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The Boston Movie Boom

Carlo Rotella

There's a priceless moment in *Gone Baby Gone* (Affleck, 2007) when a little boy on a bike cuts in front of a car on a street in Dorchester and, when the driver tells him to move, yells back, "Go fuck ya mothah." It's pure Boston-style unpleasantness—bad traffic skills, bad manners, nastiness to strangers, refusing to pronounce the r in "mother"—and it's like a shot of a yak herder or a snake charmer in a movie set in Mongolia or India: a moment that's there primarily for the citational pleasure of tasting an exotic locality that moviegoers can be counted on to recognize.

In recent years such Boston-area movie moments have become frequent to the point of becoming conventional. *Gone Baby Gone* is full of them, including some memorable variations on the great Boston theme of resentment between class fractions so close to each other that they may well appear identical to an outsider: "I remember you from high school; I see you're still a little conceited," for instance, or "Make me a fuckin' mahtini, you fat fuckin' retahd." Then there's Ben Affleck's dress-up fantasy as a series of twonic(not soda or pop)-drinkin' regular-guy icons—EMT (emergency medical technician), cop, MBTA bus driver, neighborhood hockey god—in *The Town* (Affleck, 2010); Fenway Park's cameo in *Moneyball* (Miller, 2011), in which it figures as a figurative combination of Harvard and the Death Star; and the victim-finding sequence in *Spotlight* (McCarthy, 2015) in which Standard American English-speaking reporters from the *Boston Globe* go among the no-r-pronouncing Walshes and Kennedys of the city's church-haunted immigrant-ethnic neighborhoods to catalogue the devastation wrought on traditional rank-and-file Catholics by sexually predatory priests.

Over the past decade such moments have become familiar enough to serve as the butt of celebrated parodies and needling on *Saturday Night Live* and *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, in the Golden Globe Awards ceremony, and in other such general-interest forums. It requires an intellectual effort to step back and appreciate how startling it is that Boston, of all places, has become such a prominent feature in the cinematic map of the world imagined by the movie industry and the viewing public. Boston was for much of the twentieth century strictly the sticks, a parochial dump in perennial decline that had peaked not long after the Civil War as both cultural and industrial capital. If the city was known for anything film related, it was the banning of interesting movies, as well as books and plays, by its killjoy guardians of civic virtue. But in the twenty-first century not only do homegrown notables like Ben and Casey Affleck, Matt Damon, and Mark Wahlberg make Boston movies and build their local identity into their star personas, but celebrated mythmakers from elsewhere—Clint Eastwood, Martin Scorsese, Mel Gibson—have felt drawn to get in on the action.

That action is concentrated in the subset of the movies made in and about Boston that make a conscious effort to establish a conventional local feel. This subset would not include, say, *Paul Blart, Mall Cop* (Carr, 2009), which was shot on location in malls in the Boston area but could take place just about anywhere in the nation. It would include *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (Yates, 1973), *The Brink's Job* (Friedkin, 1978), *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant, 1997), *Monument Ave.* (Demme, 1998), *Next Stop Wonderland* (Anderson, 1998), *The Boondock Saints* (Duffy, 1999) and its inevitable sequels, *Mystic River* (Eastwood, 2003), *Fever Pitch* (Farrelly and Farrelly, 2005), *The Departed* (Scorsese, 2006), *Gone Baby Gone*, *Black Irish* (Gann, 2007), *What Doesn't Kill You* (Goodman, 2008), *Shutter Island* (Scorsese, 2010), *Edge of Darkness* (Campbell, 2010), *The Town*, *The Company Men* (Wells, 2010), *The Fighter* (Russell, 2010), *Ted* (MacFarlane, 2012), *The Heat* (Feig, 2013), *Ted 2* (MacFarlane, 2015), *Black Mass* (Cooper, 2015), *Spotlight*, *Patriots Day* (Berg, 2016), *Manchester by the Sea* (Loneragan, 2016), TV shows like *Wahlburgers* and the short-lived *Breaking Boston*, and other films and shows currently in production that will have been released by the time this chapter sees publication.¹

What does it mean that this batty old Norma Desmond of a city finds itself ready for one close-up after another? How did such a traditionally uncool,

stodgy, in-turned place come to be regarded as possessing a potent cultural-historical mojo on which outsiders as well as natives place special value?

Properly answering these questions begins with following the money, which leads to considering the effect of policy decisions that cut the cost and increase the convenience of filmmaking in Massachusetts. And the visual distinctiveness as well as the versatility of the Boston area also contributes to its appeal. But these and any other explanations should be framed in a larger postindustrial picture. The Boston movie boom of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century can be understood as in large part a product of postindustrial transformation, and as a series of commentaries on what has been gained and lost in the course of that ongoing seismic shift. The movies of the Boston boom exploit the artistic and economic possibilities—for cheap production, resonant storytelling, and meaning-making—that opened up as the closing of factories and the rising importance of services, education, biotech, and finance reconfigured the economic, social, and cultural orders of Boston and its region. Exploiting those possibilities constitutes these movies' meta-theme and signifying context. That's what the boy on the bike is implicitly and even explicitly *about*.

