

HUMANIZING THE GANGSTER: AN EXAMINATION INTO THE CHARACTER
FROM HAWKS' TO DePALMA'S *SCARFACE*

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis determines why the film gangster gained acceptance in American society through an examination of both the 1932 and 1983 versions of *Scarface*. The gangster depicted in the earlier film was characterized as a “monster” that committed heinous crimes with no remorse. This was the predominant view of the gangster until the late 1960s. However, as American society changed, so did the view of the gangster. Landmark films in the gangster genre like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather* presented a gangster character that was no longer a monster; rather, a gangster that had become humanized. An examination into this genre shift is explored using Howard Hawks’ and Brian DePalma’s *Scarface*. The earlier film represents the more classical

view of the gangster as a “monster,” while DePalma’s *Scarface* presents the gangster in a far more positive light. A study of the plot, setting, characters, themes, motifs, and props found in both films present a different view of the gangster, one that is more a dark, unsavory character in the 1932 *Scarface* and one that is a more respectable, almost sympathetic character in the 1983 version.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Rarely is there a film released by a major Hollywood studio (MGM, Walt Disney, etc) that cannot be classified into a certain genre. Most films fall into categories like Action/Adventure, Comedy, Drama, Horror, Musical, Science Fiction or Western. Being able to classify films by these genres helps the studios to market the films to certain groups based on the particular genres they prefer. Tudor (1977) states, “To call a film a ‘Western’ is thought of as somehow saying something interesting or important about it. To fit it into a [classification] of films suggests we presumably have some general knowledge about it. To say a film is a ‘Western’ is immediately to say that it shares some indefinable ‘X’ [qualities or conventions] with other films we call ‘Westerns’” (p.16). If a group of films share certain conventions like plot, themes, settings, characters, iconography, and motifs, then the films will most likely be classified under a certain genre, even though they may only have minimal similarities between them.

The gangster film genre will be explored and examined in this thesis. From the earliest films that defined the genre to landmark films that reinvented the genre to modern day films that continually reshape the genre, the gangster film has been noteworthy and commercially viable for almost a century now. The genre conventions will be thoroughly investigated in this thesis, with the main focus being on the gangster character, in an attempt to explain the genre and the perceived change in the genre in the

century it has been in existence. The two films that will be analyzed are *Scarface: Shame of the Nation* (1932) and *Scarface* (1983). These two films were chosen not only because they share the same title, but also because they are both considered culturally significant and definitive films in the gangster genre. The importance of both films was seen most recently in June 2008 when the American Film Institute (AFI) named both films to their list of the Top 10 films in the gangster genre. Among the hundreds of so called “gangster” films that have been released, these two stand out as two of the absolute best in the genre.

A New Genre Emerges

As the 1920s came to a close and as America was in the throes of the Great Depression, a new genre of film became popular. With 1928’s *Lights of New York* the “gangster” film genre as we know it today was born. The film, also having the distinction of being the first to feature synchronous dialogue throughout, was a hit for Warner Bros., the studio that produced it. While there had been “gangster” movies made during the silent era, most notably D.W. Griffith’s *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), the films by and large were forgetful and had no real impact on society. The genre “originated as a response to both topical events and sociological commentary” (Wilson, 2000). While the pre-sound gangster films addressed this, it was not until the late 1920s that the films began to resonate with audiences, and with their new found importance, they became topics of intense debate.

Two of the most important films in the genre, considered to be landmarks, were released in the early 1930s. *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* (1931) were largely

influential and set the standard for the modern gangster film. A year later, famed director Howard Hawks released *Scarface* (1932), written by former journalist Ben Hecht. The film was originally shot in 1930, but problems with the censor board kept the film from being released until 1932. Considered to be one of the most violent films ever made at the time, it was banned in several states and screenings were delayed for a year in Chicago. The film is set in Chicago and most of the actual gangsters the film's characters are based on lived there. Because of the brutal depiction of violence, the Hays Office (a precursor to the Motion Picture Association of America (M.P.A.A.)) required that a subtitle be tacked on to the title of the movie, and the film became known as *Scarface: The Shame of the Nation*. The film was a major departure from the other two films.

“In earlier films of the genre, a great deal of attention was paid to developing the background of the criminal and placing much of the blame for his antisocial activities on environment, poverty, bad home life, and unthinking parents. But with *Scarface*, all of that was dispensed with as viewers saw for the first time an adult, fully developed monster who thrived on death and power” (Nash & Ross, 1985-7).

Disclaimers were also placed before the film's title sequence decrying the violence depicted within the film in an attempt to explain that the filmmakers were not glorifying the violence, rather they were opposing it. Because of the outcry and the controversy surrounding the film, it was only a moderate success, and the film was rarely seen in the United States for almost 50 years. However, the genre still thrived with Warner Bros. leading the way.

The 1930s was a decade in which gangster films performed exceptionally well with actors like Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart becoming household names through their depictions of various gangsters in the films they made. Warner Bros. continued to lead the way in the production of so-called gangster films as they were able to create “more of the significant films and classic characters than its competitors” in the genre (Karpf, 1973, p.34). Significant films like *G-Men* (1935), *The Petrified Forest* (1937), *Black Legion* (1937), and *Crime School* (1938) were all released by Warner Bros. The films were relatively easy to make once the formula was perfected early in the 1930s. Warner Bros. took full advantage of the Hollywood studio system, a system that allowed for the mass production of films. “It was not a system designed to produce ‘works of art’. It was a factory geared to turning out product on a regular basis” (Roddick, 1983). With genre conventions in place and with the public hungry for anything gangster related, Warner Bros. could turn out new films in a relatively short amount of time and at a relatively low cost, allowing the studio to flourish during the decade.

By the late 1930s, the public’s interest in the gangster film started to wane. “The novelty of movie gangsters had been exhausted, and the crisis mood of despair and bewilderment that gripped the country in the early days of the Depression did not return” (Rosow, 1978). With the public losing interest, the gangster picture saw one of its first transformations in the 1940s with the film noir. A French phrase meaning “dark cinema”, film noir describes a mood in filmmaking more so than a genre. Yaquinto (1998) states “Noir describes a particular mise-en-scene that focuses on unusual placement of human

figures in a frame, stark and meaningful lighting and irregular views” (p. 75). This is all done to create a certain dark effect, one in which the possibility for danger is present throughout the film. The role of the gangster changed in the films, sometimes pitting the gangster character on the side of good such as in the films *All Through The Night* (1941) and *Lucky Jordan* (1942) in which the gangster character is drafted for World War II and does battle with Nazi agents.

However, the genre did not see a resurgence until late into the 1960s when *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) debuted. Five years later, *The Godfather* (1972) was released and with the subsequent release of *The Godfather II* two years later, the gangster genre changed forever. The gangsters in *The Godfather* films were not the typical low-life characters the American public saw in the 1930s. Rather, they had esteem, wealth, power and influence. The characters and lifestyles depicted in *The Godfather* seemed to give a legitimacy to the gangster. No longer were they the “*Shame of the Nation*,” now they were part of the upper echelon of American society. Brian DePalma’s *Scarface* is more reminiscent of *The Godfather* films than its earlier predecessors. The film’s main character, Tony Montana, lives a life of luxury and esteem while committing some of the most violent crimes imaginable to maintain this lifestyle. Not only does this represent a change in the “gangster” film genre, it also is representative of the change in Hollywood and the gangster genre that began with *Bonnie and Clyde* and continued with *The Godfather* films. The character of Tony Montana also seemed to be a sympathetic character, someone the audience could almost cheer for. In his 1983 review of *Scarface*, film critic Roger Ebert states that while Montana does not become a sympathetic character, he is

somebody “we can identify with, in a horrified way, if only because of his perfectly understandable motivations” (RogerEbert.com). This is the one thing the Hays Office hoped to prevent in the 1930s. Yet, in the 1980s, the M.P.A.A. offered only little resistance when *Scarface* was released.

While both films unquestionably fall into many of the conventions synonymous with the gangster film, the validation of the gangster lifestyle in the latter film is most interesting and provides the basis for why this thesis was written.

Significance to Communication

Movies have a language all their own. Schatz (1981) states “The commercial cinema is a communication system – it structures and delivers meaning” (p.18). The communicative aspects of film make it comparable to verbal communication (Schatz, 1981). The field of semiology, as developed by de Saussure, looks at the importance of language and its significance to a cultural understanding. When a person goes to the cinema to see a film, regardless of the genre, they have expectations as to what will happen during what can be described as a communicative event. These expectations and the knowledge that comes from these expectations is a fundamental element of our ability to evaluate and critically analyze both films and genres.

The gangster as immigrant is one of the major conventions of the gangster film genre. This convention is present in both *Scarface* films along with most of the definitive films of the genre. The significance of where the main characters in both films originate from will be explored, with Camonte immigrating from Italy and Montana from Cuba. While this clearly reflects the time period in which each film was made, it could also

serve to further distinguish the films and the genre conventions present in both films from one another.

Genre Criticism

Sobchack (1977) states “A genre film, no matter how baroque it may become, however, still differs fundamentally from other films by virtue of its reliance on preordained forms, known plots, recognizable characters, and obvious iconographies.” It is the role of the critic to understand and recognize these preordained forms. Chesebro and Bertelsen (1998) state, “critics examine the process that leads humans to appraise, rate, and scale the utility, usefulness, importance, and general worth of themselves, others, environments, and all items or phenomenon within their environments” (p.174).

