

LOURDEAUX, Lee. *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America : Ford, Capra, Coppola, and Scorsese*. Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1990, 288 p.

Bill Beard

Volume 2, Number 1, Fall 1991

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1001058ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001058ar>

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Publisher(s)

Cinémas

ISSN

1181-6945 (print)

1705-6500 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Beard, B. (1991). Review of [LOURDEAUX, Lee. *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America : Ford, Capra, Coppola, and Scorsese*. Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1990, 288 p.] *Cinémas*, 2(1), 170-176. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001058ar>

LOURDEAUX, Lee. *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America: Ford, Capra, Coppola, and Scorsese*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, 288 p.

This book turns out to be a rather bizarre project. Proceeding from D. W. Griffith's depictions of Irish and Italian character types in his Biograph films through the canons of Ford, Capra, Coppola and Scorsese, Lourdeaux attempts to find a developing continuum of representation of the two main ethnic-Catholic components of American culture as filtered through the sensibilities of individual filmmakers. On the face of it this seems to be an at least potentially intriguing line of investigation, although one immediately wants to ask some questions about the exact nature of the project. To what degree is this to be a quasi-sociological study of the depictions of ethnic and religious stereotypes in American film? What do Irish and Italian subcultures have in common to the extent that both can be examined as facets of a larger phenomenon? How are larger trends in cultural representation exemplified in the work of single filmmakers? Why is there only one "Irish" filmmaker? What happened to the several other apparent candidates for inclusion? Why is Griffith, a WASP, included at all? Unfortunately, to these and a number of other questions the book has unsatisfactory answers or none at all.

The principal common factors between Irish and Italian in America, especially in contrast to an Anglo-Puritan dominant culture, are of course ethnicity and Catholicism. Lourdeaux's early chapters try to define these concepts in such a way that they will act as a unifying frame for what is a dangerously disparate undertaking. Distilling a bibliography of commentaries on Catholicism, and its American versions in particular, into a handful of rudimentary, easy-to-use characteristics, Lourdeaux tries to develop a simple template to lay over his various filmmakers. "For centuries, communion, mediation, and sacramentality have been the basic principles of Catholic identity", he says (15); and "let us consider the spirit behind both Irish and Italian Catholic cultures—the analogical imagination" (23). He proceeds throughout the study systematically to apply these and other portmanteau concepts to his subjects, hunting assiduously through the films of Ford, Capra, *et al.* in search of communality, mediation, sacramentality, analogical imagination and other similar defining ideas (Marian compassion, subsidiarity, Irish confessionalism, Italian personalism, etc.) Where he finds these qualities, or where they can be imposed, he filters all his inter-

pretive remarks through them; where he cannot discern them or they cannot be made to fit, he simply ignores anything else that might be present in the films. Thus for example Ford's films are interpreted as dramas of ethnic opposition and assimilation viewed through the Irish Catholic lens of mediation, sacramentality, etc., and Capra's are characterized as conflicts between Italian compassionate communion and Anglo individualist materialism. This is not to say that such interpretive angles are not useful; but Lourdeaux's investigation seems crude and procrustean when it attempts to provide a central account of these filmmakers with such inflexible tools of measurement. After awhile it is simply irritating to find film after film, theme after theme, characterized in the same restrictive and ultimately unilluminating vocabulary:

In the tradition of the Catholic visual arts, Ford's world on screen was not based on the Anglo-Saxon Word but on a visible place that emanated a sacramental reality, mostly by focusing on communal actions and mediation. (94)

To an Italian-American like Capra, Irish preoccupations like confession to the powerful mother or guilt for leaving one's neighborhood were of little importance. Molly [in Capra's 1926 film *Irene*], despite her Irish name, is not really an Irish-American, for neither in real life nor in 1920s films did the Irish-American woman show an acumen for business. (143)

Critics who dislike Coppola's work for its sentimentality are often actually objecting to his Italian penchant for metaphor. But it is precisely this use of metaphor, for both characterization and narrative structure, that reveals his personal, Italian-American touch and analogical imagination at work. (178)

Scorsese very much values actors' input as an important part of Italian personalism on set.... An Italian-American director who worries about actors feeling embarrassed on set is an artist who believes in filmmaking as familial creativity. (226-27)

In this context it is rather injudicious of Lourdeaux to refer, for example, to Peter Wollen's John Ford commentary in *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* as "astonishingly naive" because it overlooks ethnic elements and "employs only vague cultural antinomies to summarize Ford's achievement" (7). Simplified cultural tags—usually used oppositionally—are virtually the only critical instruments Lourdeaux employs himself.