*

The short answer to “Why Boston?” is “follow the money.” Since 2007, movies and TV productions shot in Massachusetts have received tax credits equal to 25 cents on every dollar of new spending they bring to the state.² That has attracted movie studios, which will go wherever they can turn out an acceptable product as cheaply as possible. The tax credit extends and enormously multiplies the investment in film production begun with the founding of the state film office in 1979, which helped attract some productions to Massachusetts by making it somewhat easier and therefore more cost-effective to make movies.³

It wasn't easy to shoot in Boston back then, as a famous story about the making of *The Brink's Job* illustrates. When word got around that the production had paid a family in the North End to remove an air conditioner from its window to improve the mid-century verisimilitude of a scene, other families up and down the block borrowed window units or painted up fake ones overnight, demanding their own payoff. That wasn't the only hardship encountered by the production, which was beset by armed robbers who stole

footage and tried to ransom it back to the producers, and by Teamsters who were later investigated by federal authorities for trying to extort money from *The Brink's Job* and other productions.⁴ Boston's reputation for prickliness, both internecine and directed toward outsiders, has not abated since then. Tina Fey joked at the Golden Globes ceremony in 2013 that Ben Affleck's "first two movies took place in Boston but he moved this one"—*Argo* (Affleck, 2012)—"to Iran because he wanted to film somewhere that was friendlier to outsiders." Her comic partner, Amy Poehler, followed up by putting on a cartoonish Boston accent to tell Affleck, "I'm from Boston too, so you're looking great, good for you," before dropping the false cheer to close on a regionally pitch-perfect note of class resentment: "You're not better than me."

Without the tax credit, the sustained boom in production would never have happened. Movies were indeed made in Boston before the tax-credit program reached mature strength in 2007, but moviemakers have not kept coming to Boston just because the city's so damn fascinating, photogenic, or welcoming. It may come as news to some state legislators whose belief in the region's superiority and attractiveness attains the level of delusion, but the boom will end as soon as it's more efficient to go somewhere else. If it becomes cheaper to simulate Southie in Romania, Hollywood will do that, assuming it remains at least a little interested in telling Boston stories. A public discussion in early 2010 about possibly limiting the tax credit, initiated by critics who plausibly argued that there were more cost-effective ways to attract more reliable jobs, was enough to drive away productions for the rest of that year. Business picked up again only when the studios felt sure that the policy wouldn't change anytime soon.⁵ The tax credit has been the essential material fact sustaining the Boston movie boom.

But the short answer won't suffice, not all by itself. Not only did at least some of Hollywood's interest in making Boston movies precede the tax credit, but Louisiana, Connecticut, New Mexico, and other states have also offered film tax credits, some with more generous rates—like Michigan's 42 percent credit.⁶ That Massachusetts has been consistently successful in the competition to draw and retain Hollywood's interest means that we need a longer answer. A more complete answer must include the city's reputation for unreconstructed white, especially Irish, ethnicity—a reputation that, outmoded though it may be in some ways, attracts white stars (news flash: they're still mostly white)

eager to play tough guys and gals from the Old Neighborhood. Boston is in fact a majority–minority city, but it’s still famous for the production of what a character in *The Town* calls Serious White People. We will return to that shortly, after attending to other salient factors.

One principal factor is that Boston and its region offers a balance between a visual distinctiveness that enables the metro area to stand out from other places and a layered versatility that allows it to stand in for other places and times. Contemporary Boston certainly has its own iconic features—Fenway, the State House, Harvard Yard, the triple-decker block, the bridges over the Charles and Mystic rivers—but its age and multilayered architecture also allow it to easily stand in for a wide range of other places and periods: Rust Belt, Sun Belt, and Old World cities; colonial or Civil War-era America; visions of the near future or alternate realities; Paris, Tokyo, New York, Mars. Furthermore, the compactness of New England geography means that no more than an hour’s driving can take you from mountains to ocean, from all kinds of cityscapes to all kinds of suburbia, farmland, or woodlands. And then there’s the quirkiness of the city’s cow-path-based street net, which actually does make the city uniquely photogenic.

“It feels like Universal Studios’ backlot here,” said James Lin, who was supervising location manager for the action movie *R.I.P.D.*, in 2011. “There are so many obtuse angles and perpendicular dead ends and curves, you don’t get that endless chasm of the avenue extending away behind the scene that you get in L.A., New York, or Chicago, which are all on a grid.” Instead, Boston’s dense, nodal layout offers picturesque backdrops. “If you’re, like, on Charles Street with the Red Line T structure on the side and three or four lanes of traffic coming together, or Post Office Square, with everything converging on the intersection, you get a kind of forced perspective,” Lin told me. “It looks great.”

The film tax credit has made it possible for Hollywood to get and stay excited about Boston’s Bostonness—a combination of weathered elegance, dinge, compactness, and perspective-rich geography that adds up to an ineffable quality movie people like to call “authentic.” What they really mean is that Boston looks like a place where people have lived for a few centuries and that’s not exactly like everywhere else and actually has four seasons, but they can still get it to look like whatever they want it to look like. Charlie Harrington, a veteran location scout, told me, “When I was a location manager in L.A., we

had to work incredibly hard to find places that looked like the East Coast. But here, the director will get off the plane at Logan and ride into town through one of the old tunnels and he'll say, "This tunnel is fantastic! I want to shoot in here!"

Harrington has worked all over the world but he is from Cohasset, 25 miles southeast of Boston, and he moved back to the area once the film tax-credit renaissance got under way in earnest. He represents one more crucial supporting factor in understanding the staying power of Hollywood on the Charles: the local talent pool. The filmmaking boom has encouraged the growth of a corps of experienced, locally based crew and other craft professionals, enough to mount two or three midsize productions at the same time. This matters a great deal to studios, which save money when they don't have to fly in crew from Los Angeles. Producers can now draw on the expertise of location scouts like Harrington, who intimately know the lay of their native land; makeup artists like Trish Seeney, who gave Amy Ryan her Dorchester party-girl up-all-night look for *Gone Baby Gone*; construction coordinators like Kurt Smith, who told me, "They want the local flavor, but it's not reality," which means that he spends a lot of time removing storm windows from New England houses because directors don't like the way they look; casting consultants like Angela Peri, who told me, "They wanted a Cambodian crack whore, so I went to Lowell and found some girls who could play a Cambodian crack whore"; and, of course, dialect coaches, whose work with actors playing neighborhood types attends to nuances of class and ethnic difference that would otherwise matter to only a handful of locals but now circulate around the world.

