

## Hyphenated Identity of Irish-Americans in Gangster Film Genre

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### Abstract

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The 1990s marks the emergence of a phenomenon in which third generation white ethnic Americans began to reclaim their roots. That was also the decade when the revival of the Irish-American gangster in Hollywood started. This article analyses the ethnic portrayal of Irish-Americans in the gangster film genre from the period of 1990-2010. The films illustrate the process of the shaping of the Irish-American identity by both the American influences and the ethnic environment. Protagonists' actions are driven by tribal codes of behaviour, loyalty and revenge, all presented with the traditional Hibernian heritage and Catholic faith. The Irish-American characters who hope to define their own identity and assimilate into the American mainstream, soon find out that they cannot escape their ethnic background. Their identity crisis is rooted in inner conflict resulting from the betrayal of Irish heritage in the quest for social acceptance in the American society.

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**Key words:** Irish Americans, gangster film genre, identity, heritage, ethnicity

### 1. Introduction

"American urban ethnic history begins with Irish Catholic immigrants. [...] A steady stream became a flood during the years of the Great Famine, 1845-49, when more than a million refugees from hunger, disease, and despair found their way to America. Irish emigration became institutionalized in the dreadful 1840s" (McCaffrey, 1992, p.1). Americans quickly developed ethnic stereotypes associated with each of the immigrant groups that came to live in the USA. Ethnic representations of Irish Americans in early American cinema were based on firmly established stereotypes in which the Irish were shown as 'Paddy,' or 'Mick' and described as "small, fiery-tempered, heavy drinking working-class men" (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004, p.59). Those stereotypes were largely based on images that developed in popular culture, especially films, which play a vital role in answering questions about the state of modern racial acculturation. As argued by Cortés (1984, p.64):

"Many viewers learn about ethnic groups and foreign cultures from these so-called entertainment media. This learning helps to create, reinforce, weaken, or eradicate their knowledge about, perceptions of, misinformation concerning, attitudes toward, and understanding and misunderstanding of different nations. In this manner, the functional media have served as a sort of public textbook on ethnicity and foreignness."

Gangster characters in the American cinema have always been ascribed an element of ethnic identity, e.g. Italian, Jewish, Irish. In essence, this means that the gangster is an immigrant, and at the same time occupies the 'other' position to the American WASP mainstream (Larke-Walsh, 2010). Gangster films highlight the fact that membership of an ethnic criminal group was the only road to success for many immigrants. The film protagonists are poor immigrants who struggle to work their way up; indeed, they can achieve social advancement only by belonging to a criminal organization: an advancement which is achieved in typical gangster fashion by the elimination of rivals.

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This is tantamount to the pursuit of the American Dream through crime and violence. The main themes of those films are killings for power and revenge. "Hollywood gangsters served as the personification of immigrants in the search for the American Dream" (Aste, 2001, p.125).

The turn of the XXth and XXIst century marks the re-emergence of the Irish American gangster in Hollywood films. The protagonists of those films emphasize their ethnic heritage, which is as colourful as the Italians' from *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). Hollywood discovered ethnic tensions in which Irish American gangs are opposed by gangs of other ethnic groups such as the Italians. The gangsters have long been a part of the Irish collective ethnic identity, along with the priest, the police officer and the politician. This collective Irish Catholic identity serves as a viable alternative to the WASP hegemony.

"After the 1965 Immigration and Naturalisation Act which disestablished official preference for European immigration into the USA, ethnicity, immigration and assimilation underwent crucial shifts in meaning, with the emergence of a phenomenon in which third-generation white ethnic Americans began to reclaim their roots, self-transforming into a category some sociologists have termed 'the New Ethnics'. This phenomenon produced individuals who were far more likely than their second-generation parents to observe rituals of ethnic food, language, and dress or to purchase tourist homeland vacations – behaviours rooted in the belief that to rediscover one's ethnic past was to break free from the contemporary crises of identity which accompanied the decline of triumphal Americanism in the 1960s and 1970s" (Negra, 2001, p.230).

