterosexual machismo towering over disco. After fans threw disco records on the field, Dahl, dressed in army uniform and helmet, drove over them in a military-style jeep. He was accompanied by Lorelei, the blonde model known for her sexually provocative poses in WLUP advertisements. Rowdy fans followed Dahl's lead and surged onto the field, causing a near riot as they angrily destroyed thousands of disco records.

As an expression of heterosexual machismo, the disco demolition night was hardly an isolated event. Frank considers it to be only the most expressive and evocative articulation of a wider homophobia that arose in the late 70s. Coming on the heels of a widespread legislative and electoral backlash against gay civil rights, the combined backlash against sexual and musical expression signified for Frank 'the conscious evacuation of gays from popular culture' (279). Considered in retrospect, the rise in homophobia at the end of the 70s belongs to the same developments as the anti-feminist backlash discussed in chapter three and the reverse discrimination attitudes discussed in chapter five. Though comprising disparate and often extreme events, these changes collectively serve as evidence of America's gradual shift towards the right. As William Mayer argues in *The Changing American Mind*, the rise of neoconservatism was not a sudden event that occurred after Reagan's election in 1980. Mayer relies on evidence of public opinion polls to conclude that American public opinion during the first half of the 70s was torn between conservatism and liberalism, depending on the issue. In the years from 1974 to 1980, however, 'American attitudes really did become more conservative—often substantially more so—about a wide range of issues' (123).

Released at the peak of disco's popularity and right before the demonization of its gay origins, *Saturday Night Fever* catalyzed disco's mainstream image as fun and innocent escapism. So closely has *Saturday Night Fever* been associated with disco that

it is easy to forget that disco was not a singular, monolithic experience at the time of its film's release. In 1975, *Rolling Stone* published *Dancing Madness*, a book-length treatise on disco and an instruction manual for neophytes, where it estimates that there were two thousand discos in the U.S., two to three hundred in New York alone (Peck 6). Not all of them looked and operated like the *Odyssey 2001*. Even excluding the gay clubs on Christopher Street in the Village, one could find a wide array of disco hybrids within the hetero-normative mainstream, including Los Angeles skate discos for teenagers, exclusive clubs for Manhattan's nouveau riche, and Latin discos in Puerto Rican neighbourhoods.

At the broad basis of the disco pyramid were the huge suburban discotheques that offered cheap and easily accessible entertainment for everyone. Released a year after *Saturday Night Fever*, and evidently trying to cash in on its predecessor's success, *Thank God It's Friday* portrays disco as the epitome of democratic entertainment. The film follows the intersecting paths of various patrons on a single Friday night at the Zoo in suburban Los Angeles, including two underage girls who sneak in through the back door, a stereotypically uptight middle class couple celebrating their anniversary, and a hairdresser who unleashes her pink-haired, New Age alter ego on the disco floor. The Zoo welcomes anyone as long as they can pay the ten dollar admission fee.

At the top of the pyramid were Manhattan's upscale disco clubs, with Studio 54 laying an undisputable claim for the peak. When it celebrated its first birthday in 1978, the event was attended by the likes of Liza Minnelli, Andy Warhol, Bianca Jagger, and Truman Capote, who commented that 'This is the nightclub of the future. It's very democratic. Boys with boys, girls with girls, girls with boys, blacks with whites, capitalists with Marxists, Chinese with everything else—all one big mix!' (cited in Bennetts). The club's democratic sexual and racial politics, however, do not quite reflect its stringent admission policy. Unless you were a Hollywood celebrity, a New York socialite, or wealthy enough to mimic their lifestyle, then you could only celebrate Studio 54's birthday on the street outside. As *The New York Times* commented, 'outside it was chaos: Pushing, shoving mobs squashed against the barricades at the front and back entrances, shouting and pleading to be let in by the harried sentries at the door' (Bennetts). Le Jardin, another elite disco in midtown Manhattan, reserved its weeknights for the posh local crowd and opened its doors on weekends to what



McCormack calls in *Rolling Stone's Dancing Madness* 'all the novice prole decadents in platform heels and marshmallow clodhoppers [that] come pouring in from the suburbs' (11). *Rolling Stone* includes an interview with one such weekend patron, Tony Magano, a working class teenager from Staten Island. 'What my old man doesn't understand', Magano asserts,

is that you don't have to be a fag to be into this scene. [...] My old man doesn't understand that dancing is not a tight-assed, uptight sex role scene. It's just a way of communicating with people you might not have anything to say to if you sat down to talk. It doesn't mean you want to fuck a broad or a guy if you dance with them. You're just doing what comes natural. (McCormack 13)

The fictional Tony Manero shares Tony Magano's social background. From McCormack's middle class, WASP perspective, they both belong to 'the Italian drinking class'. They are both young, heterosexual, Italian-Americans, and live in boroughs outside Manhattan, with parents who disapprove of their passion for disco. Yet, Tony Magano's experience in *Le Jardin* is fundamentally different from Tony Manero's experience in the *Odyssey 2001*. The former is looking to lose himself in the liberating anonymity of *Le Jardin*; the latter wants to be recognized and admired as the disco king, both in and out of the *Odyssey*. *Le Jardin* offers Magano a symbolic form of social elevation, a chance to join the Manhattan crowd and leave his ethnic working class family home behind. The *Odyssey* is an intrinsic part of Tony Manero's blue-collar neighbourhood in Brooklyn's Bay Ridge. Its patrons comprise the local Italian-American youth. They live close to each other, frequent the same fast food restaurants, belong to the same gangs, and share rides to the disco on Saturday nights. In this respect, the *Odyssey* combines the democratic inexpensiveness of suburban discotheques with an ethnically exclusive clientele that evokes *Studio 54's* elitism.

*Saturday Night Fever*, furthermore, harks back to the early days of underground clubs to present Bay Ridge as the home of a more authentic, but strictly heterosexual, disco subculture. At a time when disco entertainment was available in diverse and easily accessible ways, the film distorts reality to portray disco as a localized, exclusive world with its own codes and rituals. Manhattanites in *Saturday Night Fever* need to travel to Bay Ridge to get a taste of disco. As Tony walks into Pete's dance studio for his usual practice before the competition, Pete leads a class of budding disco dancers, who stand in line and follow his instructions with equal

amounts of eagerness and clumsiness (figures 97 and 98). Though the film does not clarify who these students are, we can safely assume that they are not Bay Ridge residents. Based on what we know about Tony's friends and family, people in Bay Ridge neither require nor can afford disco lessons. Pete's students belong to the same demographic as the readers of guidebooks on disco steps and the man in Wolfe's illustration. Seeking a break from their WASP routine, they take a trip to the exotic world of ethnic Brooklyn for a taste of disco fever.



Figure 97



Figure 98

*Saturday Night Fever's* take on disco is succinctly described in the title of Nik Cohn's article 'Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night', which was published in the 7 June 1976 issue of *New York* magazine and provided the inspiration for the film's script. Cohn describes Bay Ridge's tribal rites in a pseudo-ethnographic guide, written from the perspective of an uninitiated neophyte. Other than the change in the hero's name, the film's portrayal of Tony Manero remains strikingly similar to Cohn's description of Vincent:

Vincent was the very best dancer in Bay Ridge—the ultimate Face. He owned fourteen floral shirts, five suits, eight pairs of shoes, three overcoats [...] Everybody knew him. When Saturday night came round and he walked into the 2001 Odyssey, all the other Faces automatically fell back before him, cleared a space for him to float in, right at the very center of the dance floor. Gracious as a medieval seigneur accepting tributes, Vincent waved and nodded at random. Then his face grew stern, his body turned to the music. Solemn, he danced, and all the Faces followed. (31)

Cohn begins Vincent's story with the claim, '*Everything described in this article is factual and was either witnessed by me or told to me directly by the people involved. Only the names of the main characters have been changed*' (31). On the film's

twentieth anniversary, Cohn admitted in another article for *New York* that his original claim to authenticity was a blatant lie. A British music journalist fresh to New York, Cohn needed a subject for his first story and, after a brief visit to Brooklyn, made up the story of Vincent (the film's Tony Manero) and his disco escapades. Cohn recounts how he noticed 'a figure in flared crimson pants and black body shirt, standing in the club doorway' and then based 'Tribal Rites' solely on this first impression. He filled in the details based on his childhood experience of witnessing a gang fight in his hometown of Derry and his acquaintance of a Mod named Chris in London ('Saturday Night's' 33-34).

Cohn's may be an extreme example of a fiction being embraced as the reality of Brooklyn's Italian-American culture—and, following the film's immense success, shaping the legacy of an entire decade—but its extremity usefully highlights the cultural valence of Italian-American ethnicity in the 70s and its ability to open up a space for suspending disbelief. Tony Manero is not the first Italian-American character to inhabit a utopian or altered version of the 70s. Michael Corleone conducts his business in a universe that looks like the 50s but functions as an impossible combination of preindustrial values and advanced capitalist principles. Rocky Balboa trains for the heavyweight championship in an apolitical and nostalgic version of Bicentennial Philadelphia. In *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony Manero becomes Bay Ridge's disco king, a radically different kind of achievement from those of Michael and Rocky, but a no less idealized reworking of the present.

Before exploring *Saturday Night Fever's* ethnic disco fantasy further, the film's ethnic hero warrants a closer look. If Tony's fascination with disco is not enough to immediately signify him as gay, *Saturday Night Fever* infuses his representation with textual, intertextual, and contextual references to homoeroticism, which are not only absent from Cohn's story, but stand in bold contrast to the strictly heterosexual machismo of Michael Corleone and Rocky Balboa.

### The Best of Both Worlds<sup>33</sup>

When Robert Stigwood, the British multimedia entertainment magnate, decided to bring Cohn's story to the screen, he was minimally interested in disco and its tribal rites in Bay Ridge. Accounts of *Saturday Night Fever's* production history claim that Stigwood was looking to exploit *Rocky's* success at the box-office and the Academy Awards by making another film about an Italian-American, working class man (Auster and Quart 36). Cohn's story provided an ideal template; Brooklyn would substitute for Philadelphia and dancing for boxing. Stigwood even hired John G. Avildsen, *Rocky's* director, for the job, before replacing him with John Badham. Although Stigwood got his wish granted, and *Saturday Night Fever* surpassed *Rocky's* rental income by almost twenty thousand dollars, the character of Tony Manero ended up looking very different from his original vision of a dancing Rocky. In fact, *Saturday Night Fever* reminded some contemporary reviewers of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963). Al Auster and Leonard Quart commented in *Cineaste* that the film 'conveys Tony's narcissistic pre-disco ritual with images straight out of Kenneth Anger's underground, homosexual-cum-biker film, *Scorpio Rising*' (36). Pauline Kael similarly noticed in John Travolta's portrayal of Tony Manero, 'a feeling of the sexiness of young boys who are bursting their britches with energy and desire [...] which recalls Kenneth Anger's short film *Scorpio Rising*'. Kael immediately proceeds to clarify, however, that, whereas *Scorpio Rising* is a 'homoerotic fantasy of toughness', *Saturday Night Fever* is a decisively 'straight heterosexual film' ('Nirvana' 59-60). Auster and Quart also note that the homoerotic overtones of Tony's grooming ritual yield to a night of 'picking up nameless, interchangeable girls and screwing them in the back seats of cars' (36).

Such comments represent a common tendency in analyses of the film to acknowledge the seemingly obvious references to homosexuality in the representation of Tony Manero, while adding the qualification that these references do not actually signify him as gay. For a film that has overall attracted little interpretive interest, its representation of gender and sexuality has received considerable attention (see, for example, Bordo, Yanc). The attention is certainly not surprising. *Saturday Night Fever*

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<sup>33</sup> An earlier version of this section has been published in *Networking Knowledge* 4.1 (2011) under the title "'A Straight Heterosexual Film": Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in *Saturday Night Fever*'.

seems to consciously expose Tony Manero's masculinity as a peculiar patchwork of inconsistent gender and sexual signifiers, both textual and intertextual, which invite audiences to notice, question, or affirm his heterosexuality. Yet, the question that commonly guides these analyses is not whether Tony Manero is gay, but how he manages not to be. In the following paragraphs, I consider how different interpreters have tackled the representation of Tony Manero's gender and sexuality and how the broader literature on masculinity may shed further light on it. Before proceeding with this discussion, however, a disclaimer is in order. Attempting to explain how Tony's heterosexuality is rescued can become a misguided exercise. It carries the risk of unwarrantedly suggesting that *Saturday Night Fever* poses an interpretational riddle for audiences. The film may challenge Tony's heterosexuality with a provocative and playful lack of subtlety, but Tony embodies contradictory signs and references with a certain naturalness and nonchalance, as if unaware of the conflicts. Indeed, Kael's unqualified assertion that *Saturday Night Fever* reminded her of *Scorpio Rising* despite being 'a straight, heterosexual film' may come closer to identifying the homogeneity of Tony's gender identity than any elaborate analysis. The task of deconstructing the textual signifiers that make up Tony's masculinity will ultimately reveal its own futility. Yet, it remains useful in establishing that *Saturday Night Fever's* representation of masculinity resists a theoretically consistent analysis and prompting a historically qualified investigation in how it manages to work smoothly nonetheless.