Our modern day concept of criticism can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Its roots can be found in Aristotle’s concept of Rhetoric (oral argument). Genre criticism came about as people were able to establish certain rules and guidelines for the arts. Initial genres that existed include poetry, drama and song. Since its inception, genre criticism has taken on new forms and has been used to critically evaluate new and often more complex genres. As new genres came about, the critic remained as important as ever. Critical evaluations of new genres became important to a fuller and more complete understanding of those genres.

Genre criticism in relation to film is as old as film itself. Genres were developed and defined early on in the inception of film as audiences began to show preference for certain types of films and film conventions. Lamberti (2005) states:

“The film industry started to create a clear blueprint for narrative films by 1910. As filmmakers did this, the audiences wanted more imagination and variation within the films, but not so much that the films would be out of context. In addition, by establishing film genres of popular stories where the plots, people and storylines within the films are reworked through mass media, filmmakers created a type of expression that brings the audience into the cinematic fold” (p.7).

As genre conventions developed, the audience began to find certain conventions and certain types of movies and genres that they enjoyed. More genres began to emerge including the war film and the gangster film, which is the genre that will be most heavily discussed and critiqued in this thesis. In the 1930s, the gangster genre was classifiable by the characters which appeared in the films, most commonly

“racketeers with brains who rise to the top, gangsters without who remain as hoods, gangsters’ women, stool pigeons, cops and bent cops, crusading district attorneys and legal mouthpieces for the mobs, private eyes and heroes forced by circumstances to be such, nightclub owners and their sadistic strong-arm men; and the countless secondary figures on the fringes of this dark world, newspapermen, pool-room and gymnasium owners, news vendors and so on” (McArthur, 1977, p. 119).

Almost every “gangster” film released in the 1930s had one or more of these characters, and the genre began to take shape.

Over time, though, many of those characters, and many of the genre conventions that defined 1930s gangster films were redefined and experimented with. Conventions like the urban setting and extreme violence remained, but the settings became grander and the violence reached new levels. This was especially true in the late 1960s with the release of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Shadoian (2003) states, “It [*Bonnie and Clyde*] makes a clean aesthetic break from the past, unlike the fifties films, which struggled in transition” (p.252). The film served to set a reinvention of the gangster film in motion. *Bonnie and Clyde* became the first modern day gangster film. The genre reinvigoration that began with *Bonnie and Clyde* continued into the 1970s with what is not only considered one of the greatest gangster films of all time, but one of the greatest films of all time as well. *The Godfather* (1972) and its sequel revolutionized both the genre and the modern day film as we know it. Both films featured grand affairs, grand settings, grand production values, and grand plot devices. *The Godfather* and its sequel became the standard bearers for the genre and any gangster film made thereafter.

Scarface

The movies that will serve the basis for this thesis are *Scarface: The Shame of the Nation* (1932) and its remake, *Scarface* (1983). The 1932 version of *Scarface* is loosely based on the life of notorious gangster Al Capone. It is set during Prohibition, and it features Tony Camonte, an immigrant from Italy living in the slums of Chicago with his mother and sister, and his rise and fall within the crime organization of Tony Lovo. As he works for Lovo, mostly in the bootlegging of alcohol, he begins to gain wealth and power within the organization. This leads Tony to have aspirations of grandeur that Lovo does

not share. Tony goes on to take over the organization after Lovo tries to have him killed. Eventually, Tony's mortal flaw, an extreme overprotective nature involving his sister proves to be his downfall. After finding out his sister was married in secret, he shoots her husband, who turns out to be one of his most trusted friends Guino. The murder is discovered by the police, and they are finally able to arrest him. The film ends with a shootout between Tony and the police, in which Tony is shot down. Tony is then sentenced to die by a judge, and the film ends with Tony dying by hanging.

The 1983 version follows the same basic narrative. It is the story of Tony Montana and his friend Manny Ribera, two exiles from Cuba that come to Miami in the 1980s after Cuban President Fidel Castro opened the port of Mariel and allowed dissidents to leave the country. Beginning as dishwashers at a Cuban restaurant, they eventually grow tired of the work and begin to work for Frank Lopez, one of the major drug lords in South Florida. Like Camonte, Tony has a rapid rise to stardom in Frank's organization as well as a rapid decline. Tony wants Frank's girl Elvira, and this is one of the factors that leads to Frank trying to assassinate Tony. Escaping the attempt unharmed, Tony eventually murders Frank and takes over the business. Like Camonte, he is extremely protective of his sister, and he eventually kills Manny for marrying her. Unlike Camonte, Montana is not shot down by the police at the end of the film, rather he is killed by a rival drug lord's henchmen in a hail of bullets.

Research Questions

How has the gangster film genre and its conventions evolved in the 51 years between the two films examined?

Have the conventions evolved in a way that serves to humanize the gangster?

Thesis Chapters

- I. Introduction. The introduction will explain the reasoning behind the nature of this project, provide the methodology that will be used, introduce the texts that have been analyzed and pose research questions that provide the basis for study.
- II. Literature Review. Pertinent literature related to the topic will be examined in this section.
- III. Methodology. The six conventions of genre and how they were used in this thesis to provide a genre criticism will be examined in this section.
- IV. Analysis. *Scarface* (1932) and *Scarface* (1983) will be critically analyzed using the six conventions.
- V. Discussion. My findings will be discussed and further analyzed in an attempt to explain the significance of both films to the genre and how the conventions serve to promote a different viewpoint and understanding of the “gangster” role in society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The gangster film has been the subject of much research and study in the almost 100 year history of the genre. Much has been made of the stereotypical image presented of the immigrant, most commonly the Italian immigrant in the films as a hoodlum. The violent nature of the films has also been explored along with the myth of the American Dream and how it is portrayed in the films.

The Gangster Film Defined

The first major incarnation of the gangster film came about as a result of the public's fascination with notorious real life gangsters in the late 1920s and early 1930s such as Al Capone and John Dillinger. Their exploits were media fodder and became national news. "Gangsters in the 1930s received more press than the President of the United States" (Nash & Ross, 1985-7). Capone became the basis for the main characters in *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* and the "archetype for the gangster genre" (Ruth, 1996). The gangsters were popular because the public saw them as men that "rose above ordinary criminals by committing their crimes with bravado...all blatant transgressors of the boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong, and rich and poor" (Gardaphé, 2006, p. 3-4). Their popularity naturally made them ideal figures for films based on their exploits. Also adding to the mystique of the gangster was the violent nature in which they lived. Shindler (1996) states, "The violence (in relative terms at least) of the gangsters was felt by many to be a healthy American trait, as if the lawlessness and rough personal

justice of the days of the Western frontier were to be transplanted to the urban frontier of the twentieth century” (p.118). American history was filled with violence and most American heroes committed some kind of violent act or acts in order to achieve their heroic status, and the gangster was seen as an almost modern day hero.

There are many different interpretations as to what constitutes a gangster film. Karpf (1973) defines it as a film with a “storyline concerned with criminals employing physical violence, operating in more or less organized fashion during the period of the 1920s and early 1930s.” Rosow (1978) states “the movies that make up the genre are more than simple action-packed dramas about violent criminals driven by dreams of success. The recurring characters, stories, themes, motifs, and iconography of gangster movies represent a superstructure of values and ideas that make up a self image of America’s advanced capitalist society.” Karpf’s definition provides a more standardized view of what the genre is understood to be, while Rosow looks deeper at the films and their cultural significance. Hossent (1974) says that romance is as basic to gangster films as violence is. Watching a character on screen inspires the want and need to be that person. The person and their lifestyle are romanticized by the audience. They long to be either the gangster/bad guy role or the heroic/law enforcement type that steps in to save the day.

Munby (1999) states the fact that many of the 1930s gangster films had sound is an important aspect of their popularity that cannot be diminished. “When the gangster eventually spoke, he relocated the desires of his community in a specific body politic and in a particular social space” (Munby, 1999, p. 5). The importance of sound indeed cannot

be discounted as a reason why the gangster became immensely popular. The downtrodden masses that the gangster most likely appealed to the most heard the gangster speak, and in turn they heard someone speaking about the very problems and societal dilemmas that they faced on any given day. It was not common to have depictions of the lower middle class on the screen, and the gangster picture took advantage of this and resonated with an audience that was ravaged by the Great Depression.

This is most clearly the reason that led to the public outcry from the Hays Office. The characters depicted had massive appeal to audiences at the time. The blatant disregard for any kind of system of law and wealth and success because of this was something that alarmed the censors and the Hays Office. In 1935, a moratorium was placed on the production of all gangster films and the decree became one of the earliest examples of artistic censorship. While the major studios still produced so called gangster films after the moratorium was established, it is of importance because “it exposed the degree to which an established system of moral compensation had broken down in Hollywood” (Munby, p.20). The moratorium can be viewed as an early precursor to the movie rating system that is now in place.

