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The Gangster Film: A Welcomed Tragedy

The classic gangster film *Scarface*, directed by Howard Hawks in 1932, typifies the gangster genre with its depiction of gang warfare during the American Prohibition era. Exhibited to an audience in the midst of the Great Depression, *Scarface* welcomed filmgoers to identify with its themes of social unrest and the drive for success. The film's protagonist, Tony Camonte follows the tragic hero's conventional "rise and fall" scenario until his eventual demise, an essential feature of the gangster genre that can be interpreted as a critique of American culture. Finally, Robert Warshow's essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" claims that the gangster film, as a form of art, conveys a rejection of American optimism. While the gangster film genre provided spectators with cathartic relief from the social tensions brought about by the Great Depression, it presented a critical discourse on American mass culture.

Resulting from Great Depression, the inequitable distribution of wealth, coupled with the effects of Prohibition, created an urban environment constricted by social tensions. The gangster film genre found its success by inviting spectator identification from the masses of working-class citizens who felt shackled by their socioeconomic status. Phil Hardy proposes that "its popularity stemmed in no small part from its articulation of the complex network of feelings generated in the USA by the Depression" (Nowell-Smith, 306). To consider this in the context of *Scarface*, the charismatic Tony Camonte possesses a propensity to undermine societal rules, a quality with which the repressed audiences of the 1930's could especially identify. Spectators could watch Tony defy American social constructs and insert himself into higher society, offering a source of retribution to those members of the audience who felt tethered to working-class life. Films like *Scarface* can rightfully be seen as a commentary on pertinent social issues of the 1930's like economic conditions and organized crime, but they served a more important role as a cathartic outlet for the social tensions generated by 1930's America.

The gangster film follows a generic template that outlines the protagonist's rapid social climb and his subsequent demise. *Scarface* is no exception to this model, as Tony's reckless accumulation of power signifies a progression towards his inevitable downfall, culminating with his death and establishing him as a tragic hero, characteristic of the gangster

genre. The film presents a childlike enthrallment with wealth and power, conveyed by Tony's indulgence in lavish home furnishings and attire. Another example of this is his fascination with the Tommy gun, as if it were a newly-found toy. In one scene, Tony, clutching the machine gun, informs Johnny with an unmasked megalomaniacal tone, "There's only one thing that gets orders and gives orders—and *this* is it" (Scarface, 1932). Warshow observes that the tragic hero of the gangster genre gains his powerful status through asserting his individualism, yet ironically this is often what leads to his death. While this remains true, what differentiates *Scarface* from other gangster films is Tony's acknowledgement of his need for others, specifically his sister, Cesca. In his final moments, Tony confesses, "You can't leave me here all alone…I'm no good without you, Cesca. I'm no good with myself" (Scarface, 1932). The tragic hero procures his wealth and power through precisely the same actions that ruin him: to establish himself as an individual ultimately leaves him defenseless.

As an art form, the gangster film provides a critique on American culture's optimism and potential for individual success. In his essay, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," Robert Warshow contends that the gangster film serves as a foil to the positive attitude advertised by American mass culture, and like very few other fields of art it offers a literal and undisguised criticism of social optimism. It is often unknown to the spectator whether the protagonist, like Tony Camonte, could have avoided his life of crime or if it was thrust upon him by society's cruel fate. Yet the inescapable series of events that consumes the hero's life is a reflected (while distorted) image of American life. Warshow notes, "the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself" (Braudy and Cohen, 578). Moreover, gangster's fated existence presents a paradox that leads Susan Hayward to claim, "the gangster embodies the contradictions inherent in the American Dream" (Hayward, 174); success can only be achieved through criminality, yet criminality must ultimately fail. As Warshow theorizes, "every production of mass culture is a public act and must conform with accepted notions of the public good" (Braudy and Cohen, 576). For this reason, the gangster's eventual downfall at the end of the film is what Hayward describes as an "ideological necessity" (Hayward, 174). Furthermore, the fact that martyrdom is an inescapable fate for our tragic hero begs a critique of American culture; the mandatory rise and fall scenario of the gangster film rejects the optimism so central to mass culture. The

gangster genre indicates that if prosperity is contingent on criminal aggression, American life itself is doomed for tragedy.

Released in the setting of the Great Depression, *Scarface* reflects the social issues of its time. Socioeconomic tension directly resulting from the country's economic decline created a context in which spectators could identify with the gangster's rejection of societal conventions. Moviegoers championed the gangsters who defied American social structure to pursue wealth and power. Thus our protagonist Tony Camonte can be considered an embellished personification of the social unrest of the period. Additionally, Warshow's theory of the gangster genre regards the role of the tragic hero as a commentary on American mass culture: the notion that the gangster is doomed to fail challenges American optimism. *Scarface* communicated the sentiments of the 1930's American working class, inviting audiences to accompany Tony on his climb to the top while undoubtedly aware that he must ultimately fail.

Works Cited

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