Underpinning both *The Godfather* and *Rocky* is the ability of Italian-American men to retain traditional masculine ideals. It is precisely because of their adherence to outdated macho principles that Italian-American men are able to inhabit their hybrid 70s universes comfortably and believably. Though Rocky and Michael revive these principles in different ways, both remain strictly constricted within the boundaries of heterosexual masculinity. At a time when gay masculine identities were becoming increasingly visible, the characters' unswerving heterosexuality is essential in forging the feeling of security, familiarity, and nostalgia that permeates both films. Asked in a 1976 interview to elaborate on his comment that 'Rocky is a real man', Sylvester Stallone took the opportunity to explain the appeal of traditional masculinity in the 70s:

If macho means I like to look good and feel strong and shoot guns in the woods, yes, I'm macho. [...] I don't think that even women's lib wants all men to become limp-wristed librarians. I don't know what is happening to men these days. There's a trend towards a sleek, subdued sophistication and a lack of participation in sports. In discos, men and women look almost alike, and if you were a little bleary-eyed, you'd get them mixed up. (Klemesrud)

Tony Manero does not suffer from the 'sleek, subdued sophistication' that Stallone finds so threatening to machismo and would hardly be mistaken for a 'limp-wristed librarian' or a woman on the disco floor. The film has women begging Tony for a kiss and men looking up to him as a role model of macho toughness. In fact, Travolta's Tony Manero evokes the well-established stereotype of the Guido, an Italian-American with the looks and charm of Rudolph Valentino but the brains of a buffoon. This description could apply equally well to Rocky Balboa, but what separates him from Tony Manero is the latter's self-consciousness of his good looks. The latest well-known and self-proclaimed Guidos are the four housemates on MTV's *Jersey Shore*.<sup>34</sup> The show's image of the Guido is directly traceable back to Tony Manero. Mike 'The Situation' Sorrentino, probably the most famous of the *Jersey Shore* cast members, has turned himself into a celebrity by standing in front of cameras, lifting up his shirts, and pointing at his abs. He owes more than he probably thinks to Tony Manero, the first Guido to show off his good looks. *Saturday Night Fever* took the Guido's natural swagger and transformed it into arrogance and narcissism. Styling his hair, trying on different shirts, grooming his body, and admiring himself in the mirror seem to occupy all the time Tony Manero has left between work at the hardware store and dancing at the Odyssey.

It is precisely Tony's diligence in maintaining his good looks—as well as the film's equally diligent efforts in showing them off—that have prompted many to question his heterosexuality. The discussion of gender and sexuality in *Saturday Night Fever* centres overwhelmingly on the scene of Tony's preparation before going out to the disco. Having bought a new shirt and asked his boss for an advance on his salary in the film's opening scene, Tony rushes home and immediately goes up to his room to prepare for the night's tribal rites. The Bee Gees start humming 'Fever Night' and a

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<sup>34</sup> The reality show producers have stated that they are attempting to reclaim the word 'Guido' as a badge of ethnic pride, but Italian-American anti-defamation lobbies have readily responded with a campaign to turn 'Guido' into something of a G word.

slow dissolve takes us to a dramatic close-up of Tony's hand holding a hairdryer in what could have easily been an advertisement for the product (figure 99). Framing the hairdryer in close-up, with the brand and model clearly visible, the camera gently moves leftwards to capture Tony's face in the centre and reveal the hair brush in his other hand. The inherent connotations of effeminacy in the activity of hairstyling are accentuated by a series of stylistic devices meant to emphasize the beauty of Travolta's face. The soft lighting, the out-focus background, the near perfect symmetry of the composition, the frontal angle of the camera, and the inclusion of just a hint of Travolta's bare shoulders in the frame create an image that resembles an advertising beauty shot (figure 100).



Figure 99

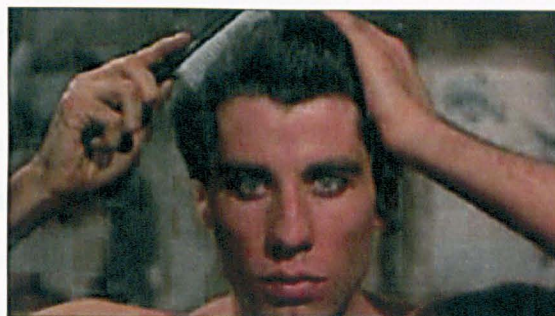


Figure 100



Figure 101



Figure 102

As the camera moves from the hairdryer to its user, Tony's face becomes the object on display. Following this opening image, the rest of the scene unfolds as a series of fetishizing fragments, mostly close-ups and medium shots, from Tony's preparation ritual. We get glimpses of Tony meticulously styling his hair, adorning his hairy chest with golden chains, searching in his closet for the night's attire, slowly buttoning up his shirt, and tightening the fabric at his crotch to pull up the zip (figures 101 and 102). The film edits these elliptical snippets together as a choreographed

reverse strip tease, intercut with long shots of Tony posing and flexing in front of the mirror in narcissistic self-admiration.

*Saturday Night Fever's* grooming scene seems to reverse a sacred Hollywood tradition—or, at least, academic orthodoxy on the subject—that forbids erotic displays of the male body. As Susan Bordo characteristically puts it, 'never before *Saturday Night Fever* had a heterosexual male movie hero spent so much time on his toilette' (198). Following Laura Mulvey's canonical thesis, Hollywood perpetuates patriarchal hegemony by equating the masculine position with power and the feminine position with passivity. Men drive Hollywood's narratives forward by pursuing and achieving their goals, while women are the passive recipients of their actions. The binary is most pronounced in displays of the naked or eroticized body. Hollywood has consistently objectified and displayed women's bodies for the viewing pleasure of men, both those within the narrative and those seated in the cinema. Hollywood's men have no time to pause and pose for the camera. Masculine virility is displayed indirectly and seemingly unintentionally, as the outcome of other activity. A man may flex his muscles to lift up a machine gun or take off his shirt to save a drowning victim.

Displaying the male body simply for the sake of doing so would challenge patriarchal superiority, place the represented man in a position of passivity, and compromise his heterosexual prowess. Neale notes that the threat of homosexuality is 'one of the fundamental reasons why the erotic elements involved in the relations between the spectator and the male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed' ('Masculinity' 286). In a study of male pin-ups, Dyer concentrates specifically on the disconcerting implications of upsetting this gendered tradition of viewership. Male pin-ups targeted at a heterosexual female viewership attempt to reverse patriarchal gender binaries, while remaining within the bounds of heteronormativity. On the one hand, they invite women to take on an active masculine position and objectify the models under their gaze. On the other hand, if the objectification works and yields erotic pleasure to the woman, then the male model on display is immediately rendered passive, visually penetrable, and feminized ('Don't



Look' 267-68).<sup>35</sup> Even the oft-used adjectival designations of the Mulveyan male gaze as 'castrating' and 'penetrating' leave little room but to question the heterosexuality of the male body displayed as erotic spectacle.

Elaborating on Mulvey's thesis, both Neale and Dyer have suggested that erotic displays of the male body call for special representational tools to preserve heterosexuality. Dyer notices that the female pin-up model commonly deals with the male viewer's controlling gaze by averting her own gaze in presumed modesty. This aversion reveals the model's awareness of being looked at and her submissions to its penetrating dominance ('Don't Look' 269). Male pin-ups, on the other side, often challenge the gaze with an even more penetrative stare, look upwards to suggest a preoccupation with loftier concerns, or look away to suggest unawareness of being looked at. 'Indeed, [the male pin-up's gaze] hardly acknowledges the viewer, whereas the woman's averted eyes do just that—they are averted from the viewer' (Dyer, 'Don't Look' 267). Another heterosexualizing tool involves the engagement of the male model in some form of physical activity that counters the passivity of being looked at. Hence, male models are often portrayed under physical duress, holding their bodies taut and tightening their muscles. Bordo proposes a similar argument, noting that men 'may display their beauty only if it is an unavoidable side effect of other "business"' (198). Neale argues that films need to formulate visual or narrative strategies that 'denigrate or deny' implications of homosexuality. In fact, Neale mentions *Saturday Night Fever* in a brief parenthetical reference as 'a clear and interesting example' of the male body 'unashamedly put on display' ('Masculinity' 286), insinuating, as does Kael, that Tony's heterosexuality somehow manages to withstand the apparent challenges.

Although Neale does not explain how heterosexuality is rescued in *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony Manero certainly shows none of the heterosexualizing casualness or unawareness in displaying his body. Tony spends almost the entire grooming scene in front of the mirror, while the film oscillates between over-the-shoulder and point-of-view shots of his reflection in the mirror. The former double his image in the frame and

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<sup>35</sup> Dyer suggests that this problematic adoption-cum-reversal of patriarchal positions may be one of the reasons why male pin-ups notoriously do not work on women and commonly find an unintentional gay male audience.

highlight the process of his objectification whereas the latter reduce him into a flattened mirrored image. In the meantime, cutaway shots to the *Odyssey* serve not only to diegeticize 'Night Fever', but also as a reminder that Tony's ultimate goal is to display his body on the dance floor. Even when he flexes his muscles, it is not a spontaneous manifestation of physical strength, which would affirm his masculinity, but a conscious imitation of the Bruce Lee, Stallone, and Pacino posters on his wall. Close-ups of these posters are always preceded and followed by shots of Tony, a shot-reverse-shot structure that suggests an exchange of narcissistic and homosexual gazes. To be sure, Hollywood male heroes have traditionally affirmed their machismo both by imposing their superiority over women and by rivalling or copying the example of other men. Michael Corleone's relationship with his father and Rocky Balboa's fight with Apollo Creed exemplify the affirmation of machismo through homosocial bonding. Tony Manero, however, is attracted to his heroes as beautified, two-dimensional images and tries to mimic their toughness and muscular built through the feminizing activities of grooming and hairstyling.

*Saturday Night Fever* keeps Tony Manero stripped down to his black, tight-fitting bikini briefs while he styles his hair and picks his outfit for the night. Although *Jersey Shore* has turned it into something of a requirement for Guidos to remain naked from the waist up, Hollywood norms in the 70s expected them to be good-looking and swaggering, but always dressed. *Saturday Night Fever* not only undresses Tony, but frames him from extremely low angles (figure 103), a spatial perspective that, as Jeff Yanc notes, 'makes the crotch appear larger and more prominent than any other part of [his] body' (42). The fetishistic emphasis on Tony's crotch contradicts Hollywood's convention of concealing male genitalia. Although, as Dyer explains, 'the symbolism of male sexuality is that it is overwhelmingly centred on the genitals' ('Male Sexuality' 112), showing the penis is something of a taboo in Hollywood films. The penis is mainly evoked through phallic symbols, which look strikingly different from the actual organ. Phalli are unbending, sharp, sword-like, and seldom made of flesh and skin. They resemble nothing of the soft and imprecise form of the penis. As Dyer's succinctly puts it, 'the penis isn't a patch on the phallus' ('Male Sexuality' 112). Following the same reasoning, D.A. Miller explains that the middle class, heterosexual man's preference for boxer shorts constitutes an attempt to conceal 'the penis, which disappears into a

cool rectangularity that [...] only apotheosizes it as the phallus' (28-29). Similarly, Chris Holmlund notes that, for all their focus on the naked male body, pumping iron films of the 80s avoid focusing on the male crotch. 'The camera never focuses on the bulge in Arnold's or Lou's bikinis or pans their naked bodies in the shower: to look might reveal too much or too little' (Holmlund 45).



Figure 103



Figure 104

Though *Saturday Night Fever* does not actually show the penis, and hence avoids the box-office suicide of full frontal nudity, the choice of body contouring underwear and low camera angles evidently disregards Dyer's, Miller's, and Holmlund's precautions. Although briefs are still Hollywood's choice of male underwear in the 70s, both the colour and cut of Tony's briefs set him apart from the heterosexual norm. Before what Dyer calls 'the revival of the boxer shorts' ('Brief' 124), white, high-rising, Y-front, cotton briefs used to be the epitome of men's underwear. Their design combined support and functionality through the frontal opening, while their colour and material allowed for practical and hygienic care. Tony's briefs sit low on his hips, as if supported only by his bulging crotch, and give the impression that he has not yet finished putting them on. They sacrifice (masculine) practicality for the benefit of (feminine) colour and style. More importantly, they draw attention to what they are supposed to conceal, the penis. When Tony awakens on Sunday morning, he moves the sheets out of the way and reaches into his underwear to scratch himself (figure 104). His unabashed display and crude handling of his body would signal in Dyer's reasoning an alignment with the gay male 'refusal to closet our bodies' ('Male Sexuality' 125). Overall, instead of implying the power of the phallus through physical activity, averted gazes, or any other of the aforementioned strategies,

*Saturday Night Fever* ascribes pleasure to the actual penis and toys with homoeroticism.

white heterosexual virility is undermined by a network of intertextual references to *Serpico*, queerness, and left radicalism.