The Genre

Rosow (1978) asserts “As Hollywood movie makers became increasingly successful in catering to audience demands, they relied on certain conventions for presenting characters, stories, and settings. When a set of conventions proved consistently popular with audiences, the film industry repeated them and crystallized them into

genres” (p. xiii). Audiences enjoy that which is familiar to them and the Hollywood studio system of the 1920s and 1930s used genre conventions to create films that followed the same basic format, with only minimal changes, as other successful films of a particular genre. It is a system that Hollywood still uses today in an attempt to capitalize on other successful films that belong to the same genre. The gangster film genre was one of the most popular of the 1930s and remains popular and viable to this day. “The genre has survived because the issues it addresses have always been central to the American experience, because its formal properties have given them a clarity of outline and lucidity of exposition, and because it has been infinitely flexible in adapting itself to shifting social and cultural conditions” (Shadoian, 2003). The settings present in gangster films, one of the six conventions, helped to establish the genre. Dark streets, dingy rooming-houses and office blocks, bars, nightclubs, penthouse apartment, and precinct stations became locations that were synonymous with the gangster film (McArthur, 1977). McArthur also suggests that the automobile is an important and major icon of the gangster genre. “It is the means whereby the hero carries out his ‘work’ and it becomes like his clothes, the visible token of his success” (p.121-122). The classic gangster genre convention is the gangster working his way up to a high priced luxury automobile. This can be seen not only in the gangster films of the 1930s but in almost every film that can be classified a “gangster” film. The car, even more so than the clothing, jewelry, and house is the ultimate status symbol for the gangster.

Shadoian (2003) highlights four aspects of the gangster genre that seem to prevail in almost every film that fits into the genre. The first convention is a man, a woman, or a

group in opposition to society. Almost every gangster film portrays a society that has done its main character wrong in some way, and the main character is reacting in the only way they understand, which is through violence. The second convention is a conflict that is almost exclusively societal, meaning that it centers around what people are and do in relation to society. The third convention is presenting the gangster as a metaphor. Though the genre originally developed as a result of the establishment and rise in popularity of the gangster, the gangster as depicted in the films became a metaphor. The final convention is a rejection of legitimacy. Gangsters can no longer live in a legitimate world because they do not know how to function in that world. Legitimate society simply does not work for those depicted in the films. The underworld is where the gangster must make their living. It is a world that the audience is most often not familiar with, but it is a world that exists all the same. However, Shadoian points out that it is evident in the films released in the last 30 years that even though the genre relies heavily on these conventions, these conventions do not exist in all films of the gangster genre. The violence and gangster lifestyle portrayed in a film may only be a backdrop for an entirely different story altogether, whether it is a love story or even a comedy as seen in the film *Analyze This* (1999).

Munby (1999) states “Hollywood’s gangster films changed over time subject to the multiple determinations of generic evolution, moral intervention, and the need to remain topical in a rapidly changing world” (p.4). This makes the gangster genre similar to almost every other genre that was first introduced in the early era of filmmaking in that it was forced to adapt to change and evolve. Shadoian states, “it [the gangster film] has

gone international, relaxed its generic borders and requirements, rested securely on its traditions, made its peace with television and video, and attracted new talent that would revitalize its gestural and iconographic storehouse”(p.13). If these kinds of changes had not taken place, the gangster genre would have not had the same impact and it would not have had the staying power in the American and International cultural landscape. Even after the initial popularity of the gangster film diminished in the 1940s and 1950s, the revolutionary nature of such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather* brought it back into the public eye and once again at the forefront of media attention and public discussion.

It is safe to say that what makes a gangster film has changed significantly since the 1930s. As McArthur (1972) states, “the gangster film of the thirties is indistinguishable from that of the fifties, or the forties thriller from its counterpart of the sixties.” A genre convention that has clearly changed is the darkness of the early films as opposed to the later films in the genre. All significant gangster films of the 1930s were in black and white, and most if not all of the action in the films takes place at night. This gave the films a bleak and desolate quality that latter films in the genre rebuked altogether. The gangsters in the earlier films existed mostly in shadow and any kind of violence was shown almost exclusively off camera. This is in direct contrast to the more colorful and vibrant gangster films that have been released since *Bonnie and Clyde*. No longer do the gangsters exist merely in the shadows. Now the gangsters operate during the day with even some of their most despicable acts occurring in broad daylight as seen in DePalma’s *Scarface* and more current films like Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*

(1992) and Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006). The importance of the change in color affects the overall feel of the film and with that, the audience's interpretation of the film. Instead of dark characters that are likely to be perceived as evil by audiences viewing the gangster films in the 1930s, audiences in the 1970s to the present are given a different view of the gangster, one that no longer lurks around under the cover of darkness. The gangster is now a family man (*Road to Perdition*), someone that is amusing (*Pulp Fiction*), and someone that has great societal influence (*The Godfather*). These were simply not characteristics one would likely see in the gangster films of the 1930s. To give the villains a soul would be unconscionable.

Controversy Surrounding the Films

In the gangster films of the 1930s, the world is dark, filled with doubt and fear, and the gangster films of the decade captured the mood of the country almost perfectly with their portrayals of their main characters, almost living their lives entirely in the shadows. The doubt and fear that defined the Great Depression and the decade provided another reason for the popularity of the gangster and another reason why major movie studios and the Hays Office saw it necessary to condemn the lifestyles depicted in the films. Though the films attempted to present the gangsters as the scum of the earth, (sometimes against the will of the director) audiences found admiration for the real life gangsters the films were based on. Shindler (1996) sums it up:

“If justification for illegality were needed, the crumbling nature of the economic, moral and institutional framework of the country provided it.

To those people whose minds were unable to fathom the ways of high

finance, it simply appeared that money which they had deposited had been stolen by the banks. Capone's tirades against bankers met an echoing roar of approval. Now, perhaps more than ever, there was a widespread genuine, if grudging, admiration for the gangsters who carved their own fortunes out of the fortresses of power and wealth with their tommy guns. They at least were doing something besides worrying how to pay the grocery bills, how to find another job, how to keep up payments on the mortgage" (p.122).

A life of crime seemed to be working pretty well for the gangster of the era and for the millions in the country that worried about what they were going to eat on any particular evening, Capone and his ilk were people that bucked capitalist society and played by their own rules. They found ways to succeed and prosper without having to play by the rules. Though sentiments toward gangsters were mostly positive, the major studios could have never released a film or films that portrayed gangsters in a positive light. Doing so would not only be indecent, but it may have even served to throw the country into a state of anarchy. If the "bad" guys were to win, the effects on the country during times of great financial hardship would be unimaginable. This is why the Hays office took action well before the first *Scarface* film was released. For almost nine months, the Hays office argued with Director Howard Hawks about the gangster depiction in the film and the need to denigrate it throughout. A disclaimer was added before the film and scenes within the film were reshot and new scenes were added that Hawks wanted nothing to do with.

DePalma's *Scarface* was met with a lot of the same criticism that Hawks' *Scarface* received, and the M.P.A.A. tried to give the film an X rating because of the gratuitous violence and language. DePalma made some cuts to the film, but the X rating remained until the ratings board finally caved to DePalma and the studio and gave the film an R rating. Though it did encounter some level of censorship, DePalma's *Scarface* did not warrant the same level of scrutiny that Hawks' *Scarface* did. Unlike the original, the problem with the remake centered around the gratuitous use of violence and language, rather than any kind of problem with the character of Tony Montana. Some media outlets even believed the outcry about the level of violence was unjustified. *Newsweek* ran an editorial that stated the following,

“Is *Scarface* as violent as its reputation... Yes and no. The violence is constant (as are the four-letter words), the body count astronomical, and the infamous chain-saw scene unnerving. But DePalma doesn't linger on gore. Any recent horror film is more graphically grisly. If *Scarface* makes you shudder, it's from what you think you see and from the accumulated tension of the feral landscape. It's a grand, shallow, decadent entertainment, which like all good Hollywood gangster movies delivers the punch and counterpunch of glamour and disgust” (Ansen, 1983).

There were very few critics that came to the defense of the original *Scarface* in the same way that Ansen did. Ansen's argument serves to justify the amount of violence in the film, and while it may be non-stop, it still plays an important role in the film. The ratings board did not require DePalma to add a subtitle to the film or place a disclaimer

before the title screen. Other than what amounted to be no more than a minimal protest, hardly an outcry, the ratings board relented and gave the film the R rating the filmmaker desired.

The Depiction of the Gangster Character

“The gangsters of the classical 1930s films (Robinson, Cagney, etc.) were dramatized as psychopaths, sick loners striking out against a society essentially made up of wholesome people (the archetypal democratic “common man” of New Deal populism)” (Jameson, 1979). Sarris (1977) says, “He represents a lower order of being in contradiction to the morally marginal hero who teeters between good and evil as he strives for money, sex, and power” (p.6). For the most part, the gangster character of the 1930s fit into these descriptions. Tony Camonte clearly does. Durgnat (1977) states, “And as he [Tony Camonte] has no qualities deserving anything but contempt, one can only wonder how a yellow rat like Scarface managed to become so powerful that the studio was nervous about showing the picture” (p. 18). The police and the judicial system believe him to be a nuisance, a lower order, and throughout the film, they play the role of the antagonist.

Gardaphè (2006) states, “Early films often portrayed gangsters as degenerate and overly feminized men losing their independence in the new capitalist society, but later films recast them as men who wielded power through sexuality and guns” (p.4). Indeed early films usually portrayed the gangster as having a softer side which usually led to his downfall. Tony Camonte is deemed to “effeminate” because of his love for jewelry and fine clothing. This functioned as a means of showing the audience that the angry and ultra

violent exterior is merely a front and on the inside, these men are weak and sexually confused. To characterize the gangster as effeminate because of their love of fine clothing and jewelry denigrates the gangster and serves to feminize the role, making it unappealing to the audience, especially the men, that is viewing it. Pells (1973) states that “the hero of these films appeared angry and violent only on the surface; underneath he displayed a peculiar capacity for tenderness and idealism... [which]... was usually the source of his downfall” (p.272). This was the tragic flaw that usually led to the demise of the gangsters portrayed in the genre.