The aim of this paper is to examine the evolution of the Irish-American identity as depicted in the American gangster genre. The analysis refers to a small selection of Irish-themed crime films from the period 1990-2010: *State of Grace* (Phil Joanou, 1990); *Monument Ave* (Ted Demme, 1998); *The Boondock Saints* (Troy Duffy, 1999); *Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood, 2003); *A History of Violence* (David Cronenberg, 2005) and *The Departed* (Martin Scorsese, 2006). The cinematic portrayal depicts the change of ethnic patterns, assimilation to mainstream America versus life in the ghetto where people are more likely to preserve their Irish heritage but also accept crime as a part and parcel of their everyday life. The films illustrate the process of the shaping of the Irish-American identity by both the American influences and the ethnic environment. The analysis shows that the gang problem is an ethnic problem in the American urban setting. The protagonists' actions are driven by tribal codes of honour, loyalty, and revenge, all presented with the traditional Hibernian heritage and Catholicism in the background of events. The approaching gentrification makes the gangster film one of the last expressions of Irish identity before it melts into the American mainstream.

## **2. The 'ghettoization' patterns in *Monument Ave*, *Boondock Saints* and *Mystic River***

These crime films portray the Irish ethnic ghettos: Hell's Kitchen of New York City (*The Gangs of New York*), Charlestown in the Boston area (*Monument Ave*) and Southie in Boston (*Boondock Saints*, *Mystic River*). *Monument Ave* depicts Charlestown threatened by gang violence and by the dual forces of immigration and gentrification. The Bunker Hill Monument serves as the setting of the film. Monument Avenue of the film's title runs up the hill to the monument's base. The street divides the old Boston neighbourhood of Charlestown, where the Irish working class settled, from the surrounding gentrified area. The Charlestown neighbourhood is defined not only by its narrow streets with brick townhouses and bars, but also by another characteristic – the 'code of silence' about unsolved murders. Although the inhabitants of the area witness acts of crime, they never testify. Their behaviour results from both fear of and loyalty to the mob. Thus, a family whose son is killed suffers not only bereavement at the tragic loss of life, but also because of lack of justice (Saltzman, 2006).

The film contrasts the lifestyles of those Irish who changed their ethnic patterns and assimilated into mainstream America with those who stayed in the ghetto. The latter behave in accordance with the years of anti-Irish discrimination when the ethnic ghetto was the only place to find work and acceptance. At the same time the rest of the Irish-Americans assimilated into the mainstream and moved out to the suburbs. Those who stayed in the ghetto are more likely to have some connections to organized crime and the Irish mob. The local Irish mob boss is Jackie O'Hara (Colm Meaney) who, apart from his criminal activities, is also a Robin Hood-like figure who doles out money and favours to the poor community.

He orders the killing of Bobby O'Grady's (Denis Leary) cousin – Ted (Billy Crudup). O'Hara knows that no one will break the Irish 'code of silence' which allows most murders in Charlestown to go unsolved. At the end of the film O'Grady murders Jackie O'Hara to exact revenge for the death of his cousin. He shoots O'Hara and his bodyguards in the boiler room of the Ancient Order of the Hibernians hall. In this scene the room is decorated with green streamers and a *ceili* band performs for the dancers. It is the same room, incidentally, where the wake of another executed mob member was held (Hynes, 2007). Forming a circle of criminals tied to one another by kinship or friendship, the ghetto inhabitants are limited by codes of behaviour excluding the possibility of change (Levy, 1999).

The Irish ghetto of Southie is depicted in *Boondock Saints*. The main characters of the film are two Irish Catholic brothers: Connor (Sean Patrick Flanery) and Murphy MacManus (Norman Reedus). They serve as protectors of the Irish-American community in Boston. The MacManus brothers are devout Catholics and regularly attend Sunday Mass. One Sunday they hear a sermon about the importance of fighting evil in society, which inspires them to defend the local bar from Russian gangsters. The incident happens on St. Patrick's Day. The next day they are forced to kill the Russians in self-defence, which elevates them to the status of local heroes. The film climax occurs when the father McManus and his two sons take over the trial of a Mafioso. The Brothers look to their father for guidance which restores his patriarchal power. The film shows their father authorising the act of vengeance by God. The father explains the meaning of the execution in biblical prose: "Never shall innocent blood be shed, yet the blood of the wicked shall flow like a river. The three shall spread their blackened wings and be the vengeful striking hammer of God." Then they decide to embark upon a mission to kill all the evil men in their town, especially the Russian and Italian criminals. The brothers behave like religious fanatics, claiming that God is on their side when they kill criminals (DiPaolo, 2009).

