

*The Boondock Saints*  
and Christian Bloodlust

an open letter to Troy Duffy

by Kem Regik

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Some time ago, and often since, an old friend of mine asked me a question I thought was innocuous: "Have you seen *The Boondock Saints*?" My answer was, as it has been many times before and since, "No." When I pressed my friend about the motivation for his question, he said I reminded him of Rocco, one of the supporting characters in the film. He then proceeded to excitedly show me the first major appearance of Rocco in the film. At the time, I recoiled over the dialogue in the scene, asking if my friend had meant to compare me to Rocco as a joke about penis size (this is relevant to the analysis, I promise), and between a hesitantly stifled laugh, my friend attempted to assure me the comparison was about Rocco's character arc through the film. A long time later, the film was recommended to me by my mentor, who insisted the cult-classic film was hilarious and absolutely worth the watch despite its dated cultural ecosystem. I went into our watch party expecting what I had been warned of, racist stereotyping, homophobia, transphobia, gratuitous vigilante violence, and other hallmarks of 90s action cinema. This, I thought, I could deal with. I have seen quite a bit in these departments; my ethnic background exposed me to international cinema, where these issues are often more glaring and resolved with far less tenderness.

I came out of the watch party disturbed by something far worse: the realization that the film was a recruitment ad for a kind of Christian anarcho-fascism.

Before I expand on this, I have to immediately diffuse the image that has been planted in your mind. By using "fascist" in this sense, I'm not referring to any specific *political* idea or system of beliefs, but to an *ethical disposition*. The ethical fascist (as in, a fascist ethical position, not an ethically positive application of politically fascist ideals) is one who denies, through one mechanism or another, a universal conception of human rights. This can be done by simply affirming that some individuals or groups are disqualified from protection under that universal conception, affirming that the model is not universal per se, or that the universal model doesn't meaningfully exist. The film adopts the third position squarely and without reservations.

The principal vehicle for the film's messaging are the protagonists, Connor and Murphy MacManus, who I will refer to collectively as the Twins given the film's abject refusal to meaningfully differentiate them from each other as characters. The Twins are first seen by the audience kneeling at a pew in a cathedral during a morning mass. The audience is immediately informed of their ethical primogeniture through their behavior; they are not listening to the mass, they are not participating in the liturgy, they are not a part of this religious body. Their movement to the altar elevates them beyond even the present clergy of the religious institution, who passively permit and encourage the Twins to break the sanctity of the ritual being conducted (presented through a priest rising to stop them but being prevented by another, presumably to inform him about the Twin's status as the "Saints"). Their reverence is displayed to the audience as higher, more sincere, more meaningful than anything the rest of the parishioners present. The Twins pray silently, kneeling at the feet of Christ rather than at the foot of the institution, and submit themselves in direct service to their god. This image is the viewer's first warning about the film's disposition, the Twins are shown as better than everyone else in a deeply moral sense. The mass, however, is still important because through it we are delivered the film's thesis

statement: "The greatest evil is not borne of evil men, but of good men who do nothing in the face of that evil."

The sermon being given in this scene is a discussion of the murder of Kitty Genovese, a real life tragedy turned urban myth that befell the community of Kew Gardens in Queens, New York City. So the most popular and most mythical version of the story goes, Genovese was attacked some thirty feet from her apartment door and stabbed to death while thirty-seven bystanders stood idly by and allowed the attacker to escape into the night. The film presents this bloodied rose as a moral condemnation of inaction, insisting that the true monstrosity of the mythicized 1964 murder was not in the depravity of Winston Moseley's actions, but in the craven refusal of any of the witnesses to help or even call the authorities to report the stabbing. It should be noted that the priest delivering the sermon is doing so from a pulpit stylized as an eagle, a traditional symbol of contemporary government, unifying the institutions of the church and the state into one voice. The film's thesis is further telegraphed by the Twins then exiting the cathedral and simultaneously lighting cigarettes outside. These two are *not* cowardly men consumed by shocked inaction, they are harbingers. Cool, collected, righteous.

The next few scenes are meant to humanize the Twins to the audience. Their elevation is momentarily inverted through their socioeconomic status; they are poor Irish immigrants working under-the-table in a meat-packing plant. They get along with everyone, play pranks on each other, and joke through their work day with their co-workers. Well, until the new employee shows up, a loud caricature of women's liberation politics, and initiates a fistfight on the factory floor. The Twins are painted as a pair of "good ol' boys" in the classical sense, with a causal chauvinism and white ethnic pride that would be well at home south of the Mason-Dixon were it not for that ethnicity being Irish. A detour is necessary at this point, because the Irish identification needs to be treated with adequate care.

The Irish, in the history of 19th and 20th century urban American race politics, are a kind of so-called "white nigger", a group disfavored for being outside the Anglo-Saxon or otherwise northwestern European ethnic canon. As a result of this classification, the film treats the ethnic identity as warrantlessly downtrodden, systemically neglected, and prone to clashes with the law. Whether this characterization is accurate to the racial politics of 90s Boston I leave as an exercise for contemporary historians, but it should be noted that this creates a narrative of *persecution* that is assembled in the Twin's ethnicity but then deflected into and resolved within their religiosity. This is a clever and dangerous rhetorical move. Audiences should be aware of the weight this writing decision carries, because it sanitizes and then rehabilitates the racialized violence the film later depicts by literally washing it in the blood of a device already considered sacred. The Irish status is, then, simultaneously a vector to white victimhood and Christian persecution complexes. This allows the target audience, poor white lay-Christians, to suspend any pretense of a majoritarian status that might complicate commitment to and application of the vengeance (not simply vigilante) fantasy the film later presents. The racialized nature of the film's conflict escalates not much later, when the Twins' being informed of their favorite Irish pub's impending closure is interrupted by a gang of Russian mobsters who would very much prefer the shuttering happen right then and there.