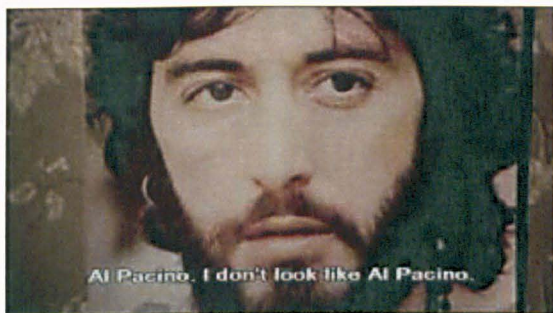


Figure 105



Figure 106



Figure 107



Figure 108

The film, furthermore, seems to be pushing us to question Tony's machismo by including intertextual references to homosexuality. The morning after his disco adventures, Tony catches a glimpse of the *Serpico* poster on his wall (figure 105) and recalls a girl's comment that kissing him felt like kissing Al Pacino. He celebrates the compliment by prancing around in his underwear chanting 'Al Pacino, Al Pacino' and 'Attica, Attica' (figure 106). His imitation of Pacino does not actually refer to *Serpico*'s eponymous hero, a heterosexual police officer, but to *Dog Day Afternoon*'s (1975) Sonny Wortzik, a bisexual man who attempts to rob a bank to pay for his lover's sex change operation. The robbery goes awfully wrong and Sonny ends up holding everyone in the bank hostage, as the police and a crowd of curious bystanders surround the building. At a moment of narrative climax, Sonny goes outside to negotiate with the police and, inspired by the cheering crowd, starts shouting 'Attica, Attica' (figure 107). The line refers to the 1971 Attica Prison riots, which followed the shooting of a radical black inmate (figure 108). Sonny's 'Attica, Attica' voices a collective frustration with police brutality, government corruption, homophobia, and

racism. When Tony Manero repeats the line in *Saturday Night Fever*, his intended celebration of white heterosexual virility is undermined by a network of intertextual references to blackness, queerness, and left radicalism.

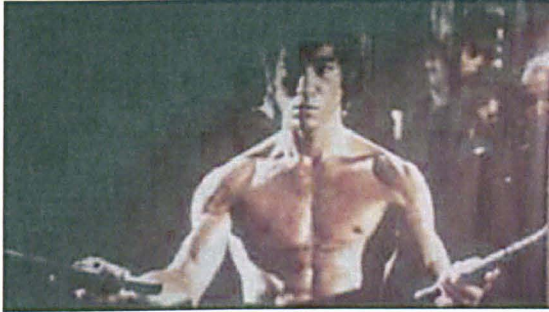


Figure 109



Figure 110



Figure 111



Figure 112



Figure 113



Figure 114

This almost playful provocation to question Tony's heterosexuality reaches its climax in an indicative sequence of images at the end of the grooming scene. A shot of the Bruce Lee poster on his wall (figure 109) cuts to a reverse shot from the perspective of the poster as Tony looks in the mirror and mimics Bruce Lee's pose (figure 110). This is followed by yet another dramatic low angle shot of Tony's crotch (figure 103). Just when the narcissistic display of Tony's body threatens to challenge his heterosexuality, however, the film zooms into an extreme close-up of the Farrah

Fawcett poster on Tony's wall (figure 111). Her wide smile, presumably at the sight of Tony's penis, affirms its heterosexual use. As Kenneth Dutton explains, erotic images of male bodies are often balanced by the inclusion of a female somewhere in the frame, so that 'the onlooking and approving woman reinforces the legitimacy of the male body as object of the gaze' (258).

Immediately afterwards, however, Tony's father comes into the room to remind him that it is time for dinner. The owner of the gaze is no longer a poster, but another living man. We first see his father through his reflection in the mirror, next to Tony posing in his new shirt (figure 112). In the context of a scene constructed around the fetishization of Tony's body, his father's gaze could even gesture at incestual homosexuality. In the following shot, however, Farrah Fawcett's poster appears next to the father to reclaim his gaze and rescue heterosexuality (figure 113). Not only does he turn to look at the poster, but the camera even assumes his point-of-view for a close-up of Fawcett's cleavage (figure 114). In a textbook-like example of the Mulveyan male gaze, Tony's father becomes the subject of the film, the heterosexual masculine position, and Farrah Fawcett's body is objectified and fragmented under his gaze.

Jeff Yanc concentrates specifically on explaining the interplay of contradictory gender and sexual signifiers in both *Saturday Night Fever* and its 1983 sequel, *Staying Alive*. Yanc argues that the films aim for a catch-all-audiences approach and construct 'a sexual image of Travolta that appealed to everyone, thus creating a fused audience that could potentially include both teenage girls and gay adult men' (43). This interpretation places *Saturday Night Fever* squarely within the era of blockbusters and corresponds with Hollywood's attempts at the time to release fewer films, targeted at diverse audiences. Yanc also borrows from Miriam Hansen's analysis of Rudolph Valentino's erotic image to situate Travolta within a tradition of Hollywood Italian-American lovers, whose public personas allowed for both homoerotic and heterosexual interpretations. There is, however, a significant distinction between Valentino's and Tony Manero's erotic images. Hansen focuses on homoerotic interpretations that arose independently of Valentino's films, in the circulation of his image in the public sphere. In the case of *Saturday Night Fever*, homoerotic interpretations are provoked by textual and intertextual references embedded in the film. Attempting to acknowledge this distinction, Yanc yields back to an updated

Mulveyan perspective to argue that a heterosexual reading ultimately takes precedence. The 'objectification of Travolta's body', he argues, 'is countered by a blatantly overdetermined construction of masculinity' (39). 'Because [Tony Manero] is fully aware of his own image,' Yanc writes,

the viewer is denied true voyeuristic pleasure in subjecting him to an objectifying gaze, and his overtly displayed narcissism is positioned for the viewer as a display of macho self-appreciation, which the viewer recognizes as stereotypically masculine, despite the image of his near naked body. (42)

Yanc's argument essentially constitutes a reversal of Dyer's analysis of the male pin-up. Whereas Dyer argues that the male pin-up reclaims the masculine position by refusing to acknowledge his objectification, Yanc finds a similar source of masculine empowerment in Tony Manero's forceful acknowledgement of his objectification. In Mulveyan terms, Tony is reinstated to the subjective, masculine position by actively taking charge of the gaze, of which he is also the object.



Figure 115



Figure 116

While Yanc's interpretation provides a compelling revision of Mulvey's theory, it applies more convincingly to *Staying Alive* than to *Saturday Night Fever*. The six years separating the two films and their evident differences in the representation of Tony Manero render a common explanation problematic. Directed by none other than Sylvester Stallone, *Staying Alive* transforms Tony Manero into the image of hyper-masculine action heroes like Rambo and the Terminator. Instead of his iconic white suit in *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony displays his hairless and more muscular naked body in *Staying Alive*. His costume in the film's climactic dance performance—a few tattered pieces of cloth, calculatedly wrapped around his body to contour his bulging biceps and crotch (figure 115)—could have easily been borrowed from the wardrobe of

*Conan the Barbarian* (1982) (figure 116). Although several scholars have identified homoerotic subtexts in 80s action films (see, for example, Holmlund), their interpretations usually constitute a retrospective queering of these films. The prevailing mainstream view at the time considered puffed-up and hairless male bodies to be an unambiguous signifier of heterosexuality.

In 1977, however, hyper-machismo was the exclusive domain of a gay subculture known as the gay clones. In Martin Levine's description, gay clones are those post-Stonewall gay men who 'embrac[ed] the presentational image of the butch style, modifying it into a more stylized uniform' (58). 'By the end of the 1970s', writes Levine, 'the clone look was the look for the postcloset urban denizen of the gay ghetto' (58). The clones 'favored the hood, athlete, and woodsman looks for everyday leisure attire. They wore the Western, leather, military, labourer, and uniform looks for going out or partying' (Levine 60). While reacting against the stereotype that associated homosexuality with the effeminacy and feebleness of an aristocratic upper class, clones also rejected the traditional male nonchalance about appearance and manifestly stylized their looks through carefully trimmed facial hair, evenly toned bodies, and well-tailored costumes. In the aforementioned shot of Tony scratching his genitals, clearly visible on the dresser next to his bed are two objects that gay clones would be familiar with, his hairdryer and a construction worker's hard hat (figure 104). Following Yanc's updated Mulveyan perspective, the two objects could be interpreted as heterosexualizing elements that counter the objectification of Travolta's naked body. The hard hat could be seen as a reference to male physical labour and the upward pointing hairdryer as an obvious phallic symbol. While the image of Tony's naked body and the attention to his penis objectify him, his heterosexual phallic power is simultaneously rescued on the left side of the frame. This interpretation, however, suffers from historical myopia. In the context of 1977, the coupling of a naked disco dancer and a hard hat cannot but evoke the Village People, the most famous representatives of the gay clone community in the mainstream. The hard hat appears unworn and, based on what we already know about Tony Manero, completely useless in his line of work. Like the hard hat worn by David Hodo, the construction worker of the Village People, Tony's hard hat seems more like a fashion accessory than an actual tool.



A historically informed approach to *Saturday Night Fever's* depiction of the male body offers a more promising means for negotiating the film's representational inconsistencies. Laura Mulvey draws on examples from Classical Hollywood to explain how cinema incorporated and perpetuated the rigid gender dichotomies of patriarchal society. *Saturday Night Fever*, however, was released at a time when patriarchy was facing increased pressures to renegotiate its boundaries. Men's liberation, as we have seen in chapter three, popularized a distinctly un-macho model of heterosexual masculinity. Liberated men could display their refined taste, indulge in self-grooming, and opt for fashionable dress, all the while remaining strictly within the boundaries of heterosexuality. Considered in this historical context, Tony's narcissism could serve as an example of a heterosexual man embracing these opportunities. Men's liberation promoted a model of, what was derogatorily called, soft or sensitive masculinity. Its followers had no qualms about expressing their feelings and emotions, their refined taste for clothing, and their 'sleek, subdued sophistication' that Stallone mocked.

Tony Manero, however, pushes male narcissism beyond what would be permissible even for liberated men. His disco swagger corresponds neither with Stallone's version of a real man nor with liberated masculinity. Liberated men opted for soft hues, pullovers, and sneakers. Tony wears bold, contrasting colours, frilly lapels, and oversized platform shoes. His wardrobe has been such an inspiration for recreations and parodies of the 70s that it is easy to forget that most men did not actually dress like him at the time. As Bordo explains, Tony's style would only be permissible for a heterosexual man if he were a performer. 'Although this was the polyester seventies, and men like Sonny Bono dressed like Tony on television, Bono was very careful (as the Beatles were too) to treat his flamboyant ruffles as showbiz costumes' (198-99). It is the same principle that guides Apollo Creed's distinction between his sequinned costumes in the ring and his office attire outside it in *Rocky*. On the one hand, Tony does not need to differentiate between stage and everyday clothing; his entire life is a continuous performance. Flamboyant outfits and a theatrical strut are part of his daily routine as Bay Ridge's disco king. On the other hand, Tony does not only dress to impress onlookers, but also to display his body as erotic spectacle. His calculated self-objectification contradicts both 70s norms and Hollywood's representational principles. Bordo effectively describes his style as being

closer to Cher's than Bono's. 'Cher proudly strutted her feathers and finery as a second skin for her body and sexuality. Tony, like Cher, chooses his clothes to highlight his sinuous form' (198-99).

Much more than Tony's sartorial choices, it is his behaviour that sets him apart from liberated men's brand of narcissism. A liberated man could confidently transgress traditional gender boundaries under the explicit condition that he understood and accepted the sources of this freedom. Men's liberation developed as a response to feminist demands. Whether genuinely believing in the women's movement or simply trying to disassociate themselves from the stigma of male chauvinism, leaders of the movement like Warren Farrell and public spokesmen like Alan Alda were usually self-declared feminists. Tony Manero neither owns a copy of *The Liberated Man* nor has a poster of Alda on his bedroom wall. In fact, in every respect other than his taste for fashion, Tony behaves like a stereotypical masculine supremacist. In a telling conversation with Annette, Tony sums up his understanding of womanhood in the belief that all women can be neatly divided into 'good girls' and 'cunts'. Desperate to win Tony's attention, Annette naively replies that she would like to be both, only to provoke Tony's nearly violent insistence that there is no middle ground. In a scene that is otherwise completely extraneous to the plot, Tony and his friends threaten to bash a stereotypically effeminate gay male couple. The gang's exaggerated display of prejudice interrupts the discussion of their sexual adventures, as if to reaffirm heterosexuality through homophobic machismo. With his epithet-infested language, brazen homophobia, and constant ill-treatment of women, Tony Manero would fit more comfortably in the company of Michael Corleone than Alan Alda.

His homophobia and sexism, however, do not derive from hostility towards feminism, insofar as hostility presupposes knowledge. Tony is simply unaware of the demands of feminism and the constraints of male liberation. His first meeting with Stephanie provides an indicative example. Having recently found a job and a boyfriend in Manhattan, Stephanie returns to Brooklyn eager to display her new understanding of feminism, which she clumsily expresses as bourgeois snobbery. Tony misinterprets her attitude to be that of a modest 'good girl' and instinctively reacts as the archetypal tamer of women. The more Stephanie ignores him, the more intense become his attempts to gain her attention. Women's liberation and second wave feminism are not

only incomprehensible to Tony, but completely absent as possibilities. It is precisely this unselfconsciousness that renders Tony's amalgam of masculinities qualitatively different from the homoeroticism of *Scorpio Rising's* bikers, the costumed performances of the Village People, the overconfident feminism of Alan Alda, and especially the more recent parodies of 70s masculinity in films like *Starsky & Hutch* (2004) and *Semi-Pro* (2008). In all of these cases, masculinity is a consciously planned performance; it acknowledges the process of its construction and displays its mastery over the source material. Tony's masculinity similarly combines styles and behaviours that have already been appropriated several times in popular culture. Yet, Tony embodies his patchwork masculinity as if unaware of its seams, as if he lacks a critical perspective on what each part of his hybrid masculinity signifies and how uneasily they all fit together. He enjoys all the sartorial and stylistic benefits of liberation, while remaining oblivious to contemporary debates surrounding female empowerment, sex role symmetry, and new social etiquette. As Henry Allen succinctly put it in his review of the film for *The Washington Post Magazine*, '[Tony] is too dumb to know about the obligations of the new sexuality. He's just a nice guy'.

