

Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman*: A gangster's life and claims

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Directed by Martin Scorsese; written by Steven Zaillian, based on the book by Charles Brandt

Veteran American director Martin Scorsese's new film *The Irishman* sets out to dramatize the life of Frank Sheeran (played by Robert De Niro), a member of a Pennsylvania crime family and a Teamsters union official.

Shortly before his death in 2003, Sheeran told author Charles Brandt that he had killed his former boss (and longtime friend) Jimmy Hoffa, the Teamsters president from 1957 to 1971, who disappeared in 1975. Sheeran's claims have been strenuously and convincingly contested by various sources. (Brandt's book is *I Heard You Paint Houses: Frank "The Irishman" Sheeran and the Closing of the Case on Jimmy Hoffa*, 2004). Costing nearly \$160 million and with a running time of 209 minutes, *The Irishman* is Scorsese's longest and most expensive film.

The new film is being treated by the American media as a significant cultural event. *The Irishman* took over the 1,000-seat Belasco Theatre in New York City's theater district in November for a month of screenings, imitating a traditional Broadway schedule, with only eight shows a week. It is now available on Netflix.

The film has received universal praise from critics. Innumerable publications have pronounced it "epic" or a "masterpiece," or both. The *New York Times*' A.O. Scott argues that Scorsese's work "is long and dark: long like a novel by Dostoyevsky or Dreiser, dark like a painting by Rembrandt." The critic who differs sharply with these views is very much fighting against the stream.

While not as overtly misanthropic or malicious as *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), *Gangs of New York* (2002) or *Goodfellas* (1990), *The Irishman* is a poor, shallow, trite work, which goes back over territory Scorsese has covered numerous times. It continues and even deepens an unhealthy and tedious obsession with the representation of mob figures as somehow holding the key to understanding modern American life. The fact that the filmmaker goes to such great lengths to make figures who coldly kill for money and power into essentially sympathetic or compelling characters is hardly to his artistic or intellectual credit. (Nor is it to the credit of the critics who succumb to the same attraction.) More importantly, this speaks to the general cultural and political stagnation of the past several decades.

It is one of Scorsese's misfortunes that he was long ago, to a certain extent by default, proclaimed the "greatest living American filmmaker." An undoubtedly gifted individual, he has been working, through no fault of his own, during the weakest decades in the history of the American and global cinema, a period when filmmaking in the main has turned its back on the lives, conditions and feelings of the great mass of the population. Moreover, there appears to be no one in or around the circles in which Scorsese travels who offers serious criticism or an objective appraisal of his film work.

The Irishman distinguishes itself somewhat from the rest of Scorsese's work by its ostensible dealing with political and historical events. The

1961 Bay of Pigs invasion by US-sponsored Cuban exiles to overthrow the Castro regime, the Cuban missile crisis a year later, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the Watergate affair in the 1970s and, of course, Hoffa's murder in 1975 all come in for treatment of a sort, along with a number of prominent "mob hits."

However, each incident—except for Hoffa's killing—passes by in a matter of seconds, with virtually no explanation or context provided. One suspects that certain episodes, such as Sheeran's recognition of E. Howard Hunt (Daniel Jenkins) during the Watergate hearings as one of the men he met years before during his purported participation in the Bay of Pigs plot, will be entirely incomprehensible to most viewers, especially younger ones.

The filmmakers have divorced *The Irishman* from a serious assessment of Hoffa's role, the broader evolution of the American labor movement and conditions of life in the US in the mid-20th century. Instead, Scorsese and screenwriter Steve Zaillian offer their audience a rambling, highly repetitive, at times incoherent drama, which presumably depends for its success with critics on a number of extended set pieces involving De Niro, Al Pacino (as Hoffa) and various other performers doing their best impressions of "tough guys." Reality and history don't figure largely here. These are impressions working from other impressions arranged according to Method Acting clichés (inspired to an extent by *On the Waterfront*, directed in 1954 by one of Scorsese's idols, anti-communist informer Elia Kazan), and not necessarily life.

