

## **THE UNTOUCHABLES: *symbolic and ironic metaphors***

This film analysis will discuss the maze of symbolic, yet ironic, metaphors, which constituted the greatness of *The Untouchables*. In addition, metaphors, symbolism, and ironies shall often play a significant role in foreshadowing events in the film.

In essence this essay will use metaphors, symbolism, and ironies as tools to illustrate why *The Untouchables* constitutes a good film. The general purpose of this paper aims at illustrating the various symbolisms in the film, through filmic language. In addition the two most obvious scenes, which made reference to 'the western' and *Battleship Potemkin*, will not be discussed to focus more on the less obvious. The paper will include a number of topics such as, references to real life, violence in contrast to innocence, the use of the color red, camera angles, and some ideological contrasts. The paper wishes to demonstrate how a variety of devices could be used to create film form, which a typical audience will invariably miss. The opening credits used symbolic images to metaphorically represent the difficulties in policing Al Capone. The opening credits were composed of a series of shadows, which seemingly stalked with an ever-increasing speed. These images metaphorically drew a parallel to the difficulties, which Chicago policemen experienced in hunting down Capone in the thirties, which resembled chasing shadows at night. The film included a central theme, which emphasized trust and contrasted Capone's vertical integration, including politics and the police department. The shadows in the opening sequence essentially portray a stark image of Capone's power in the Chicago of the thirties. In addition, as the camera panned out providing a long shot, the shadows were revealed to be portraying the film's title. The link between the shadows and the title illustrated that the untouchables were essentially tracing and using Capone's tactics, and as the film illustrated, using them against him. In essence the opening credits foreshadowed Capone's criminal methods, and consequently the methods which would be used to bring about his demise.

In this regards the film further exploited this frustrating notion associated with chasing organized crime by repeatedly emphasizing, 'who do to trust', and 'beware of the listener'. When Costner first met his assigned officers the camera focussed on the closing door which symbolized the notion of closed-door discussions. Nonetheless the film ironically brought fourth the issue of mistrust by revealing, although later in the film, that the stool pigeon was the chief of police. Ironically, however the chief of police was Connery's main source of information. On the other hand, the importance of the listener was further emphasized when Connery joined Costner, mentioning; you trust nobody. However when Connery said this, they were ironically filmed amongst a large crowd of people on the sidewalk suggesting that potential listeners/spies surrounded them. This also suggested how insignificant the band of untouchables, were in a large city like Chicago, filled and dominated by organized crime. Finally in emphasizing the role of the listener as soon as Connery joined Costner he knew exactly where to start his liquor raid. They crossed the street and raided a stock market building right across from the police station. Ironically Connery said everybody knows where the liquor is, that is everybody except the people who were specifically hired to seize it, like Costner.

The notion of trust and the listener coupled with the opening credits intrinsically illustrated organized crime's vertical systematic integration. In addition the film correctly captured the essence of chasing Capone down and putting him behind bars. However Capone's hunt caused several consequences to arise, one of which was violence. The theme of violence was often contrasted to quite family life or moments of innocence, which correctly yet ironically represented both Capone's and Connery's theory "an eye for an eye". In fact Chicago in the thirties was a mix of high-pitched street battles and quiet family life. The contrast of both notions was created through editing by graphic means, as opposed to spatial or temporal means. Film Art (p. 300) mentions that, graphic, spatial, and temporal are tools, in terms of editing, which, through different means, achieve the same end result. Noel Carroll (p. 327) holds that editing, as part of, a formal system, should be the only level/means by which a film should be analyzed. Therefore the theme of violence both represents an irony, when contrasted to family life, and a metaphor which contains violence as a vertically integrated concept. The first irony occurred when the little girl blew up with the bomb, which, through graphic editing, was contrasted with Costner's quiet moment in his family setting. The contrast occurred at different levels for example, an explosive soundtrack contrasted to a quiet home setting, and a panoramic long shot of violence contrasted to a close-up of family life. Another scene, which depicted a striking contrast, between violence and family life, was Costner's drug bust celebration, which

was contrasted to Capone's violent outburst where he killed a man with a baseball bat. A quiet scene in Costner's home where he was depicted shaking his head, while in the presence of his child and wife then followed the violent scene.

Similarly Capone lost his temper after Costner's big Canadian drug raid, where he vindicated violence against Costner's entire family which was contrasted to a shot where Costner was deciding what to name his newborn baby. This stark contrast was made especially vibrant by the use of sound whereby Capone violently screamed in opposition to Costner's silent family environment.