What Allen identifies as dumbness and niceness in Tony is essentially an ethnic stereotype. From his socially and intellectually elevated perspective as a *Washington Post* writer and someone familiar with the obligations of the new sexuality, Allen recognizes Tony Manero as simply the Guido from Bay Ridge. As we have seen in chapter three, new gender and sexual mores, including male liberation, were strictly WASP, middle class phenomena. Tony Manero is an outsider to these developments and remains unaware of the new obligations. By the same token, however, he is also not bound by them. He can pick and choose new masculine fashions, combine them with more traditional traits, and nonchalantly embody them as a plausible masculine identity. At a very suggestive moment in the film, Joey, one of Tony's friends, spells out the privileges of Italian-American ethnicity. As he catches his reflection in the car door window, Joey narcissistically remarks: 'Looking sharp, huh? Sharpest you can without turning into a nigger'. Tony and his gang are ethnic enough to comfortably adopt the coolness of African American men and white enough to remain racist bigots. When Marsha Kinder criticized the film for being unable to decide if 'Tony's style is a matter of personal expressiveness or racial identity' (40-41), she was unwittingly identifying

the very ambivalence that makes his style possible. Tony's flamboyantly macho strutting belongs to the stereotypical 'pimp' representations of 70s blaxploitation films. At the same time, however, his outspoken bigotry reveals a faith in white supremacy that would simply not be permissible to educated Anglo-Saxons in the 70s.

The same racial in-betweenness can also explain Tony's adoption of styles and behaviours that would have otherwise challenged his heterosexuality. To paraphrase Joey's comment, Tony can style his hair, display his naked body, and imitate Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon* without turning gay. His ethnic masculinity gives him the privilege of an unbroken connection to earlier models of heterosexual machismo. In his description of Italian-American youth, Cohn conjectures that 'this generation's real roots lie further back, in the fifties' ('Tribal Rites' 31). Though Cohn probably has London's Mods in mind, his comment effectively captures the cultural valence of Italian-American ethnicity in the 70s. Tony can enjoy the sartorial benefits of liberated men and gay clones while preserving the sexism and homophobia of a 50s alpha male. All the complex liberation movements of the 60s that gave rise to his stylistic and behavioural freedoms are completely and conveniently removed from the picture. As *The Village Voice* effectively put it, 'in *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta plays a kid who lives in a world where it's like the '60s never happened' (F. Rose 50). It is not surprising that Travolta's next Italian-American character, *Grease's* Danny Zuko, actually goes back to the 50s to create a similar pastiche of 50s and 70s masculinities.

*Saturday Night Fever's* narrative may unfold in a recognizably contemporary setting, but it exemplifies the ability of Italian-American men to remain faithful to a nostalgically imagined past of unobstructed male supremacy. It is the same ability that manifests in *The Godfather's* transference of family into advanced capitalism and *Rocky's* combination of white privilege with a post-civil rights mentality. *Saturday Night Fever* exploits the privileges of ethnicity even further to infuse explicit homoerotic references into an aggressively heterosexual man.

### **Welcome to Brooklyn, Have a Nice Escape**

Using the privileges of Italian-American ethnicity as a springboard, *Saturday Night Fever* constructs a world where disco is an everyday reality, not a weekend fantasy.

The film invites audiences to enter Tony Manero's world with the same ethnographic fascination that attracted Nik Cohn to its tribal rites. Following Cohn's lead, *Saturday Night Fever* portrays Bay Ridge as the home of the authentic disco culture. Tony Manero's experience of disco is not restricted within the Odyssey 2001 or on Saturday nights alone. When he is crowned disco king, the prestige of his title is transferable to his everyday life. *Saturday Night Fever's* fantasy extends to the streets of Bay Ridge, which is also where we first meet him.



Figure 117



Figure 118



Figure 119



Figure 120

With the Bee Gees singing 'Staying Alive' in their signature falsetto vocals, *Saturday Night Fever's* opening credit sequence introduces Tony Manero on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Before we see Tony's face, we see his bell-bottomed, platform-heeled feet strutting down 86<sup>th</sup> Street, in the stretch between 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Avenues. Tony pauses outside a shoe shop window and lifts up his left foot to compare his shoe to the one on display (figure 117). Satisfied that his heel is noticeably higher, Tony turns the other way and continues walking, while the camera remains levelled to the ground and pulls back to free the space as he strides assuredly towards it. Superimposed against this image, the three words of the film's title light up one by one like a red neon sign (figure 118). 'Fever' starts flashing just when the Bee Gees utter

the song's first lyrics, which confirm on Tony's behalf, 'Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk, I'm a woman's man, no time to talk'. Although the music is non-diegetic, Tony walks to its exact rhythm, with the sound of his heels accentuating the beat of the song every time they hit the pavement. Whatever Tony's strutting may lack in elaborate disco moves, the film substitutes with exaggerated stylizations, as if conniving with its protagonist to turn the streets of Bay Ridge into a dance floor. Close-ups of Tony's shoes alternate with low angle shots of him looming large in frame. When the Bee Gees reach the chorus of the song, canted frames turn Tony's body into a dramatic diagonal across the frame (figure 119). Mirrored pairs of these images are edited together to accentuate the heavy breathing of 'Ah, ha, ha, ha, staying alive'.

At one instance, Tony notices a woman walking by him and decides to stop and flirt. The camera abandons its distinctive backward tracking to assume Tony's point-of-view as he tries to block her way, placing us for a few seconds in the position of Tony being rejected by a woman. She looks at Tony with neither the prudence of a 'good girl' nor the audacity of a 'cunt', but with the evident annoyance of a woman who has no time and interest in Tony's machismo. She rolls her eyes in exasperation and, with an almost pitying sway of her hand, pushes him aside. Tony reciprocates the disparaging gesture and continues on his own way with no sign of losing confidence. Foreshadowing his relationship with Stephanie, Tony seems unable to understand why a woman would reject his advances.

Throughout the opening sequence Tony holds a paint bucket on one hand, which receives its fair share of close-ups (figure 120). As we find out immediately afterwards, Tony's walk on 86<sup>th</sup> Street is in fact part of his job. He has been running an errand for his boss at the hardware store, Mr Fusco, who would rather have Tony buy the paint from another store and re-sell it, instead of turning away a customer. The paint bucket immediately signifies Tony as a blue-collar worker, but it functions more like a stylistic accessory during the credit sequence than a signifier of class struggle or trade union allegiance. It provides a weight for his hand to remain immobile as he walks and concentrates all the attention on his assured posture and the marching rhythm of his feet. Tony looks and behaves less like a labourer and more like a genuine free market consumer. He is introduced comparing products in the shop window and realizing that he has already made superior purchases. He later leaves a deposit for a

new shirt to wear on Saturday night and then devours two slices of pizza sandwiched together, while visually consuming the girls passing by. As he performs his day job, therefore, Tony manages to effortlessly combine lunch, window shopping, and flirting, all the while never missing a beat of 'Staying Alive'.

After he returns to the hardware store and the music stops, Tony continues to perform his job with the same self-conscious projection of coolness as in the streets of Bay Ridge. He enters the store from the back door, so that the customer will not realize where her paint came from, and, through a quick edit, appears before her the next instant. During this subtle ellipsis, Tony miraculously finds time to take off his black leather jacket and put on the store uniform, a plain beige polyester jacket. Even the broad collar of Tony's red shirt, which neatly laps over his jacket, speaks to his ability to bring some disco flair to the workplace. Tony confidently glides through the cluttered space fetching paint buckets, pushing ladders, and chatting with customers, as if performing a careful choreography. With his slick salesman skills and natural charm, he appeases the angry customer for the prolonged wait, sells the paint for a higher price, and gets away with an inappropriate joke about another customer's wife. Less than ten minutes into the film, audiences already have a clear portrait of Tony Manero: young, heterosexual, working class, materialistic, narcissistic, and a natural charmer.

The introduction of Tony Manero and his disco lifestyle may be packed into an opening credit sequence with minimal dialogue, but textual signifiers correspond to elements from John Travolta's star persona that were already circulating in the public sphere. Travolta was at the time a relative newcomer to cinema, with his most important role being that of a bully who plays a prank on Sissy Spacek's character in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). He had previously made his stage debut in 1972 in *Rain* and later had a minor role in the touring company of *Grease*. Travolta also starred in the 1976 television movie *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*, the story of a boy with a rare immune deficiency who literally spends his life in a plastic bubble. Alongside acting, Travolta pursued a recording career and had three albums by 1978. 'By the summer of '76,' *Newsweek* reported, 'Travolta was a full-blown teen idol with a bubble-gum pop album in release and a hit song' (Orth 65). The song is the soft ballad 'Let Her In', which peaked at number ten on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in 1976.

When *Saturday Night Fever* came out, however, Travolta was primarily known as Vinnie Barbarino, the wisecracking high school heartthrob from the television series *Welcome Back, Kotter*. According to *The Village Voice*'s Frank Rose, 'as Vinnie Barbarino, Travolta draws about 10,000 pieces of fan mail per day' (49). In addition to elevating Travolta to stardom, *Welcome Back, Kotter* established the connections between his star persona and Brooklyn's Italian-American working class, which made him an ideal candidate for the role of Tony Manero. The greeting in the series title refers to Gabe Kotter's return to Buchanan High to teach a group of underachievers known as the Sweathogs. An ex-Sweathog himself, Kotter is welcomed back as a facetious but well-meaning teacher who realizes the Sweathogs' true potential. Vinnie Barbarino is the smug but good-hearted leader of the Sweathogs. He enjoys the admiration of his friends for his sexual successes and pranks, which he has a habit of celebrating by chanting his surname to the tune of The Beach Boys' 'Barbara Ann'. The series offers very little insight into Vinnie's life outside high school and only through brief references in the dialogue. All the information, however, fits neatly into the Guido stereotype. Vinnie comes from a Catholic family and shares a room with his brother in their two-bedroom house. He frequently jokes about his parents' loud arguments and his female cousins' bad taste. The only topic that is off-limits for jokes is his mother, whom he often calls a saint. 'Barbarino is a cute kid', Rose commented, 'he's cool, he's funny, he's the ultimate in endearing pests. Unfortunately he has the depth of a cardboard cut-out. And he is dumb—verging on slack-jawed' (50).

Vinnie Barbarino is only the first articulation of John Travolta's persona that elevated him to stardom in the late 70s. It takes little effort to notice—as *Saturday Night Fever*'s contemporary reviewers did—that Tony Manero is essentially an R-rated version of Vinnie after graduation. *Newsweek* introduced a December 1977 tribute to Travolta with the title 'From Sweathog to Disco King' and described the young star as having 'specialized in playing kids from the wrong side of the tracks' (Orth 63). Both Vinnie and Tony are working class Italian-Americans living in Brooklyn; Vinnie is the leader of the Sweathogs, Tony is the leader of the Faces. More importantly, they are both played by Travolta with the same mannerisms, accent, and a sense of constant self-awareness of their coolness. Following *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta carried his version of the Guido to *Grease*'s Danny Zuko and *Urban Cowboy*'s (1980) Bud. Danny is



essentially Vinnie Barbarino in a 50s version of Buchanan High and Bud is a bull-riding Tony Manero that has relocated to the Sunbelt.



Figure 121



Figure 122



Figure 123



Figure 124

In *Urban Cowboy*'s opening segment, Bud moves from his family farm to urban, working class Houston, a more natural environment for Travolta. He gets a job at the oil refinery, learns the pleasures of women and alcohol at the local bar, and discovers that he can get plenty of both by simply being a 'real cowboy'. Bud's speedy transformation from a farm into an urban cowboy is sealed when he shaves off his beard and changes his clothes. With overt references to Tony Manero's grooming scene in *Saturday Night Fever*, the revelation of the new Bud begins with an over-the-shoulder shot of a shirtless Travolta looking in the mirror and beginning to trim down his beard (figure 121). 'Here goes', he exclaims and a dissolve leads to the next shot of a transformed Bud. Beginning with his new tight-fitting jeans, the camera gradually pans up to reveal the conspicuously large buckle of his belt, the fashionable broad collar of his shirt, and his fancy black Stetson (figures 122 and 123). Bud's cowboy clothes used to be his everyday work attire, but they have now been deprived of any vocational use and replaced with overalls, a hardhat, and goggles. What remains of the 'real cowboy' is just an evening look, inspired as much by Bud's days at the farm as by Travolta's nights at the Odyssey.