The film depicts the 'ghettoization' of revenge and vigilantism. The Irish-American community constitutes a marginalized society with no legal protection against crime. Revenge is shown as an ethnic tendency and the only 'justice' available within the corrupt judicial system. The local inhabitants of the Irish ghetto are shown to have a strict code of behaviour: they never involve the police, look after their own and even if they are criminals they still go to church (McEntee, 2009).

Another film depicting the Southie ghetto in Boston is *Mystic River*. People who grow up in the neighbourhood choose different paths. Some of them leave the area and get a job outside; others stay and become gangsters or at least have contacts with organized crime. Children who grow up in an Irish ghetto neighbourhood soon learn that crime is an accepted part of life, and when a crime is committed a complex set of loyalties must be adhered to. The main characters of the film are childhood friends: Sean Devine (Kevin Bacon), Jimmy Marcus (Sean Penn), and Dave Boyle (Tim Robbins). We see them at a pivotal stage of life: Sean becomes a homicide detective, Jimmy is a respected businessman and an ex-gangster, and Dave has marital problems. The film deals with such themes as the effects of childhood sexual abuse, along with the murder of a nineteen-year-old girl and the quest for justice of her family. The inhabitants of the Irish ghetto believe that the police are useless and it is their responsibility to distribute justice on their own. Jimmy believes it is his duty to protect his extended clan and pledges to avenge his murdered daughter: "I'm gonna find him, Katie; I'm gonna find him before the police do, and I'm gonna kill him." With those words Jimmy initiates a chain of events which trigger the mechanism of violence (Redmon, 2004). On the banks of the Mystic River, Jimmy says to Dave: "We bury our sins; here, we wash them clean." Then Jimmy stabs Dave with a knife. The film depicts the Irish-Americans from the ethnic ghetto as a community with its own system of justice, but in the world of *Mystic River*, "justice asserts itself as an anarchic, ancient act akin to the lynchings" (Vaux, 2012, p.94).

The religious symbols of *Mystic River* add texture to the depiction of the film's setting – the Catholic district of Boston. The river from the title of the film "functions within Christian tradition as symbol of grace – of hope for cleansing and redemption" (Simon, 2007, p.173). At the end of the film the viewer sees that the titular river is in fact a river of blood. The rituals of the Catholic Church are presented in a confirmation service, full of inspiring music, which symbolizes a child's welcome into the Catholic family.

However, that Church does not offer any consolation for Jimmy after his daughter's death. There is a discrepancy between the official doctrine of the Catholic Church and actions of individuals belonging to that Church (Vaux, 2012).

*Mystic River* shows the most significant of Catholic symbols – the cross – in the most dramatic scenes of the film. The first cross we see in the film is on the signet ring worn by a sexual abductor who also wears a police badge. The victim is deceived by treacherous symbols which are supposed to represent the law and religious authority. The second cross is presented in the form of a tattoo on Jimmy's back. We see the entire cross when Jimmy learns that in his passing his fatal verdict of the innocent Dave, while trying to avenge the death of his daughter, he had killed the wrong person. The moment of Dave's death is marked by a blinding light and rhapsodic organ music. Then there is a parade with American flags as the neighbourhood celebrates the nation's birthday. The religious symbolism and sentimental patriotism are illusionary in the context of Dave's murder. The film shows that in urban America vigilante justice, deeply rooted in clan loyalties, exists alongside official legal institutions (Simon, 2007).

These films portraying the Irish ghetto in Boston show that the mobs serve as a substitute for other institutions which are superficially intended to protect the safety of people in the community. Although this practice sometimes leads to wrongful acts of punishment, the ghetto inhabitants refuse to trust external representatives of law enforcement: an attitude which may be interpreted as reluctance to acculturate to the American culture and its system of justice. In the world of American ethnic ghettos there is no threat of urban renaissance and the possible gentrification is purely illusory. The films show that the true image of America can be perceived only through depictions of community life (Vaux, 2012).

