

# An Examination of Mafia Spectatorship Phenomena from a Psychological Perspective

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People often experience strong visceral reactions to the mention of crime and criminals. Even though they claim to deplore the idea of transgressing social mores and aggressive behavior, nonetheless even respectable people have complex emotions about these things; typically, there is excitement associated with violence. Whether the voyeuristic titillation of witnessing an automobile accident or refusing to leave one's seat with the promise of a bench-clearing brawl during a baseball game, everyday citizens are regularly stimulated by violence, intentional or otherwise.

This phenomenon can be seen in the complex reaction people have toward organized crime, specifically the Italian American Mafia. Though most people vilify these criminals, nevertheless there are those who exhibit a subtle or overt affinity for *mafiosi*. This fascination is nothing new and clearly evident in the popularity of Mafia characters on television and in film. Organized-crime fictional characters seem to possess in the public imagination some variety of social gravitas not typically attributed to other perpetrators of crime. This social status can be said in a sense to trump the dangerous, furtive nature of the Mafia livelihood and lifestyle.

The psychological underpinnings of this attraction have not been well examined. Whereas on an individual basis these psychological phenomena have received attention by Frosh (2009) and Gabbard (2002), nonetheless, psychological examinations of societal fascinations with the Mafia have been conspicuously absent. This article explores via film and TV analysis the characteristics of the Mafia structure and the prominent Italian American Mafia-related features that elicit strong fascination and appeal. Given the existence of a robust literature utilizing psychological (Fleming and Manvell 1985; Wedding, Boyd, and Niemiec 2010; Wedding and Niemiec 2003; Zimmerman 2003) and psychoanalytic (Gabbard 2001; Gabbard and Gabbard 1999; Hauke 2014; Sabbadini 2014) theories for film analysis, it seemed apt to apply this methodology to the enduring phenomena of Mafia spectatorship.

The Mafia movies included in this article are Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995) and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* and *The Godfather II* (1972 and 1974); David Chase's *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) will represent TV series. I choose these works because of their continued

popularity as well as because they are instructive in terms of spectatorship phenomena. The psychological concepts discussed in this article are narcissism and omnipotence, rules and structure, familial connectedness, and gender roles. These concepts and experiences, pervasive within Mafia portrayals, exist also in noncriminal frameworks, though often on an unconscious level, making viewing such phenomena on the big or little screen illustrative of the appeal of the Mafia and *mafiosi*.

### Narcissism and Omnipotence

The 2013 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5* (DSM-5, the latest installment of the prominent psychiatric classification system) describes narcissistic personality disorder as marked by an exaggerated self-appraisal, an overinflated sense of self, grandiosity, and a compromised ability to empathize with others (American Psychiatric Association 2013). However, the DSM and other classification systems commonly fall short of bringing the nuances of mental disorders to light (Greenberg 2013; Frances 2013; Tasso 2013). On a more experiential level, narcissism and narcissistic styles can range from personal preoccupation and social savvy to more pathological qualities like destructiveness and identity confusion (PDM Task Force 2006). Psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg (1984, 1992) examines the concept of the more destructive, hostile, or malignant narcissist. With an assumed etiological explanation that such personalities are born out of a predisposition toward aggressivity, early trauma, and pathological early attachment relationships, these individuals are the essence of destructiveness. They have a tendency to convert personal psychological pain into the infliction of pain onto others. Possessing both a functional paranoia and a comfort with aggression, they often use violence to settle differences. Consumed by envy, these severe narcissists desire to spoil things they covet and often idealize those objects of envy; they both envy and admire powerful people. The combination of this idealization of power along with aggression manifests as what Kernberg (1998) refers to as “justified indignation,” or rationalized violence. This personality subtype goes through life treating others as means to an end, taking things from them for their personal consumption through ruthless exploitation and systematic violence. This extreme narcissist can have a sense of loyalty and abide by certain sets of rules and mores, though they may be more countercultural and counterproductive than the norm. This kind of personality thrives on a feeling of omnipotence.