Scenes of sartorial transformations rarely have a man as their subject in Hollywood film. As Tamar Jeffers McDonald points out, 'an improvement in the male wardrobe seems inevitably accompanied by a decline in morality' (205). Travolta's transformation in *Urban Cowboy*, however, comes only ten minutes into the film, too early to qualify as a proper character change. It fits much better into Jeffers McDonald's 'true self' paradigm for a woman's transformation, a 'metamorphosis acting somehow both as a change and simultaneously as a confirmation of qualities already inherent' (82). In Bud's case, we barely know the character to appreciate his inherent qualities. He does have, however, intertextual qualities borrowed from Travolta's stardom. Since Bud has shown no signs of knowing anything about fashion and style, it is as if Tony Manero has taken over during the slow dissolve from the unshaved to the groomed Bud to facilitate his metamorphosis. The image of Travolta taking off his shirt and standing half-naked in front of the mirror not only evokes similar images from *Saturday Night Fever*, but also signifies the removal of everything that is Bud to unveil Travolta beneath the cowboy clothes and facial hair. When the camera catches his clean-shaven face in profile, Bud turns to face the camera in a dramatically lit medium close-up that outlines his jaw and cheekbones. As the transformed Bud leans on the bar with his thumbs resting in his belt and nonchalantly scans the space around him, we are finally faced with a familiar Travolta who pays attention to his image and is always conscious of being looked at.

Almost too aware of Travolta's stardom, *Urban Cowboy* continuously allows him to shine through Bud, often at the expense of the character but always for the satisfaction of audiences. Soon after the transformation *Urban Cowboy* stages Bud and Sissy's wedding, dressing him in a ruffled shirt and an elaborate white three-piece suit (figure 124) that evokes Tony Manero's famous disco outfit. A groom who later carries his bride over the threshold of a trailer home would probably not have been able to afford this suit, but the wedding is clearly as much Travolta's as it is Bud's. The film commemorates the event by continuously interrupting the wedding sequence with flashing lights and freeze frames, a device used nowhere else in the film, but entirely warranted for Travolta's first onscreen wedding.

The foundation for such direct quotations from Travolta's earlier roles was laid with the first similarities between Vinnie Barbarino and Tony Manero. One of the most

notable is the association between Travolta and the well-established stereotype of Brooklyn as an ethnic, working class, parochial world. The title sequence of *Welcome Back, Kotter* begins with an image of the roadside sign 'Welcome to Brooklyn' (figure 125), reminding viewers in every episode that Brooklyn is close, but not quite in our midst. It is a place that one has to travel toward and be met with a 'welcome' upon arrival. As the credits appear on screen, accompanied by the theme song 'Welcome Back', every shot emphasizes the idea of physically going to Brooklyn. Images of trains, roads, and bridges are interspersed with travelling shots of Brooklyn shops and houses, presumably filmed from the window of a car or a train (figures 126-128). As the inhabitants of this world, the Sweathogs fit recognizable blue-collar, urban stereotypes: a cocky Italian, a foolish Jew, a fiercely proud Puerto Rican, and a hip African American. The song's lyrics, furthermore, welcome Gabe Kotter back to the place from which '[his] dreams were [his] ticket out', suggesting that Brooklyn is a somewhat limiting place, conducive to cultivating your dreams or inspiring others to dream, but not for fulfilling your dreams.



Figure 125



Figure 126



Figure 127



Figure 128

The same view of Brooklyn surfaces in Cohn's essay, which begins by establishing the author's perspective as an outside observer to the 'Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night'. 'Over the past few months', Cohn writes,

*much of my time has been spent in watching this new generation. Moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, from disco to disco, an explorer out of my depth, I have tried to learn the patterns, the old/new tribal rites. In the present article, I have focused on one club and one tight-knit group which seem to sum up the experience as a whole. (31)*

Cohn writes with the confidence that the upper middle class Manhattan readers of *New York* are as alien to the world of Brooklyn as he is and will not recognize his fabrication. Unlike *New York's* socially and geographically localized readership, *Saturday Night Fever* reached a much wider audience. Nevertheless, the film replicates Cohn's approach by introducing Brooklyn through a spatially distanced and socially elevated perspective. Before 'Staying Alive' cues in the credit sequence and Tony's introduction, the film begins with two brief and much less memorable shots of the Brooklyn Bridge and the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. The former connects Brooklyn to the sophisticated world of Manhattan and the latter to the suburbs of Staten Island. The two bridges establish the setting for some of the most dramatic events and transitions in *Saturday Night Fever's* narrative, including Bobby's suicide and Tony's decision to give up disco.



Figure 129



Figure 130

The bridges' larger narrative significance, however, can only be appreciated in retrospect, after watching the entire film. When we first see these images in the film's opening, they perform the much more basic function of setting the story squarely within Brooklyn. The first shot shows Brooklyn Bridge in the foreground, with the

iconic Manhattan skyline in the background (figure 129). The twin towers of the World Trade Centre loom large in the left half of the frame. This is still just a few years after the completion of the towers in 1972, before they assumed their iconic status and while their aesthetic merits as an architectural landmark were still debated. This is the view of Manhattan as the city of shiny tall buildings, fast changes, and new possibilities. It is the cityscape view of Manhattan from Brooklyn's proximate 'out there', the place to which Gabe Kotter returns after pursuing his dreams. A slow dissolve to the next shot juxtaposes for a few seconds Manhattan's skyline with an aerial shot of Brooklyn, underlining the difference between the former's shiny skyscrapers and the latter's housing projects. The camera then pulls back to reveal a side view of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in the foreground, with Brooklyn immediately behind it and Manhattan in the far distance (figure 130). This particular perspective eliminates the space between the two boroughs and highlights their proximity, while the dramatic image of the bridge in the foreground and the noticeable differences between the two cityscapes brings back the irony of their architectural and social differences.

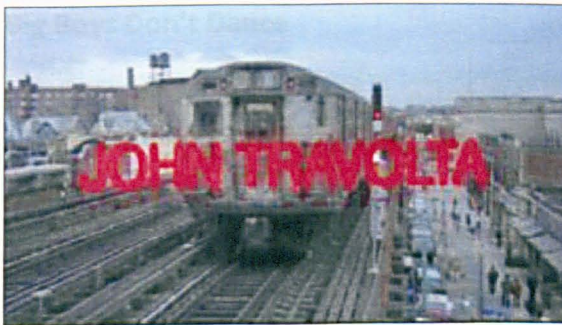


Figure 131

Appearing right after the Paramount logo and accompanied only by the sound of driving cars, the two shots give the impression of a prologue that precedes the actual beginning of the film. Cinemagoers expecting to see the adaptation of Cohn's story or John Travolta's debut in a major film role encounter in *Saturday Night Fever's* opening both his natural space as Vinnie Barbarino and a familiar perspective on this space. Not only are the images strikingly similar to the title sequence of *Welcome Back, Kotter*, but they also serve the same purpose of portraying Brooklyn as an

enclosed, intermediary space between Manhattan and Staten Island. These associations are reinforced when the slow retracting motion and ambient noise are suddenly interrupted by the speed and much louder sound of a train passing diagonally across the frame. The introduction of 'Staying Alive' begins in the soundtrack and Travolta's name is superimposed against the image of a train arriving in Brooklyn (figure 131), a familiar pairing borrowed from *Welcome Back, Kotter* (figures 127 and 128). As audiences, we are quite literally being transported from the city to the exotic world of ethnic Brooklyn. We are invited to witness Tony's story as Manhattanite outsiders, a spectatorial perspective that, as Nystrom observes, fosters 'a perceived disparity in critical self-consciousness' (127) between the film's audiences and subject matter. In the absence of first-hand experience of Brooklyn's tribal rites, we cannot but accept that this is indeed a world where a hardware store employee can dress up and walk down the street to the rhythm of 'Staying Alive'. We may not yet know the name of Travolta's character in the film, but textual and intertextual cues have already located him in the self-enclosed space of Brooklyn, where disco fantasy can become everyday reality.

### **Big Boys Don't Dance**

Unlike Vinnie in *Welcome Back, Kotter's* sitcom universe, Tony ventures outside high school in the R-rated *Saturday Night Fever* to discover the darker side of Brooklyn, a world of violent gang fights, unemployment, impossible gender standards, and asphyxiating ethnic particularism. In the film's finale, Tony takes the midnight train to Manhattan and provides the film with what Golden identifies to be 'some hints of escaping' ethnic stereotypes (92). Michael Corleone's accession to family leadership and Rocky Balboa's completion of his American Dream mark a victory for their respective ethnic utopias. In contrast, *Saturday Night Fever's* conclusion seems to shatter the fantasy of a 70s white man unaffected by contemporary challenges to masculinity. This section investigates the uneasy coexistence of the disco fantasy and the social drama in *Saturday Night Fever*, arguing that Tony Manero's Italian-American ethnicity allows the former to prevail.

The first signs of Tony's frustration with social realities in Brooklyn surface immediately after the opening credit sequence, when he returns with the paint bucket to the hardware store. Tony pleads with Mr Fusco for an advance on his salary to buy a new shirt, but Mr Fusco volunteers a mini lecture on how Tony should stop frittering his money away on new clothes and start saving for the future. 'Fuck the future', Tony angrily retorts to the advice, but a close-up of his worried face reveals that he is already beginning to consider that Mr Fusco may be closer to the truth in replying 'you don't fuck the future, the future fucks you'. On the one hand, Brooklyn provides Tony with the certainty of permanent but prospectless employment at the hardware store. Hiring him back after an argument, Mr Fusco explains that his other two employees have been with him for fifteen and eighteen years and promises Tony the same stability. On the other hand, Manhattan can offer Tony more opportunities and a shot at becoming a professional dancer. Stephanie, who has already migrated to Manhattan, brutally reminds him, 'You're a cliché. You are nowhere on your way to no place'. But Stephanie is no less of a cliché herself. Her only attachments to Manhattan are an affair with an older man and a minor job as a secretary. She still commutes to Brooklyn to compete in dance contests and show off her newly acquired sophistication. If anything, Stephanie's experience proves that there can be no compromise between Manhattan and Brooklyn.

In addition to Tony's story, the film follows the subplots of his father's violent behaviour, his brother's decision to abandon priesthood, and his mother's misguided attempts to save her dysfunctional family. Sandwiched between the extravagance of the grooming scene and Tony's night out at the Odyssey, a less memorable scene set around the Manero dinner table introduces us to Tony's family (figure 132). The setting is all too familiar for representations of *la famiglia*. From Catherine Scorsese's meatball sauce to Carmella Soprano's baked ziti, Italian-Americans have been consistently associated with cooking, eating, and feasting. Even in adverse conditions, dinner tables are usually sites of abundance, exuberance, joy, and good-heartedness.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The association between Italian-Americans and food has also yielded one of the most controversial ethnic stereotypes. Anti-defamation groups are always keen to protest images of jolly Italian-Americans serving tomato sauce, especially when the server is a gangster or a plethoric mama. Most recently, The Order Sons of Italy in America has targeted its criticism at the television commercial for Pizza Hut's New

*Saturday Night Fever* borrows the trope to populate the Manero dinner table with familiar characters: the housewife mother, who has prepared the all too predictable spaghetti with tomato sauce; the patriarch father, whose only responsibility in the preparation is to remind everyone that dinner is ready; the elderly grandmother, whose vocabulary is limited to ‘mangia’ and ‘basta’; and of course Tony and his younger sister, who complete the nuclear family.

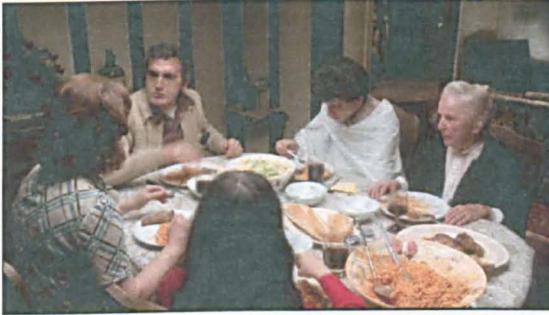


Figure 132



Figure 133

No sooner do they all take their seats around the table, however, than the Manero dinner turns into a hotbed of domestic dysfunctionality. Mrs Manero’s cooking lacks both quality and quantity. As her husband comments, her spaghetti sauce ‘don’t drip, it don’t taste either’. His sarcasm can barely conceal his own failure as the breadwinner of the household. Laid off after twenty-five years work in construction, Tony’s father has been unemployed for six months and unable to provide for his family. When his wife attempts to live up to the plethoric mama stereotype and forces food onto Tony’s plate, he angrily reminds her, ‘What do you mean “have more pork chops.” I’m out of work?’ While the father resorts to sarcasm and anger, the mother finds false hope in her older son’s priesthood. Father Frank’s framed picture looks over the dinner table, along with the crucifix, as if he were also a deity. Mrs Manero crosses herself every time she mentions his name and, following an unwittingly blasphemous reasoning, goes to church to pray so that her son calls her. Her solution to Tony’s late workday afternoons is to follow his brother’s career path,

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Sicilian Pizza Lasagne, which depicts an elderly man in a striped suit and fedora admiring the new dish and complaining to his apron-wearing wife, ‘Why you no make-a da pizza like dat’ (De Sanctis 19).



but, as we find out soon afterwards, Tony's brother has already decided to leave the clergy and is the first to urge Tony to move to Manhattan.