Moreover, the book's cultural/aesthetic stance is difficult to pin down. On the one hand Lourdeaux has some of the convictions and training of an auteurist: he chooses the work of "auteurs" to study and he proceeds through their films in search of consistent themes and viewpoints. On the other hand, his

primary task is to generalize along ethnic and religious lines rather than personally expressive ones. Certainly he acknowledges this dual focus at the outset, but that does not make the combination any the easier to operate. Likewise, he makes some attempt to link ethnic/religious characteristics with cinematic ones, talking about the differences between the Protestant idea of transcendence (via Paul Schrader) and the Catholic idea of immanence (via Leo Braudy) as traced into the *mise-en-scène*, and about Ford's visual use of Monument Valley as a sign of the sacramentality of the world. And yet he seems far happier in the world of pure thematic analysis than in any examination of visual styles. He is quite ready to find visual tropes in the presence of objects or patterns in individual shots—a statue or holy picture in the background, a compositional arrangement of characters inside the frame—but he seems not at all ready to investigate global visual characteristics such as Ford's heroic compositional style or Scorsese's claustrophobic and expressionist visual tendencies. In the end the book advances a thematic analysis and a cultural analysis side by side, embodied in the category terms already described, and consigns visual analysis to the margins in the form of occasional isolated examples of visual symbolism. Nor is there any form of political, structural, psychoanalytical or gender-conscious inquiry to be found.

Lourdeaux's split purpose is signalled by the fact that the first third of the book does not actually deal with any Irish or Italian filmmakers: the two opening sections are devoted to defining the study's ruling ethnic and religious concepts, and the two subsequent ones to examining the representation of Irish and Italian and Catholic stereotypes in (first) the films of Griffith up to *Intolerance* and (then) the period between 1916 and the coming of sound. Lourdeaux's remarks about Griffith's fondness for ethnic and Catholic characters and themes as a kind of personal revolt against Anglo rigidity and materialism are interesting (though debatable: it would be just as easy to place these qualities in the mainstream of Victorian sentimental exoticism), but not really relevant to an account of "Italian and Irish filmmakers in America". Likewise the survey of changing ethnic and religious stereotypes in the post-*Intolerance*, pre-sound era contains many illuminating facts and is of interest as a general discussion; but its relevance is equally questionable in a project not really devoted to tracing the general depiction of such stereotypes but mostly to the work of selected ethnic filmmakers. It is ironic that these sections of dubious topical relevance contain some of the most useful material in the book.

The treatment of Ford is indefensible. It is true that the interpretations of some of the silent films and of the most unwieldy, overtly symbolic later works yield insights. Lourdeaux's examination of *The Iron Horse*, and of such less familiar silent features as *The Shamrock Handicap* and *Mother Machree*, as models for the problems of cultural assimilation of Irish immigrants is valuable. And his tags for Irish Catholicism—the Mater Dolorosa, the Judas-like betrayer, compulsive confessions—are well-suited to *The Informer* (indeed they almost seem to have been generated by it), and are hieratic enough to apply effectively to *The Fugitive*, a selfconscious, highly iconic religious film paralysed by its own reverence. Lourdeaux's capsule view of Ford as an essentially ethnic sensibility goes as follows:

Ford's...canon...clearly divides into four landscapes: Irish America, Ireland, foreign lands, and the wild West. Each landscape suggests a roughly chronological stage in Ford's career: First, early films set in ethnic America acknowledged and then improved on negative immigrant stereotypes; second, films set in the old country explored its violent social tensions; third, films set in imaginary foreign lands experimented with deeply conflicted Irish values; and fourth, the late westerns revitalized American history by fine tuning earlier ethnic schemata. (88-9)

Once again Lourdeaux's effort to schematise leads to a restrictive and indeed sometimes quite wrong-headed set of views. Ford is in fact one of the most promising of Lourdeaux's subjects. Ford's historical and social idealism, his heroic vision of individuals, his use of the epic canvas of the American wilderness landscape, his mythic representation of institutions, his pessimistic avoidance of the here-and-now in favour of the exotic reaches of the past or the foreign, can all be illuminated by reference to (in Lourdeaux's own words) the "underlying tension in Ford's canon between the Irish and Anglo-American halves of his heritage" (89). But the book's commentary here is far too literal-minded. One would have thought, for example, that *The Quiet Man* would provide the most interesting field for exploration, since it not only presents the literal Ireland diegetically, but presents it as an exotic idealisation analogous to the similar presentation of the American West and the American past in such films as *My Darling Clementine* and *Young Mr Lincoln*. Yet Lourdeaux devotes only a cursory short paragraph to the film (most of that reading like a dismissive newspaper review), ending with the following remarks:

While *The Informer* had come to terms with Irish identity through a Judas figure in a Passion narrative, *The Quiet Man* looked

uncertain and unfocussed. After this, Ford gave up setting his films in Ireland. (109)

(So much for *The Rising of the Moon*, as explicitly Irish a film as Ford ever made, filmed five years after *The Quiet Man* in Ireland with a cast drawn from Dublin's Abbey Theatre.) It is simply perverse to spend considerable time on, for example, arguing that such unlikely subjects as *The Lost Patrol* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are really "Irish" films, while slighting or overlooking completely such obvious commentaries as *The Quiet Man*, *The Long Gray Line*, and *The Rising of the Moon*.