The Russians, in 20th and 21st century American pop culture, occupy a particularly complicated space as an ethnic group. Cold War-era romanticism has pigeonholed them into the shape of archetypal villains to American audiences: brutish, godless, and prone to extreme criminality. This scaffolding is used liberally by the film to paint the gangsters not only as antagonists, but as cultural invaders wishing to forcefully remove the culture that underpins the Twins and the group identities they share with the other patrons. After the barfight, when the Twins are ambushed in their apartment, the film exposes this maneuver to direct sunlight by plastering the hammer and sickle on Ivan Chekov's gun (stop laughing). The film is not just trying to externalize the Russians ethnically and politically, but *culturally* by attaching their characterizations to Communism specifically, the quintessential political caricature of atheism. This is the first in the film's many invocations of cultural atheism and heathenry, and should be understood as the first salvo in its assault of moral and cultural prescriptions.

The introduction of the Boston police and the FBI agent leading their investigation into the deaths of Ivan and his companions is the next wave of artillery. The film subverts expectations by painting the police as incompetent, disorganized, and at a loss for how the crime may have occurred. As a viewer, I was initially pleasantly surprised at this maneuver, having assumed I would be served copaganda. As the interactions between the Twins and the police carry on, however, it seems obvious that they are intentionally taking the department for a ride, slyly exposing the film's anti-institutional bent just a little more. Further, the FBI agent is clearly gay-coded as a source of derision by the frame and writing, even if not by the Twins themselves in dialogue. The agent is shown to be genuinely intelligent and capable of picking up details the police officers miss, serving to both signal potential alignment with the Twins and to separate him from traditional law enforcement.

The investigation in the alleyway is a crystallization of the film's thesis within the character of the FBI agent. His choice of intellectual focus is *Mi Chiamano Mimi*, a piece from the opera "La Boheme", and this is no accident. Though the film does not extend the appearance of the piece to its lyrical conclusion, we should focus on Lucia's admission in her singing: "Non vado sempre a messa, ma prego assai il Signore," (I have not always gone to Mass, but I pray to God a great deal). The film has highlighted the FBI agent through his departure from the cultural norms being promoted, both in his institutional binding (respect for the rule of law and judicial process) and his aberrant sexuality. He is the archetype of the heathen attempting to remain moral within Christian norms, hence his passion for law enforcement and his frustration at the slowness of its machinations. The later scene of the Twins turning themselves in to a room full of stunned officers is a kind of soft revelation to the FBI agent, revealing the god he refuses to acknowledge through his "Saints" and the explanation of their handiwork on the godless Russians. The self-defense nature of these killings renders any prosecution moot, but the framing shows a latent respect within the FBI agent for the Twins' eagerness to do what he has wanted to do all along. This creates a tacit camaraderie between the three of them that the narrative later blooms.

It is here, within the walls of the police station, that we are bombarded with juxtaposition as characterization. Alongside the FBI agent is Rocco, the second heathen the story wishes to define for narrative purposes. Rocco's arrival to the station serves more than to deliver clean clothing to the Twins, it serves to show the audience he is explicitly arriving from *outside* the film's thematic sanctum: divine justice. He is not like the Twins, who have devoted their lives to this aim, and so he cannot be ideolocated within it. He can enter the station, even serve as a vehicle for affirming the Twins' faith in delivering their rosaries, but he cannot stay. The late-night mission from God is the first of several reinforcements of this division, making the alignment with the moral prescription of the film something exclusive to the Twins.

Rocco's heathenry is explored first by his interaction with the Italian mob boss Yakavetta, where his position as the "Funny Man" is exploited. This scene makes a great opportunity to return to the issue of the racialized core of the film. Rocco, as the audience's bridge to the secular world existing outside the moral prescription, occupies the space of a ethnic universalist. This position is immediately confronted by Yakavetta through his insistence (and Lipazzi's concurrence) on his using of the word "nigger" to refer to the black man in Rocco's joke. The film is communicating to the audience that despite Rocco's desire to live in respectful peace of other's status, as we see in his friendship with the Twins, the wider secular world he lives in withholds this respect. The Italians, like the Russians and the Irish, are racially activated and negatively race-conscious, which is a difficult thing for Rocco to overcome. The film is arguing here that in absence of a divine universal, the secular default is bigotry. The joke itself, however, is the unacknowledged monster under the bed, as the scene revels in the punchline of the white man simply wanting the Mexican man and the Black man out of his country. Nothing in the film before or after this moment uses this instance of blatant racism to morally charge Rocco's eventual revenge against the Yakavetta organization, nor is the matter even brought up again. He comes to hate the Italians not because they're morally repugnant, but because they have taken advantage of the humor he delivers without granting him status. The bigotry is taken not as condemnable, but as *expected* within the secular frame of reference Rocco inhabits, used only to provide believable details to men the film labels as ontologically "evil".