A malignant narcissist, while not quite taking part in full-fledged antisocial or categorical psychopathic lawlessness, subscribes to the ethos of

aggressiveness and persecution—idealizing power and operating with an overinflated sense of self. Initially it might appear that *mafiosi* would fall more into the antisocial than the narcissist camp, given the abundance of violence and destruction linked to them. The two disorders are quite similar, sharing many overlapping characteristics, although persons with antisocial personality disorder are at the more destructive, dangerous end of this spectrum. Upon close examination, however, it appears that narcissism may be the more fitting diagnosis for most *mafiosi*, given narcissists' capacity for connectedness and emphasis on the well-known protocol of the underworld. Schimmenti et al. (2014) empirically demonstrate that *mafiosi* in prison exhibited greater emotional connectedness to others than non-Mafia inmates despite their significant prevalence of antisocial tendencies, thus lending recent scientific support for the narcissism rather than the antisocial categorization.

How does the pervasiveness of destructive narcissism relate to Mafia spectator appeal? Even some law-abiding citizens have fantasies of domination and power over others. Common watercooler talk following broadcast of episodes of the hit HBO series *The Sopranos* readily opened this window of appeal. Frosch (2009) and Gabbard (2002) explored the allure of viewing such willful, yet controlled destructiveness. Italian American Mafia film and TV viewers are able to indulge in the fantasy of controlled dominance. They are able to put themselves in the place of omnipotent Mafia figures—to protect and avenge their honor and impose their will with minimal resistance; to command servility even from law enforcement and politicians; to hedonistically indulge in essentially all that one desires (e.g., food, material things, sex). The fact that most people would not engage in hostile, destructive actions like these does not mean that they do not want to. In fact, such feelings are universal, though most people proactively modulate these dark and private inner experiences. However, with film and television, the viewer is able to identify with such brute force by identifying with the characters. The spectator never needs to passively accept perceived injustices, nor fear victimization, despite the fact that these figures they admire are in fact more vulnerable to violence than law-abiding citizens are. Now it is the spectator who is the aggrandized person regularly imposing his or her personal will and no longer subjected to derision or secondary stature.

We see many examples of this displaced revenge in Mafia films and TV shows. In *Godfather II*, a young Vito Corleone returns to his homeland of Sicily to avenge his father's murder by killing the aging Mafia don who took his father's life many years earlier. *Goodfellas*'s main female character, Karen Hill, is assaulted by a next-door neighbor attempting sexual advances. Several scenes later her beau, Henry Hill, viciously

assaults the neighbor, humiliating him in the presence of peers who are paralyzed with fear, while Karen looks on excitedly, the voice-over indicating that it “turned her on.” A *Sopranos* episode in which Dr. Jennifer Melfi is brutally raped (“Employee of the Month”) brilliantly captures the desire for power and vengeance vis-à-vis the experience of the powerless. Subsequent to the assault we view the perceived inability of Dr. Melfi’s ex-husband Richard LaPenna to avenge his ex-wife, alongside her symbolic dream of Tony Soprano’s ability to inflict severe punishment on the rapist. Here we witness the juxtaposition of upstanding citizens and the Mafia—the symbolic impotence of living within the confines of the law vis-à-vis the perceived power of the *mafiosi* to make the offender the fearful and suffering one.

Although examples are plentiful in *The Sopranos*, one in particular possibly has a unique appeal to the everyday spectator. In “Boca” (1999), Tony Soprano and his Mafia associates discover not only that their beloved girls’ high school soccer coach Don Hauser is planning on leaving the school but also that he was sexually involved with one of their daughters’ teammates. The guys actively consider sanctioning a hit on the coach, though eventually Tony calls a halt to the plan. Ironically, here we have the criminals considering partaking in vigilantism putatively for the “greater good” of society by contemplating “eliminating” the child predator. An interesting twist is that the viewer is left unsure of whether they would have considered such actions had the winning coach not decided to leave their team, a slight to the overly invested *mafiosi*.

In each of the aforementioned examples, the viewer experiences a character contemplating or exacting revenge—ostensibly stemming from a slight or injury—that results in an affliction of pain and suffering or even death. The viewer is invited to identify with the omnipotent one, the fearless, dominant character with the power to destroy.

### Rules, Order, Boundaries, and Structure

Although a salient theme of the Mafia is the systematic breach of societal laws, this breach has a different aspect than in the cases of other brutally destructive characters and gang subsets because of the Mafia’s emphasis on boundaries, order, and perceived predictability. Psychologically, a lack of structure and order is exceedingly daunting and begets dread and fear, providing fertile ground for severe psychiatric disturbance. The young child who protests against parentally imposed limits unconsciously feels comforted and protected by such restrictions. When a severely emotionally compromised patient in a psychiatric clinic begins to psychologically

decompensate, the first line of intervention (even prior to psychotherapeutic or psychopharmacological treatments) is assisting the patient to a “quiet room,” one with minimal stimulation and maximal structure.