One of the few solid notions one takes away from the film, at least its final act, is that being alone and isolated while growing old is a terrible fate. Along these lines, Scott in the *Times* argues that "public affairs and Cosa Nostra chronicles aren't really what this movie is about." Its real theme involves "a deeper, sadder lesson that has to do with the inevitability of loss. The loss of life, yes, but also the erosion of meaning that accompanies the fading of experience into memory and memory into nothing." So the \$160 million budget, the re-creation of various locales in the 1950s and beyond, and all the rest are merely scaffolding for a "meditation" on loss? A feeble, unconvincing argument, which, if taken seriously, only underscores the considerable waste of talent and resources involved.

The Irishman opens with an aged Frank Sheeran recounting his time with the Mafia as he lives out his last days in a nursing home. The film is told mostly through flashbacks in a non-linear way.

(As an aside, the production uses new "de-aging" technology rendering De Niro (76) and co-stars Pacino (79) and Joe Pesci (76) considerably younger as certain portions of the plot require. A visual effects team, according to one account, "creates a computer-generated, younger version of an actor's face and then replaces the actor's real face with the synthetic, animated version." The technology no doubt has impressive possibilities, but in *The Irishman*, as a result, we see an impossibly younger De Niro as a World War II veteran and other similar anomalies. One wonders why the production couldn't have simply hired younger

actors.)

In 1950s Pennsylvania, Sheeran works as a truck driver for a meat delivery company. Caught stealing from the company, he is defended by lawyer Bill Bufalino (Ray Romano), who then introduces him to his cousin, Russell Bufalino (Pesci), the head of a northeastern Pennsylvania crime family and a significant national figure.

Sheeran begins doing jobs for Bufalino, eventually including murders. Bufalino hands the telephone at one point to Sheeran, indicating that Hoffa is on the line. "I heard you paint houses," Hoffa says in their first conversation, a code phrase apparently for carrying out a contract killing.

The Teamsters chief becomes close to Sheeran and his family. In his narration, Sheeran asserts that in the 1950s, Hoffa "was as big as Elvis. In the '60s, he was like the Beatles. Next to the president, he was like the most powerful man in the country." Hoffa becomes more and more entangled with mobsters, allowing them to borrow large sums of cash from the Teamsters' pension fund to build casinos in Las Vegas and finance other projects.

In 1958, Hoffa is questioned by Robert F. Kennedy, then chief counsel of the Senate Labor Rackets Committee, at a public hearing about organized crime. Three years later, the newly elected president John Kennedy appoints his brother as attorney general and the latter organizes a "Get Hoffa" squad of prosecutors and investigators. This concerted effort eventually results in Hoffa's conviction in 1964—in two separate cases—on jury tampering charges and fraud. Hoffa begins serving his sentence in 1967.

After four years and nine months in prison, Hoffa is pardoned by President Richard Nixon in December 1971. The government adds the restriction that he not run for the presidency of the Teamsters again. Hoffa nonetheless begins to campaign for the post, angering the mobsters with public accusations about his replacement Frank Fitzsimmons' having sold the union out "to his underworld pals." Hoffa declares, "The mob controls him, which means it controls our pension fund." Despite warnings, Hoffa keeps up the demagogic attacks, as well as his megalomaniacal claims, "This is my union!"

In the end, Sheeran reluctantly agrees to participate in getting rid of Hoffa. The latter is never seen again.

The Irishman should end at this point, but it doesn't, dragging on interminably. Sheeran attempts to reconnect with his estranged daughter Peggy (Anna Paquin), who has abandoned him because of his mob dealings. We watch the elderly Sheeran collapse in his home and be placed in a retirement home. Does Scorsese stage these latter scenes because he recognizes that Sheeran is not an attractive figure and thus a good deal of effort is required to make him seem human and sympathetic before the credits roll?

The one serious opportunity to make something of Sheeran comes early in the film when the De Niro character recounts to Bufalino/Pesci that he spent four years in World War II, including a staggering 411 days in combat. He also describes shooting unarmed and defenseless German prisoners. The picture of brutality in the imperialist slaughterhouse goes a long way toward explaining his and other Mafia soldiers' indifference to killing and suffering in the postwar era, but Scorsese drops the matter almost as soon as he raises it. Such historical and social concreteness is not his métier.