This classification of evil is immediately juxtaposed with the Twins again, who have arrived at an underground arms dealer's den to trade their Russian loot for more firepower. The cage in the rear is important to note, as its decoration is critical environmental storytelling: an Irish national flag below a slogan reading "When the wicked stand confounded, call me with thy saints surrounded." This is a mangled line from *Deis Irae*, a Latin poem from the Middle Ages that was so disturbingly eager to expound on the subject of divine rage and retribution that the Catholic Church *removed* it from funeral liturgies as one of many reforms packaged in Vatican II. Those readers not familiarized with the sociocultural discourse surrounding this moment in Catholic history are forgiven for not immediately suffering an increase in blood pressure. Without throwing sedevacantists too many bones, the controversy of Catholic reforms has been ongoing and discussed as widely as it has been condemned. The film, through this minor set piece choice, has thrown its hat in with the most conservative camp of Catholics, insisting that the historical image of the faith as a vehicle for judgement is not only correct but immediately

preferable. The child-like wonder and glee on the faces of the Twins cements this, confirmation that not only are they capable of enacting their goals, but they are desperate to do so.

The armory scene is the Twins' pivot from "righteous underdog vigilantes" to "bloodlusting crusaders," exemplified by the handling of sniper rifles, machine guns, and anti-aircraft guns. The exchange doesn't read like serious men preparing to do seriously distasteful work, but like a teenage boy's Call of Duty-powered schoolyard revenge fantasy. This is the film discarding the mask of morality and throwing it to the ground performatively while the audience is distracted trying to play IMFDB bingo.

As the Twins arrive at their target's address, the film quickly returns to the FBI agent. Now at home and in bed with another man, the film uses the opportunity to confirm the characterization planted earlier and exploit it to further morally separate him from the Twins. Not only is the FBI agent gay, but he's toxically gay; unconcerned, unaffectionate, and uninterested in hiding it. His partner is treated not as a parallel to the moral prescription, but as a vacuous facsimile undeserving of the devotion shown elsewhere. This queer fatalism, the film argues, is the logical endpoint of the moral heathen: a false satisfaction devoid of both the weight and depth offered by the moral prescription.

His investigation of the second crime scene is where the film takes the religious subtext surrounding the Twins and coalesces it. Laden between discussions of ballistics and shooting positions is a conversation about the potentially religious motivations for the killings, noting the pennies left on the eyes of all the victims as not only markers of faith but of ethnicity. The practice is noted to be ancient, an additional elevation of the Twins' religiosity above the common practitioner by way of a nod to the "primitivist" tradition of fundamentalism. Again, this framing distinguishes the Twins as more authentically or impactfully religious than the average, rendering unto them additional moral authority. The film is insisting not that the Twins' faith drives them to kill, but that the killing *is* their faith in a comprehensive sense, and that is what makes it real in the way the faith of others is not.

The targets themselves, of course, are all Russians again, and the set dressing solidifies their inherent godlessness through art. Around the penthouse suite are displayed several paintings that are easily missed and discarded as incidental, but upon closer inspection their importance becomes unavoidable. They're all paintings of *people*, unlike the majority of the art we've seen in frame up until now, which has been religious in nature (the rosaries, the holy water font, the sculpture of Jesus, etc). These Russians are not only godless, the film argues, but they are deeply atheistic even in their pursuit of art, preferring the flesh-centered work of Fabio Hurtado rather than the divinity-centered work the film promotes. The conflation of the "evildoing" and the "heathenry" exemplified by the Russians is more than narrative convenience, it is the internal justification for the Twins' holy rampage.

Of particular note during the killing sequence proper is the reverence and admiration the editing performs for the preparation of the corpses. The drop of the rosaries, the handing off and placing of the pennies, the dispatching of surviving targets, all of it is treated with intense

sanctity and all of it is communicated through *structure* rather than mere depiction. The frame is monochrome, full of Dutch angles and slowed down takes of the Twins benedicting and dedicating corpses, all set to angelic chorus. It wants you to feel good about this, to feel vindicated in their ritualistic mass murder, but most importantly it wants you to feel *licensed* to feel this way. That's more than art direction, more than clever camera work, it's intentional messaging. Especially in the director's cut.

But hold onto that *holier-than-these-now-dead-men* feeling tightly, because the film will betray it instantly. Not only are the Twins piously bloodthirsty, they're piously *marauding*: the very next thing they do is steal a sack full of cash left on a bar counter. No mention is made of charitable action or mutual aid, and one must remember that the narrative has squarely rejected any notion of communist sympathies (or rather, crushed them with a toilet). Without doubt the Twins intend on keeping the money to fund their carnage, nevermind the apparently performative asceticism from the opening minutes. The film has, at this point, dispensed fully with any pretense of genuine moral upkeep within subtext, committing emotionally to preaching piracy.

And piracy it very much does preach after Rocco reappears and reassembles his blown mind. With a single word, actually, the answer given to Rocco's first question back in his apartment:

"Anybody *you* think is evil?"

"Aye," responds Connor, the MacManus brother "Veritas," as he fiddles with a firearm.