The delineated boundaries and order of the Italian American Mafia have significant viewer appeal. Historically, the popular perception has been that the Mafia does not target innocent civilians. The world of the Mafia is bound by rules and laws from which “upstanding” *mafiosi* and associates do not stray. In other words, there is a Mafia morality code. According to some mediated depictions, breaking the law and committing violent acts are actions perpetrated solely against others in the criminal world. Murders have to be properly vetted and sanctioned, and attacks on personal family and associates are discouraged.

Why do these parameters exert a powerful allure among law-abiding citizens? Knowledge of these rules allows one to indulge in a fantasy of omnipotence and aggressiveness, and yet perceived parameters facilitate the belief in safety and predictability. Whereas random acts of violence perpetrated by those not affiliated with any criminal group or organization ostensibly lack such guidelines (and therefore imply greater threat and increased vulnerability), allowing oneself to psychologically step into the world of the Mafia entails a sense of dominance concurrent with the illusion of security.

In *The Sopranos*, for example, when Dr. Melfi queries Tony Soprano about possible guilt over his lifestyle, he defensively asserts that he and his associates are soldiers and merely following a code of ethics. Tony and others regularly commiserate about “old school” Mafia values and wax nostalgic for the “better days” of when people followed rules. Problematic mobsters (those who do not follow the rules) cause disorder and are subsequently deemed “bad guys,” even among fellow *mafiosi*, often failing to garner viewers’ support. *Goodfellas* Tommy DeVito, the volatile sociopath, regularly evoked fear even among his criminal cohort in part due to his maverick approach to the underworld. Richie Aprile of *The Sopranos* also failed to gain viewer support partly because of his unwillingness to follow gangster protocol. These characters illustrate the power of structure and order in the Mafia spectator appeal.

### Family and Nonfamily Connectedness

The rules and orders of Italian American organized crime bring us to a different set of psychologically appealing concepts: family, community, and connectedness. Much has been written about the centrality of the family to Italian and Italian Americans (Giordano, McGoldrick, and Guarino Klages

2005; McAuliffe and Associates 2008; Tasso, Kaspereen-Guidici Pietro, and Tursi 2013), and Mafia life, too, centers on social connectedness. Family is prioritized, albeit sometimes with less than traditional (and more sinister) values. Holidays, meetings, and dining among TV and film *mafiosi* are communal, elaborate, and worthy of considerable time and devotion. Non-Italian American organized criminals make little reference to the sacrosanctity of the family, suggesting that this is not a primary value. Though including more than typical marital and familial arrangements (see below), the explicit inclusion of family structure is very appealing to audiences. How does the focus on the family affect the Mafia's appeal? The viewer gets to step into a fantasy of vengeance and omnipotence but with the comfort of rules and orderliness and within the perceived structure of a solid nuclear family.

It can be argued that a key component of the appeal of *The Godfather* series is the intrafamilial dynamics. Family life is capable of humanizing even the sociopathic. In Scorsese's 1970s Las Vegas film *Casino*, the most renegade and vicious of mob associates, Nicky Santoro, who transgressed the laws of both society and the underworld, is "anchored" to humanity based on his purported loving attachment to his young son. (We achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of familial connectedness when that connectedness is absent. In *The Sopranos*, Corrado "Junior" Soprano is portrayed as a protracted adolescent despite being a mob boss figurehead in large part due to his family-less status, as is Paulie Gualtieri.)

## Gender and Gender Roles

At first glance conceptualizing gender roles within the Italian American Mafia seems rather simple: Men are dominant and autocratic; women are passive and acquiescent. In film and television, *mafiosi* ostensibly adhere to very narrowly confined ideals of what it means to be a man (e.g., unemotional, brave, homophobic, hyperaggressive, and derisive of "feminine" feelings), while wives of *mafiosi* appear reflexively servile, lacking fortitude, unquestioning of patriarchy, and missing a personal identity other than overseeing progeny and preparing meals for their spouses. The ferocity with which TV and film Mafia men go about their daily lives intimates that such dominance would easily transfer to home life and with their wives. There is evidence of such, with extramarital affairs the status quo along with wives' tacit acceptance. These relationships, however, are riddled with conflict and duality.