At this point, there are probably attentive moviegoers in Jakarta or Kiev, with a dozen Boston movies under their belts, who sit there in the dark, thinking, "This guy's supposed to be from Southie? Come on, that's more of an Eastie inflection!" The authenticity police devote much of their attention to the accents, and Boston is a city overendowed with volunteer authenticity police, but they're often really talking about something else when they slag Kevin Costner's unconvincingly dropped r's (What do you expect? He's from California) or applaud the Falmouth-born, Cambridge-bred Casey Affleck's pitch-perfect use of "guy." Rebekah Maggor, a dialect coach who has worked on Boston-area productions, told me, "Dialect is often a stand-in for a general

judgment of authenticity in a movie, which has as much to do with the script or the setting or something else.”

Exhibit A in support of Maggor’s point is *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, generally regarded as the granddaddy of all Boston movies. Its leads, Robert Mitchum and Peter Boyle, and many of the other actors don’t even bother to try imitating a serious Boston accent, but the movie gets everything else so ecstatically right—the gluey cream pie and watery coffee served in diners, the Dutch Masters-toned interiors of bars and apartments, the left-out-in-the-rain look of early-1970s Boston—that some of the most overweening zealots of localism remember the accents as impeccably rendered.

*

Now for the long answer. As time and space are measured by Hollywood, Boston and the other Massachusetts cities are strange, ancient places with distinctive physical forms, curious folkways, and alien languages, like Jerusalem or the cities of the Silk Road. Their quality of familiar exoticism only intensifies as New England’s industrial era recedes into history, joining the transcendentalists and Paul Revere’s ride. The industrial city’s gradual decay into romantic ruin, forming another layer atop the remains of the eighteenth-century commercial city and the seventeenth-century religious colony, is the bigger story about the changing form and function of Rust Belt cities that moves behind the formula plots of the crime stories, comedies, and family dramas shot in Boston and environs. The state’s efforts to woo film and TV production by establishing a film office (now part of the travel and tourism office) and a tax credit are classic postindustrial economic development strategies. The decline of manufacturing opens up a gap that can be filled, in part, by other sorts of enterprise as the New England mill city becomes a backwater in the industrial economy and acquires a new role in the postindustrial economy, especially the production of culture. Becoming a backwater enabled and demanded the policy moves that put Massachusetts back in the center of the cultural action as a hotbed of film production, and it added a crucial layer to the local aura of history and character.

Old manufacturing capitals that don’t make things anymore have turned to providing services, information, images, history, experiences. You can see the process in action in the repurposing of factory buildings to house museums,

arts spaces, loft housing, convention centers, and places to eat, drink, and shop—and make movies. And you can see the process onscreen in scenes like the long shot in *The Fighter* of Charlene knocking on the door of Micky's apartment with dark mill buildings looming in the background. Whatever's going on in the plot, scenes like this one are also about the possibilities that opened up when the factories closed.

So, drawing on the rich body of work supplied by Boston movies, let's sample some scenes from the postindustrial transformation of eastern Massachusetts.

The story begins with *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, and it begins in New York City, which set the template for urban movie style in the 1970s and provided the era's model of a city reinventing itself as a center of film production. Until the late 1960s, New York was known for documentaries and art films, but not for feature or TV production. That's when John Lindsay, a mayor looking for high-profile ways to attract new business to a city that was losing industrial jobs and restore glamour to a civic reputation damaged by the urban crisis, declared that he would "throw open the city to producers from Hollywood." He made a well-publicized recruiting visit to Los Angeles, founded a City Hall office to help with permits and police assistance, and otherwise made it attractive to shoot in New York. A lot of feature films and TV shows took advantage of the new policies, among them a stylistically distinct subset that did all they could to give themselves a timely New York street feel. *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger, 1969), *The French Connection* (Friedkin, 1971), *Shaft* (Parks, 1971), *Super Fly* (Parks, 1972), and other New York movies that appeared at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s pioneered an influential new stylistic synthesis, enlivening traditional Hollywood storytelling with extensive location shooting, documentary-style mobile cameras, traffic wipes, informal lighting and sound, informal and improvised line readings, and other elements borrowed from the French New Wave, Italian neorealism, and the documentaries and art films that had previously dominated the city's filmmaking scene. Especially when applied to the formula conventions of crime stories, this became the canonical style for telling stories of the postindustrial inner city, the emergence of which had helped to bring on the national urban crisis of the 1960s.⁷

Hollywood had avoided the inner city for much of that decade, but it returned to the subject with a vengeance once it had restocked its stylistic armament and its repertoire of landscape features, character types, and

storytelling habits. The industry now had the equipment it needed to explore the ghetto, barrio, white-ethnic enclave, embattled business district, and other features of the postindustrial metropolis of inner city and suburbs that was emerging through and around the receding industrial city of downtown and neighborhoods. If the resulting stories felt new, with wah-wah-pedaled guitar wailing in the background as characters said things like “Everything’s everything, baby,” it’s also true that D. W. Griffith would have had no trouble recognizing the chases and racial melodrama of *The French Connection* or *Super Fly*.