When subtext becomes text, it is incumbent on the audience to pay attention. This is not, any longer, a mere expression of artistic license, of the infamous "gesture". This is *intentional*. Formal, even, as consequence of craft.

Scenes and sequences abound to speak of the seasonally sensationalized so-called "Divine Command Theory," the ethical construction whose image is invoked through the Twins. We can gather from sight thus far that the narrative has claimed their god ordered them to kill those Russians, and perhaps it might gain some dramatic utility with this maneuver. But alas...

"No," says the narrative, "the Twins claim universal divine ascent of *judgment's determination*, not simply its delivery."

Oh. Well, that's significantly worse. One might give the benefit of the doubt on fuzzy biblical decree, but the absolutely indeterminate minds of the Twins alone could hardly suffice as a reliable mechanism. And yet therein lies the pitch the film makes to the viewer: the Christian (\*) doctrine espoused by the Twins gives full license to those willing to commit fully, and vast rewards follow those who pass the test.

\* Sidenote, "On Doctrine"

There is an immediate concern here, I suspect, from a certain Christian apologist and perhaps even from the well-meaning atheist: does the film actually make this claim? I would argue from narrative fundament that the answer is a resounding yes.

One would expect that a narrative wishing to deliver its messaging with nuance and complexity would take time to provide contrasting viewpoints, genuine objections, or perhaps force a moral dilemma as consequence of commitment. This film rejects any such intellectual honesty flat-out. Nowhere in the film are the Twins' religious sentiments labeled extreme, unscriptural, heretical, unorthodox, divergent, or even simply contested. A single clergyman within the opening sequence begins to rise and is immediately stopped. The FBI agent discusses religious intent but not severity of faith. Their zealotry is treated as inconsequential and unremarkable.

The only extremity present is the lengths the film goes to in order to minimize and simplify the discussion of religion at all in explicit terms. The rosaries and spoken prayers are the only icons formally presented to the audience and this is by design, intentionally widening the scope of audience identification. Even foundational items like *Jesus himself* are stripped and trimmed, reduced to a cropped visual cameo. The Twins refer to their god as "Lord" and to themselves as its "Shepherds" in their family prayer (which has its own uncomfortable implications, but at this point why bother), but no further elaboration on their specific beliefs is made. We don't even see as much as a bible, as if out of a desire to comfort Mormons and JWs.

The accuracy of the Christian depiction lies in its minimal construction, the monotheistic judge god of ill-defined morals and desert storm rage. This is the tonal spitting image of the Southern Baptist monster Reagan built, married somewhat awkwardly to its own Roman Catholic cousin through incestuous homoeroticism and violence. Doctrinally, this is as basic and cover-all-your-bases as it gets and the film knows it. Anything else the Twins might need to satisfy any academic challenge is insisted on by the film through the midnight revelation and not further reached for.

\* End Sidenote

Of course, Rocco buys in immediately, signaling to the audience not only that the Twins are right, but that "they're saying what everybody's thinking." Their desire to engage in wanton extrajudicial violence doesn't land as a red flag, it lands as relief. And relief for whom, exactly? The primary rescuee the Twins identify is not the low and downtrodden of Boston, not the victims of the crime and sinfulness they wish to destroy, but instead the "decent men with loving families" of the city, who are subject to the worst possible suffering the Twins can imagine: watching the news after work.

If that doesn't seem like it would add up in your mind, that's because it doesn't. This is the clearest tell the film gives of its true intentions, ripping the status of victimhood and persecution from those actually suffering and projecting it onto the distant bystander. There is no

empathy here, no desire to truly help or deliver anyone from evil, the film is completely disinterested in any genuinely aggrieved party. In fact, the Twins seem to believe that the only legitimate grievance is that of the middle and high class *men* who must merely grapple with the *knowledge* that evil people exist. Nevermind any conversation about corporate news media and their penchant for emotional manipulation, nevermind any mention of the women being raped or the children being molested, nevermind even the addicts on the street. The true hurt, the real pain, the actual problem is that white Christian men... know about it. And if that wasn't enough, the Twins then pin this grievance not on the evil itself, but on the *criminal justice system* of all things for not assuming all these evil men are guilty by default. That the state doesn't simply execute suspected criminals on sight is the affront to the natural order that the Twins are rallied against. After all, who needs due process when you have God on your side? "Hallelujah, Jaffar," says Murphy, the MacManus brother "Aequitas", waving his lit cigarette with righteous satisfaction and not a shred of self-awareness. And as if to punctuate the flippantness of this delivery, the three characters spend the rest of the night drinking, smoking, and whinging until Rocco's bloodlust boils over and onto his girlfriend's cat.

It's here that I'll take a moment to lock in on a statement Rocco makes.

"They're fuckin' me man. They can suck my pathetic little dick! And I'll dip my nuts in marinara sauce just so the fat bastards can get a taste of home while they're at it."

Painting Rocco as an invirtuous failure is one thing, but using his own dialogue to emasculate him is something else. Something that demands attention. Within the framing the film builds around the actions taken by the Twins is an unmistakable stench of "traditional" masculinity. Their violence, irreverence, and piety is drenched in the stuff, but when Rocco wants a turn, even he seems to know that something is missing. Recall for a moment the famous film "The Davinchi Code," and one of its throwaway lines during the central reveal.

"The more penises you have," chuckles Leigh Teabing, "The higher your rank. Boys will be boys."