### 3. Identity Crises in a *History of Violence*

*A History of Violence* discusses complex loyalties concerning the blood family and the ethnic gang membership. The film features Joey Cusack (Viggo Mortensen), an Irish-American gangster from Philadelphia, who wants to escape his past, especially his history of violence in the Irish mob. He changes his name into Tom Stall, gets married and becomes a restaurant owner in a small town, Millbrook, in Indiana. Tom is not only a good husband and father, but also a churchgoing member of the community. His ordinary life finishes when he is forced to kill two robbers as an act of self-defence, which makes him a local hero. The news is broadcast on TV and the world hears of him. The media coverage attracts the attention of the gangsters from Philadelphia. They visit Tom claiming to know his real identity and demand his return to the mob. They keep harassing the Stall family and eventually, it becomes clear that Tom Stall and Joey Cusack are one and the same. When Tom's true identity is revealed, his relationship with the children becomes strained and future of his marriage uncertain. Tom knows that only the death of his brother, who is the mob boss, can protect his family and life in Millbrook. Finally, Tom kills the gangsters and his son, Jack, kills their boss in defence of his father. At the end of the film Tom walks into his house and finds his wife and children at the table eating dinner. After a few agonizing moments his daughter sets a plate for her father which indicates that the family accept his past. There is hope for new life, redemption and reconciliation.

"Tom, the family man, becomes violent to protect his family, and Joey Cusack, the violent man, becomes a father and family man. The two men are perfectly integrated, and the rules which governed the previous 'world' of the text are no longer sufficient. The old rules must be destroyed and replaced because following the old rules there is no place for a man who is both father and murderer" (Cooper, 2010, p.5).

In a crisis situation when Tom's double identity is revealed he sacrifices his ethnic loyalty to the mob and chooses his middle-class American life with his chosen family. He believes that the main duty of the paternal figure is to protect the family, not the business of the gang.

In *A History of Violence* a religious motif accompanies Joey Cusack's transformation into Tom Stall. When his wife Edie asks him about his past, Tom claims that Joey is dead; and was killed in the desert.

"The desert motif is common for all three of the major monotheistic religions: Moses led his people through the desert for forty years, Jesus went out into the desert and was tempted by the devil, and Mohammed endured the desert when he left Mecca for Medina. The desert is a place of ritual purification, a place where Tom could cleanse himself of his violent alter-ego, Joey" (Cooper, 2010, p.6).

Catholic symbols in *A History of Violence* are also connected with violent motifs in the film. In one of the scenes Tom Stall sees the mobsters outside of his diner and takes a shotgun in order to defend his family. The mobsters are, in fact, going to another place and Tom feels intense relief. In this scene the viewer sees a small silver cross hanging from his neck. In another scene Tom kills his brother, who is the mob boss in Philadelphia. Then, Tom goes to the lake behind his brother's house, removes his shirt and throws the gun to the lake. The viewer's attention is drawn to the silver cross around his neck. Those scenes emphasise the paradoxical nature of American Christianity with regards to violence (Cooper, 2010). The Irish-American Catholicism emphasised in violent film scenes symbolises identity crisis of the protagonist who has to make dramatic choices involving ethnic loyalty.

#### **4. Duplicitous identities in *State of Grace* and *The Departed***

*The Departed* and *State of Grace* show characters who hope to escape their ethnic background and assimilate into the American mainstream but whose life paths put them again into familiar ethnic ghetto where their friends still live according to old life patterns. Both films show that the ethnic background is vital in shaping the characters' identity.

*State of Grace* focuses on contemporary settings and non-Italian ethnicities in the gangster film genre. The film returns to historical subjects and Mafia mythologies (Larke-Wash, 2010). *State of Grace* does not mention the name of the gang but resembles the actual history of the Westies gang (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011). Historically the Irish started their activities in organized crime in the U.S. long before the Italians and the Westies developed a working relationship with Italian crime families in New York. The Westies dominated the underworld in New York City's Hell's Kitchen for three decades (Benshoff and Griffin, 2004). In a reflection of real life, the Irish mobsters from the film cooperate with the Italian mobsters.

