

Heroes or Hoodlums: A Comparative Analysis of an Italian and an American Gangster Film

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While the Rico character in Mervyn LeRoy's gangster drama *Little Caesar* (1931) is a reflection of the vilification of ethnic minorities in the United States in the early part of the century, Francesco Rosi's elusive protagonist in the Italian film *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962) is, conversely, glorified for his attainment of a mythical status as a result of his criminal endeavors. Though the production of *Little Caesar* preceded *Salvatore Giuliano* by more than 30 years, the two films may be compared on the basis of how each director handles and portrays a criminal protagonist, while considering elements such as historical and cultural context. Though many distinguishing contrasts can be drawn between the two films, both *Little Caesar* and *Salvatore Giuliano* contain elements indicative of the political, economic, and social atmosphere that prevailed at the time of their respective productions. Such cultural factors inevitably impact the sentiments of the filmmaker and audience alike, and the incongruities between the characters of *Salvatore Giuliano* and Rico Bandello can be viewed as a reflection of the eras out of which they were born. Through a comparative analysis of the two films, we can establish a general understanding of the factors that contributed to the discrepancy between the veneration of one mafioso and the vilification of another.

Though the distinction must be made between the interpreted real-life events chronicled in *Salvatore Giuliano* and the fictional character Rico Bandello in *Little Caesar*, the factual reality of *Salvatore Giuliano*—notorious Italian outlaw and patriot—should not hinder us from examining him in this circumstance as a film protagonist, and, hence, the result of some degree of creative interpretation. Similarly, though Rico Bandello has no exact historical counterpart, he cannot be dismissed as entirely fictional but, rather, may be viewed as the stereotypical average of several

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prominent real-life criminals, namely Al Capone and his contemporaries. Alternatively, one could argue that Rico is the effigy representing the feared and despised criminal minority of the 1930's and is, therefore, the product of very real human sentiments and passions.

LeRoy's *Little Caesar* and Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* can first be compared for their incorporation of a strong theme of nationalism. Though *Salvatore Giuliano* and Rico Bandello appear to be diametrically opposed as barometers of national identity— one as the poster child of Sicilian pride and the other as a smudge on the face of white America—closer inspection reveals both as the product of the widespread fear and apprehension associated with an emerging uncertainty of national identity. As Sicilians sought to assert their identity as a resolute and indomitable people, they exalted Giuliano as a symbol of their resistance in the face of external oppression and internal corruption. Similarly, Rico represents an apprehension toward change as Americans in the early part of the century were forced to revisit their definition of what it means to be “American.”

The great popularity of the legend of *Salvatore Giuliano*, despite his less than wholesome lifestyle, can perhaps be seen as a manifestation of the rebellious and incorrigible Italian spirit, cultivated by hundreds of years of external domination (Wittman 215). Giuliano's life seems to almost mirror the history of Sicily itself, which may be why he has left such an imprint in the hearts of Italians. Exile, duplicity, violence, corrupt politics, and tragedy are common themes in both the brief life of Giuliano and the long and turbulent history of Sicily. Angelo Restivo remarks on the empathy many feel for outlaws such as Giuliano, saying “the bandit at one and the same time speaks of a nostalgic ideal and the impossibility of its fulfillment; within the bandit we see not only the impossibility of our desire, but also the inevitability of history” (31).

Whereas the legend of Giuliano is inseparable from his identity as a Sicilian patriot, LeRoy uses subtler methods to establish the ethnic identity of Rico Bandello. Rico's minority status is conveyed to viewers as somewhat of an innuendo rather than an overt reference, consistent with the more taboo and racially sensitive atmosphere of pre-WWII America. With surnames like Bandello, Vittori, and Mas-sara, the characters' association with the influx of European immigrants is implied rather than explicitly stated. Norma Bouchard discusses this point in her essay entitled “Ethnicity and the Classical Gangster Film: Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* and Howard Hawkes' *Scarface*,” saying,

the film nevertheless draws upon a repertoire of markers of ‘Italian-ness’ to

fasten Italian ethnicity to urban criminality. At the very opening of the film, Rico, accompanied by his friend Joe Massara, commits a robbery. Unfazed by the murder of the gas station attendant that ensues, he enters a diner, where he consumes a meal of spaghetti and engages in a dialogue marked by loud, demonstrative behavior, a strong accent, and a poor command of the English language. Since these rapid sequences of events serve to vilify markers of Italian ethnicity, they establish an immediate connection between the world of criminality and the immigrant cultural background. (71)

With coarse grammar and an abrasive disposition, Rico hastily murders his way to the apex of the organized crime world. Short, homely, and crass, Rico is hardly a charming leading man or the ideal representative of Italian Americans. Bouchard also raises the suggestion that the unfavorable association between the uncouth protagonist and his namesake, Julius Caesar, is “belittling to the lofty Roman lineage” by “associating it with a conceited, pompous, and even megalomaniac gangster” (71-72).