However my favorite use of the violence metaphor occurred when Costner panicked after being threatened by one of Capone's thugs at his home. Upon seeing and talking to the thug Costner ran into his home to verify whether his family was safe. The stark imagery which occurred consisted of an image depicting Costner holding his gun while he simultaneously hugged his daughter. The gun was contrasting violence and innocence by physically placing the gun against the young girl's body. This contrast in this instance was graphic and physically linked both violence and innocent as opposed to using two scenes to illustrate the same contrast.

Finally the contrast of violence and innocence (family life) were violently illustrated in the scene where Connery dies while operatic music played in the background. This contrast was effective at many levels because an innocent night at the theatre was contrasted to Connery's death. But at another level an interesting metaphor occurred, contrasting tragic operatic music to Connery's death. The metaphors occurred because opera is tragic music but a night at the opera is not tragic in itself. However the operatic tragic theme, as well as Connery's innocent death, represented tragedy. Metaphorically, as Connery had been gunned down Capone received the message as he was tragically crying in relation to the opera. He halted his grief when he was told of Connery's death, and then joyously continued crying adding a cynical grin.

Violence and family life/innocence were contrasted to illustrate two parallel worlds within *The Untouchables*. Often however these two worlds collided pitting innocent by-standers against a ruthless underworld at war with law enforcement for control of the lucrative liquor trade.

Within this theme perhaps the most prevalent ironic symbol in the film was the color red. It ironically identified itself with glamour and death/violence suggesting that both were linked. The color red was used as a recurring motif, which provided the plot with a binding element. Its repetitive nature, as discussed in *Film Art* p. 81, enabled a theme to develop around the color red.

Red was ironically used in many parts of the film to represent the road to Capone while it simultaneously indicated a symbolic price that one had to pay to catch him. Capone often found himself in rooms, which were decorated with red wallpaper. In addition most scenes leading to Capone included a path up a long stairway covered with a red carpet. Red's appearance in the first scene, where Capone was being shaved, ironically foreshadowed the blood that was spilled in the bar explosion. On the other hand, red made its first glamorous appearance, after Costner failed liquor raid, a butler was witnessed ascending a long stairway covered with a red carpet, which led straight to Capone's room. In addition the music which accompanied the ascending red carpet was a large orchestration in true MGM musical's style. The music was a recurring motif, which added an association of glamour to the red carpet. However, when Costner did succeed his first liquor raid, the violent use of the color red was made graphically apparent through the illustration of blood which spilled out of a man's head, after Capone beat him to death. The same graphic contrast was used once more when Costner went to confront Capone after the accountant was assassinated, Capone was illustrated coming down a long red carpeted stairway while the previous scene illustrated a wall painted with blood. Ironically the red carpet in these three scenes was always accompanied by ceremonial music which attached a mood of glamour to the scenes. The music in essence created a mood of a victory, which was ironically achieved through the high cost of blood. In essence the color red's symbolic use was achieved through its ironic use which pitted violent reactions against glamour.

The film also provided many moments where the camera was used to foreshadow future events. These moments were significant because they helped differentiate film students from an average audience. This

provided another reason for calling *The Untouchables* a good film. The film was both entertaining and filmic thus making it enjoyable for everybody for different reasons.

The most obvious of these shots were the bird eye view shots who most often signified a downfall or death in this film. The first scene in the film opened with a bird's eye view shot, of Capone getting a shave, which symbolically foreshadowed Capone's downfall. Similarly towards the ending, the accountant's bird's eye view also suggested, regardless of the suspense created by the 'Battleship Potemkin' scene, that he would be caught thus facilitating Capone's downfall. Finally, the bird's eye view shot was used after Capone used his baseball bat illustrating both the man's downfall/death, but also illustrated the organization's fall. The bird eye view shot included all of Capone's organization signifying the organizations fall, even though we do not see the organization's fall the see the beginnings of it by Capone's conviction.

Long shots also provided telling moments, as their filmic role also foreshadowed and structured the plot. For example Costner's long shot, as he came down the stairs, represented his first failed attempt at a liquor raid. The long shot was symbolic because it illustrated Costner as he was coming down the huge stairway as opposed to an action, which illustrated him going up. The long shot was effective because we were able to witness the long spiral of the stairs, which swirled in a downward direction. Had the scene been shot with a close up the loss of the stairway view would have eliminated the down spiral. Another negative shot, which was both a close up and a long shot simultaneously, was provided when Connery entered a phone booth shortly before he was assassinated. The phone booth was used to create a split screen image with Connery in a close up on one side, located inside the booth, and the thug, that was about to assassinate Connery, filmed in a long shot in the background across the street. These long shots foreshadowed and represented negative connotations in that they indicated lost battles/failures. This being said camera shots could also attach positive connotations.