The Irish gangster Jackie Flannery (Gary Oldman), a member of the gang, is determined to hold on to the old way of life. He cannot forgive his sister, Kathleen (Robin Wright) for moving uptown to escape her roots in the ghetto. Jackie's childhood friend Terry Noonan (Sean Penn) returns to Hell's Kitchen after a ten year absence. He renews his romance with Kathleen, and the relationship between the central characters is about love, honour and betrayal as Noonan is in fact an undercover officer assigned to infiltrate the local Irish mob run by Jackie's brother, Frankie Flannery (Ed Harris). Terry is supposed to help the police break up the gang. Soon Terry's assignment grows increasingly difficult as he becomes torn between loyalties to his criminal friends and his employers. One night in a bar, Jackie is attacked by three members of a rival Italian gang and kills them in self-defence. There is tension between Frankie and mobsters from Little Italy, who instruct Frankie to kill his brother. Frankie cares neither about his gang members nor his own family. He values only his own success within the gang hierarchy. It is his way of achieving the American Dream. He sacrifices his family to protect the interests of the gang and at a secret meeting he fatally shoots Jackie. At the same time Terry, who was supposed to back up Jackie, actually fails to help him and consequently decides to resign from his undercover operation.

The plot includes the interplay between the Irish mob and the Italian mafia. Both gangs are facing the sudden gentrification of their neighbourhood by yuppies constructing new housing estates and opening their restaurants. "The off-white ethnic neighbourhood is being dismantled by investments in white culture" (Mizejewski, 2008, p.28). The Irish-Americans living in the ethnic ghetto represent a marginalised off-white group. People living in the suburbs represent the white group. Frankie Flannery believes his neighbourhood is already lost to the yuppies and moves to the suburban New Jersey.

Terry Noonan, who conducts his undercover operation aiming to break the gang and making the district safe, also in a way facilitates the gentrification of the ghetto: the end of the gang means the end of the old order and traditions and gradual introduction of middle-class values with American institutions of law and order.

In the film, the Irish gang must cooperate with the Italian mobsters just to survive in the new economic order. Noonan is emotionally torn between loyalties to the law, the interests of the Yuppies and his childhood Irish-American friends. *State of Grace* is also about issues of loyalty and truth. It deals with anxiety and frustration at social changes resulting from the gentrification of the neighbourhood and the parallel rivalry with the Italian gangsters. Those pressures unravel the Irish self-identity (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011). Jackie Flannery expresses his anger that comes with the changes: "They don't even want to call it *Hell's Kitchen* no more, Renamed it Clinton."

On St Patrick's Day, at Jackie's funeral, Terry shows Frankie his police badge, inciting Frankie to order his gang members to kill Terry. While Kathleen is participating in the St Patrick's Day parade, Terry goes to the bar where he meets Frankie and his gang and, after a deadly shoot out, Terry kills them all. He himself is shot three times and the viewer is left unaware as to whether he lives or dies. Juxtaposed onto this haunting image, we see the traditional pipers and redheaded girls marching to St. Patrick's Cathedral. The climax of the story takes place on St. Patrick's Day, which symbolizes that the loyalty conflict of the main protagonist is rooted in his Irish heritage. His nostalgia for traditional ethnic heritage is also expressed by a necklace cross he wears. The cross emphasizes the hero's identification as Irish Catholic. Irish Catholic identification is also emphasized by the theological title of the film (Mizejewski, 2008). Terry Noonan is also a police officer and a former gang member. It is beyond his capabilities for him to be loyal to his Irish Catholic mob friends and fulfil his responsibilities as an American police officer.

*The Departed* is a remake of the 2002 Hong Kong thriller *Internal Affairs*. The previous films of Scorsese portrayed Italian gangsters but, as with *The Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese, 2002), he continues his ethnic shift and depicts Irish mobsters (Kolker, 2011). *The Departed* was released in 2006, at a time of national betrayal in connection with the war in Iraq. The plot of the film explores the layers of informants used by the police and the gangsters alike. It shows Boston Irish mobsters from Charlestown, the police officers and the FBI agents who infiltrate and are infiltrated by them. "The informer lies deep in Irish culture as well as Italian: both nationalities abhor the practice" (LoBrutto, 2008, p.384).

The film deals with lies and betrayal on the streets and inside police headquarters, the themes of trust, morality, religious faith, respect for authority and the extents of family and mob loyalties. There are good guys masquerading as bad guys and bad guys masquerading as good guys (Roman, 2009). *The Departed* is "a tale of false fathers and betraying sons" (Alleva, 2006, p.16). "*The Departed* is not only about betrayal of friendships but also about unfaithfulness to one's ethnic identity. [...] An ethnic subjectivity can no longer exist when the realization of the American Dream coincides exclusively with materialistic values" (Heyer-Caput, 2011, p.160).