Scarface takes this underlying sexual confusion one step further. A character flaw of both Camonte and Montana is an unhealthy, incestuous interest in their respective sisters. Munby (1999) states, “Tony [Camonte] also cannot fit into the heterosexual economy. *Scarface*, building on its predecessors takes the problem of the gangster’s sexuality to a new level of intensity through the suggestion of incest.” Both Camonte and Montana were highly overprotective of their sisters, rarely even allowing them to have any contact at all with any male that wasn’t them. Throughout both films, the incestuous nature of the relationship between the gangster and their sister is played out, and while both Camonte and Montana have their chances to actualize the incest, once again the plot lines of both films do not allow this to happen. The threat of incest leads to the demise of both characters.

Though the characters had tragic flaws and though the Hays Office decried many early depictions of gangsters and forced filmmakers to place disclaimers on their films to show that the lifestyle shown was not one to be admired, the gangster remained an

attractive figure for movie going audiences. This is clearly seen by the number of “gangster” films released in the 1930s. In 1931 alone, some 50 gangster films were released. This was due in large part to the overwhelming success of *Little Caesar* that same year (Bergman, 1971). Though gangster films were big hits at the box office, the genre and its gangster characters have largely been viewed in a negative light. Shadoian (2003) states, “Despite the excellence and popularity of its films, the genre has been generally held in low esteem. Critics and reviewers, high of tone and brow, have in the main been hostile” (p.3). While the gangster film is attractive to lower class audiences, it really never seemed to catch on with the upper class. This can be attributed to the gangsters presented in the films and the settings in which they live. Most plot lines center around a gangster rising up from a life of depravity to a life of wealth and fortune through violent circumstances.

For the upper class in the country, this was nothing they were accustomed to. These “gangsters” are the type of people they have no familiarity with and they choose to believe they do not exist. The gangster genre does not produce films that the upper class in American society wishes to see. “It has been troubled by censorship, a sure sign that people have been afraid of what it aims to accomplish and of its power” (Shadoian, 2003). What is presented in the films is a view of America that is a radical departure from what the upper class knows and in censoring the films, they choose to censor that which they are afraid of. If these gangster characters were to achieve wealth through robbery and murder, then these films promote that idea to the lower class in the country. Warshow (1962) makes the argument that the films reject the American way of life

altogether. “The gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and demands of modern life, which rejects ‘Americanism’ itself.”

Films made in the 1930s were not supposed to focus on the negative aspects of American culture at the time. Rather, they were supposed to uplift and reassure the audience that happier times were ahead. Ceplair and Englund (1980) state, “Films about the Depression in America always carried upbeat endings, usually focusing on some Roosevelt-like savior promising to clean the Augean stables of corrupt bankers and industrialists. Current, burning social themes such as anti-Semitism, racism, the plight of minorities in America, poverty, labor conflict, and the role of women were hardly touched at all” (p.305). Aside from the gangster genre, any kind of issue based film was rarely made. Rather, the studios focused on musicals, comedies, and melodramas (Ceplair & Englund, 1980).

One of the major concerns of studio executives and producers between the 1930s and 1950s were that the films they released would offend the movie going audience. Because of this, every attempt was made to ensure that films carried little to no political message or if the film was about or related to a current event, that it took no side. Most of the scripts about the Spanish-Civil War were never turned into films, no films were made about Hitler or Mussolini’s rise to power for fear of alienating German and Italian markets, and the adaptation of Sinclair Lewis’ bestselling book *It Can’t Happen Here*, a fictional account of a dictator coming to power in America, was scrapped altogether even

after MGM spent \$200,000 in pre-production because it was deemed “too dangerous” (Ceplair & Englund).

In this 20 year period, the gangster film branched off into film noir, and they were still held in relatively low esteem by the upper class. Two noteworthy “gangster” films released in the 1940s, *Dillinger* (1945) and *Key Largo* (1948) came under fire for reinvigorating the gangster and bringing it back to the forefront of American consciousness. The Production Code Administration (PCA), Hollywood’s self regulating body formed in 1934, received complaints from directors as well as concerned citizens about the so called return of the gangster. The complaints argued this it was not the time to bring the gangster character to the forefront of the American consciousness such a short time after World War II. Doing so would remind the world about the negative aspects of America at a time when America should be celebrating and promoting its positive aspects. Film Director Frank Borzage was one of the most outspoken critics of the new wave of gangster films. In a letter written to the M.P.A.A., Borzage said that gangster films produced in the 1930s did more to distort the image of America to other countries than any other factor. Borzage went on to say that the first step to ensuring that the image of America is not sullied once again is the “total elimination” of all gangster films (Munby, 1999).

In the late 1940s and 1950s, censorship was taken to a new level in Hollywood during the infamous Red Scare. As America entered into the Cold War with the Soviet Union, screenwriters, directors, actors and producers were blacklisted by the Hollywood community because they were believed to have Communist Party ties. Gangster films and

their creators were not exempt from the blacklist. Those behind such gangster movies as *Force of Evil* (1948) and *Asphalt Jungle* (1950) were blacklisted and like many others were forced to work under pseudonyms throughout the 1950s.

The 1960s saw an end to the blacklist and for all intents and purposes, the end of the gangster. The decade was one marred by turbulence, one that saw assassinations, protests and war while Hollywood seemingly tried to look the other way. “Hollywood had occupied itself with farce and escapist cinema, doing its best to ignore the growing melee outside the theaters” (Yaquinto, 1998). Then, *Bonnie and Clyde* was released in 1967 and the gangster was brought back into the social consciousness once again. Yaquinto (1998) says the film used the gangster genre conventions of the 1930s as a comment on the 1960s and the events that transpired. The film reinvigorated the genre and “recaptured the charisma, flair, and powerful appeal of the gangster in Faye Dunaway’s Bonnie Parker and Warren Beatty’s Clyde Barrow, making them out to be heroes against the system” (Man, 2000). Above all the film gave the audience two gangster characters that they could identify and sympathize with. Man (2000) states, “The gangsters’ deaths were not the elimination of threats to a stable society, but an eradication of vibrant personalities who lived in an aura of romance, imagination, drama, and passion” (p.112). The use of “vibrant” to describe the personality of the gangsters is important here. That word would never be used to describe the gangsters of the 1930s.

Bonnie and Clyde was a hit, making more than \$20 million in its first year of release (Clarens, 1980). Though audiences flocked to it, film critics and those part of the media establishment railed against the film saying that it was “immoral, irresponsible,

and as provoking as a puff of marijuana smoke blown in their faces” (Clarens, 1980). However, with the success of the film, a reverse of opinion seemed to take place in the media. The film reviewer for *Time*, who initially dismissed the film as inauthentic was replaced and *Bonnie and Clyde* made the cover of the magazine. For a film as violent as *Bonnie and Clyde* to make the cover of a magazine such as *Time* was definitely a huge breakthrough for the genre and the gangster. Never would a gangster film of the 1930s have been promoted in *The New York Times* or any major newspaper or magazine. The film’s turn from media scoundrel to media darling definitely marked a change in the air for the gangster genre.

It was not until 1972 however that the gangster reached legitimacy. *The Godfather* and the character of Don Corleone (Marlon Brando) allowed the gangster to achieve an almost iconic status. Gardaphè (2006) points out that “one reason for this is that Don Corleone is the first fictional gangster is not presented as a psychopath” (p.21). Rather, Corleone can be considered as a “bona fide culture hero,” (p.23) a stark contrast to the monster seen in the gangster films of the 1930s. The film was a gigantic leap forward for the gangster genre. A man that murders, steals, and commits heinous atrocities is no longer a psychotic criminal; rather he is now a businessman. The gangster has become a family man with grandchildren. The gangster attends weddings and wields political power. The level of violence associated with gangster films is still present in *The Godfather* but the film departed from the typical gangster film narrative in that none of the Mafia characters are arrested for their crimes. This was also the case in *The Getaway* (1972). In the film, a pair of bank robbers are able to steal and murder and at the end of

the film, they drive away to spend their money free and clear of the law. For the gangsters to receive no punishment for their crimes would be unfathomable in the 1930s. However, in the 1970s, the gangsters are not only able to escape the law, but the audience actually sympathizes with them as well (Hossent, 1974).

A phrase most often discussed in relation to the gangster is someone that is “the man of the city.” Warshow (1962) says “The gangster is the man of the city, with the city’s language and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring, carrying his life in his hands like a placard, like a club....for the gangster their is only the city; he must inhabit it in order to personify it: not the real city, but the dangerous and sad city of the imagination wish is so much more important, which is the modern world” (p.135). The city is the all important setting genre convention that is found in the gangster films of the 1930s and today. The city is as important as the wealth or the luxury goods that come about as a result of the mayhem, for the city is all there is for the gangster. That is all they know, and that is where they thrive. Rosow (1978) states “the city was the actual setting for the people who shaped the movie industry and who produced the gangster genre. The period of the gangster genre’s rise and fall is one in which American culture experienced and recognized the growing pains of urbanization” (p.37). Urbanization and a thriving underground economy allowed gangsters to thrive in the 1920s and 1930s, so it is only fitting that the gangster on film used that same underground economy to thrive as well.