Similar to LeRoy’s treatment of Rico’s immigrant status, Giuliano’s criminality is implied and understood rather than depicted explicitly. In fact, one of *Salvatore Giuliano*’s most remarkable stylistic hallmarks is the almost total absence of Giuliano from the film. Rosi opens with a bird’s eye view of Giuliano lying lifeless in a courtyard on July 5th, 1950 and flips back and forth between 1950 and 1943 in series of flashbacks that illustrate the events that culminated in Giuliano’s demise. He appears only very briefly in the film as a living person, which serves to convey to audiences the impression that every aspect of Giuliano’s brief life was shrouded in mystery. The chaotic life of Giuliano can only be aptly chronicled by Rosi’s avant-garde editing style, described by Laura Wittman in her essay “The Visible, Unexposed: Francesco Rosi’s *Salvatore Giuliano*” as “[a] jumbled chronology meant not only to provoke discomfort but also to induce skepticism towards any linear interpretation” (213).

It is important to note as well that rumors of Giuliano’s radical and extremist activities had been circulating continuously amongst Italians for several years at the time of Rosi’s undertaking of the film. Thus, Rosi could take advantage of the audience’s previous knowledge of the subject almost as its own cinematic device. Rosi offers audiences an alternative representation of a story already quite familiar to them, and does so with minimal moralizing or politicization. One may cite Rosi’s depiction of Giuliano’s violent and untimely death as his commentary about the distastefulness of a life of crime, but aside from this, Giuliano’s criminal deeds are

left to stand alone with neither justification nor absolution.

While the legend of *Salvatore Giuliano* was nothing new to Italians, many Americans were shocked at the criminal activities being portrayed in LeRoy's *Little Caesar* after its release in 1931 (Server 30). The early part of the century saw dramatic changes in nearly all aspects of life, and no one could deny that cinema was changing too. As millions of immigrants flooded American shores in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the depiction of ethnic minorities in cinema became an increasingly popular theme (Bouchard 68). Mervyn LeRoy's second major film, *Little Caesar* was one such product of this trend as it portrayed the delinquent activities that lead to the rise and fall of the lawbreaking protagonist. "The turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century marked the beginning of a communications revolution that was to have a major impact in defining social life in the United States during the twentieth century," says Laura Beshears. While the increasingly popular gangster film provided the masses with an opportunity to temporarily escape their hardships and fantasize about the glorious wealth and opulence of the gangster life, films such as *Little Caesar* were not without critics.

Though *Little Caesar* seems relatively family-friendly by today's standards, it contained subject matter that some 1931 viewers found disconcerting. Just a few years after the introduction of Prohibition and in the throes of the Great Depression, crime films like *Little Caesar* spurred the introduction of a film censorship mandate in the United States. After 1934, films were subject to review and revision in accordance with the Hays Code, which created a set of moral guidelines for film producers to follow. As a "Pre-Code" Hollywood film, *Little Caesar* was able to include morally questionable elements that would have been rejected had it been produced three or more years later. The general social climate of wariness and instability in the United States at the time is reflected in the code's admonition that "special care be exercised in the manner in which the [certain] subjects are treated," such as the "use of the flag," "sympathy for criminals," and even "surgical operations" (qtd. in "Film Censorship"). Rico's coarse and pointed use of language, which distinguishes him as a gangster, and most certainly his use of a firearm in violent situations would have been reproached by the board of censure. In addition to censorship by the Hays Code, films were soon to be required to undergo scrutiny by the Office of War Information, which suggests a different sort of tension brewing in pre-WWII America.

However, this is not to say that *Little Caesar* is either vulgar or explicit in its composition and style. LeRoy uses explicit violence only in situations when it is

critical for the development of the plot, such as in the scene depicting the inevitable death of the protagonist, who is mercilessly gunned down by police officers as he makes one final attempt at evasion. Though the subject matter is unsightly, Rico's death is depicted judiciously, without blood or gore. Rico's dramatic fall from grace is also indicative of the social climate of America in the 1930's as he returns to the gutter as a Depression-era drunkard. The purchase and consumption of alcohol, as well as the ever-looming presence of the troublesome immigrant, were hot issues in the years surrounding the production of *Little Caesar* and the way in which these issues are addressed in the film certainly holds some degree of historical significance.