The insurgent New York-flavored style heavily influenced the director Peter Yates when he set out to adapt George V. Higgins’s Boston novel *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* for the big screen. The film tracks a crew of bank robbers and their associates, exemplary denizens of the dumpy old Boston who, like dinosaurs after a comet strikes the earth, can feel the world changing around them. Some respond by changing their ways, principally by giving up on old-school gangster omerta and learning to snitch to the feds; others, like the small-time knockaround guy Eddie “Fingers” Coyle, fail to adjust or come to it too late. Marrying style to theme, the movie stages a series of cold, distanced encounters between desperate characters who demonstrate and at times manage to articulate a distress and alienation that resonates with the processes of change visible in the city in which they move.⁸

Yates relies on the relationship between his camera and the landscape of Boston to do much of the work of communicating his characters’ anomie, disorientation, and sense of impending doom. J.D. Connor has observed that Yates sets their interactions as often as he can against notable examples of recent modernist architecture, especially the New Brutalism just beginning to emerge as the house style of monumental redevelopment in Boston at the time.⁹ The hit man Dillon meets with Foley, the federal agent who pays him to snitch, on City Hall Plaza against the backdrop of City Hall, the pièce de resistance of Government Center, a massive redevelopment project erected on the semi-blank slate created by the eradication of the Scollay Square neighborhood. Other characters meet at the parking garage at Government Center, with Walter Gropius’s JFK Federal Building in the background, and on Day Boulevard with the Prudential building rising up in the distance behind them. A gun dealer does business with hippie revolutionaries on

a riverside park bench in Cambridge with views of the Hancock building across the Charles and Alvar Aalto's Baker House dormitory at MIT across Memorial Drive. Dillon meets with a mobster at the new North Quincy Station on the T's Red Line, a strange angular landscape that appears to leave Dillon bemused.

The characters are like astronauts floating in an alien and potentially lethal void, but the architectural cues identify it as not a void so much as an emergent order. Postindustrial Boston was in that moment beginning to visibly succeed industrial Boston, which had been aging out for half a century or more. That older Boston's signature features—clusters of dense low-rise workers' housing, redbrick factory buildings, rail lines, waterside industrial facilities, neighborhood dives and hangouts—had been redefined as blight in the age of urban renewal, and some of that older landscape had been cleared to make way for poured-concrete and steel-and-glass structures suited to information-handling service work. We can see remnants of the older city in the glimpses we catch of Eddie Coyle's natural habitat: the cramped kitchen where he and his wife, who still has a strong Irish accent, use appliances that haven't been updated in decades; and the dark, woody bars and diners where Eddie hangs out with his cronies, places that reek of history—which, framed by the advance of the New Brutalist landscape, feels like obsolescence.

Jump ahead a generation or so to *Good Will Hunting*, skipping over *The Brink's Job*, *The Verdict* (Lumet, 1982), and a handful of other Boston movies made in the interim. By the late 1990s the state's film office had been up and running for decades, but the tax credit was still in the future. *Good Will Hunting* serves as the next major landmark because in it the phase of Boston just emerging in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* has matured to the point that it's competing for primacy with the old Boston, which has proportionally receded. Will Hunting, a hard-handed blue-collar genius from Southie, is a fantasy figure designed to bridge the two Bostons: he's good with his hands, a streetfighter who does demolition work that looks like the brick-by-brick disassembly of the old Boston; and he's also brilliant enough to succeed across the river in Cambridge, where he wows the mathematicians of MIT and, in the movie's most famous scene, humiliates an impossibly snooty and aggressive Harvard graduate student in a bar with a recitatif on the subject of the colonial American history that builds to a soaring cadenza of regular-guy rank-pulling:

“You dropped a hundred and fifty grand on a fuckin’ education you could have got for a dallah fifty in late chahges at the public library.”

By the late 1990s, Boston’s reputation had largely turned around, with the city increasingly regarded as a center of research, education, high tech, and high-end services that made it a poster child for postindustrial comeback rather than a sad exemplar of deindustrialization. The tag line “The New Boston” had been adopted by the city’s progrowth coalition of government and business interests and had become semi-canonical. In the movie the New Boston has progressed to the point of incipient dominance and the old neighborhoods of the city’s receding industrial order have begun to acquire an idealized gloss of esoteric potency, a figurative Old Country situated in the heart of the American city. Unlike the unevolved Eddie Coyle, Will Hunting, who’s so wicked smaht that he can crush you with his wits but can also kick your ass, has adapted to travel back and forth between the Old Neighborhood and the New Boston. As such, he serves as a one-man template for the glut of Boston movies to come, which will be populated by two main kinds of (largely male) characters: a majority of Irish and other white-ethnic tough guys from remnants of the immigrant-ethnic industrial neighborhood order in Southie, Dorchester, Charlestown, and outlying cognates like Lowell; and a minority of fast-talking overeducated types from elsewhere, often associated with Harvard or MIT.