The Twins have twice as many penises as Rocco, and apparently neither is lacking size. With a tiny emphatic qualifier, the film establishes the hierarchy of the trio and of the real groups they represent: the Twins and white extremist Christians are above Rocco and the atheists willing to tag along, not because they are less morally compromised, but because they are "real men." There is no dialectical maneuver more devastating in Troy Duffy's mind than accusations of penis envy, and from the look on my old friend's face, he seemed to agree. The film's latent misogyny is nothing in the face of its obvious and clearly spoken misandry, pointed inwards from one man to another as if to create boundaries even within alliances. So much for honor amongst thieves.

When I say "latent misogyny," by the way, I mean glaring misogyny. Upon his return from killing Yakavetta's men, Rocco wastes absolutely no time verbally abusing, physically assaulting, and threatening the only other named female characters with any lines of dialogue

since the feminist in the meat packing plant. What's worse, the Twins can't muster even the mildest of defenses for these women, presumably because Rocco primed them towards ambivalence in the previous scene. "They're drug addicts, don't you know," says the film, "They deserve nothing from the Twins, our paragons of virtue." Nevermind that Donna and Rayvie haven't done anything even approaching evil since they stepped into frame, nevermind that the substances they may or may not be hooked on are never presented to the audience, nevermind that the two of them are clearly in distress as Rocco abuses them, Rocco calls them promiscuous druggies and that's all the film cares about. This is the one scene that could have rehabilitated everything thus far, the single best opportunity the film creates to use the Twins' moral crusade in a visibly positive way. The Twins could have seized on both Rocco's conversion and his outburst to show the audience the road they walk is truly difficult and disciplined, and instead they just wordlessly usher Rocco out of the apartment. They don't even have the decency to clean the late cat's viscera off the wall.

Of course, the sudden expansion of the duo into a trio is enabled by Rocco, who rebrands himself in the heat of the moment into something of a fixer for the Twins. His scheduling strategy is to wait by the entrance to the unimaginatively named "Sin Bin" night club and wait for Lipazzi to arrive for his evening romp. Within the antechamber of this club, however, the image of this new trio goes up in smoke before Rocco even gets a chance to be a part of it. Not simply visually, through his clear lack of preparation and professionalism, but through the Twins' dialogue: Murphy compares Rocco to Mushmouth from *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, a cartoon from the 70's. This flew right past me on the first viewing, as I'm far too young to have ever seen the show or its reruns, but I was shocked at what I found with minimal digging. Mushmouth, on top of bearing an ableist slur as a name, is a character widely condemned for his heavy resemblance to minstrel caricatures of African-Americans. Even his production writeup warns of his clearly offensive depiction of speech impediments. The invocation serves to alienate and denigrate Rocco, reducing him back to the status of "Funny Man" just as quickly as he was elevated from it.

Exactly *what* Rocco had hoped to be elevated to is shown immediately after some tonal whiplash, with the film's third investigation jumping between somber piano notes and action guitar. Within the proverbial belly of the beast, Rocco takes a Sin Bin employee hostage, extracting the location of Lipazzi from her at gunpoint with recently-practiced skill. When she complies, the audience is shown the horrific depths of Lipazzi's depravity: watching pornography... in a private room... as a paying customer. Rocco is... *somehow*... outraged by this, insisting to the audience that his former boss truly is a "sick motherfucker," and we see Lipazzi get what the film believes he deserves. Pay no mind to Rocco *sexually assaulting* the employee after she passes out in the next shot, he promised to tip her. If the film had bothered to show any money actually exchanging hands, it might have a claim of genuine charity, but alas. Instead, the Twins decide to ignore the plight of an abused sex worker and proceed to sentence the two other patrons to death.

Now, we knew what Lipazzi was doing, but these two men were unrelated to him by the film's admission, so what was their crime? The FBI agent explains the Sin Bin's business model,

a style of peep show common to large cities like New York prior to gentrification in the late 90s. The film confirms this is what the two patrons were indeed doing as they each slip bills through their respective slots. It would seem the audience is expected to receive this in a "If you thought that guy was bad..." sort of way, but the gravity just isn't there. These two unnamed and faceless men are, by any account, innocent of any genuine crime by even the strictest definitions, but the film lumps them in with the gangster by mere association: they patronized a lawful business the Twins don't like, so they get lead for their last supper. But before they're served, as if to make it that much more ridiculous, Rocco begs the Twins for the kills—and I wish I was making this up—as *penance* for his prior sexual assault. One is left to suppose that Hail Mary's just aren't enough in this economy, a stronger purification is clearly called for.

You would be forgiven, Dear Reader, if you expected Rocco to deliver his two victims from Sodom with any amount of reverence or seriousness. Regretfully, he too has shed any pretense of guilt, executing with glee and theatrics before announcing his spiritual orgasm with an invocation of "Wyatt fuckin' Earp". The vigilante convinces himself he's a lawman, and Los Angeles suffers another earthquake as the true lawman rolls in his grave.