Mr Manero's unemployment threatens not only the nourishment of his family, but also the gender power dynamics that support it. When his wife suggests finding a job to contribute to the household income, he takes her proposal as an insult to his manhood and responds with physical violence, which she readily reciprocates. 'You never hit me before', he points out, facing his emasculation with a mixture of surprise, anger, and disappointment. The violence soon spreads to the rest of the table, with everyone shouting hysterically and slapping each other, while the grandmother instructs 'basta, basta' in vain. Their escalating exchange of slaps may have a slapstick-like quality, but these are not simply loud Italians culturally predisposed to violence and hysterics. Their problems are firmly rooted in the father's unemployment. Unable to provide for his family, Mr Manero becomes cynical, his wife delusional, domestic disputes ensue, everyone resorts to violence, and familial bonds collapse. Neither is this particular dinner an isolated incident in the Manero household. 'How come every day it's the same thing?', Tony wonders. Though nobody responds to his question, the answer seems to be nothing less than the vicious cycle of poverty.

Whereas *Rocky's* Philadelphia gradually transforms from a desolate corner of the Rustbelt into a nostalgic vision of ethnic proletarian unity, *Saturday Night Fever's* Brooklyn comes closer to a realistic portrayal of the working class in the 70s, or, at least, middle class stereotypes of the working class. As Jefferson Cowie explains, blue-collar workers in the 70s looked very different from both the determined unionists of the 50s and the amorphous category of the poor in the 60s. The first half of the decade experienced some union action, targeted at the rising inflation, and working conditions. Most organized union insurgency, however, came to a halt with the 1974-75 recession and the labour question was subsequently dissolved (Cowie 78). White workers in particular came to be associated with conservatism and backlash against their own trade unions. On 8 May 1970, hundreds of helmeted construction workers attacked a peaceful student anti-war demonstration in Manhattan's Wall Street district, leaving seventy students and bystanders injured. Following the incident, the term 'hard hats' was metonymically applied to the entire white working class. The hard

hats became the most loyal supporters of conservative and segregationist politicians.<sup>37</sup> It ought to be noted, however, that the hard hats are at least partly the product of middle class prejudices and anxieties. As Ehrenreich explains, scattered incidents of racism and discontent with unions were exaggerated by middle class observers as a full-scale backlash in order to 'seek legitimation for their own conservative impulses' (*Fear* 98-101). Combined with the traditional association of Italian-Americans with racism as well as the racist impulses of the ethnic revival movement, the Italian-American worker in the 70s became the embodiment of conservatism and bigotry in middle class imagination.

We can easily imagine Tony's father joining a union, a protest, an unemployment line, the local bar, or otherwise behaving like a stereotypical member of the hard hats. Tony, however, remains strangely detached from proletarian concerns. Although his family's problems have a direct effect on how many hours he works and how much he can spend on Saturday night, Tony has no interest in satisfying his parents' wish to maintain the pretence of a functional family. His priorities are finding a new shirt and a different girl to have sex with every night. Dinner is an unwelcome interruption in Tony's Saturday night routine, appropriately marked with the first prolonged pause in the Bee Gees soundtrack. He initially refuses to join the rest at the table and then begrudgingly accepts to avoid his father's angry moaning. He spends the entire scene with the tablecloth wrapped around his shoulders to protect his new shirt from hazardous sauce spills. When his father starts slapping everyone around the table, Tony's only worry is to preserve his carefully styled coif. 'Watch the hair,' he instructs, 'I've worked a long time on my hair' (figure 133).

Beneath his youthful carelessness, Tony's indifference conceals a genuine sense of higher worth than his family and friends. He stands out in Bay Ridge as uniquely talented, handsome, charming, and much more suitable to be a leader than another hard hat. Indeed, as we have seen, the hard hat on his dresser is simply an accessory. While he is no less racist, violent, homophobic, or misogynistic than any of the Faces,

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<sup>37</sup> They include Louise Day Hicks, the leading opponent of school integration in Boston; Charles Stenvig, the policeman-turned-politician in Minneapolis; Anthony Imperiale, the organizer of neighbourhood vigilante squads in Newark; and, above all, George Wallace, the Alabama segregationist governor.

he possesses the integrity, self-discipline, and work ethic to climb up the social ladder and join Manhattan's middle class ranks. Even within the constraints of a job that allows for little more initiative than a factory assembly line, Tony excels as a salesman and displays natural talent and enterprising skills. When a customer compliments Tony for the quality of his work and offers him a job, the apprehensive Mr Fusco immediately reciprocates by offering Tony a raise. In the humorous bargaining exchange that follows, Mr Fusco increases his initial offer of a two and a half dollar raise twice, finally settling at four dollars. What should not be lost in the humour is that Tony is intelligent, talented, well-spoken, and hardworking. These qualities also surface in his determination and efforts to win the disco dance contest. In an attempt to attract his erotic interest, Annette proposes to be his partner in the competition, but Tony insists that their relationship as dance partners should be strictly professional. 'It means practice, Annette', he instructs, 'it don't mean dating; it don't mean socializing'. They first meet to discuss their partnership in a strip club adjacent to the Odyssey, but, for someone with a seemingly unquenched sexual drive, Tony pays no attention to either Annette or the stripper.

It is equally important to note that individual excellence and social mobility are qualities that assume positive connotations in a capitalist context. Max Weber was the first to exalt the superiority of the capitalist ethos in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Whereas Catholicism promises to reward good deeds with future salvation, Protestantism conceptualizes them as a sign of present grace that benefits both the individual and society. Weber argues that the Protestant work ethic created the conditions for capitalist economies to develop and explains why Western Europe was the first part of the world to experience the industrial revolution. Although Weber's causal link between religion and political economy has been almost irrevocably refuted, Western culture has adopted the Protestant work ethic as self-evident proof of its inherent superiority. As Dyer points out, the unstated assumption underpinning the Protestant ethic is an association between economic prosperity and whiteness. The spirit of enterprise, Dyer argues, is one of the major attributes—embodiments, as he calls them—of whiteness (*White* 30-39). When Catholic Italian-Americans are portrayed as cunning, violent, or excessive in their behaviour, the implication is that they are also a step down on the scale of whiteness in comparison

to Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and Scandinavians. It is all the more notable, therefore, that Tony Manero, a stereotypical Guido in every other respect, lacks the Guido's stupidity and laziness. Despite his ethnic styles and behaviours, Tony is smart, enterprising, hardworking, and, by implication, more deserving of the bourgeois benefits of pure whiteness.

While his father fatalistically accepts his unemployment and emasculation, Tony decides to take hold of his life and, in the tradition of Hollywood's white male heroes, drives the narrative to its conclusion. The final twenty minutes of the film provide Tony with a series of revelations that force him to face his options for the future and live up to the full potential of his talents. As William Graebner puts it, Tony's move to Manhattan represents his

migration from one set of values and positions to another: from ethnicity to universalism, from working class to middle class, from a corrupt survival to merit, and, in the film's narrative trajectory, from Bay Ridge to the beneath-the-bridge daydreams that project him outward. (172)

The diminutive and naive Bobby, who does not fit the Faces' strict criteria for machismo, falls to his death from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge as he tries to prove his masculine fearlessness. Annette, who has been desperately trying to win Tony's romantic interest, ends up raped in the back seat of the car. At the final dance contest the Odyssey's Italian owners do not allow the Puerto-Regan couple to win first prize, even though they are evidently the best dancers. After witnessing the discrimination, Tony realizes that ethnic tribalism has invaded the world of disco, where only dancing skills and sharp looks used to matter.

The Odyssey 2001 proves to be as corrupted and limiting to his potential as any other aspect of Bay Ridge. It is the unavoidable conclusion of a narrative that has consistently portrayed disco culture as an intrinsic, and, hence, equally dangerous, part of Brooklyn's parochialism. When Tony's brother pleads with him to leave Brooklyn and pursue his dreams in Manhattan, he is essentially exalting the bourgeois values of upward mobility and personal growth: 'Are you gonna do something with your dancing, Tony? [...] The only way you are gonna survive is to do what you think is right, not what they are trying to jam you into'. If survival for Tony's brother means leaving the clergy, for Tony it means leaving Brooklyn. While contemplating his brother's words, Tony places the priest collar around his neck and pulls it up to mimic choking

(figure 134). Philadelphia's working class became Rocky's greatest ally in going the distance; Brooklyn's working class contains and limits Tony's potential. As long as Tony remains the best Italian dancer, he is guaranteed first place at the Odyssey's dance contests. He has already come to realize, however, that such guarantees are as meaningless and constraining as Mr Fusco's promise of life-long employment at the hardware store. Not surprisingly, therefore, many interpretations of *Saturday Night Fever* have found beneath the surface of disco glitter the full force of a social drama. This is the approach of Joseph Kupfer, who interprets the film as a 'tale of maturity' (171), and Greg Keeler, who considers it 'a coming of age story' (167).



Figure 134

Where others have found a laudable example of social elevation, Ehrenreich interprets *Saturday Night Fever* as another instance of Hollywood's calculated efforts to subjugate the working class. She argues that the film's conclusion affirms the assumed moral superiority of the capitalist middle class by condemning working class masculinity. The film assigns the working class man to 'the lowest level of consciousness, the dumping ground for all vestigial masculine traits discarded by the middle class'. The working class man is associated with a 'prior stage of the middle class life cycle—boyish "physical striving"—only confirmed his diagnosis as a psychic retard' (*Hearts* 136). In another article co-authored with Biskind, Ehrenreich places *Saturday Night Fever* in the same category with such films as *Blue Collar* (1978) and *Bloodbrothers* (1978) (211). The corrupted autoworkers' union in *Blue Collar's* Detroit forces the three protagonists into crime. Their collaboration for a heist, however, is riddled with rivalries and traps them deeper into the vicious cycle of blue-collar angst. Richard Gere's Stony De Coco in *Bloodbrothers* dreams of working with children, but

first needs to find the courage to leave the Bronx, his brother, and his work in construction. The promotional tagline of *Bloodbrothers* could apply equally well to Stony De Coco and Tony Manero, 'How do you tell people you love you have to do it on your own?'

Biskind and Ehrenreich's interpretation of *Saturday Night Fever* resembles Fredric Jameson's argument for an allegorical substitution of crime for capitalism in *The Godfather*. It will be recalled that Jameson finds in *The Godfather's* romanticized depiction of the Mafia a deliberate attempt to disguise American capitalism within the more appealing cloak of an ethnic utopia. Biskind and Ehrenreich find a similar strategy in *Saturday Night Fever's* refusal to provide a clear definition of the capitalist class system rooted in income disparities. Instead, the film presents Brooklyn's working class as a parochial ethnic community and Manhattan's middle class as the modern world of feminism and intellectual cultivation. Phrased in Jameson's terminology, *Saturday Night Fever* reifies capitalism by substituting social inequalities with immaturity, or, as Biskind and Ehrenreich indicatively put it, 'Werner Erhard replace[s] Horatio Alger' (211). Consequently, Tony's dilemma is not whether to fight against or submit to the pressures of the capitalist system, but whether to remain the juvenile Guido from Brooklyn or choose personal growth in Manhattan. For a moment, Tony contemplates the former, haranguing Stephanie with a furious, primitive Marxism that explains gender, race, and class in a few easy pieces:

My Pa goes to work, he gets dumped on. So he goes home and dumps on my mother, right? Of course, right. And the spics gotta dump on us, so we gotta dump on the spics, right? Even the humpin' is dumpin' most of the time.

Had the film ended with this speech, maybe it would have come closer to an indictment of the social problems troubling Bay Ridge. It would have presented the upside of *Rocky's* Philadelphia, the dark side of the ethnic working class that does not rise to support its champion. But Tony's Marxist moment ends there and, soon afterwards, Bobby's timely death tilts the balance in favour of Manhattan and embourgeoisment.

For Biskind and Ehrenreich's argument to remain valid, however, the film would need to clearly expose disco as an ill-founded fantasy and Tony's life in Bay Ridge as dangerous for his maturity; in the same way that *Bloodbrothers* condemns

fraternal loyalty for crushing Stony De Coco's dreams and *Blue Collar* criticizes working class camaraderie for fostering betrayal and theft. *Saturday Night Fever* never subjects its disco fantasy to the same critique. Tony Manero's maturity remains narratively obscured in a rushed conclusion and overshadowed by a trajectory of popular reception that insists on remembering him as Bay Ridge's disco king. Film critics in 1977 quickly noted that *Saturday Night Fever* leaves its dramatic elements underdeveloped, unmemorable, and outshined by the disco surface. 'As long as *Saturday Night Fever* stays at the hero's local disco', *Time* commented, 'it is on solid footing'. It becomes less successful, however, when it embarks on 'the tensions of [Bay Ridge's] workaday jobs and Roman Catholic guilts' (Rich, 'Discomania'). *Film Quarterly* agreed that all the dramatic subplots 'remain terribly undeveloped—but presumably give the feeling of a lot happening' (Kinder 42). In even less sympathetic terms, *The Washington Post* charged the film for 'breezing right past the moment of dramatic truth that would redeem the material' (C14). *Harper's* described *Saturday Night Fever's* dramatic plot as a failed effort at constructing a unified narrative. 'We are invited to revel in the disco rites and enjoy what we see, but it is a movie and, for good or ill, it has to go somewhere' (Terzian 80). While I do not espouse the evaluative approach that simply dismisses the film's conclusion as a clumsily executed plot device, its narrative obscurity does contradict Biskind and Ehrenreich's argument for a clear condemnation of the working class. Regardless of ideological intentions or filmmaking skills, *Saturday Night Fever* remains inconclusive about the implications of Tony's move to Manhattan. A more consistent and productive interpretation would acknowledge—as does Golden, albeit in the context of a very different argument—that Tony Manero's escape from his ethnic community is restricted to just 'some hints'.