In any event, there is considerable question as to whether the claims Sheeran made in 1972 to Charles Brandt, the author of *I Heard You Paint Houses*, about shooting Crazy Joe Gallo—a New York crime figure—and Hoffa, for example, are true. Various journalists, police and FBI officials emphatically reject Sheeran's confession, although they concede he may have been involved in Hoffa's killing in some fashion. There is no corroborating evidence to back up the gangster's extravagant, deathbed contentions.

It seems irresponsible for the filmmakers to have staked so much on

such relatively flimsy evidence. But this seems in keeping with Scorsese's generally cavalier attitude toward historical truth. (One should remember that his *Gangs of New York*, which passed itself off as incisive socio-cultural history, was based on a collection of tall tales.)

Asked by an interviewer from *Entertainment Weekly* as to whether he believed "that what you have [in the movie] is what really happened," Scorsese replied, "No. I don't really care about that. What would happen if we knew exactly how the JFK assassination was worked out? What does it do? It gives us a couple of good articles, a couple of movies and people talking about [it] at dinner parties. The point is, it's not about the facts. It's the world [the characters are] in, the way they behave. It's about [a character] stuck in a certain situation."

In fact, if, for instance, official or unofficial CIA involvement in the Kennedy assassination were to be established, it would have a devastating impact on American public opinion.

More significantly, Scorsese has never been drawn to presenting *actual* history. He has his sights set on "higher" things, mythicized history, the working out under varied circumstances of his particular and unchanging concerns—guilt and redemption, "human evil," criminality, male friendships, loyalty and betrayal, etc.

The director has done little to add to the public's knowledge about Jimmy Hoffa or the degeneration of the American labor movement. Pacino's performance is a collection of physical and vocal mannerisms, apparently uninformed by any study of the Teamsters leader's history or the meaning of his career.

Hoffa (born in 1913 in Brazil, Indiana), a staunch trade union militant in Detroit from an early age, was trained in union organizing in the 1930s by socialists Farrell Dobbs and the Dunne brothers, members of the Trotskyist movement and leaders of Teamsters Local 544 in Minneapolis. Local 544 spearheaded the organization of the successful general strike in 1934, which, in turn, led to the rapid growth of the Teamsters among long-haul truckers in the Midwest.

In 1941, on the eve of World War II, Teamsters President Dan Tobin set about the destruction of the Trotskyist leadership of Local 544. As the Socialist Workers Party's leader James P. Cannon explained in his 1947 article, "The Mad Dog of the Labor Movement," when the rank and file revolted against Tobin's effort to put the local under receivership, the latter "called the federal cops through his friend President Roosevelt, and simply had the leaders [of the local] thrown into prison."

Cannon continued, "At the same time, a horde of Tobin's gangsters [headed by Hoffa], armed with blackjacks and baseball bats, were turned loose on the trucking districts with the open connivance of the city police."

Hoffa, in his 1970 autobiography, paid tribute to Dobbs as the "the master architect of the Teamsters' over-the-road operations," "a crackerjack organizer" and "a brilliant strategist." However, Hoffa went on, he never had any "patience" with either the Communist Party "or with the Trotskyites of the SWP." He continued: "Both were Marxist; neither believed in a free-enterprise system; both failed to see that workers who leave the enslavement of capitalistic czars for the enslavement of state-appointed czars are no better off and, in fact, lose great economic and social values in the transition ... To me, all communists are nuts."