Little Caesar met with a mixed response from critics and audiences for the novel way in which it cast a spotlight on the criminal lifestyle. Conservative Americans concerned with preserving public morals resisted the exposure of crime by instituting the Hays Code and other restrictions. Others, however, found the criminal exploits of gangsters like Rico thrilling and exciting and embraced the new genre of film. *Salvatore Giuliano* also inevitably met with both adoration and detestation over the course of his controversial and tempestuous life. Though he made an enemy of himself in the eyes of law enforcement, local government, and the wealthy from whom he stole, he ingratiated himself with the oppressed and persecuted peasant class of Montelepre, Sicily.

As Giuliano's notoriety began to rise in the early-mid 1940's, he quickly identified himself as a "friend of the common man" and created a kind of real-life Robin Hood image. This strategy undoubtedly helped prolong his life when the hills of Montelepre would be scoured by carabinieri intent on finding and killing Giuliano and arresting his conspirators. The unique relationship that developed between the poor townspeople of Montelepre and Giuliano, an outlaw and a criminal, can also be interpreted as indicative of the general mood of dissatisfaction and oppression that was felt by the Sicilian working class. Corrupt, inadequate local government officials allowed the wealth to be controlled by a very small, privileged minority while the malnourished majority struggled to eke a living out of the harsh and merciless hills of the Italian countryside.

While *Salvatore Giuliano* was exalted by the peasantry, he was not so well received by government officials and police. The first Italian newspaper to publish a story on Giuliano met with immediate backlash from local officials despite the fact that it sold 1,200,000 copies almost overnight. Though the original accusation of being "basically indecent" was brought forth by a conservative rival newspaper, it was sufficient to embarrass the Minister of the Interior into firing Palermo's chief

of police and arresting reporter Ivo Maldolesi and two of his associated editors on the charge of "aiding and abetting banditry and glorifying crime." Perhaps such a sensational story was simply published too soon in a country recovering from the crippling effects of World War II and fascism, but, regardless, we can draw a rather definitive conclusion: there was incongruity between the desires and intentions of the government and those of the people.

Though it is open to speculation whether Giuliano's compassion toward the poor was born of genuine goodness within himself or whether he was clever enough to realize that he needed the sympathies and cooperation of the people if he were to survive, he became a sort of advocate and mercenary for the downtrodden. Giuliano's victims consisted mainly of those who oppressed the poor, as well as Communists and carabinieri. Though many people benefited from the criminal endeavors of *Salvatore Giuliano* (principally the peasantry of Montelepre), his actions were certainly not without unsightly consequences as well as underlying political motivations. It is widely believed that Giuliano was at least in part responsible for the killings at the Portella della Ginestra Communist May Day gathering on May 1, 1947. The notion that Giuliano, a noted patriot and "friend of the poor," would open fire upon his own countrymen compounds the perplexity of his evasive and tumultuous life.

As with nearly all the facts surrounding Giuliano's mysterious life there is much speculation and doubt as to the historical accuracy of the propagated legends. Rosi not only acknowledges but embraces the mysterious nature of his subject, saying "The film is a kind of quest for the truth: an approximate search, too, because even today we do not know the whole truth" (qtd. in Cowie). Though it may be argued that the historical accuracy of Giuliano's tale is nearly irrelevant at this point—he has served his purpose as an icon of Italian nationalism and indestructibility—it seems that most accounts agree that Giuliano did in fact live up to his reputation as a cryptic and whimsical mythological figure. One reporter who had the fortune of being granted an audience with the elusive Giuliano after much perseverance describes the striking presence and almost flamboyance of the mysterious outlaw: "The bandit was wearing boots, riding breeches, a yellow sweater and an ornate belt buckle which," he explained, had "a star for luck, a lion for strength, an eagle for cleverness." It was that cleverness, in conjunction with the support of the citizens of Montelepre, that allowed Giuliano to evade the police for so long.

Though *Salvatore Giuliano* is considered a documentary-style film, it is more than merely an objective biographical representation of Giuliano's life. "My first

preoccupation," says director Francesco Rosi "was to recount the story of the man and also the nature of the Sicily—even the Italy—of that period so as to denounce the hidden links between the power of the state, the power of the country's institutions and the power of the Mafia. Corruption percolates through every level of authority, from the highest government echelons to the simplest local policeman" (Cowie). Though not overly political, Rosi invites reinterpretation and skepticism through his "complex, ambiguous, and often contradictory account" (Crowdus) of the events surrounding Giuliano's life and death. "[Rosi's] works are imbued with an aggressive vitality, their narratives thrust forward in a quest for a mirage-like 'truth,'" says Cowie. Rosi makes it apparent through his unconventionally ambiguous and non-linear presentation of the narrative that the few biographical facts that exist about Giuliano's are obscure, conflicting, and confusing.

