

Movie critique: gangs of new york assignment

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Jennifer Lawson American History Project #2 Movie Critique Gangs of New York "Gangs of New York" is a historical crime film which takes place in New York in the 1840s-1860s. The film was released in 2002. It was directed by Martin Scorsese, and written by Jay Cocks, Steven Zaillian and Kenneth Lonergan. It is loosely inspired by Herbert Asbury's 1928 nonfiction book The Gangs of New York. The film was critically acclaimed with 10 Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture and Best Director. The film begins in the winter of 1847, with a battle in the snow-covered streets of the Five Points between the Dead Rabbits and the Natives.

The Five Points was a run-down slum in the middle of Manhattan. This is the first obvious inconsistency. The fight that is being portrayed in this scene did not actually take place until July 4, 1857 (Brown, 2003, p. 5). In reality, the gang referred to in the film as "the Natives" was actually called "The Bowery Boys". This particular fight attracted much attention due to its "extraordinarily high" number of deaths and injuries and "because of the use of guns" (Brown 2003 p. 5). There were twelve deaths and 37 injuries as a result of this battle.

As depicted in the film, the weaponry utilized in this famous battle consisted of brickbats, clubs and fists. However, the other weapons wielded in the on-screen battle, including cleavers and axes, were not historically accurate. Joshua Brown, executive director of the American Social History Project at The Graduate Center, City University of New York, noted that "the ensuing mutilations and massive body counts misrepresent the extent and nature of the antebellum gang violence." (Brown, 2003, p. 5) The Five Points was an extremely dirty and run-down slum in Manhattan in the 1800s.

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Historians have said that there was a brothel in nearly every building (Eynon, 2007). As far as the dirtiness, clothing and poverty depicted in the film, most would agree that this is fairly accurate. Some historians would even say that it could have been dirtier. The Five Points was known for being a congested and disease ridden area, full of prostitutes and alcoholics. Disease spread quickly and easily and was more rampant among those residing there because of the crowding and overpopulation. In the 1840s, there was a Great Famine in Ireland.

Ireland had become a weakened country as a result of two decades of English rule. There were millions of fatalities during the Great Famine due to Ireland's lack of ability to overcome the crisis. The Irish were migrating to New York in large numbers. " Between 1845 and 1855 over two million Irish fled to America looking for work, security and freedom from the English rule. " (Eynon, 2007, p. 3) The influx of Irish immigrants caused overcrowding in New York especially and led to the turf wars and battles which were depicted in the film.

The Irish were not welcome in the Five Points and treated almost as poorly as the African Americans at the time. Due to the overpopulation, housing was limited. This was well depicted in the film as well, with multiple beds in each room and old breweries that had been turned into housing for the poor. America was becoming more industrialized throughout the 1800s with expansion toward the east and the production of the railroad system. The different classes were emerging in New York and a more distinct segregation between the rich and the poor was becoming apparent.

The Five Points was one of the biggest slums in the city and looked down upon by the wealthy and middle class. The Protestants believed that poverty was a result of immorality and looked down upon the residents of the Five Points. (Eynon, 2007, p. 5) The rapid industrialization in New York led to an abundance of jobs. The dirtiest and most dangerous were left to the newly arrived Irish immigrants. This was for a variety of reasons. The Irish that migrated to New York after the Great Famine in Ireland were poor and uneducated; many of them could not even speak English. (Eynon, 2007, p.) Those that had immigrated before the Great Famine came with skills and a means of providing for themselves by using those skills to their advantage and were more accepted by the Americans. The film would have been much more accurate if it would have shown more Irish women working. The area was so poverty stricken that even the women and children had to work to make ends meet. Here is yet another inconsistency in the theater scene of the film where the audience threw fresh fruit and vegetables to the stage. The residents of the Five Points were way too poor to be throwing good food for any reason, let alone at the theater!

The amount of African Americans in the film was relatively small in number compared to the actual population of African Americans at the time. There were only about 20 African Americans throughout the movie which is extremely inaccurate. The African American community was much larger due to the expansion and rise of slavery. There was also a larger Chinese community depicted than what actually existed at the time. Chinese immigrants were not nearly as abundant in real life in the 1850s as the film portrays. When the Chinese did migrate to American, most of them were in

California. The Brown Quarterly, 2000) The last major fight in the Gangs of New York was between the Natives, still led by Bill the Butcher and Amsterdam, Priest Vallon's son. This battle was about to begin right in the middle of the Draft Riots of 1863. Martin Scorsese went to great lengths and undoubtedly spent a large chunk of his budget on making sure that the Draft Riots of 1863 were accurately depicted. Although New York had provided many soldiers to the Union Army in the beginning of the civil war, they were now provided too few. New York wasn't making its recruitment quota, which left them susceptible to the draft.

The Union Army passed the Conscription Act in 1863 (The Lincoln Institute, 2002-2009). This act stated that all men from the ages of 18-45 were eligible to be drafted to the Union Army. The only way to avoid the draft was to pay \$300 to buy your freedom. This infuriated people because only the rich had enough money to buy their way out of the draft. Needless to say, the rich never had to worry about risking their lives for their country. The Draft Riots of 1863 were a result of all of this built up anger that the lower classes had for the government, the Conscription Act of 1862, and the rich who were buying their way out of it.

The draft was aimed at the city of New York because of the lack of recruits that came from New York. The riots started with people crowding the streets, breaking windows of public offices, police stations, stores, etc. This was pretty accurately portrayed by Scorsese in the film. They also raided houses of the rich and were setting buildings and houses on fire, just as we saw in the movie. There were police being attacked and African Americans being beaten and killed in the streets. This riot lasted for 3 days.

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Scorsese didn't get the entire riot in the movie because he ended the film with the last fight between Amsterdam and Bill the Butcher. Visually, I think Scorsese did a wonderful job of depicting the era and extreme violence in the Five Points. Although there were some inaccuracies with his character, Bill the Butcher, I believe it was all for the good of the plot and the movie. This film was very educational and interesting. It helped me put into perspective what the people of New York were going through at that time and how strongly they felt about the Civil War and the draft. Bibliography