Impact of *The Godfather*

The Godfather is based on the best selling book of the same title by Mario Puzo. Released in 1969, the book spent 67 weeks on the best seller list and more than one million hardcover and twelve million paperback copies were sold before the film was released (Biskind, 1990). The book's popularity translated into a record breaking box office for the film. By the end of 1972, *The Godfather* had become the highest grossing film of all time with an estimated worldwide gross of \$150 million (Biskind, 1990). Not only did *The Godfather*'s success revitalize the genre, it also revitalized Hollywood "which had been in financial doldrums for several years" (p.68).

"*The Godfather* films were certainly gangster films but they went far beyond the bounds of that genre into a much wider context. That context is the way in which those films brilliantly, at exactly the right time in exactly the right place, caught the temper of a changing America on film" (Palmer, 1987). Enough simply cannot be stated about how much of an impact *The Godfather* had on the genre and on filmmaking in general. Langford (2005) says, "Since *The Godfather* launched a major generic revival in the early 1970s, the genre's popularity has grown, to the point where the gangster can fairly claim to stand alongside the Western hero as a globally recognizable American cultural emblem" (p.134). Palmer says that Francis Ford Coppola, the film's director, turned the gangster into a businessman that had to be as competitive and as willing to engage in the same type of business ethics as CEO's of legitimate corporations like GM or Proctor and Gamble. The gangster has become a legitimate businessman.

The Godfather redefined the genre as a whole and it brought about an entirely different kind of film. The film has become so renowned that it has split the genre into pre-*Godfather* and post-*Godfather*. Cawelti (1976) states “Along with *Little Caesar*, *The Godfather* directly impacted the popularity of the gangster genre and represented a turning point in the genre’s development.” The film was what many considered to be the definitive film of the 1970s. The movie was not only a hit with critics but with audiences as well and once again, as was the case with *Bonnie and Clyde*, the audiences could see themselves identifying with the main gangster characters. The film depicted a family more than anything else, something every person going to see the film knows very well.

The Gangster Post *Godfather*

Undoubtedly, the success of *The Godfather* and the overwhelming positive response to it is a central reason why a film like DePalma’s *Scarface* and its main character could appeal to a mass audience. “*The Godfather*...established an enduring popularity for the ‘retro’ gangster film” (Cawelti, p.144). *Scarface* owes much to the gangster films of the 1930s as well. First and foremost, it is a remake of one of the landmark gangster films of the 1930s. Secondly, it follows a similar plot structure that almost all of the gangster films of the era followed, being the rise and fall narrative. Lastly, it is a film about an immigrant in search of the so called American Dream. The humanization of the gangster that led audiences to identify with them continued throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s with films like *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Gardaphé (2006) states, “through the films of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Brian DePalma, the American ethnic gangster of fiction eventually

became more rounded, more thoughtful, and less inclined to act violently” (p.4). The gangsters portrayed in these films were no longer creatures that lurked in the dark. Although graphic violence was still prevalent in the films, the gangsters now had a softer edge to them. They had the ability to show compassion, and they could also be quite humorous at times. These are the kinds of characteristics that audiences could identify with.

Post *Godfather*, the gangster has once again seen a transformation with the innovation of the African-American gangster story. Films like *Boyz ‘n the Hood* (1991), *Dead Presidents* (1995), and *American Gangster* (2007) use the classic gangster model and set the films in a more urban setting. Much like the classic gangster films of the 1930s, these films have been met with heavy criticism. Langford (2005) states, “A controversy virtually identical to that surrounding the 1930s gangster cycle erupted around the African-American themed gangster (gangsta) films of the early 1990s, with both White elite opinion-formers and Black religious and political leaders inveighing virtually unanimously against the high body counts and apparent glorification of inner-city drug lords in such films as *New Jack City* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993)” (p.147). Munby (1999) also says the recent concern over the films echoes that which met the classic gangster films of the 1930s. While *The Godfather* went a long way in changing the portrayal of the gangster, the African-American gangsta films of the early 1990s reverted back to the classical view of the gangster as a low-life thug that should not be emulated.

However, the white gangsters present in such films as *Goodfellas* and *Reservoir Dogs* were not met with the same disdain reserved for the African-American ‘gangsta’ characters. Spigner (1994) says “the political reality of race and imagery must consider majority / minority dynamics since African-Americans can be put at further risk precisely because more negative perceptions prevail.” Once again, the African-American ‘gangsta’ characters presented images that the upper class and elite were not accustomed to. Their way of life was something that was not part of the upper class lifestyle that they lived. The relationship between the gangster of the 1930s and the gangsta of the 1990s provides an opportunity for further research.

An interesting phenomenon in the past 10 years has been the admiration given to the 1983 version of *Scarface* by predominantly African-American audiences. When the film was re-released in 2003 to mark the twentieth anniversary, the film was sent to theaters with predominately African-American audiences. Macaulay (2003) states, “Tony Montana is particularly sympathetic to the black underclass. He is, first, an immigrant with no place in mainstream America. White authority is shown to be either faceless or corrupt, so his only escape from a life of washing dishes is crime.” For African-Americans, Tony Montana has come to represent hip-hop culture with its love of materialism and excess even though the film was made while the art form was still in its infancy. The acceptance of the film in the community provides an interesting avenue for further research with the predominating question being why this film has become “the gangster movie that African-American males adore” (Macaulay).

III. METHODOLOGY

Movies have had a major influence on American culture since they were first introduced in the late 1800s. From their inception in 1895 to 1946, “movies were the most popular and influential medium of the culture in the United States” (Sklar, 1994, p.3). Movies became the first major audio/visual development of the mass media, predating television by 50 years. With the new medium came an increase in film criticism. As genres were established and conventions became identifiable, genre criticism became a more established method of study as well.

Genre Criticism

This thesis is a study into the genre shift that took place in the 51 years between the first *Scarface* film and the remake in 1983, with the focus being on the gangster character and its perceived acceptance in society. Along with the character, the other genre conventions of both films will be thoroughly analyzed with the main focus still being the gangster character. A discussion of genre conventions and how they are instituted in both films and what those genre conventions say about the characters in both films will be also be discussed.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to develop an understanding of the gangster film genre as a whole and what forces led to the change in the depiction and acceptance of the gangster in the 50 year period between the films. An understanding of this will help bring

about a better idea of why the gangster we see at the cinema and on television today is not depicted in the same way that the 1930s gangster was. The gangster seen in film and television today is widely accepted by people of all different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds as seen with the popularity of HBO's *The Sopranos*. With both mass audience appeal and critical acclaim, the show came to define the HBO network in the late 1990s and into the new century. Though the show was about killers, the characters were humanized to the point that they were instantly recognizable to the audience that watched, something the show owes to *The Godfather* (Gardaphè, 2006).

The show became a cultural phenomenon and though it shares many of the same genre conventions of the gangster films of the 1930s, the outcry against the show remained minimal. Another recent depiction of the gangster genre, Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006), grossed over \$100 million at the box office and went on to win the top cinematic prize, the Academy Award, for both best picture and best director, a first for Scorsese. While the Academy would occasionally nominate a gangster film for best picture, or its main actor for best actor, both the movies and the actors were shut out from taking home the awards in the 1930s. While motivations behind this, if any, are unclear, it would have been significant to the genre and the era if a gangster film or gangster were to be recognized by the Academy in such a way. However, this was simply not the case.

Importance of Film and Genre Criticism

While the film critic became important to both film producers and film attendees in the 20th century, they rarely engage in film criticism. While genre conventions are important to their understanding of the film and their overall approval/disapproval of the

film, film criticism goes much further. Those that engage in film criticism are usually found in academia. Bywater and Sobchack (1989) write “film critics are usually academics, scholars, and teachers of film history, aesthetics, and theory; their film criticism is most often found in small journals geared to a scholarly audience and in books published by university presses” (p.xii). A film critic dissects a film and analyzes its parts. The critic is concerned with what is meant by a particular genre convention being used or being left out, what is meant by a particular shot being used or one not used, what is meant by the dialogue of the main and secondary characters. Meaning is interpreted and in turn, the movie or genre is viewed in a new light, one possibly never thought of before.

This is not to say that film critics in major newspapers and magazines do not have merit, but Schatz (1981) would make the argument that there are two kinds of critics, elitists like John Simon and David Edelstein and populist critics like the late Pauline Kael and Roger Ebert. Schatz would argue that the more elitist critics like Simon and Edelstein judge the success of a film based on its artistic merits alone, whether the film can be thought of as a work of art, while Kael and Ebert may not necessarily believe that artistry alone is the determining factor for a film’s success. A “quality” film can be based on any number of factors. This thesis will attempt to incorporate elements from both critical styles, with the main goal of the thesis to make an argument based on an academic critique of the genre conventions in both films.

Auteur criticism also has merit. Schatz (1981) calls auteur criticism “the single most productive concept in film study over the past quarter century” (p.7). In their

interpretation and evaluation of a film or a group of films, the critic is trying to make an inference into the motivations of those responsible for the film. Schatz (1981) believes that auteur and genre criticism complement and counterbalance one another with genre criticism concerned with certain cinematic forms and auteur criticism concerned with those having success working within those forms. Evidence is evaluated in order to come up with a satisfactory and justifiable conclusion as to what the overarching goal of the film is thought to be. Film and genre criticism look at a film as multi dimensional. There are multiple explanations and multiple interpretations as to why the filmmakers chose to do what they did.