Additionally, no critical analysis of Rosi's film can be complete without mention of his cast of "real people" rather than paid actors, which gives the film an authenticity that is otherwise impossible to achieve. In one particularly moving scene, Sicilians relive the tragedy of the Porta della Ginestra killings, their very real emotion and pain translating beautifully onto film in a performance that could not have been achieved through any amount of rehearsal. Consistent in his aspiration for authenticity, Rosi shot many scenes for the film in the actual courtyards and streets where Giuliano lived and died. Filmed on location in the beautiful Sicilian city of Montelepre, visual depth is often created automatically in the film by the sweeping vistas of the Sicilian countryside and the receding, undulating streets of Montelepre. Rosi expertly compensates for this by blocking characters in the foreground or by arranging the shot so that buildings or other objects visually stabilize the frame. The composition of each frame in the film is almost an artistic statement in itself for the way that Rosi expertly balances aesthetic elements, though it seems to occur so effortlessly that it may be easily overlooked by the inattentive viewer.

Contrastingly, *Little Caesar* is very much the archetypal American early Hollywood film. Produced by Warner Brothers and featuring the ever-popular themes of the "self-made man" and the pursuit of the "American dream," *Little Caesar* captivated audiences for the ease with which they could identify with the ambitious-yet-doomed Rico and for the novelty of the subject of a criminal protagonist. "Directed by Mervyn LeRoy in a coolly (some would say blandly) distant style, the film presented the gangster's rise and fall with effectively no rhetoric or moralizing, a fly-on-the-wall presentation that seemed to increase its quality of stark realism—the stripped-down portraiture of ruthless men, the unadorned glimpses of crime and

violence" (Server 30).

Though Rico Bandello hardly acted for the good of the "common man," as we saw in the case of *Salvatore Giuliano*, other outlaws such as Bonnie and Clyde, who may be considered the contemporaries of Rico Bandello, owed a portion of their success to the cooperation of working-class citizens. In the early part of the 20th century, a certain phenomena arose that consisted of a unique relationship between criminals and the common people that mirrors the symbiotic relationship between Giuliano and the peasants of Montelepre. In the throes of the economic turmoil that prevailed during the rise of the gangster, millions of Americans found themselves suddenly jobless or even homeless. From the perspective of a small-business owner or farmer facing a sudden devastating foreclosure, the animosity that developed toward the bank and "the Man" is not too difficult to rationalize. As the police searched rural and residential areas for the bank-robbing pair Bonnie and Clyde, they met with little support and less assistance. People were willing to conceal the outlaws in their homes with a logic that may be explained, either consciously or unconsciously, by the old adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The good citizens were being oppressed by the banks, but the banks were being oppressed by Bonnie and Clyde.

Though *Little Caesar* and *Salvatore Giuliano* both chronicle the unlawful deeds of a criminal protagonist, we find ourselves examining two films that differ dramatically in tone, composition, style, and content. Both Francesco Rosi and Mervyn LeRoy were subject to the influence of their environments as they endeavored to produce films whose novel subject matter would appeal to audiences without offending those concerned with the exposure of criminal activities. One may attribute the incongruity between the two films to the influence of the social and cultural climate that prevailed during the time of the films' respective productions. In the case of Rico Bandello, we see the cinematic result of a period of immense change in the American way of life. Many people were forced to reexamine questions of ethnicity and identity as minorities flooded predominantly white cities. Concurrently, Americans found themselves dealing with issues such as the Great Depression, the global tensions preceding WWII, and the aftermath of Prohibition. *Salvatore Giuliano* may also be cited as the product of widespread fear and anxiety, though of a different sort than that experienced by Americans at the time of *Little Caesar's* production. Sicilians turned to Giuliano as a means of alleviating the crushing oppression and poverty brought upon them by the rampant corruption that permeated almost every faction of law enforcement and government. We can postulate that

this prevailing national sentiment of helplessness and dismay, as well as the lure of a legend as enigmatic and mysterious as Giuliano, influenced Rosi to create a film altogether different in content and intention than LeRoy's *Little Caesar*.

Notes

Brianna Humphreys is pursuing her Bachelor of Science degree at the College of Charleston as a Biology major and anticipates graduating in the spring of 2014. "Heroes or Hoodlums: A Comparative Analysis of an Italian and an American Gangster Film" was originally written as a term paper for Professor Giovanna De Luca's Studies in Italian Cinema class. Brianna's primary academic interests lie in the field of Botany, and she looks forward to contributing to the scientific community by becoming professionally involved in laboratory or field research.

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