By the time we get to *The Departed*, just on the cusp of the implementation of the full 25 percent tax credit, habits for representing Old Neighborhood guys (Will Hunting’s regular-guy side, as opposed to his genius side) have been worked out in greater detail in *Monument Ave.*, *The Boondock Saints*, and *Mystic River*, among others. In these and other movies the Old Neighborhood, a physical and cultural holdover of the urban orders fashioned by white-ethnic immigrants to the industrial city, has become a mythic space on a par with the frontier in the Western: a territory understood to produce character types whose violent potency fancifully expresses their connection to history. As the prominent Boston writer Dennis Lehane (several of whose novels have been adapted into movies) and others have pointed out, this idealization of Boston’s avatars of the Old Neighborhood has happened as the places in the city that once exemplified the industrial neighborhood order have lost much of the immigrant-ethnic and blue-collar

character that the movies fetishize.¹⁰ Young professionals have descended on Southie and Charlestown, in particular, and you have to look harder and harder in such places to find old-school tribal street culture rooted in manual labor and a set of high-industrial-era institutions that included the parish church, saloon, union hall, immigrant social club, and neighborhood-level organizational strata of the ethnic political machine. This arrangement, rooted in the nineteenth century, once tended to foster the sort of clannish criminality traditionally practiced by do-or-die newcomers to America from Ireland and Italy, but that was long ago.

Two early scenes exemplify how *The Departed* wallows in the notion that this kind of tribalism persists in Boston. The movie's opening sequence, set to the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter," offers images of Boston's school desegregation crisis of the 1970s as a nonfiction frame around the movie's fictional crime-story plot. In a voice-over, Frank Costello, a character played by Jack Nicholson and based on the Boston archcriminal James "Whitey" Bulger, recasts the story of Boston's notorious struggles over school busing as a tale of white-ethnic potency. The busing crisis, which in the past helped give Boston a reputation as America's most racist city (though there have been many claimants to that distinction), is now ripe for rereading. First, though, Costello offers a thumbnail history lesson. Italian "headbreakers, true guineas," showed their strength when they "took over their piece of the city," and the Irish rose up from abjection to seize not just their own neighborhoods but the presidency as well. In his view, "the niggers" haven't learned the fundamental Old Neighborhood truth that you take what you want because nobody's going to give you your fair share, no matter how eloquently or insistently you ask for it. Costello's use of the n-word, like the vivid memories evoked by the movie of white Bostonians chanting and throwing rocks at school buses full of black children, has been recast here as a sign not of atavistic racism but of atavistic potency derived from the Old Neighborhood's ethnic and class cohesion. Costello's not afraid to use the word because he's strong enough not to worry whether anyone might take violent offense, and of course he doesn't care if black people or overeducated types in Cambridge think he's a racist. What matters most in the world of the movie is the intensity of one's belonging to the Old Neighborhood, and using the word marks him as a supremely unreconstructed old-school exemplar of that place.

The other scene is a similarly introductory montage, set to the Dropkick Murphys' anthem "Shipping Up to Boston," in which we see a policeman named Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) serve time in jail to establish his cover as a criminal so that he can infiltrate Costello's gang. The director, Martin Scorsese, apparently went out of his way to recruit the runtiest white guys he could find to play the inmates in the scene, both to help the lissome DiCaprio fit in and also to emphasize the notion that they're terrifying simply because they're white guys from Boston, not because they're intimidatingly enormous. The black inmates appear to be tiptoeing around them, a dynamic exemplified by the image of Costigan doing dips in his cell as a black inmate prays fervently in the next one. Later, on his way out of lockup, Costigan runs into a guy who asks if he's related to Sean Costigan from L Street, in Southie—Billy's cousin, of course. "Connected, not too bright," says the other guy; "I mean, no offense." Hey, none taken. You can feel the delight of Scorsese, whose body of work displays a tendency toward hero-worship of white-ethnic gangsters (lightly covered by the occasional headfake toward recognizing their monstrousness), at having discovered a fresh motherlode of Serious White People. Ripe for imbuing with traits associated with the increasingly myth-encrusted industrial neighborhood order, his Boston Irish tough guys have arrived in his oeuvre just in time to augment the nearly tapped-out supply of Italian American hardcases from New York.

The Departed is a remake of a Hong Kong movie, *Infernal Affairs* (Lau and Mak, 2002). *Fever Pitch*, a romantic comedy about diehard Red Sox fans, is an adaptation of Nick Hornby's novel about diehard Arsenal Football Club fans. In both cases, Hollywood's desire to retell a foreign story in a resonant American location led to Boston, a city that was coming more and more to stand for the general principle of authentic locality.

When the film tax credit went into full effect in 2007, the ground had already been prepared for the glut of movies and TV shows that followed to work out the permutations of the meaning of locality, Boston-style. Not all of those shades of meaning can be labeled as conscious meditations on postindustrial transformation, of course, but that historical process and its consequences suffuses a growing body of work.

Sometimes the relationship is explicit, visible on the surface of the work. Take, for example, *The Company Men*, a male weepie about the sorrows wrought

upon corporate executives by deindustrialization. In one crucial scene, two former colleagues take a walk in a silent, rusting, broken-windowed shipyard after the funeral of a third former colleague, Phil, who worked his way up into the executive suite from the shopfloor and committed suicide when he was fired in a round of corporate downsizing. Gene (Tommy Lee Jones) segues from talking about Phil's glory days as a welder to rhapsodizing about the kind of masculinity enabled by industrial work. "We used to make something here, before we got lost in the paperwork," Gene says, while the younger Bobby (the ubiquitous Ben Affleck) listens respectfully.

Two thousand men, three shifts a day, six thousand men. An honest wage, in that room. Fed their kids, bought homes, made enough to send their kids to college, buy a second car. Building something they could see—not just figures on a balance sheet but a *ship* they can see, smell, touch. Those men knew their worth, knew who they were.