Genre criticism is an important area of study within film criticism. Particular genres can be studied to determine the importance of a group of films as a whole, and genre criticism can also be used, as it will in this thesis, as a means of tracing changes in the genre over an extended period of time, ultimately with the goal of trying to figure out why those changes happened. A genre cannot be understood without a framework of study that can give meaning to the genre and its conventions, and this is where genre criticism is most important. According to Schatz (1981), the genre approach provides this framework because:

“(1) is assumes that filmmaking is commercial art, and hence that its creators rely on proven formulas to economize and systematize production.

- (2) it recognizes the cinema's close contact with its audience, whose response to individual films has affected the gradual development of story formulas and standard production practices
- (3) it treats the cinema as primarily a narrative medium, one whose familiar stories involve dramatic conflicts
- (4) it establishes a context in which cinematic artistry is evaluated in terms of our filmmakers' capacity to re-invent established formal and narrative conventions. (p. vii – viii).

Any worthwhile genre criticism uses this framework in its analysis of a particular genre. Schatz (1981) states that “a genre approach provides the most effective means for understanding, analyzing, and appreciating the Hollywood cinema” (p.vii). Schatz' interpretation of the framework used for genre study will provide the framework for this thesis as well.

Ryall's (1998) interpretation of genre criticism breaks it into three separate parts that will also provide a background for the critical nature of this thesis. Criticism can be used to study the films as generic wholes. Secondly criticism help the critic more fully define a genre's conventions both internal and external. Finally, criticism seeks to analyze individual films in relation to their genre or genres.

Nachbar and Lause (1992) argue that genre conventions can be classified into six separate categories: plot, motifs, setting, characters, theme and props. Looking at the gangster genre, one can clearly see all six of these conventions at work, and these six conventions will provide the framework for this study. The plot usually follows a rise and

fall narrative, in which the gangster gains power only to lose it at the end of the film. Motifs can be seen in the characters tragic flaws, their overprotective nature, their paranoia, etc. These flaws usually lead to their downfall. Settings have changed from the early darker films of the 1930s to the more vibrant and well lit films of the 1970s and 1980s. The setting for the films most commonly revolves around a major city, which still holds true for modern films. The different characters and character types seen in the gangster film have been discussed and many of the same characters or slight variations on the characters can still be seen in modern day films. The theme of the films most commonly center around some kind of social injustice, and props include almost every type of weapon imaginable, most commonly guns and cars, which have also been discussed.

A critical analysis of these conventions will lead to a better understanding of the genre and a better understanding of what caused the shift in the portrayal of the gangster from the 1930s to the 1980s and to the present day. It is not simply the conventions that are important to an overall understanding of the genre but why those conventions are important in and of themselves, and what can possibly be interpreted and understood through the conventions.

Goal of this Project

The main goal of this project is to understand and fully interpret the genre conventions in place in the gangster movie, specifically the gangster character, with a focus on both *Scarface* films. A satisfactory conclusion for this goal would be to find qualities in the conventions of both films that promote a different understanding of the

gangster character, one that promotes a negative, the gangster as monster, view of the character in the early films of the genre and a more accepted, positive, humanized view of the gangster in later films. To evaluate this assertion, a genre criticism looking at the six conventions will be used.

Summary

Films have been important cultural artifacts since their inception in the late 1800s. Since then, the artistic nature of the films has been criticized by both critics and audiences alike. Most often only true criticism comes from academia however. Film criticism and its various subcategories including genre criticism and auteur criticism requires a full understanding and interpretation of the film(s) that are being analyzed. Only then can the full impact of the films and their importance to society be known. This project satisfies the goals of a genre criticism because this project attempts to interpret what kind of change in genre conventions brought about a different understanding of the films, and more specifically the gangster character within them.

Though all conventions will be investigated, the character will be given the most thorough inspection for it is the change in the validation of the character that is of the most interest in the context of this thesis. In the 1930s, it was not so much the films themselves that faced scrutiny but the depiction of the gangster within them. The same can be said of the gangsters of the 1970s and 1980s. While the films and genre conventions present in them received noteworthy attention, it is the gangster character within the films (Tony Montana, Michael Corleone, etc.) that the audience responds to

the most. It is the gangster character, even more so than the film that becomes the cultural icon.

IV. ANALYSIS

Plot, motifs, setting, characters, themes and props are the conventions that define what is known as a genre. From the earliest gangster films to the most recent, these conventions remain. This is not to say that the genre does not change because as society has changed so have films and the different genres that exist in film. Genres have seen redefinition and experimentation, but the six conventions still provide the fundamental idea of what genre is and how it is defined. These conventions still appear in some degree in any film that can be classified within a genre. This chapter will provide a genre analysis of *Scarface* [1932 and 1983]. Both films will be examined to determine how well they represent the gangster genre. Also, the differences in the conventions in both films will be explored to determine if there is relevance.

Scarface (1932)

As one of the three films credited with playing a seminal role in the development of the genre, Howard Hawks' *Scarface* is the "most elaborate, powerful, and disturbing" (Rosow, 1978, p.203). In its review of the film the *New York Times* said that it "makes all the other gangster pictures appear almost effeminate. Where other producers were satisfied with three or four killings, *Scarface* orders them by the gross" (In The Realm, 1932). The movie was heavily censored upon its initial release and even with censoring, the state censorship boards in New York, Ohio, Virginia, Maryland and Kansas along with municipal boards in Detroit, Seattle, Portland, Boston and Chicago rejected the film

and prevented its showing in their respective areas (Black, 1994). The various censorship boards eventually accepted the film due in part to some help from Jason Joy of the Hays Office who convinced the boards that films like *Scarface* represented the end of a cycle of violent films and not the beginning (Black, 1994). Because of Hawks' dislike of the censored film, it was locked away for almost 50 years. It is a nearly perfect example of the genre conventions that made up the definition of the gangster film in the 1930s. The six conventions of genre, plots, motifs, setting, characters, theme and props are clearly seen in the film and serve to promote an overall understanding of the film. Therefore, this movie provides an important role in this thesis in that it serves to establish the classic view of the gangster, the gangster that is looked down upon and the gangster that is a menace to society.

Plot

The plot is the classic rise and fall narrative seen in many of the films of the gangster genre. Tony Camonte emigrates with his family from Italy to the slums of Chicago. The film opens with a pan to a local mob boss, "Big Louis" Castillo as he celebrates with some friends of his after a party. After his friends leave Castillo walks to a telephone booth to answer a phone call. It is then the audience first sees Tony, only in the shadows, as he walks over to Castillo. With three shots, Tony kills Castillo. Tony has started working for Johnny Lovo, another mob boss in the Chicago area, and Castillo was one of Lovo's enemies. Lovo is the alcohol bootlegging business and Tony quickly bullies bars in the area to only order their liquor from Lovo. Soon, Lovo, with Camonte as his second in command, has the entire south side of Chicago in his grasp. Camonte is

eager to go after the North side as well believing there is plenty of money to be made up there. However, Lovo is hesitant to allow Tony to expand the operation to the North side because it is territory run by O'Hara, a man Lovo is clearly afraid of.

Tony eventually does venture into the North side, taking over one of O'Hara's bars, against Lovo's orders. This causes one of Lovo's men to be thrown out of a moving car at the feet of Lovo and Camonte with a note attached that reads "Stay Out of the North Side." While Lovo is clearly afraid, Camonte shows no fear and eventually disregards Lovo altogether, even making advances on Lovo's girl, Poppy. Tony takes out O'Hara and eventually takes out Lovo as well to become the boss of the organization. Tony begins a full scale assault on the remnants of O'Hara's gang and soon he is in control of both the North and South sides.

Tony, like many of the gangster characters of the time, has a tragic flaw. Camonte has an overbearing need to shelter his sister to the point where the relationship borders on incest. Tony goes after every man his sister talks to, not allowing her out of his grasp. When his sister begins to flirt with Tony's right hand man, Guino, this signals the beginning of the end for Tony. Tony and Poppy, his "prize" for becoming boss, leave for Miami, and Cesca, Tony's sister, engages in a romantic relationship with Guino. Tony returns from Florida to find out from his mother that Cesca has moved into a place of her own with a man. This shocks Tony and he leaves to go find her. Tony arrives at Cesca's apartment to find Guino, and with little hesitation, Tony kills him. As Cesca weeps over Guino's dead body, it is found out that the couple was married the day prior, and they were planning on surprising Tony with the news.

This proves to be Tony's downfall. Law enforcement officials find out about the murder and dispatch a bulletin to bring up Tony on murder charges in connection with Guino's death. Tony, Cesca, and Angelo, Tony's secretary, head back to Tony's hideout followed by police officers. Angelo is killed by a stray bullet as he attempts to close the door, leaving only Cesca and Tony. Cesca pulls a gun on Tony with revenge clearly on her mind. However, when police sirens are heard, Cesca pulls the gun away and instead joins her brother in fighting off the cops. It is at this point the incestuous nature of their relationship is almost actualized. However, Cesca is mortally wounded by a stray bullet, leaving Tony alone to fend for himself. Tear gas is thrown into the apartment and Tony is forced to leave and heads downstairs to the waiting police officers. With no gun at his disposal, Tony turns into a coward and pleads with the police to spare his life, a scene reminiscent of something the police chief said to him earlier in the movie. "Take your gun away and get you in a tough spot and you'll squeal like all the other rats" (Hawks, 1932). This is precisely what Tony does. As the police move to put handcuffs on him, Tony runs only to have the police force open fire on him, striking him down in a barrage of bullets.