To cap off the trio's night of violence, the audience is once again treated to the MacManus family prayer, which deserves some attention of its own. The recitation itself is idiosyncratic and unrecognizable to anyone with Seminary schooling, but rather reminiscent of inventions by lay-Catholic parents (I myself was taught a bespoke prayer as a child, invoking family members by name). Its structure is simple, three rhyming sections ending in the trinitarian formula, with particular emphasis on the Twins as vehicles for divine judgement. The last section is the portion that concerns the most: "So we shall flow a river forth to Thee / And teeming with souls shall it ever be." Not just a promise of action, to seek out the wicked and bring them to justice, but a promise of *volume*, to ensure a steady and unending flow. Notice that there is no request for wisdom or guidance on how to identify those actually deserving, no plea for mercy for those who might yet be saved, not even a lament for those caught in the crossfire. The Twins are entirely uninterested, even through their deepest spiritual expressions, in anything other than continuing to enable their carnage because the carnage is the point.

Here, at the very least, one would expect the film to finally build the bridge to Rocco it has been teasing for the last several minutes, to have the Twins formally induct him into their enterprise. He even seems eager for it, asking the Twins to teach him the prayer so that he might more effectively serve their cause. Of course, no such bone is thrown, as the Twins quickly and sharply reject him. The film's message is clear: the line that separates Rocco from the Twins is impermeable. He can visit and vacation for a while, but he can never stay. To the film, the concept of genuine conversion is unfathomable, and for this lack of imagination Rocco is forced to pay the highest price.

When I first heard the name "Il Duce" spoken by Yakavetta, my mind went to the only place one can expect: Mussolini. Ol' Benito is the subject of some controversy among historians for his role in the Second World War, but his impact is felt most deeply in the hearts of political scientists. He did *invent* the word "fascism", after all. In the world of politics, this label has seen

use and abuse by many a thinker and commentator, even if the definition has been diluted in the process. In the introduction to this letter, I dismissed concerns over my use of the term since it is being employed in a different context with a different purpose. This is still the case, but it would be irresponsible of me to not elaborate on that insistence. Mussolini's coining of the term came with the following formulation: "Everything within the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State." Very clean, very totalitarian, and very reminiscent of the subtext (read: text) of the film. The historical Duce was quite serious about this sentiment, especially as it pertained to answering the Roman Question that had plagued the Kingdom of Italy he replaced. The Lateran Treaty that he facilitated provided a solution that this film promotes rather candidly: "the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Religion is the only religion of the State."

When the audience is shown the face of this "Il Duce" character for the first time, it comes with an interesting detail plastered in text: "Christian Name: Unknown". This happens immediately after he is chained and caged for a seemingly regular parole hearing, and as the stamp granting his release is placed on his record, we get glimpses of his history. Il Duce is in custody, according to the form, in connection to an IRA carbombing, signalling his violent history. Of course, within the narrative of the film Yakavetta hopes to use Il Duce to kill Rocco before he can become an asset in the government's prosecution of him and his criminal enterprise. That being said, he serves a different purpose subtextually that is not fully illuminated until much later.

Before we discuss that, however, I want to quickly highlight something fascinating about the fourth murder scene, specifically in the killing of the hitman Rocco was hunting: he kills the hitman with a cue ball. Not a gun, not a pool cue proper, but the cue ball specifically. In a game of American 8-ball pool, the cue ball is an object existing in a liminal space, meaning within a *threshold* of action. The pool cue is a tool of direct action, the table warrior's weapon. The colored balls are the targets, the enemy that is to be vanquished and buried in the pockets. The cue ball is neither, it exists as the intermediary between both, never acting under its own power or for its own ends but exclusively at the direction of the cue and the other balls. It is a vehicle for the game rather than the game itself. When Murphy rolls the cue ball to Rocco, he is playing a game of metaphysical pool for the audience, transferring the force of his religiosity through the vehicle of Rocco and onto the targets of the raid. The hitman, then, serves as the metaphysical 8 ball, the last thing that must be buried before the game is complete, and even though Rocco is encouraged to kill the hitman himself, he can only do so after the Twins direct him. Rocco as a character is fully realized here and shown to the audience for what the film needs him to be: a useful component of the game, not a skilled player.

To this effect, the ambush of the trio by Il Duce further draws this comparison. When the shooting starts, Rocco immediately kneels while the Twins remain standing. As the firefight progresses, Rocco is the first to be hit and the first to jump out of the line of fire, showing him to be the most vulnerable and the most cowardly of the trio. Later, after the FBI agent is done screaming about the crime scene, we learn the exact nature of the injuries sustained by the trio: Rocco lost a finger, Murphy was hit in the arm, and Connor was hit in the leg. The distinction made by the film is clear, the Twins suffer towards greater purpose but Rocco suffers towards

his own destruction. It would be incidental if he had retained the finger, but it ends up in the possession of the FBI agent, who promptly uses it to identify Rocco and begin unravelling the Twins' activities. The film then transitions to the following day, with Rocco dropping the Twins off for a morning mass but notably not following them inside, further separating him from them spiritually. That is, until he notices the FBI agent drunkenly stumbling into the cathedral. Rocco, being the only one of the trio who identifies the agent as a potential liability, decides to trail him in an attempt to eliminate that liability. What follows is the greatest reveal of Rocco's relationship to the Twins.

Upon seeing Rocco force his way into the confessional with the priest at gunpoint, Connor immediately follows. He does this not with the intention to observe or participate in Rocco's actions but to stop them, going so far as to reach through the other screen of the confessional and put his own gun to Rocco's head. The exchange between them is heartbreaking.