*Saturday Night Fever* negotiates the dilemmas of WASP, middle class viewers in 1977 much more satisfactorily by remaining ambivalent on Tony Manero's fate. Beginning with the dance contest, the film abandons the focus on Tony's disco adventures and, almost too aware that the social drama narrative cannot sustain credibility and audience attention for long, rushes to the implausible conclusion that finds Tony and Stephanie in a Manhattan apartment. They sit by the window and hold hands, silhouetted against the light of the dawning new day (figures 135 and 136). Tony embraces his new WASP self, his liberated masculinity, and agrees with

Stephanie to remain just friends, while the melodic ‘How Deep Is Your Love’ leaves open the possibility of future romance.



Figure 135

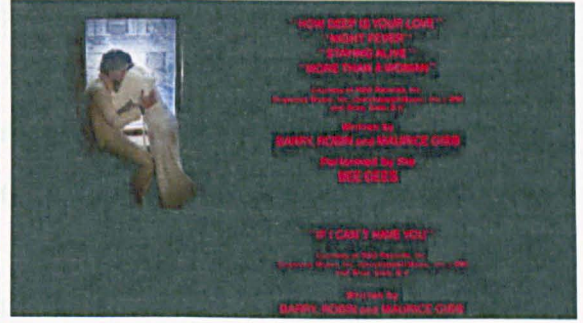


Figure 136

For white, middle class, male audiences in the 70s, Tony’s move to Manhattan is both a comforting and alarming conclusion. On the one hand, the suggestion that even Brooklyn’s disco king aspires to their lifestyle affirms middle class superiority. On the other hand, we have seen very little of Manhattan and Tony’s chances of making it are uncertain. If he follows Stephanie’s path, he will have to fake his entry into WASPdom through pretentiousness and pathetic namedropping. As Jefferson Cowie notes, Tony and Stephanie ‘are sitting in a borrowed apartment. They are literally inhabiting someone else’s world’ (94). If Tony affirms middle class superiority by desiring social elevation, the fact that he does not actually achieve it satisfies bourgeois *Schadenfreude*. If all workers could find middle class jobs and climb up the social ladder, then the capitalist system would simply collapse. The same year that the film was released, *Harper’s* published an article by Robert Lekachman, an economics professor, on the question of unemployment. Paraphrasing Marx’s famous aphorism, Lekachman entitles the article ‘The Specter of Full Employment’, with the subtitle spelling out his key argument: ‘A Secure Working Class Threatens the Principles of Capitalism’. ‘When people are scared about losing their jobs’ Lekachman writes, ‘they work harder and gripe less’ (39). Working class unemployment keeps the workers at bay, competing with one another for the same jobs, while perpetuating the affluence and prosperity of the capitalist middle classes as the suppliers of jobs.

Even if Tony does make it in Manhattan, the ending avoids mentioning the implications of his embourgeoisment. In the context of a film that has defined the



interrelation between ethnicity and masculinity in a rigid geographical binary, Tony will have to give up his hyphenated ethnic identity and become assimilated into WASP normalcy. Disco will no longer be an all-encompassing lifestyle, but simply an escapist weekend fantasy. A monogamous relationship with Stephanie will signal the end of his sexual adventures; a white-collar job will limit his time for dancing and grooming; sophisticated Manhattan friends will gradually tone down his racism and homophobia. As Henry Allen puts it, 'he'll be just like all the other male narcissists, and nobody will even notice him'. The brevity and romantic mood of the final scene, however, conceal both its lack of credibility and its alarming implications. As the end credits begin to roll, the soundtrack switches from 'How Deep Is Your Love' to the upbeat 'Staying Alive'. 'I've been kicked around since I was born', the Bee Gees sing in their signature falsetto, echoing the darker side of Tony's life in Brooklyn. The following line, however, offers an assurance that could apply equally well to the male character in the film and the male viewers watching the film: 'Now it's all right. It's OK. And you may look the other way'.

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*Saturday Night Fever* illustrates more clearly, and often more crudely, than both *The Godfather* and *Rocky* the fruitful representational possibilities of Italian-American masculinities in the 70s. Tony Manero can behave simultaneously as a blue-collar labourer and an obsessive consumer, a disco king and a breadwinner, an erotic object on display and a model of aggressive machismo. Yet, unlike *The Godfather* and *Rocky*, *Saturday Night Fever* pushes him to take sides. Familial values and corporate capitalism operate in seamless reciprocity in *The Godfather*; *Rocky* resurrects the American Dream to renegotiate racial and gender tensions. In contrast, Tony Manero is torn between blue-collarism and embourgeoisment, between careless nights at the Odyssey and responsible adulthood, between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Although he finally succumbs to the pressures, his maturity comes too late into the film to overshadow his disco swagger. *Saturday Night Fever* conveniently ends before we see what the future entails for Tony. It would not be until seven years later that *Staying Alive* transformed Tony Manero into a professional dancer struggling to make it in the

harsh world of Manhattan. With Stallone's directorial input, the sequel ends with a triumphant show that finally materialized Robert Stigwood's vision of Tony Manero as a dancing Rocky. *Staying Alive*, however, failed to replicate *Saturday Night Fever's* box-office success or alter Tony Manero's lasting impression as the Guido from Bay Ridge on the bright-coloured floor of the Odyssey 2001.

## CONCLUSION

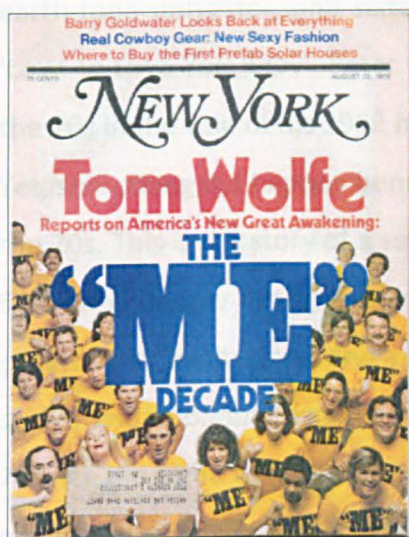


Figure 137

The cover of *New York* magazine on 23 August 1976 boldly announces that ‘Tom Wolfe Reports on America’s New Great Awakening’ (figure 137). In the middle of the cover, the capitalized and enlarged word ‘me’ looms over a v-shaped crowd of people. They all look up and point at their identical yellow t-shirts, imprinted with each one’s individual ‘me’. The quotation marks enclosing the word suggest not only its metaphorical meaning as a cultural phenomenon, but also direct speech. According to Wolfe, Americans in the 70s are constantly thinking and saying ‘me’. The people attending Erhard Seminars Training in his opening example even queue up at the microphone to shout it out. The ‘New Great Awakening’ in the essay’s title refers to this collective narcissistic desire to re-imagine oneself as special, different, unique, and more worthy of individual attention. Wolfe describes such seemingly disparate phenomena of the 70s as second wave feminism, religious cults, excess consumerism, and new flashy fashions as different manifestations of the same impulse to ‘discover and start doting on *Me!*’ (40).

Since the first publication of Wolfe’s essay, ‘the “Me” Decade’ has become a synecdochic term for all the decadence, superficiality, and excess tastelessness that allegedly was the 70s. The decade has gone down in history as a low point in American history, an era of personal (as opposed to political or social) awareness and a cultural

retraction from the rebellious 60s. The 60s brought passion, grandeur, youthful promise, and tragedy. The 70s brought the yellow smiley face, pet rocks, stagflation, earth-tone polyester, and sixteen minutes of Donna Summer's orgasmic moaning in 'Love to Love You Baby'. Peter Carroll effectively captures the prevailing impression of the 70s in the title of his 1982 history of the decade, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*. Yet, something did happen beneath the sequined surface that tells a different story of the 70s. This is the story of a society struggling to come to terms with the legacy of the 60s, an economy facing the end of a thirty-year boom, an electorate losing faith in government institutions, and a nation suffering its first military defeat abroad. Political, social, and economic changes inevitably filtered into and defined the culture of the 70s. In the light of these changes, cries of 'me' are not expressions of some self-generated narcissism that descended upon the U.S., but symptoms of uncertainty, distrust in authority, and inward withdrawal.

This thesis has concentrated on a small piece of this story, the renegotiation of masculine and ethnic identities in Hollywood's representation of Italian-American men. Conceptualizing this subject as part of the cultural history of the 70s may initially appear like an odd choice. The history of Hollywood and the history of immigrant communities pose as more apparent and useful frameworks for analysis. The 70s witnessed the rise to prominence of Italian-American filmmakers with film school degrees and a desire to reconnect with their ethnic heritage. In the meantime, developments in the industry allowed them the freedom to realize their personal visions. *The Godfather* showed the profit potential of ethnic-themed films early in the decade and so did Hollywood's Italian-American screen parade begin. What more can the discourses, practices, and texts of the 'Me' Decade tell us about representations of Italian-American men? The discussion in this thesis has been guided by the contention that we cannot examine these representations independently of their popular appeal. *The Godfather*, *Rocky*, and *Saturday Night Fever* are not just hit films that happen to feature Italian-American men. Ethnic masculinities are too pronounced in their narratives and too closely connected to ambient discourses on ethnicity and masculinity to be explained simply as symptoms of changes in the film industry. Situating Hollywood's Italian-American men in the cultural history of the 70s is

necessary for explaining what American audiences found so enthralling in the Corleones, Rocky Balboa, and Tony Manero.

The theoretical and methodological tools guiding the analysis have relied on the understanding of a reciprocal and dynamic relationship between films and their historical context. This approach opens up a space for exploring the way representations can assume new meanings in the trajectory of their reception and appropriation. Examined from this perspective, Michael Corleone's trip to Sicily becomes a topical search for ethnic roots; Rocky Balboa's quest for the heavyweight championship joins the politics of white victimization; and Tony Manero's homoerotic display of his naked body transforms into an ethnic act of machismo in the eyes of middle class, WASP audiences. Some of these connections to the cultural context are embedded in the filmic text, such as *Rocky's* selective adoption of elements from Muhammad Ali's persona in the portrayal of Apollo Creed. In other cases, they are activated by discourses circulating in the public sphere, as in the diverse masculine models that go into the construction of Tony Manero's masculinity. In both cases, a synthesis of text, context, and intertext allows for historically qualified interpretations, specific to American audiences in the 70s.

The thesis has focused particularly on the appeal of these films to middle class, heterosexual, WASP men—the men commonly imagined as the epitome of the American hegemonic norm. The boundaries between the norm and the periphery, however, became increasingly problematic and malleable in the 70s. Looking more closely at the cover of *New York* magazine featuring Wolfe's essay, there is only one African American woman among the people shouting 'me'. Not coincidentally, all the other narcissists are white Americans. Following the increased cultural valence of the civil rights movement and the various cultural nationalisms it inspired, white Americans became eager to discover that part of their identity that separated them from the oppressive mainstream. This is particularly true for white men, who faced the additional attacks of feminism. As the women's cause gradually moved from the radical fringes to the cultural centre, so were men propelled to renegotiate their own social roles. As more and more minorities broke away from the mainstream and shouted 'me' in the 70s, middle class, heterosexual, WASP men switched from being the undisputed cultural hegemony to being the oppressors of everyone else. In these

circumstances, a new kind of white masculinity arose in the 70s, one that was not defined by explicit privilege, but by the parallel attempts to indulge in self-victimization, evaluate challenges, and regroup as a hegemonic bloc.

Men's liberation, the movement responsible for the most organized effort to renegotiate the boundaries of male hegemony, was from the start a predominantly white, middle class phenomenon. Beneath the feminist surface, the movement reveals an underlying agenda to counter accusations of white patriarchal supremacy. From the very beginning, liberated men walked a tightrope between two antithetical goals, a willingness to accept feminist demands and a parallel effort to emphasize the costs of patriarchy to men. The movement used the idea of oppression in a politically neutered sense, as a free-floating general condition that affects everyone equally, on a personal rather than a social level. The emphasis on psychological oppression and the self-advancement rhetoric are not just symptoms of the Zeitgeist. They provided an ideal discursive package for promoting feminist ideas to men and lessening the guilt of patriarchy. By avoiding the question of gender power discrepancies, the movement could claim that men are as much the victims of patriarchy as are women. This discursive strategy came to the fore as men's liberation gradually developed into an openly anti-feminist men's rights cause by the end of the decade.

In this climate, Italian-American men found themselves in a privileged position, with ethnicity offering a readily available means for disassociating themselves from white privilege. After decades of trying to assimilate into an all-encompassing Caucasian whiteness, the descendants of Italian and other Southern and Eastern European immigrants abandoned the melting pot and joined the ethnic revival. Although the revival fashioned itself as a spontaneous resurrection of ethnic identification, there was also a more pressing reason for exiting the melting pot in the 70s. The demand for assimilation had been supported by the undisputable privileges of whiteness, which alleviated the cost of suppressing ethnicity, whether voluntarily or not. The experience of African Americans since the 50s, however, showed that assimilation was not the only path for inclusion. The inherently unmeltable descendants of African slaves demanded and gained political liberties and cultural centrality, inspiring other minority groups to set similar goals. White ethnics drew not only their inspiration and an organizational template from the civil rights movement,

but also the urgency to distinguish themselves from WASP whiteness. By embracing their ethnic heritage, they could also plead their innocence to the accusations facing white America.