The film shows the last of the urban Celtic clans ruled by godfather Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson). Scorsese's Costello is certainly the cinematic version of James "Whitney" Bulger, the Irish mob boss of Boston's Winter Hill Gang who, apart from dealing in drugs and conducting other criminal activities, used to run guns for the IRA to impress the inhabitants of the Irish ghetto. In fact, Bulger made a deal with the FBI, which allowed him a degree of freedom in exchange for information on criminal activity (Cashmore, 2009). His biography confirms the life of betrayal. In the film, Costello is also an FBI informant. The film character is named after the legendary Francesco Castiglia Costello – the leader of the Genovese crime family (LoBrutto, 2008). The use of the name Costello in the film is confusing as, for majority of viewers, it sounds Italian. However, the name Costello is also known in Ireland. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the English settlers began to establish colonies in Ireland following the Norman invasion. The English family – the Nangles – adopted the surname Costello (MacLysaghte, 1991). Moreover, for many viewers the film Costello is defined not by his Irish/Italian name but rather the Irish American neighbourhood and the Irish American characters living there (Cavellero, 2011). The film Costello is a hybrid persona based on the Irish gangster "Whitney" Bulger, Italian gangster Francesco Costello and the Chinese mobster Hon Sam from *Internal Affairs*. He links not only the Irish and the Italians but also the West and the East. The film is about the quest for identity (Heyer-Caput, 2011).

Costello serves as the personification of a typical Irish mobster: violent, generous, cruel and shrewd. The film tells the story of an undercover agent William "Billy" Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) infiltrating the inner circle of Boston's Irish mob and a corrupted cop Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) from the Massachusetts State Police who works for the gangsters. For Sullivan and Costigan, Costello is a paternalistic figure who represents the fathers they never had (Roman, 2009). Costello receives information about law enforcement from Sullivan who gets a position in the Special Investigations Unit. Meanwhile, Costigan works his way into Costello's organization. It becomes a dangerous game for them, with Costigan supplying information about Costello's plans to the police, and with Sullivan countering by leaking police intelligence reports to Costello. When both sides learn that the other has someone inside, both Costello and Costigan struggle to ascertain the identity of their counterpart (Anastasia and Macnow 2011).

Scorsese incorporates the latest communications technologies and explores the possibilities of the mobile phone to develop the narrative and accelerate action of pursuit and surveillance scenes e.g. when the characters are hunting each other in Boston Chinatown. Early in the film Sullivan swaps over the SIM ('subscriber identity module') in his cell phone to avoid detection as he speaks to Costello. Another scene depicts Sullivan and Costigan listening to their breathing on the cell phones, not speaking a single word for fear of revealing their identities. In the warehouse scene at the end of the film, Sullivan allows his ringtone to be heard and this draws Costello's attention. Then Sullivan kills Costello and collects his mobile to prevent his identification. The mobile makes it easier for Sullivan to shift among his various identities and mask his betrayal (Marling, 2008).

Although both Costigan and Sullivan succeed with their duplicitous identities, one in the police force and the other in Costello's gang, they are both shown to agonize over an inner conflict deriving from their heritage. They were raised as Irish-American Catholics and religion plays a vital role in establishing their cultural identity. "Even though they have moved outside the church's laws they have never freed themselves of a sense of guilt" (Ebert, 2008, p.257).

*The Departed* shows that one's environment always shapes one's identity. In the opening lines of the film, Costello in a voiceover narration expresses his quest for an identity: "I don't want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product of me. Years ago we had the church. That was only a way of saying – we had each other." His words are accompanied by the song "I'm Shipping Up to Boston," performed by the Celtic punk band the Dropkick Murphys. The soundtrack of the film also includes traditional Irish folk songs (Heyer-Caput, 2011).