Hawks wanted this to be the end of the film, with Tony dying at the hands of the police force. However, the censors intervened and a new ending was shot. The ending features a judge sentencing Camonte to death by hanging after a long denunciation of his actions. Tony is shown being led to the gallows, and the film ends with the executioner pulling a lever and Camonte's body falling. Actor Paul Muni (Camonte) was not present

for the scene because of his prior obligations to star in a Broadway show. A stand in took his place.

The classic rise and fall narrative was nothing new to the gangster genre, but of the three landmark films that defined the genre, *Scarface* was the most heavily censored. The Hays Board was worried that the film glorified the gangster, and the board would not let the film see the light of day unless the necessary changes were made.

Setting

The film is set entirely in Chicago during the Prohibition era. *Scarface* is similar to the other gangster films of the decade in that the main gangster character lives and exists within the city. The various locations used in the filming are not extravagant by any means. All sets in the movie have a very minimalist quality.

Tony Camonte is rarely seen during the day. All “gangster” activity takes place at night. Willis (1975) says, “Like vampires, these gangsters come to life only at night; they’re always in shadow” (p.134). This helps to create a certain feel in the movie appropriate for both the genre and the time of the film’s release. The gangster lurks in the dark because he is an unsavory character and must carry out his business under cover of the night.

Characters

“They [gangster movies] showed characters responding actively and often with a strong sense of personal honor to social circumstances which, in real life, seemed to condemn their audiences to inactive frustration in the face of a ‘system’ which often appeared dishonorable” (Roddick, 1983). The most important element of the gangster

genre is the gangsters themselves. The Hays Office was principally concerned about glorifying the gangster in the films more so than the film. The audience sees a part of their own self in the characters. The gangster is fighting back against a society that has deemed him to be an outcast and for the audience watching in the theater, they are able to live through the character. Because of the violent nature of the gangster character, this was a huge problem for the Hays Office in the early 1930s. Every attempt was made in order to portray the gangster in a negative light. No film could glorify the gangster. At the height of the depression, there would be mayhem in the streets.

The audience knows that the gangster ultimately must meet his demise. American society does not promote success through non legal means so the audience knows that no matter how successful the gangster becomes, he will ultimately fail. Mitchell (1995) states, “There has always been something ‘fated’ about the main character in American gangster films. We know that no matter what happens, somehow the gangster will ‘get his.’”

Tony Camonte is a very powerful character. He is a homicidal maniac and an unstoppable monster (Willis, 1975), a “bizarre, demented, dangerously comic lout (Sklar, 1994) and “brutal, arrogant, unsophisticated, vulgar [and] stupid” (Nash & Ross, 1985-7). Though Muni’s portrayal of the gangster is at times laughable because of Muni’s comical Italian accent and overacting (Yaquinto, 1998), Muni’s Scarface still has the ability to strike fear in the hearts of those who oppose him in the film and the audience watching in the theater as well. Rafter (2006) states, “the gangster protagonist of the first *Scarface* movie, as his simian face suggests, is animalian in his cruelty, someone who lives

ruthlessly by the law of tooth and claw” (p.95). Rosow (1978) asserts “Muni’s demonic energy seems to light up certain scenes with the intensity of his performance, as when he fires a machine gun for the first time or sells booze to reluctant speakeasy owners” (p.210). Throughout the film, Tony is relentless in his pursuit of what he believes the world owes him and that’s everything. After Lovo tries to have Tony killed, Tony and Guino go to his office to pay him a visit. As Lovo tries to deny any involvement, he expresses to Tony his happiness that he survived. In this scene, the camera zooms in on Tony for a close-up of his face. Camonte’s “demonic energy” is most clear in this shot. The look in Tony’s eyes is like that of a man possessed. He knows that it is Lovo that tried to have him killed and there is only one thing that he can do now, and that is to get rid of Lovo.

Scarface is filled with characters like Tony. Aside from Tony’s secretary whose main purpose is for comic relief, Tony’s gang and the characters in rival gangs are demented characters that have a relentless need to kill. This is typical of the way gangsters are portrayed in most of the gangster films of the 1930s. One watching would believe they are soulless, killing machines. While this characterization of the gangster may have some truth to it based on the stories in the popular press at the time detailing the exploits of notorious real-life gangsters of the era, it is doubtful that the gangsters were the heartless monsters they were characterized to be. Tony seems to have no affection for his mother at all, and his only interest in his sister is strictly sexual. He even kills his right hand man with little to no remorse. Tony is presented as a monster whose only goals in life are to obtain fine cars, fine jewelry and fine clothes. At no point in the

film does he seem to have the slightest care about others. However, this flaw comes to light during the climax of the movie. After Cesca is shot and killed, Tony loses his grip saying,

“You can’t leave me all alone.

I’m no good by myself.

Please, don’t go.”

This exchange shows that Tony is not the ruthless, go it alone villain that audience believes him to be. Though he appeared to be fearless throughout the film, Tony shows himself to be a coward and as fearful as everybody else. Like everyone else, he too is weak and left alone to fend for himself, he quickly gives up.

A stark contrast to the gangster with a heart as presented in *The Godfather* and post *Godfather* era, the gangsters of Tony Camonte’s ilk are likely characterized in this way to make them as unappealing as possible to the movie going audiences that packed the theaters for them. These were severely flawed characters that had a wide range of problems, among them sexual confusion. Though the remark made the incestuous relationship between Tony and his sister far more overt, the underlying incestual tone presents a disturbing dynamic between Camonte and Cesca in the original version. Though he has Poppy, she is more like a trophy to him, something he has achieved for reaching the top. His eye has always been on Cesca, and if he can’t have her, then no man can. The gangster’s confusion sexually was typical of the genre in the 1930s. The main character of Rico in *Little Caesar* may be involved in a homosexual relationship and Tom Powers of *The Public Enemy* has an attitude toward women that “is so dominating as to

seem aberrant” (McArthur, 1972). These flaws serve to make the gangster far less appealing to the audience.

Themes

The themes present in the movie are the business of the mafia and the theme of crime doesn't pay. The business of the mafia is much like any business. A person starts small and they eventually keep building until they amass a sizable business and a sizable income. This is what Tony engages in throughout the film. Tony starts out with relatively no power in Johnny Lovo's crime organization, but he continuously advances until he becomes even more powerful than Lovo himself. Even before Tony kills Lovo, he has taken over the organization. Much like a business, Tony engages in what amounts to be corporate takeovers. Tony monopolizes the bootlegging business in the area so that the only option for so called speakeasies is to come to him for their alcohol. Tony is half gangster, half businessman. He has a firm grasp on what he needs to do to make the most profit but his means of doing so are through threats and bullying, not exactly ethical for a legitimate business.

Once again, the other major gangster films of the decade prescribed to the same gangster as a business theme. Both *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* portray gangsters that bully and kill their way to the top of their respective crime organizations. As the gangsters advance in their “business” they achieve the success and power commonly associated with the myth of the American Dream. However, the way in which the gangsters achieve this is anything but American. Rather than work their way up through

hard and honest work, the gangsters resort to violence in order to reach their goals. While they are most definitely not ethically sound, the gangsters are running a business.

A crime doesn't pay theme is made clear throughout the movie. In order to get the film approved by the censors, the theme is hammered into the minds of the audience. The Hays Office ordered that a disclaimer be put in place before the film that read:

“This picture is an indictment of gang rule in America and the callous indifference of the government to this constantly increasing menace to our safety and our liberty. Every incident in this picture is the reproduction of an actual occurrence, and the purpose of this picture is to demand of the government: “What are you going to do about it?” The government is your government. What are YOU going to do about it?”

This theme is repeated throughout the film, most often spoken by the law enforcement in the presence of Tony. Special scenes were added at the request of the Hays Office and to the displeasure of Hawks that further the crime doesn't pay theme. One of the final scenes in the movie is such a scene. Camonte goes before the judge and the judge sentences him, condemning his lifestyle:

“You have been tried by a jury of your peers in this court and the jury has found you guilty without recommendation of murder in the first degree. It is the judgment of the court that you are guilty as found. Antonio Camonte, I want to go on record as stating that you deserve this verdict more than any criminal who has come before me for sentence. You are convicted of one crime but you're guilty of hundreds. Until now, you've

escaped by corruption, perjury, and vicious coercion of witnesses. Since your arrest, they've come forward the first time and told the truth. You've commercialized murder to satisfy your personal greed for power. You've killed innocent women and children with brutal indifference. You are ruthless, immoral, and vicious. There is no place in this country for your type. This court hereby sentences you on the 10th day of December 1931 in the penitentiary of this state to be hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may God have mercy on your soul.”

More than anything, the Hays Office was worried about glorifying the gangster and the office put its full force behind making the film a complete denunciation of the gangster. The Hays Office requested the edits in an attempt to encourage the audience to view the gangster’s activities as “despicable and dangerous and as evils that must be stopped” (Dika, 2000). Of the gangster films, *Scarface* was the most violent, with 28 deaths recorded in the film (Nash & Ross, 2000) by and far the most ever in a motion picture at the time and because of this, it was also the most heavily censored.

The theme of crime doesn’t pay is also played out with the gangster dying at the end of the film. If the gangster were to make it to the top and never experience a fall, then this would almost assuredly be a glorification of the lifestyle. The gangster must die at the end of the film, and in the 1930s, this was the case in almost every gangster film released. The gangster must die. It is the ultimate validation of the crime doesn’t pay theme.