Costner's low angle shot, shortly after Capone's thug threatened him, framed two church towers in the extreme background illustrating that faith and God were on his side. Although the scene did not depict a battle that was lost or won, it did depict faith, which in the long run gave Costner and his band the patience, as seen through a catholic believer, they needed to bring about the fall of Capone. In fact Capone's fall was ironically foreshadowed during the last chase between Costner and Capone's thug. During the chase the thug shot two beer bottles which, not only illustrated the fall of prohibition shortly after Capone's court ruling, but it also immediately helped foreshadow Capone's court battle loss because the alcohol which helped make him rich was the element which helped put him in jail. Finally, avenging Connery's death, Costner victorious shot came when Capone's thug as he was cornered and caught dangling from a rope. The scene provided a bird's eye view of the thug and a low angle shot, through the use of a shot reverse shot, which both illustrated Costner's victory and the thug defeat.

Finally, an ongoing motif was created through the use of a long shot, which focussed its attention on the street name Racine. The street name bared significance because Connery's home was located on this street. In addition the entire plot was commanded by Connery's significance which both began and resolved the plot. Connery led Costner towards, wisdom, his first alcohol raid, and information leading to the capture of the accountant with helped lead provides the evidence to convict him.

The scene where Costner visited Connery to convince him to join his force began with a long shot which ironically framed the street name in the center which then phased it out at the camera zoomed in. The street name appeared once again in another turning during the night when opening the scene when Connery got gunned down. Finally the name reappeared once more when Costner lit a match from the thugs matches and noticed the street name on the inside which signaled the thugs guilt, because he knew where Connery lived. This was once again a turning point because it helped Costner to obtain the list of names of jurors and judges who were paid, by Capone, to grant him a sentence of not guilty. This was a turning point because, had Costner not obtained the list, he would have lost the case not knowing that it was rigged to begin with. Therefore the name Racine Street, the long shot's indication marked key turning points which led to Capone's downfall.

Finally *The Untouchables* raised some ideological contrasts which shed light on all that's been mentioned thus far. The ideological suggestions were far ranging and numerous so therefore only a few will be analyzed.

The first ideological notion related to the government's belief that they could fight Capone's guns with book keeping skills. The notion was brought forth when Costner first met the accountant, the day after his first failed liquor raid. The accountant was sent by the government to help Costner capture Capone by revealing his tax evasion practices. The paradox in all of this was that the government sent the accountant at a time when Costner needed manpower and guns to match Capone's resources. The government understood the end result, Capone's tax evasion court battle, but had no understanding of the means, which were needed to bring about these end results.

Ironically another of the film's ideological beliefs was that Capone had to be fought an eye for an eye regardless of the violence which was implied. Mixed in with the ideology was the simple fact that while Connery advocated 'an eye for an eye', the means by which to bring Capone's downfall, the discussion took place in the most ironic of places, a church. This suggested that religion was advocating a violent response. After all, the bible in itself justifies war in terms of the religious wars, and crusades, which occurred during most of the Middle Ages.

Growing out of that discussion the notion of street smarts was contrasted to textbook procedures. The film, as was mentioned above, makes a mockery of the police system by illustrating organized crime's infiltration into decision maker's hands. Connery's wisdom, which the audience learned through his speeches, most notably on the bridge and in his home, demonstrated how street smarts may accomplish more results with, often less resources. In fact a comical panoramic shot of Costner's band leaving the police station and just crossing the street to go on their first liquor raid, illustrated the system's willing blindness as the goods were found just across the street.

The film also depicts a scene, which illustrated the battles that had to be fought within the police department in order to obtain information. Three times the police chief 'rats' fellow officers of which the third was Connery. The police officers fought, in the back alley, till they were bloody in order for Connery to obtain the information to put Capone behind bars. It indicates that not only were citizens fighting organized crime but we were also fighting ourselves, as the forces of good were just as corrupt as the forces of evil.

In conclusion this essay attempted to discuss the maze of symbolic, yet ironic, metaphors, which constituted the greatness of *The Untouchables*. In doing so this essay has hoped to reveal the filmic devices which an average audience would invariably miss. In the process this paper has utilized a number of topics which shed light on various different aspects of the film and has avoided discussing two key scenes, the western depiction, and the Battleship Potemkin scene. In essence has used long shots, ironies, recurring motifs, symbolism, and ideological explanations to illustrate why *The Untouchables* constituted a good film.