The movie's male characters have lost touch with their worth, with who they are, and it becomes clearer as the story proceeds that the real crisis wasn't getting fired, it was the disorientation of moving from blue-collar to white-collar work. Bobby is tellingly saved from despair by Jack, his brother-in-law (Kevin Costner, whose working-class Boston accent wobbles to the point that he sometimes sounds like Jim Garrison in *JFK* [Stone, 1991]), a contractor who hires him to help rebuild a house. The honest manual labor reconnects Bobby to his working-class roots, and by the end of the movie, with the shipping company that stands for the American manufacturing sector miraculously revived, Bobby has regained his confidence and even begun to recover his own long-suppressed Boston accent.

It requires no interpretive stretch to see *The Company Men* as a meditation on what has been gained and lost in the transformation of work and everything connected to it—which is just about everything—in the former manufacturing capitals of the Rust Belt. The script, the camera, and the characters all oblige us to perform such a reading. In many other cases, though, that meditation proceeds in the background, or *sub rosa*, and we are invited rather than ordered to read the film in a postindustrial frame. The earlier-mentioned scene from *The Fighter* in which Charlene confronts Micky at his apartment with the brooding textile mill buildings of Lowell in the background would be

a good example. The opportunities for storytelling opened up by the closing of those factories form part of that scene's implicit subject matter, even if the usual romantic complications occupy the foreground, and the Oscars handed out to actors in the movie—Christian Bale and Melissa de Leo—can be seen as rewards for the acrobatic feat of inhabiting the consciousness of regular guys and gals from places like Lowell that have been violently reshaped by deindustrialization. Dialect coaches in the Boston area who have long made their living by helping working-class people shed their accents so that they can compete for service jobs can now also profit from reversing the process, securing lucrative assignments from film productions to teach millionaires from elsewhere to sound like local types who will never belong anywhere other than on the shopfloors of defunct factories and in the neighborhoods gutted and cast adrift by the closing of those factories.

As the thematics of the Boston movie become more familiar and redundant, greater and greater compression becomes possible. Asked in *The Town* by Doug (yes, Ben Affleck, again) about the rumor that she recently got into a fight on the street, Krista (Blake Lively) says: "Fuckin' Somalian started talking shit while I was with my daughter. All these here yuppies out here, they think there's no more serious white people in Charlestown. So they can fuckin' talk shit? No." That brief speech renders the Old Neighborhood in schematic perspective: squeezed from above by educated professionals employed in Boston's booming service sector and from below by the waves of post-1965 immigrants who have helped make Boston a majority-minority city. With no more honest skilled labor to support the industrial white working class's former way of life, no more reinforcements coming over from the Old Country, and the institutional and cultural orders of the Old Neighborhood fraying rapidly, what's left, in the logic of the Boston crime movie, besides oxycontin and bank robbery?

The Town imagines a figurative solution to the Old Neighborhood's ongoing crisis of obsolescence by proposing an alliance with "the yuppies," as Doug moves on from Krista, his best friend's sister, to Claire, a clerk who works in one of the banks he has robbed (in a heist scene that pays homage to *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*). Doug's romance with Claire worries his Old Neighborhood associates not only because she's a witness to one of his crimes, but also because she represents the class of educated outsiders moving into Charlestown and encroaching on unreconstructable Old Neighborhood types

like Krista and her brother James (Jeremy Renner), Doug's best friend and fellow bank robber. The semi-reconstructed Doug's romance with Claire, and especially the savage beating for bothering Claire that he and James give to an ethnically ambiguous guy who lives in the projects, extends the fantasy project of *Good Will Hunting*: reconciling the old and new Bostons in such a way that the old Boston retains the essence of its potent vitality.

But the principal attraction of the Old Neighborhood remains its insularity and exoticism, its promise of access to a throwback tribalism that is simultaneously disappearing and gloriously persistent. *The Town* offers its own version of *Gone Baby Gone*'s little boy on a bike in a scene in which the FBI agent Adam Frawley, played by Jon Hamm, returns to his car after an unsuccessful stakeout in Charlestown to find that somebody has left a note on the back windshield of his car telling him to go fuck himself. It's from Doug the bank robber, who has used his working-class local knowledge to slip through a massive dragnet, first leaping between rooftops and then borrowing his father's old bus-driver's uniform to escape at the wheel of a city bus (which Doug, being a regular guy, of course knows how to drive). But the note could just as easily be from anyone in the neighborhood: after all, Adam's not from around here. "We are a *national* organization," Adam reminds Claire, and that—plus his scrupulous pronunciation of the r's in "are" and "organization"—is exactly what makes him the logical recipient of such a note.

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Postindustrial Boston has been on a largely sustained economic upswing since emerging in the 1980s from of its century-long industrial decline, and in that sense is unlike New York in the 1970s, which was descending into a major economic crisis that would lead to the brink of bankruptcy, but the two cities' situations are analogous in that both match a reputation for high-cultural sophistication and wealth with a gallery of stock street and neighborhood characters infused with local color. The Boston boom has been narrower in its exploitation of its resources, however, not only less stylistically innovative but also less inclusive. The New York movies of the late 1960s and 1970s offered a range of representative characters. Think of Jill Clayburgh in *An Unmarried Woman* (Mazursky, 1978) or Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall* (Allen, 1977), for instance, and, even if we just consider standard male action heroes of the kind

who overpopulate Boston movies, the New York movies of the period feature white-ethnic regular guys like the Corleones and *The French Connection's* Popeye Doyle, black Caesars like Shaft and *Super Fly's* Priest, and migrants from the western played by Eastwood and Charles Bronson. *Good Will Hunting* remains the template for Boston movies because its hero manages to embody both the Irish working-class hero from the Old Neighborhood and the fast-talking savant affiliated with Harvard or MIT, almost exclusively the only two types who matter (the former a great deal more than the latter) in Boston movies so far.