This desire to claim a darker shade of whiteness defined the ethnic revival's political rhetoric. Just as liberated men joined women in sharing the burdens of patriarchy, so did revived ethnics lay claim to the same formative experiences under WASP oppression as African Americans. There is, however, one significant distinction between the ethnic revival and men's liberation. The former enjoyed what was perceived to be a more legitimate claim to victimhood. Italian-Americans did not become ethnic in the 70s in the same way that liberated men became feminists, but through a reconnection with an inborn identity. The revival literature conceptualized the relationship between birthplace and ethnicity as analogous to that of genes and racial physiognomy. Biological determinism offered Italian-Americans a strong, albeit fundamentally inconsistent, advantage. They could still enjoy all the benefits of whiteness by virtue of being Caucasian Americans and simultaneously claim an inalienable, primordial right to be the victims of white privilege.

While the revival explicitly defined ethnicity as a genetic essence, its practices suggested a different meaning. Ethnicity was revived in the proliferation of ethnic restaurants, in the various quests for ancestral roots, and in the popularity of heritage fests. In Werner Sollors's terminology, ethnicity was caught between the two poles of descent and consent, between its assigned definition as a primordial identity and its experiential definition as a matter of choosing to look and act ethnic. Neither were the ethnic festivals, cuisines, and fashions restricted to white ethnics. Just as it reserved a guilt-free shade of whiteness for those of ethnic blood, the revival also looked outwards and invited everyone to join in the celebration of ethnicity. It is through these ambiguities of exclusion and inclusion, descent and consent that Hollywood's representations of Italian-American men in the 70s are framed.

On the most basic level, *The Godfather*, *Rocky*, and *Saturday Night Fever* can serve as historical documents of the ethnic revival. In their choice to concentrate on Italian-American subject matters, these films tapped into the popularity of ethnicity and contributed to spreading the ethnic fervour beyond ethnic communities. Nevertheless, both their politics of representation and their circulation in the public

sphere speak more closely to the needs of the WASP mainstream, not the revival's political agenda. Most obviously, all three films cast their Italian-American men in the moulds of established and easily recognizable ethnic stereotypes: the Mafioso, the Palooka, and the Guido. Although the films do introduce significant variations to the stereotypes, the Corleones, Rocky Balboa, and Tony Manero are certainly far from the positive film portrayals demanded by the increasingly vocal anti-defamation lobby in the 70s. The gangster's criminal impulses, the Palooka's combination of aggressive physicality with blue-collarism, and the Guido's mixture of boastfulness and dumbness constitute different articulations of the same prejudiced belief that there is something inherently limiting in ethnic origin. At the historical root of every one of these stereotypes lies the requirement for bestowing a sense of Otherness upon the Italian-American man. By containing him within the moral, intellectual, and social periphery, Hollywood could affirm the superiority of middle class WASPdom. In the broader context of assimilationist politics before the 70s, the implication was that the Italian-American man needs to let go of Italianness, if he is to become a law-abiding citizen, a self-composed man, and an upwardly mobile employee.

On the face of it, it would seem that *The Godfather*, *Rocky*, and *Saturday Night Fever* rehearse the same associations between ethnicity, social marginalization, and masculine primitiveness. The 70s, however, provided a different cultural context for these stereotypes to operate. Hyphenated identities uncompromisingly combined the ethnic periphery and the American norm. Italian-American men could be proud ethnics, in touch with their heritage, and fully incorporated American citizens at the same time. This coexistence of Italianness and Americanness is readily apparent in the films' appropriation of ethnic stereotypes. Ethnicity is no longer just a generic signifier of Otherness, but a thematic and narrative element in its own right. The Corleones, Rocky Balboa, and Tony Manero look and behave distinctly more ethnic than their cinematic predecessors. Yet, they all remain at the centre of American society. The Corleones are a closely knit Sicilian family, but many interpreters saw in them the quintessential American capitalists. Rocky Balboa is the proud Italian Stallion, but that did not stop him from becoming the iconic American underdog. Tony Manero lives in an all-Italian neighbourhood and is the leader of an ethnic gang, but he is also the uncontested disco king of the 70s, both within and outside the film's fiction.



In all three films, furthermore, the duality of Italianness and Americanness becomes a vehicle for reviving traditional masculine attributes that were under attack by feminism. Vito Corleone is the loyal family patriarch; his son, Michael, resembles the strong, silent types of Classical Hollywood; Rocky Balboa is the courageous patriot with faith in the American Dream; and Tony Manero is the macho youngster with no reservations in expressing his racism, sexism, and homophobia. These models of masculine heroism and authority are of course constructs, no more accurate as documents of American manhood than Hollywood's spies, cowboys, warriors, and biblical patriarchs have ever been. Neither is the cultural function of heroic masculinity significantly different in the 70s. As a vision of unproblematic machismo, it affirms men's sociocultural supremacy, while placating their fears and anxieties. What did change in the 70s, however, is the ability of Italian-American Mafiosi, Palookas, and Guidos to embody roles previously reserved for non-ethnic white men. At a time when WASP men were pressured to discover liberation and get in touch with their feminine sides, Italian-American men are both white enough to become believable Hollywood heroes and adequately exotic to remain unabashedly macho.

Italian-American masculinity allows Hollywood to simultaneously exorcize and valorize traditional masculine models. On the one hand, ethnic difference acts as a safety lever that keeps the gender and racial prejudices of traditional white machismo at a distance from the new liberal and liberated mores. On the other hand, the newfound cultural centrality of ethnicity refashions machismo as believable, current, and plausible in the 70s. In all three films, the privileges of hyphenated ethnicity spill over into the representation of masculinity. Italian-American men occupy both the liberated norm and the macho periphery. Michael Corleone begins *The Godfather* as an all-American college graduate, war veteran, and loving fiancé for Kay. Halfway through the film, he discovers Sicilian patriarchal values and graduates into *Part II* as both an American businessman and a Sicilian *pater familias*. Rocky Balboa similarly starts off as a caring and respectful boyfriend for Adrian. Although *Rocky* does not turn him into the domineering husband that Michael becomes for Kay, it does transform Adrian from an independent woman into a housewife, allowing Rocky to concentrate uninterrupted on his macho quest for the heavyweight championship. *Saturday Night Fever* performs the most daring balancing acts between traditional and current

masculinities. Tony Manero takes liberated men's narcissism and taste for fashion, carries them to such an extreme that he openly toys with homoeroticism, but remains more racist, sexist, homophobic, and virile than either Michael Corleone or Rocky Balboa.

Using the representational opportunities of Italian-American masculinity as a springboard, all three films situate their characters within hybrid versions of 70s. The definition of ethnicity as a primordial connection between one's present and ancestral roots allows Hollywood's Italian-American men to live and operate at the centre of 70s milieus, while harking back to an imagined past that is more familiar and secure. *The Godfather* literalizes this connection by portraying Michael Corleone's trip to Sicily as a metaphorical journey back in time and to his ethnic roots. The American present, to which he returns as a revived ethnic, is the nostalgically recreated post-World War II era, a time of economic prosperity and faith in patriarchal authority. Yet, despite the meticulous attention to historical detail in the production design, *The Godfather's* version of the 40s and 50s is anachronistically infused with elements from the 70s. Michael successfully transitions into advanced capitalism, turns the family business into a corporation, and relocates it to the Sunbelt. His capitalist endeavours may be criminal, corrupted, and ruthless, but, as a revived ethnic, he conducts them with an antiquated sense of familial morality and patriarchal authority that sets him apart from the standard American corporate boss.

If *The Godfather* recreates the 40s and 50s through a 70s lens, *Rocky* performs the reverse gesture. The film opens in the harshness of the Rustbelt in the year of the nation's Bicentennial, a time of uncertainty and confusion over the nation's future. Philadelphia is a derelict and poverty-stricken metropolis, populated by unemployed factory workers, violent drunkards, small-time thugs, and cynical boxing coaches. As Rocky transforms into a determined pugilist, so does Philadelphia transform with him into a romanticized ethnic utopia. The city does not look any different at the end of the film, but it is infused with the social mores of the 50s, in large part through intertextual attachments to earlier boxing films and the legacy of Rocky Marciano. Yet, *Rocky* exhibits a highly selective memory of the 50s. Marciano's proletarian ethos is largely ignored and all the union action at the heart of *On the Waterfront's* narrative is anachronistically substituted with ethnic pride to produce an alternate 70s world

where Rocky's American Dream can flourish. In this world, the Italian-American man becomes an agent for both male supremacy and white privilege. At a time when WASP America could not express its concerns over the pervasiveness of the civil rights movement without counteraccusations of white resentment, *Rocky* invests in hyphenated ethnicity to renegotiate Apollo Creed's empowerment and reincorporate him into an updated social and racial hierarchy.

*Saturday Night Fever's* portrayal of Brooklyn is similarly informed by topical discourses of the late 70s. The film has entered popular memory as the epitome of 70s disco culture, to the extent that it is easy to forget that Tony Manero's experience of disco is no less a construct than *The Godfather's* business-family duality or *Rocky's* romanticized portrayal of Philadelphia. *Saturday Night Fever* brings together the liberating potential of disco's early days as a queer form of entertainment and the mainstream appeal of disco at the end of the 70s. The result is a skewed reflection of disco culture, geographically localized in Brooklyn and restricted to Italian-Americans. Drawing both on Nik Cohn's 'Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night' and Travolta's star persona, the film transforms Brooklyn into an exotic world beyond the bridge, alluringly close for Manhattanites to visit, but separated from middle class WASPdom. Within this world, disco becomes an expression of Tony's racist, homophobic, and misogynistic machismo. *Saturday Night Fever's* version of disco fever satisfies WASP audiences' need for escapism, while simultaneously affirming middle class superiority through the gratuitous and utterly inconsistent conclusion that has Tony move to Manhattan.

Six months after *Saturday Night Fever's* premiere, Travolta was back on the big screen with *Grease*—not as a bourgeois Manhattanite, but still as a macho Italian-American. Before concluding this thesis, it would be useful to briefly revisit the case study of chapter one in the light of the discussion that followed. Considering the operative role of Italian-American masculinity in the construction of *The Godfather's*, *Rocky's*, and *Saturday Night Fever's* hybrid versions of the 70s, we can locate a similar contribution to *Grease's* playful pastiche of the 50s and 70s. Although the signifiers of ethnicity in *Grease* are not nearly as pronounced, narratively central, or 'authentic' as in the other three films, Danny Zuko's representation certainly does not abide by the assimilationist ethos of the 50s. Indeed, as we saw in chapter five, the mere choice of

Travolta for the role highlights Danny's ethnic roots and renders him as much a 70s Guido as a 50s Greaser. Travolta brings to Danny Zuko some of the Guido's narcissism and self-conscious projection of coolness, turning his Greaser into an exaggerated, outdated, and often comic model of machismo. As in the case of *Saturday Night Fever's* portrayal of Brooklyn's tribal rites, *Grease's* portrayal of 50s masculinity places 70s audiences in a socially elevated position, from where they can gaze back at Danny Zuko with the self-righteous knowledge that social mores have progressed from these overeager displays of machismo.

Transferring the Italian-American man to the culturally primitive past is only one aspect of *Grease's* representation of ethnic masculinity. Danny's hyphenated ethnicity simultaneously allows youthful machismo to survive through the 70s without upsetting the new liberated sensibilities. From the very beginning, Danny shows a more sensitive, romantic, and, by 70s standards, mature side. He sings out his love for Sandy, joins Rydell's athletics to impress her, shows up at the carnival without his signature leather jacket, and comes out to his friends as a sensitive man in love. Tony Manero faces a similar dilemma between over-sexed machismo and monogamous romance, which *Saturday Night Fever* hastily resolves in its narratively obscured conclusion. In this respect, *Grease* is closer to *Rocky*, which transforms Adrian to accommodate Rocky's newfound masculine self-determination. Sandy undergoes a completely different transformation from Adrian in *Grease's* finale, but her hybrid version of a 'bad girl' is no less effective in preserving the benefits of Danny's ethnic masculinity. Danny gets to keep his macho style and attitude, even as he enters a monogamous relationship with Sandy. Like *The Godfather's* amalgam of business and family, *Rocky's* all-white American Dream, and *Saturday Night Fever's* unequivocally straight homoerotic fantasy, *Grease's* utopian conclusion assumes a semblance of credibility and contemporary relevance through Danny's Italian-American masculinity. Americanness allows the hero to finally get the girl, while Italianness keeps his machismo intact.

With retrospective knowledge of how American history developed through the 80s, *Grease* appears to be the last stronghold in the representational privileges of Italian-American masculinity. By 1978, the radical movements of the 60s had already been commercialized for popular consumption and America was already moving

towards neoconservatism. A year after *Grease's* release, the homophobic backlash against disco culminated in the disco demolition night. In 1981, Ronald Reagan entered his first term in office and Robert Bly started leading his mythopoetic masculine therapy workshops. The Hollywood screen would soon explode with unapologetically hyper-macho white heroes. Stallone became John Rambo in 1982 and, the following year, he de-ethnicized Tony Manero and transformed him into a dancing action hero for *Staying Alive*. Before middle class, heterosexual, WASP men finished renegotiating the terms of their hegemony, however, they could still rely on the cultural valence of Italian-American ethnicity for visions of white American machismo. For as long as the transitions, disappointments, and anxieties of the 'Me' Decade were underway, Hollywood could count on that semantically conflicting but representationally fruitful space of the hyphen.

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