It is no coincidence that the examination of Italian American Mafia gender roles has been a clear topic of literary attention (Cavallero 2011;



DeStefano 2006; Gabbard 2002; Gardaphé 2006; Lavery 2006). In mediated depictions, Italian American Mafia men greet one another with the physical affection of hugs and kisses on the cheek. Mafia men prefer to socialize with other men, actively engage in homosocial bonding, feel more intimate in the presence of other men, and connect with men more than their wives, children, mistresses, and prostitutes.

Parker (2008) discusses how Mafia-related male bonding centers around eating. Food, a common starting point for social connectedness for people of all cultural and religious backgrounds, holds a famously central place within Italian and Italian American culture. The combination of male connectedness and community among *mafiosi* represents a striking dichotomy—hypermasculinity and homophobia coupled with a homosocial environment far exceeding male-to-male interactions seen in other criminal and noncriminal groups. As Parker (2008) aptly notes, mealtimes are when men are the source and target of intimacy—complimentary of food, discussing business—all with open displays of physical closeness and vulnerability. For those with more power, such as Peter Clemenza in *The Godfather*, or *capos* on *The Sopranos*, cooking for others is not a demeaning, menial task but rather an exalted honor. Such male bonding, commonplace in Mafia movies and television, transcends the homophobic and stunted emotionality of nearly all other depictions of Mafia life and all other criminal subsets.

Women's roles in the Italian American Mafia on screen are also noteworthy and demonstrate a unique presence in the nuclear family and criminal business at large. Women of the Mafia come complete with their own sense of power and agency, armed with the potential to subvert the entire Mafia enterprise in a way even gun-toting mobsters are unable to accomplish. Near the end of *Goodfellas*, when Karen and Henry meet with federal agents to discuss the possibility of entering the witness protection program, the law enforcement agent expresses disbelief at Karen's profession of ignorance about her husband's criminal activities, saying, "Don't give me the babe of the woods routine."

*The Sopranos* gives viewers numerous examples of powerful and destructive women within the lives of *mafiosi*. McCabe and Akass (2006) address the complex, multilayered aspects of Carmela Soprano, illustrating how she exhibits a sly power, intimidating a Georgetown University associate to support her daughter's application or leaning on her son's school principal to force teachers to give the boy preferential treatment. Carmela has even been able to overpower her husband, Tony, when she strong-armed him into bankrolling her several-hundred-thousand-dollar housing project by making their marital reconciliation contingent upon the

financing. Janice Soprano is an even more pronounced example of female conniving and destructiveness (see Palmer-Mehta 2006). We witness Janice regularly usurping her brother Tony despite his most stringent attempts to contain her. She also successfully manipulates romantic partners (e.g., Ralph, Richie, Bobby) and was the puppet master in her fiancé Richie Aprile's attempt to gain power by killing Tony.

However significant Janice and Carmela are in *The Sopranos*, they are far from the most powerful or destructive of the Soprano women. In fact, a premise of the entire series is the omnipresent influence of Tony's mother, Livia Soprano, who exudes a more potent presence than any *mafiosi*. Livia is a primary reason Tony, the feared mob boss, is in treatment for panic attacks. In this relationship, which is revisited throughout the series, we see that even posthumously Livia infiltrates Tony's psyche. In life, she repeatedly torments her daughter-in-law, Carmela, and was the Svengali behind her brother-in-law Junior's botched attempt to kill Tony. In several brilliant psychotherapy scenes, Dr. Melfi accurately identifies ways in which even Tony's father, another rough gangster, cowered from Livia's wrath.

Male-female relationships within the Mafia also illustrate how men leave themselves vulnerable in ways atypical to their business-as-usual approach. In *Casino*, such depictions translate to non-Italian American gangsters: Sammy "Ace" Rothstein, the levelheaded gangster associate overseeing a Mafia-controlled Las Vegas casino, "takes a gamble" and marries working girl Ginger, who becomes central to the demise of the Mafia's control of the casino business. Johnny "Sack" Sacrimoni, the highly controlled cerebral underboss of the New York family in *The Sopranos*, experiences an out-of-character, affect-laden, professionally counterproductive moment when he assaults a mob associate following awareness that other *mafiosi* were mocking his wife's obesity—an attack that almost results in his murder. In a more subtle moment highlighting the difficulty of straying from stereotypical gender roles, Johnny Sack cries at his daughter's wedding as he is being taken back to prison, at which point his gangster associates decide that his emotional expressiveness is a sign of weakness, a determination that subsequently costs Johnny his credibility.