The Massachusetts movie boom may not be as significant as New York's, but it's happening in an era when the continuing expansion of Hollywood's international reach ensures greater circulation. One side effect has been to create an odd wrinkle in the globalization of popular culture. The subset of Boston-area movies that try to achieve an authentic-feeling local quality forms an exception to the general rule that Hollywood has tended to remove specialized regional American content from its movies as it has sold more and more to a world audience. As Boston has come to stand for the principle of authentic locality in American movies, as filmmakers fall into the habit of turning to Boston to exercise an interest in the local as a theme, the fetish for Bostonness has returned regional content to American movies with a vengeance. That's how mythmakers from elsewhere like Scorsese and Mel Gibson have found themselves flocking to Boston to join homegrown stars like the Afflecks and Wahlbergs, and that's how those moviegoers in Jakarta or Kiev come to find themselves exclaiming, "You can't say that in a bar on Dot Ave! Somebody's gonna get tuned up!" It may be that artists and audiences in a self-consciously globalizing age are hungry for any kind of local feel at all—even, weirdly, Boston's.

That local feel has become canonical to the point that it's easily gestured at and made fun of. *Saturday Night Live's* fake Dunkin' Donuts ad starring Casey Affleck and Seth Meyers's trailer for an invented blockbuster entitled *Boston Accent* are the best-known parodies. Meyers's spoof was so spot-on that the trailer for the deadly serious *Patriots Day*, released many months later, appeared to quote one of his joke trailer's intentionally hackneyed images, a close-up shot of Boston police patch. *The Heat*, a comic take on the cop buddy picture, exploits audience assumptions learned from other

Boston movies for many of its yuks. For instance, there's a throwaway scene in which a woman drives by, cranking the band Boston's "More Than a Feeling," and gives the finger to Mullins (Melissa McCarthy), the crude but effective Boston cop. "Who was that?" asks Ashburn (Sandra Bullock), the proper but deceptively tough FBI agent. "My mom," says Mullins. It's a little-boy-on-a-bike scene, this time played for laughs. Then there's the conversation in which McCarthy's relatives try to grill Bullock about whether she's a narc but she can't understand them through their accents. And the very fact of a female buddy picture pokes implicit fun at the unremitting maleness of the Boston movies as a whole.

The formation that produces canonical Boston movies—a set of stylistic and thematic habits undergirded by a material foundation of state economic policy, local governmental cooperation, studio money, and allied local enterprises that feed like oxpeckers off the studios' spending—has become dominant enough to feel oppressive. *Patriots Day*, in particular, inspired even parochially jingoistic Bostonian observers to wonder whether turning the civic trauma of the marathon bombings into the occasion for just another regular-guy wish-fulfillment vehicle for Mark Wahlberg was a good idea after all.¹¹ One small-time local filmmaker, Garth Donovan, whose productions cost so little that they don't even qualify for the tax credit, has set out expressly to make Boston-area movies that don't conform to the canonical profile. His best-known film, *Phillip the Fossil* (Donovan, 2011), about a thirtyish landscaper in suburban Needham who hangs out with high school kids, features working-class characters who aren't from the myth-encrusted Old Neighborhood. "I'm from Needham, and I wanted to make a movie about people like the ones I grew up with, but I didn't want to make a 'Boston film,'" Donovan told me in 2011.

Look, I thought *The Fighter*, for instance, was very well done, but that depiction of Boston, I'm tired of it. It's played out. I'm against having to have that accent and tell that same story as "This is what Boston is." Some of the Boston films, it's so contrived and forced. There are a lot of other kinds of experiences around here.

One way he tried to give his Boston-area movie an authentic working-class feel, in other words, was to avoid the Boston accent generally regarded

as the most reliable marker of the authenticity of a Boston film because it indicates direct connection to the immigrant-ethnic past and the industrial neighborhood order.

Even within the canonical heart of the formation, there are signs of curdling. In very different ways, both *Black Mass*, a by-the-numbers gangster movie, and *Spotlight*, an Oscar-winning prestige production on the model of *All the President's Men*, both released in 2015, locate a systemic and long-festering rottenness at the core of the same Old Neighborhood that has been so passionately idealized by Boston movies. In *Black Mass*, a movie made inevitable by the capture of Whitey Bulger after his many years on the FBI's most wanted list, the neighborhood gangster is more horror-movie villain than hero. Physically repellent (in the Hollywood universe of artificially perfect dentition, Johnny Depp's scrupulously recreated bad teeth serve as shorthand for horribleness) and morally indefensible (he kills helpless, begging victims with the remorseless blandness of Jason in the *Friday the 13th* franchise), Whitey's also a fink and a rat, protected by a childhood buddy from Southie who has become an FBI agent. There's almost nothing left in this movie of the Old Neighborhood aura of old-school masculinity and loyalty; the old ways are just grotesque and cruel. In *Spotlight*, the *Globe's* investigation of sexually predatory priests protected by the archdiocese reveals another racket that has been preying on the good people of the Old Neighborhood for generations, so deeply woven into the fabric of neighborhood institutions that rooting it out means pulling up the whole structure and exposing its hateful true nature to the light. This thematic strain positing some kind of original sin tainting the Old Neighborhood can be detected in earlier Boston movies—in *Mystic River*, when one of the child abductors flashes a Jesuit ring, and in *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, in which the neighborhood gangsters start informing for the feds to stay afloat in a city that has begun to change around them—but in the two recent films it has moved to center stage and become the principal theme.