The main characters of the film feel very confident about their potential for social advancement but the film shows that their childhood environment defines them. Whether you had an American or immigrant childhood, your background is destined to influence your later life. Once Sullivan joins Costello, his life is determined and he cannot change his environment. The social advancement of Sullivan is shown when he moves into a Beacon Hill condominium with a view of the Boston State House's golden dome. The real estate agent tells him: "If you move in, you're upper-class by Tuesday." In the final scene Sullivan is shot in the head by the SIU agent for his life of deception (Cashmore, 2009). Costigan wants to escape his environment by entering the state police academy. He believes that after graduating he can define his own identity. However, he is immediately framed as a relative of known criminals and becomes an undercover agent. Costello feels confident about his ability to rise above his surroundings. He says: "Church wants you in your place. Kneel, stand, kneel, stand. If you go for that sort of thing, I don't know what to do for you. A man makes his own way. No one gives it to you. You have to take it." Costello believes he can shape his identity as a gang boss but the pressure from the police and a mole within his own mob undermine his effectiveness as a leader. He dies wearing a T-shirt with IRISH written in capital letters on it

*The Departed* is about people trying to shape their individual identity while being a part of an ethnic community. (Cavellero, 2011). The main protagonists of the film betray their ethnic identity in their quest for social acceptance (in case of Costigan) or greater power (in case of Sullivan and Costello). The violence of the film protagonists is a way of expressing their guilt resulting from the betrayal of their ethnic identities through the achievement of the American Dream (Heyer-Caput, 2011).

## Conclusion

The Irish-American protagonists from the gangster film genre accept the mob rule and achieve social advancement by promotion within the gang structure. The mob serves as an instrument of justice but often it is the innocent who are punished. The guilty are rarely punished as ghetto inhabitants believe in the 'code of silence' which obliges them to mob loyalty. The ethnic conflicts cause mob wars in which the individuals die but the established structure survives. The lack of trust towards the American system of justice may be interpreted as the reluctance of the Irish to acculturate into the American mainstream.

The movies with contemporary settings depict the 'ghettoization' patterns of Irish-Americans who observe ethnic tribal codes of honour and clan loyalties allowing the survival of vigilante justice (*Monument Ave.*, *Boondock Saints* and *Mystic River*). The driving forces of the story in the analysed films are blood and revenge, which symbolise tribalism. The ghetto is threatened by both ethnic rivalry and the more subtle forces of gentrification. The mobsters ruling in the ghetto are afraid of American influences and fight not only to keep control of the area, but to preserve their ethnic customs. They realize that with the Americanization of the neighbourhood comes a sharp decline of their status. However, the approaching gentrification evokes nostalgia for the Irish heritage.

Catholicism is a vital theme of gangster films featuring Irish-American characters, and the Catholic Church plays an integral part in establishing Irish identity. The Catholic faith is usually emphasized in the climactic scenes, when the plot reaches its crossroads, one of the protagonists dies or has to make a dramatic choice, and also in funeral scenes which unite the divided characters of a common ethnic background. Those film events often take place on St. Patrick's Day (*Boondock Saints*, *State of Grace*). What is interesting is the fact that the Irish-American Catholicism is always connected with violence in the film (dramatic events, gang wars and killings), which symbolize the fight to protect the Irish heritage. It is similar to the situation in Ireland where Catholicism is not only a faith to worship but a patriotic force uniting people.

The gangster *genre* makes use of Biblical themes such as 'grace' (*State of Grace*), 'river' (*Mystic River*) and 'desert' (*A History of Violence*) to emphasise the character's transformation. These motifs function within Christian tradition as symbols of cleansing and ritual purification. There is a discrepancy between the official doctrine of the Catholic Church and actions of individuals belonging to that Church. The films show that respected churchgoing members of the community turn out to be murderers as well. Their duplicitous identity is rooted in inner conflict deriving from Irish heritage. Nostalgia for ethnic heritage is expressed by necklace crosses worn by the main characters (*Mystic River*, *State of Grace*). The cross is used as a symbol of identity crisis when the protagonist has to make a dramatic choice involving ethnic loyalty.

The films illustrate the historical process of shaping the Irish-American identity by both the American influences and their ethnic environment and community life. The contemporary films show that a gang career is no longer the only way of social advancement for the Irish-Americans as life outside ghetto offers opportunities to succeed. However, the characters who hope to define their own identity and assimilate into the American mainstream soon find out that they cannot escape their ethnic background (*A History of Violence*, *State of Grace*, *The Departed*). Their identity crisis symbolises guilt resulting from the betrayal of Irish heritage in the quest for social acceptance in the American society.

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