What is the connection between the mother-son relationship and later male aggressiveness that potentially undergirds Mafia spectator appeal? Stuart Twemlow (2000) writes about the early developmental antecedents of aggressive propensities, homing in on the early mother-son relationship. Specifically, Twemlow asserts that hostile tendencies emerge via (a) unconscious rage due to the need to jettison merger fantasies with one's mother, (b) anxieties about being able to forgo such connectedness due to the aggrandized image of the mother, and (c) the fantasy of revenge, symbolically



targeting authority representations due to the mother's perceived power and the feeling that one is abandoned by the mother. Key to Twemlow's theorizing is the impact of mother-son symbiosis on later male aggression. Fred Gardaphé (2006) applies Christina Wieland's (2000) theory to Italian American *mafiosi*, further suggesting that the symbolic power of the mother over the son and his perceived heightened relationship with the mother begets hostility. More recently (Tasso, Kaspereen-Guidici Pietro, and Tursi 2013), Twemlow's mother-son aggressivity theory was applied to Italian American domestically violent relationships. Specifically, we lean on Twemlow's work to conceptualize Italian American male aggressiveness by suggesting that the Italian American mother-son closeness is a possible backdrop for later male-initiated intimate partner violence.

When we examine this aspect of the mother-son relationship in representations in film and television, a number of interesting examples emerge. The mother figure in the entire *Godfather* series is worth noting. Whereas it has been argued that this character is subject to diminution given her minimal stature, accentuated by the fact that she lacks even an official name (see Messenger 2002), it can be argued that she is an angelic woman of few words, clearly revered by her entire extended family, and, though mostly voiceless, a prominent presence. This perhaps is not more evident than in *Godfather II*. When Michael Corleone is becoming increasingly aware that his grip on his family is slipping, he consults his mother. During this emotional scene, dimly lit and with an economical use of words (spoken in Italian), this nameless figure is his *consigliere*, the wise and powerful figure, not other male *mafiosi* colleagues.

*Goodfellas* offers a multilayered mother-son relationship that is ripe for analysis. In a lighthearted though psychologically rich scene, Tommy DeVito and friends stop by his mother's home (she is played by Catherine Scorsese, the real-life mother of director Martin Scorsese). As they engage in a hefty, impromptu late-night meal prepared by his mother, she begins to probe her adult son about his single status. When she asks, "Why don't you get yourself a nice girl and settle down?" Tommy responds by stating, "I get a nice one almost every night, and in the morning I'm free again—I have you" (kissing his mother on the cheek). This comical part of the film is psychologically revealing and parallels the aforementioned viewpoints (Gardaphé 2006; Tasso, Kaspereen-Guidici Pietro, and Tursi 2013; Twemlow 2000; Wieland 2000) on the developmental factors of aggressive penchants. In this scene, we see the prominence of the mother—the erotized mother-son relationship openly precluding the adult son from seeking longer-term romantic partners. Here we witness this most dangerous of cinematic Mafia characters articulating the experience of divided loyalty—to choose

a romantic partner with whom to have both an emotional and sexual relationship or to bifurcate a relationship with one's mother and pursue meaningless sexual encounters with random women.

How do these complex gender roles and relationships influence spectator appeal? The women of the mediated Mafia represent a "break" from overt criminality and thus provide a gender-specific unconscious identification with the complex, nonlinear aspects of relationships and gender roles. Women can be powerful, while men can jettison the aggressiveness, at least temporarily. This allows for a loosening of the straight-jacket nature of stringent gender roles.

## Conclusion

This article explored Mafia spectatorship from a psychological perspective and specifically homed in on several distinct but interrelated concepts accounting for a large faction of society's affinity with the Mafia. One example explored was the roles narcissism and omnipotent fantasies play—how via the psychologically and societally safe vehicle of television or film viewers can identify with destructive, narcissistically centered activities while remaining in the personally and legally safe confines of their viewing spaces. This article also endeavored to illuminate how the voyeuristic engagement with individuals prone to sociopathic actions facilitates the psychological bifurcation of desire for societal standards while tapping into one's intense aggressive, dark, hostile urges. Furthermore, the Mafia's mandate on rules, order, and structure with an overarching theme of the sacrosanct family in concert with complex gender roles and relationships also contribute to the appeal—the perceived sense of belonging and family parenthetical with gross disregard for societal boundaries further stimulates intrapsychic conflict, touching on yet another component of the fascination with Mafia ethos and the allure of Italian American–related organized crime.

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