The curdling is by no means universal. *Patriots Day*, for example, released in 2016, demonstrates that the Boston movie is still capable of unironic indulgence in its traditional regular-guy pieties. But the inability to sustain the idealized fantasy of the Old Neighborhood seems to be advancing. One way to read its progression, especially if you include *The Heat* and other parodies of

Boston movies, is to recognize that, while the tax credit and Boston's cultural function of standing for locality in American movies may continue to attract production to the city, it's getting harder and harder to tell Old Neighborhood stories with a straight face as industrial Boston and its signature ways of life slip ever farther into postindustrial Boston's past. A self-consciously hard-bitten realism has been the main house style of the Boston movie, but it's getting more difficult to suspend disbelief in that particular fashion, and it's therefore getting easier to see the local as contrived rather than authentic. At this point, as Boston stories about Irish tough guys exemplifying the industrial neighborhood order rapidly approach the status of pure fantasy, such stories increasingly belong to the realm of historical romance. Like smoothbore cannons and crinoline skirts, "Go fuck ya mothah" marks a lost world.

Notes

- 1 This chapter draws upon, updates, and expands an argument made in partial, preliminary form in three previously published articles: "The Cult of Micky Ward in Massachusetts," in *Rooting for the Home Team: Sport, Community, and Identity*, ed. Daniel Nathan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, Sport and Society series, 2013), 205–217; "Hollywood on the Charles," *Boston* (January 2012), 39–43; "A Boston Film without the Stereotypes," *Boston Globe*, April 27, 2011, http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2011/04/27/a_boston_film_without_the_stereotypes/. Quotations not otherwise cited in this chapter were collected by the author in personal interviews conducted in the course of reporting those three articles.
- 2 See Massachusetts Film Office, "Production Tax Incentives," <http://www.mafilm.org/production-tax-incentives/> and Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Revenue, "Report on the Impact of Massachusetts Film Tax Incentives through Calendar Year 2014," <http://www.mass.gov/dor/docs/dor/news/reportcalendaryear2014.pdf>.
- 3 Candace Jones and Pacey Foster, "Film Offices as Brokers: Cultivating and Connecting Local Talent to Hollywood," in *Brokerage and Production in the American and French Entertainment Industries: Invisible Hands in Cultural Markets*, ed. Violaine Roussel and Denise Bielby (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 171–188.

- 4 Paul Sherman, *Big Screen Boston: From Mystery Street to The Departed and Beyond* (Malden, MA: Black Bars Publishing, 2008), i–ii.
- 5 To track the 2010 dip and 2011 recovery in film production in Massachusetts, compare the key findings of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Revenue’s 2010 “Report on the Impact of Massachusetts Film Tax Incentives,” <http://www.mass.gov/dor/docs/dor/news/reportcalendaryear2010.pdf> to the key findings of its 2011 “Report on the Impact of Massachusetts Film Tax Incentives,” <http://www.mass.gov/dor/docs/dor/news/reportcalendaryear2011.pdf>. The terms of the public debate in 2010 about capping the film tax credit were outlined in a *Boston Globe* editorial: “Film Tax Credit Boosts State, Shouldn’t Be Subject to Cap,” February 14, 2010, http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/editorials/articles/2010/02/14/film_tax_credit_boosts_state_shouldnt_be_subject_to_cap/.
- 6 On various states’ film tax incentives, see Peter Caranicas and Rachel Abrams, “Runaway Production: The United States of Tax Incentives,” *Variety*, August 27, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/biz/news/runaway-production-the-united-states-of-tax-incentives-1200589317/> and Bryn Elise Sandberg, “Film and TV Tax Incentives: A State-by-State Guide,” *Hollywood Reporter*, May 6, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/film-tv-tax-incentives-a-885699>.
- 7 I have told the story of New York’s role in the revision of Hollywood’s depiction of the inner city in *Good with Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 105–166; also, See Lawrence Webb’s chapter in this volume for further discussion of the Mayor’s Office of Motion Pictures and Television in New York City. See Nathan Koob’s chapter in this volume for further discussion of city film offices.
- 8 See Stanley Corkin’s chapter in this volume for further discussion of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*.
- 9 J.D. Connor, “The Modern Sounds of Modern Massachusetts: *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* and the Voice of Southie,” a paper that was part of a session cleverly entitled “The Global Southie: Boston and the Cinema of Class,” presented at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies meeting, March 24, 2012. I served as chair and commentator for the session. For more on the New Brutalism and the New Boston, see *Heroic: Concrete Architecture and the New Boston*, ed. Mark Pasnik, Michael Kubo, and Chris Grimsley (New York: Monacelli Press, 2015).
- 10 Dennis Lehane, “Introduction: Tribalism and Knuckleheads,” in *Boston Noir*, ed. Dennis Lehane (New York: Akashic Books, 2009), 12–13.

- 11 Kevin Cullen, a metro columnist in the *Globe* who cultivates a regular-guy Bostonian persona, devoted multiple columns to thinking about the debate over the appropriateness and timing of *Patriots Day*. See, especially, “Patriots Day’ Is Not Just a Movie. It’s Personal,” *Boston Globe*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/12/23/not-just-movie-personal/BqVgBLmPBYbX06IB1KBSmM/story.html> and “Marathon Bombings Hero Will Look away This Time,” *Boston Globe*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/massachusetts/2016/03/14/the-real-world-and-hollywood/e7X2sO6QTKyGYGdfDC5vcM/story.html>.