Connor: "You little fuck, let him go, or I'll drop you right fuckin' now."

Rocco: "Okay, just calm down. He could hurt us, brother. He could ruin the whole thing."

Connor: "You let him go or I will deliver you right fucking here!"

Rocco: "You won't do it. You won't Connor. You love me, man."

But Connor would. He knows it and the audience knows it. The only one who wants to believe something else is Rocco, who hopes that the love and devotion he's shown the Twins would surpass their faithfulness. But, of course, it doesn't. The Twins hold no loyalties and no allegiances beyond their religion, and when the institution of that religion is threatened everything else is fair game, including Rocco. The truth the film gives us here is that Connor *doesn't* love Rocco, not in any way the film thinks is meaningful, not in the way he loves Murphy. He doesn't refer to Rocco as a brother, nor does he treat him like one, he is just a tool for their machinations, a means to an end. One that can be discarded if it runs roughshod over the Twins' piety, any desire to be useful be (literally) damned.

The confession itself reveals the nature of the FBI agent as well, if in the opposite direction. He confides his frustrations in the priest, that his efforts to do well in the world are stymied by bureaucratic procedure, by the red tape of secular justice. He laments that the Twins operate with an efficiency he idolizes, and that he cannot achieve the same results through his own position in the secular system. The priest replies by suggesting that the agent's alignment with the Twins and drunken desire to seek religious affirmation is God speaking to him, delivering a sobering line for the film: "It's very easy to be sarcastic about religion. But it's much more difficult to take a stand." This serves to galvanize the FBI agent, and by proxy those he represents, towards action. He admits he wants to do what the Twins are doing, to kill with religious commission, but cannot commit without shedding his allegiance to the secular system he serves. The Father then delivers the film's thesis statement, condensed into a single

sentence: "The laws of God are higher than the laws of man." With this permission (and the agent admits this is what he wanted from the session), he can finally commit himself to helping the Twins, even if indirectly.

Once everyone is on the same page, the scene shifts to Rocco alongside the Twins in the aftermath of an attempt to enter Yakavetta's mansion, captured and chained to chairs in a basement bunker. Rocco specifically is tortured with the loss of an additional finger by Yakavetta, who then exits the room with his men and consults them on what should happen next. One of the men pipes up, noting that they likely won't be getting any information out of the trio. To add insult to injury, another insults Rocco's intelligence, identifying the Twins as the real brains behind the killings. Yakavetta, without any further consideration, decides the only reasonable thing left to do is to execute Rocco, which he does with little hesitation or fanfare. What follows is meant to be the emotional climax of the film, the slow and painful death of the audience surrogate. The framing of the event certainly attempts this, but the impact of the sequence and its closure of Rocco's character arc carries a different weight with all the analysis we've done thus far.

Rocco's death is played very seriously, with Connor screaming and Murphy closing the distance for a final show of intimacy. The event is set to another angelic chorus, the same used for the killings the Twins have committed, and this signals the same "higher purpose" as before. Rocco's death here is not significant but rather instrumental, the film *needs* to kill Rocco in order to deliver its thesis, as his heathenry is ultimately unacceptable under the employed rhetorical frame. Rocco cannot genuinely convert to the faith of the Twins, he cannot truly forward their cause, and he cannot follow them to their ultimate conclusion. Rocco, as a character, has been framed consistently and sharply by the film as an outsider, from his arrival to the police station until this moment, and his death is the delivery on that promise. Even his dying words are an emboldening: "You can't stop! You get out of here. Don't ever stop."

"This," says the film, "Is the fate of the apostate, the heathen, and even the cooperative atheist. This is what it means to exist outside of the moral prescription. This is what awaits you, and you know it. You will die in service to this mission and know that you deserve nothing else."

The Twins' mourning of Rocco is not rendered in shades of remorse, contemplation, or even religious doubt, but in further violence. Connor curses Yakavetta, Murphy vows to kill him. There is no declaration of love for Rocco, no confession of their devotion to him, not even a prayer to their god for mercy on the soul of someone who gave his life for them and their cause. The only real mourning, it would seem, is over the *utility* of Rocco, not over his personhood or his personal significance to the Twins. Structurally, this mourning is cut short by the film, immediately ditching them in favor of watching Yakavetta curse in Italian and promptly leave his men to deal with the incoming Duce. And the Duce does indeed arrive—after some transphobic displays at the expense of the FBI agent, anyway—just in time to interrupt the only sign of respect the Twins have ever given Rocco: the placing of coins on his eyes and recitation of the MacManus family prayer... the same thing they do for the "evil men" they murder. The

interruption serves to reveal the primary twist of the film's plot: Il Duce is actually Noah MacManus, father to Connor and Murphy.

One can only read this narrative conclusion as both the Twins' reward for their conviction and the establishing of a *genuine* trio to replace the false one made with Rocco; the literal embodiment of the Christian Trinity with Noah as God, standing above the knelt Twins as they look up to him with devoted reverence. This completely reframes the prior scene of Noah's parole hearing, which served as a subtextual "releasing" of the Christian god from the secular cage it has been confined to and back into civilization, where the film clearly wants it to live.