In the final analysis, Hoffa's relationship with the mob was a long-term function of his rejection of socialist politics and embrace of the profit system. His gross opportunism and the moral degeneration bound up with it also cost him his life. In *The Irishman*, Hoffa simply comes across as irritatingly churlish and stubborn. The viewer is almost encouraged to root for his giving in to Bufalino and company—after all, it will obviously save his life and there doesn't seem to be any principled reason why he shouldn't go along with the mobsters.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has more than once commented on Scorsese's fixation with thugs. The *Hollywood Reporter* recently took

note of the “real-life inspirations” for *The Irishman*’s “film stars:” Sheeran, an alleged hitman; Bufalino, who hid “a vast domain of criminal activity behind his curtain business;” loan shark and racketeer Felix “Skinny Razor” DiTullio (Bobby Cannavale); Sicilian-American mobster Angelo Bruno (Harvey Keitel); Anthony “Tony Pro” Provenzano (Stephen Graham), a captain in the Genovese crime family and a Teamsters official; Anthony “Fat Tony” Salerno (Domenick Lombardozi), a New York mobster; and Joseph “Crazy Joe” Gallo (Sebastian Maniscalco), a gangster and part of the Profaci crime family.

Each of these characters, as much as it is within *The Irishman*’s power and scope, is given individual and even *loving* attention. Murderers and psychopaths in many cases, some of whose actions have more than a hint of medieval savagery about them, the foulest and most backward members of society, they are given far more depth and pathos than they possibly deserve.

But what about the Teamsters members themselves? The only scenes in which they are included are ones where Hoffa addresses meetings of drivers (assuming that some of the audience members are drivers and not union officials), who applaud and cheer him on like mindless automatons. No truck driver is singled out for dramatic treatment, only gangsters.

Many scenes in *The Irishman* are dramatically pointless. Characters argue at length about when it is considered rude to be late or wear shorts to a meeting, etc. This “comic” banality juxtaposed with savage violence (*à la* Quentin Tarantino) rapidly wears thin. In fact, the banter becomes almost unendurable at a certain point, in part because the lowlife characters themselves and their concerns are not interesting to begin with.

In the narration that opens Scorsese’s *Goodfellas*, mobster Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) explains, “As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster. To me, being a gangster was better than being president of the United States ... To me, it meant being somebody, in a neighborhood full of nobodies. They weren’t like anybody else. They did whatever they wanted. They parked in front of hydrants and never got a ticket. When they played cards all night, nobody ever called the cops.”

This unsavory, juvenile fantasy, which the real-life Hill realized, apparently holds some appeal for Scorsese himself. The filmmaker seems fascinated, like many petty-bourgeois intellectuals, with “strong men,” men with guns or clubs in their hands able to do “whatever they want.” It may not be his intention, but he has, over the course of a number of films, “romanticized the Mafia thug and turned him into a peculiar variety of American folk hero,” as the WSWS argued in a review of Scorsese’s *The Aviator* in 2005.

Decades in which the “nobodies,” i.e., the working class majority of the population, have been politically, socially and economically suppressed and excluded—thanks in good measure to the suffocating role played by the type of pro-“free-enterprise” trade unionism championed by Hoffa—have had their impact on Scorsese and other artists. They see the active or energetic element in society, malevolent or otherwise, as lying elsewhere. Scorsese’s work *reflects* these difficulties (or rather *wallows* in them) without making sense of or grasping their logic. Throughout his career, the director has accepted uncritically and superficially the immediate, retrogressive reality, now in the process of breaking up, as a given.

In recent comments, Scorsese, who has done important work as a producer, curator and preserver of films, has spoken out against large budget, blockbuster films based on comic books. In a *New York Times* opinion piece in early November, Scorsese repeated a remark he had made to an interviewer in October, to the effect that “Marvel [Comics] movies ... seem to me to be closer to theme parks than they are to movies as I’ve known and loved them throughout my life.” He added that, “in the end, I don’t think they’re cinema.”

Scorsese noted further that “for the filmmakers I came to love and respect, for my friends who started making movies around the same time

that I did, cinema was about revelation—aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation. It was about characters—the complexity of people and their contradictory and sometimes paradoxical natures, the way they can hurt one another and love one another and suddenly come face to face with themselves.”

Scorsese’s criticisms of contemporary Hollywood and the emptiness of its superhero products are entirely appropriate. However, his own efforts, unhappily, do not represent a genuine alternative, but rather the other side of the same deeply unsatisfactory coin. Important “revelations” are all too few and far between in his films, and the director’s conception of the “complexity of people” extends only to a very limited and debased social layer.



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