Again it seems decidedly odd to detail ethnic stereotypes throughout the silent era and then stop the procedure just as the gangster movie with its plentiful Italian gargoyles comes upon the scene. But the next section, on Capra, is better, if only because Lourdeaux's tagging of the populist Capra hero (played by super-WASPs Gary Cooper and James Stewart though he may have been) as a disguised Italian characterized by virtues of communality, mediation, Marian compassion and personalism does to some degree correspond to the values at the heart of the films. The struggle between populist community values and materialist individualist values is not distorted by being recast in the terms Lourdeaux has chosen. But if (in contrast to the Ford section) no violence is done to the subject, there is no special illumination either, and in particular there is little acknowledgment of what is perhaps Capra's most interesting and most revealing quality: the intense doubts that emerge subtextually about his films' ruling gospel of social optimism—a quality which makes *Meet John Doe* and *It's a Wonderful Life* into nightmarish and fearful films.

To a considerable extent Lourdeaux's commentary on Capra relies on personal testimony from the filmmaker himself in the form of autobiographical reminiscence and interviews. And this signals an increasingly biographical perspective in the book as a whole, a trend clearly apparent in the Coppola and Scorsese sections. Capra's poor-immigrant-working-class childhood, Coppola's family drama arising from his father's disappointed career ambitions, Scorsese's religious aspirations growing up in Little Italy, are all used as bases for interpretive focus. The filmmakers themselves are cited in exegesis of their own works to an increasingly important extent. And the filmmakers' own words are often very enlightening, too. Coppola's analyses of his *Godfather* films, and of *Apocalypse Now*, are always worth hearing and even rehearing. But Coppola is relatively taciturn or unconvincing on his later work, and Lourdeaux makes no

distinction between the vitality and intensity of the films from *The Rain People* to *Apocalypse Now* and the increasingly empty and ventriloquistic selfconsciousness starting with *One from the Heart*. Thematic labels elaborated from Coppola's boyhood (the self-destructive successful father, the caring older brother) are put to work beside the book's familiar category tags, and both are applied indiscriminately to Coppola's entire *oeuvre*. So we hear that "Coppola's narrator [in *One from the Heart*] has shone a personal light on the Italian ideal of a family where individuals mediate in one another's lives" (200), and that the climax of *The Cotton Club* "again features (Italian) mediation and community in dance" (204), together with detailed notes about the biographical reflections in *Gardens of Stone* (his son's death) and *Tucker* (the family failings of a public father). Of the most important development in Coppola's filmmaking, namely the on-going crisis of narrative confidence which has rendered the director unable to make any utterance which is not smothered in selfconsciousness and cinematic hyperbole—a development which might in fact yield very interestingly to Lourdeaux's focus on themes of success and compromise in Coppola's work—we hear nothing whatever. Instead we are obliged to stand by while Lourdeaux airs arguments such as the following (in relation to *One from the Heart*):

Critics complain that Coppola's colored filters and strong lighting are consistently and self-consciously artificial. But the startling break with conventional Hollywood lighting suits well the story of a couple's struggle with the routine of middle-class success. Coppola, like John Ford with his riveting pictures of Monument Valley, has an ethnic Catholic's sacramental regard for locale, which here helps substantiate the artifices of musical comedy. (199)

The argument as to the thematic relevance of Coppola's *mise-en-scène* is highly debatable, since daily life and fantasy sequences alike receive the same anti-realist treatment in the film. But the comparison to Ford is what really startles, since nothing could be further from Ford's heroic classicism than Coppola's delirious visual sensuality. To have them yoked incongruously together under the rubric of ethnic Catholic sacramentality is, alas, all too typical of the book's analytical procedures.

The Scorsese chapter contains much of interest, though again the bulk of this derives from the filmmaker's own testimony as found in interviews. Lourdeaux has here conducted his own extensive interview with Scorsese as well as drawing on previously published ones, and so he is certainly instrumental to the illuminating remarks that emerge. Scorsese talks at length about his

Catholic boyhood, his priestly ambitions, and his development of an intense personal evangelism separate from circumscribed institutional ones. There are insights into the autobiographical components of Scorsese's earliest films, as well as of *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, into the basis of Scorsese's interest in Kazantzakis' equally idiosyncratic Christianity in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and even (indirectly, since the book does not cover it) into the origins of that haunting blend of good humour and horror in *Goodfellas*. Yet there are also the book's characteristic blind application of categories and the descent into gossip (however absorbing) about what goes on on the filmmakers' sets and in his relation with actors and actresses.

In the end *Irish and Italian Filmmakers in America* is of interest only intermittently and at the margins. The marshalling of facts about the depiction of Irish and Italian subjects serves a historical and sociological function, but it is conducted piecemeal; the categorization of "Catholic" qualities seems unduly stiff and formulaic. The studies of the individual filmmakers bear only a tenuous relation to this overarching function (where are Sennett and McCarey and Minelli?) And the studies of the individual filmmakers range from the disastrously unsatisfactory (Ford) to the intriguing but not fully formed (Scorsese). On the whole, this is a disappointment.

Bill Beard

University of Alberta