The film begins its conclusion by showing the FBI agent now in full cooperation with the MacManus Trinity, allowing them back-door entry into the courthouse where Yakavetta is standing trial. Clad in black clothes and professional faces, the three of them make their way to the courtroom while Yakavetta is delivering testimony, invoking the name of Kitty Genovese a second time as the name of a butcher's shop. This cold and callous reminder of the foundational myth the film claims as its *raison d'etre* is particularly disgusting, as it not only undermines the message its use intended to deliver but trivializes the very real murder at the center of the myth. Presiding over the trial is the only non-white character in the entire film who isn't an extra or a criminal, a judge the film doesn't even have the decency to name. The framing here, prior to the MacManus Trinity's derailing of the proceedings, suggests that the secular justice system is an instrument of racial others and not the preferred mechanism for the white lay-Christians the film seeks to activate toward its cause.

When the MacManus Trinity finally does arrive, they do so to deliver a monologue in three voices, which I will render here for completeness:

*"You people have been chosen to reveal our existence to the world. You will witness what happens here today and you will tell of it later. All eyes to the front.*

*Now you will receive us. We do not ask for your poor or your hungry. We do not want your tired and sick. It is your corrupt we claim. It is your evil that will be sought by us. With every breath we shall hunt them down. Each day we will spill their blood till it rains down from the skies.*

*Do not kill. Do not rape. Do not steal. These are principles which every man of every faith can embrace. These are not polite suggestions. These are codes of behavior and those who ignore them will pay the dearest cost.*

*There are varying degrees of evil. We urge you lesser forms of filth not to push the bounds and cross over into true corruption, into our domain. For if you do, one day you will look behind you and you will see we three. And on that day, you will reap it. And we will send you to whatever god you wish."*

The MacManus Trinity then recite their family prayer together, as one unified voice, and in sight of the executors of secular justice they execute Giuseppe Yakavetta. The film cuts just as the aftermath of this murder is unfolding to a scene of the Twins in a bedroom with their father. Connor asks how far his father wants to take this, and the answer is delivered by its stand-in for the Christian god with an air I can only refer to as truly evil:

"The question is not how far. The question is, do you possess the constitution, the depth of faith, to go as far as needed?"

This is the question the film leaves in the hands of its target audience, and the answer it seeks to receive in return needs not be spoken, let alone put to paper in this analysis.

As both thematic conclusion and convenient place to put credits, the film ends with a series of scripted "woman-on-the-street" interviews conducted by the reporter who has appeared sporadically in between killings. Her stated intent is to gather public opinion on "the Saints" now that they're on the run from the law. The reaction is mixed, but clearly in favor of the vigilantes, most lamenting that they haven't gone far enough. This is the final maneuver to recruit the audience watching, trying to preempt as many reactions as possible within the final seconds of attention the film will likely receive.

I want to suggest that you take a deep breath, Dear Reader, because this has been a lot to take in. I know this because it was a lot for me to take in, and it was certainly a lot more for me to process and then write about. My memory of the watch party sits firmly in my mind, festering like a wound, mostly because when I got up from my chair I felt as if I had been stabbed. The bad news for you, my friend, is that Troy Duffy's production really is a violent, hateful, and regressive work of art that promotes the most vile things imaginable to the people most likely to take in and adopt them. The good news is that your part to play in this dissection is over; I am no longer speaking to you, but to Troy himself.

Many of my critics, Mr. Duffy, may choose to defend your work by insulting you. Indeed, many reviewers have dismissed your film on the grounds that they believe you do not possess the artistic talent to produce a story worth telling or the technical ability to actually tell it. I have seen, as a part of the research I did for this analysis, many people decry your film as an uninspired, thoughtless, and mediocre attempt to elevate yourself among the greats of filmmaking. Some have called you a discount Tarantino, others have mocked Weinstein for thinking your script could compete with his, and most are content to leave your film with a half-hearted "meh."

I am not one of those people, Mr. Duffy. I take your film incredibly seriously, as I would expect anyone to take any work I myself produce, because once published, art is forever. I do think your film is a serious work of art, and I do think that you are a serious artist, because you have successfully created something that comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable. It is with this admission that I deliver the following condemnation of you in the most severe tone possible:

Troy Duffy, you are a monster.

You are a monster for having written this, you are a monster for having directed this, you are a monster for having edited this, you are a monster for having published this, but above all possible critique utterable by any sane and rational human being you are a monster for doing it with a straight fucking face.

*The Boondock Saints* is not, as my mentor attempted to reassure me, a work of satire or parody. It is a bonafide attempt to leverage a specific genre of film for ideological aims and you did it for specific ideological reasons, whether you realized it at the time or not. You are something more than a mere artist, writer, or filmmaker. You are a propagandist for the worst ideology ever conceived by man: Christianity, the religion of slavers, warmongers, and pedophiles.

You are to your church what Riefenstahl was to the NSDAP, and so long as I breathe I will not let anyone forget it.

I am perpetually thankful that your fame and fortune ran out quickly, that you have faded quietly into obscurity, and that your film is only popular with the ignorant and immature. It may be the militant atheist of my youth that manifests the sentiment, but I am tempted to believe that perhaps it is divine judgement that your film was released mere days after the failed bombing of Columbine High School, so that the impressionable youth of America could not be brought within your slimy grasp.

If there is a hell, Troy Duffy, I am certain I will find you there. Expect a swift kick to the balls when I arrive alongside you.