Motifs

The three most common motifs in *Scarface* are revenge, violence, and isolation. Revenge plays an important role in the movie. After Tony tries to take over a business on the North side, O'Hara retaliates and kills a member of Lovo's crime syndicate. Tony extracts revenge on O'Hara killing both him and his second in charge as well. Even within Lovo's group, there is the revenge motif present. Lovo tries to have Tony killed as revenge for Tony moving into the North side against his orders. When the assassination of Tony fails, Tony gets his revenge on Lovo by killing him and taking over the organization. Later in the film, Tony once again extracts revenge, this time on his right hand man, Guino. Tony discovers that Guino has started dating his sister thereby taking her away from him. Tony shoots Guino within seconds of discovering his betrayal. The final act of revenge is the ultimate revenge against the gangster. The police try throughout the film to bring Tony in, but it is not until the film's climax that they finally are able to do so. The police become a metaphor for society. It is not only the police force in the film that is getting its revenge but society is finally getting its revenge on this menace that has been a scourge on society. Tony is hanged for his crimes and for his lifestyle, the ultimate act of revenge.

Violence is another important motif. The violence in the film advances the narrative. Tony gets to the top of his organization exclusively through violence. It is shown in the film as a means of getting what you want. Violence can be seen throughout the film in Tony's relationship with practically every character. Tony is the enforcer of violence throughout the film until the very end when finally society strikes back against

him. Though violent acts occur throughout the film, no murder is actually shown. Because of censorship, no blood is shown either. While the audience does not see what are most assuredly grisly murders, the fact that they cannot see them in a way makes them all the more violent. Violence left to the imagination of the audience was probably far more violent than anything Hawks and the filmmakers could have come up with. This was commonplace in films at the time. Violence could be heard but not seen due to the provisions of the Hays Code. A direct contrast to the highly stylized violent gangster films of the post Godfather era, 1930s gangster films were far more subdued. In doing this, the violence still became an important plot element, but it by no means overwhelmed the plot.

Isolation is a final motif present in the film. Tony doesn't need anyone. He is determined to succeed on his own. Early on in the movie, Tony tells of his plans for taking over the organization to Guino, saying that Johnny is soft and has no business fronting a mob organization. Tony does not feel for anyone. His relationship with Poppy is merely a prize for him, and his relationship with Guino is strictly business. Even in his interactions with his sister, it is obvious that as Tony's mother says "she is just another girl to him."

However, when Tony finally becomes isolated during the climax, he panics. He cannot survive on his own and quickly gives himself up to the police. Tony, who felt like he didn't need anyone throughout the film, in actuality, did. His independence and isolation turned out to be one of his many great flaws.

Props

Cars, guns and the letter X play important roles in the film. Cars are the means by which the characters get around. They are means of pursuit, escape, and status. Both the police and Tony's gang use cars to pursue their targets, with Tony being the target of the police, and O'Hara's gang being the target of Tony. After Tony is almost killed leaving a deli, he quickly jumps into his car to evade his attackers. Finally, when Tony is describing what he has purchased with his new found wealth, his bullet proof car is one of his most cherished possessions. Cars are used throughout the movie and have become an important symbol in the gangster film. From the earliest of films to the films of the present day, cars have been used in the same way they were used in *Scarface*. They are the gangster's ultimate status symbol, the way the gangster can show the world that he has finally made it.

Another key component of the gangster film is guns. Every act of violence in *Scarface*, and by and large in the genre itself, is committed with a gun. Guns become the ultimate symbol of power for the gangster. In *Scarface*, the machine gun plays an important role in making the mob more ruthless and terrifying. The introduction of machines guns into the film allows for a higher body count, and they allow Tony and his mob to take over the city much faster. In the end, guns are ultimately what take Tony down as the police unload on him after he tries to make his escape.

Tony is at his most sinister when playing with his guns. He uses these weapons of murder as if they are mere toys. The bullet count in the film is high, and throughout the film, Tony uses his guns with a reckless abandon, shooting first and asking questions

later. The way in which he seems to have no understanding of the nature of the weapons he possesses brings out the true monster in Camonte

A final prop used in the film is the letter X. Before a crime is committed, the letter X can be seen signifying to the audience that someone is about to die. In the cleverest use of this prop, Tony and his gang kill O'Hara's second in command in a bowling alley while he bowls. After he records a strike, the letter X is marked on the scoring sheet, and moments later gunfire is heard signifying his death. Even an X can be seen on the gallows as Tony is killed. The X in the film becomes death's calling card.

Scarface (1983)

Shortly after the original was released from the vault, plans were put into action to remake the film. Famed director Oliver Stone wrote the screenplay, Brian DePalma directed, and the title role was played by Al Pacino, who was no newcomer to the genre (*Godfather, Dog Day Afternoon*). The film was released on December 9, 1983 amid much of the same controversy the first film had seen upon its release. Critics and the M.P.A.A. lashed out at the film for its depictions of violence, including the infamous chain saw scene, and its profanity. A special feature on the Platinum Edition DVD tallies the uses of the word 'Fuck' in the movie and the number of bullets shot in the film. The word 'Fuck' and its variations are said 233 times in the film at a rate of almost one profanity a minute. A total of 2,048 shots were fired in the film with the majority of those no doubt coming during the film's violent and bloody climax. Though DePalma had to cut the film three times in order to garner an R rating instead of an X, there was nowhere near the same censorship and backlash that had been leveled against the earlier film.

Plot

DePalma's *Scarface* follows the same basic rise and fall narrative of the earlier film. Only this time, Tony Montana and his friend Manny are Cuban instead of Italian. Tony and Manny come to America in 1980 when Castro opened Mariel Harbor and allowed those seeking refuge, mostly the dregs of society, to leave the country. Tony and Manny settle in Miami but are detained by Immigration Officials on suspicion of criminal activities. Both are put into a camp called Freedomtown. Manny tells Tony of an opportunity he has heard about that would allow them to get their green card and become residents of America, but it involves murdering Castro's former aide, a man by the name of Rebenga. Tony has no problem with this and during a riot at the camp, Tony stabs Rebenga in the stomach, fatally wounding him.

The pair get their green card and begin working at a Cuban restaurant, but Tony is clearly unhappy. He wants more. They start working for Frank Lopez, a notorious mob boss in the Miami area. Through the selling of cocaine, Montana works his way up the organized hierarchy until he becomes Frank's right hand man. Much like Camonte in the original, Montana believes his boss to be soft and it is clear that Frank is just a stepping stone for Tony on his way to the top. Tony begins to act without Frank's approval, with the most significant time coming while Tony is in Bolivia and negotiates a cocaine distribution deal for Frank that far exceeds what Frank initially wanted.

At the same time, Tony begins to advance on Frank's girlfriend, Elvira. Frank, angry about both the distribution deal and Tony's flirting with his girlfriend arranges to have Tony killed. As in the first, the hit fails, and Tony quickly extracts his revenge on

Frank. With Frank out of the way, Tony is now at the top. He marries Elvira and purchases a large mansion and fancy cars. The fall is quick for Tony however. He develops an addiction to cocaine and he is set up in a sting by the IRS for tax evasion. Tony's Bolivian contact, Alejandro Sosa, steps in and offers Tony a way to escape prison. In exchange, Tony must assassinate a journalist that is threatening to expose Sosa to the world.

Tony and one of Sosa's henchmen head to New York where the journalist is scheduled to address the United Nations. A bomb is placed under the journalist's car, but on the morning the assassination is scheduled to be carried out, Tony has an unexpected change of heart. After seeing the journalist pick up both his wife and kids, Tony backs out, shooting the henchman that Sosa sent with him instead of the family.

Montana, like Camonte, is overbearingly protective of his sister to the point where it seems his interest in her is also incestuous. Tony returns to Miami to find out that his sister, Gina, has moved out of his mother's house. Upon paying Gina a visit, Tony finds Manny with her and shoots him dead. Tony takes Gina back to his mansion. Infuriated by the news that Tony did not follow through on the assassination, Sosa sends hit men to Tony's house to kill him and after a bloody battle and numerous casualties, both Gina and Tony are killed.

Though the plots are similar, there are some changes that reflect the time period. For Camonte, the wealth he attains comes from bootlegging, while for Montana, the wealth comes from cocaine. In 1932, the sale of alcohol was still banned by the 18th Amendment to the United States Constitution which went into effect on January 16,

1920. It wasn't until the following year after the film's release that the amendment was repealed ('Chief Steps' 1933). In the 1980s, cocaine smuggling became a major business in and out of Miami with more than \$5 billion worth of the substance passing through the city in any given year ('Arrests Seen Soon', 1982). Cocaine is almost a separate character in the film with almost every character either talking about it or snorting it at some point during the course of the movie.

The character and the setting are the other main differences in the film. Tony Montana, being Cuban, is a departure from the typical Italian background of most gangsters in the 1930s up to the 1970s. The film is also set in Miami and not Chicago as the earlier film was. This is more a reflection of the time period than anything else. Immigrants from Cuba began to enter the country in staggering numbers after Fidel Castro came to power in 1959. The opening of the Mariel Port in 1980 brought in thousands more. With that being the main immigration concern of the early 1980s it is not difficult to see why Stone and DePalma would make Montana Cuban instead of Italian.

Settings

The film is set in Mexico, Bolivia, and New York. Instead of the minimalist approach toward the setting that the earlier film took, DePalma's *Scarface* is extravagant. Large, sweeping shots of the landscape are used, and the sets are all brightly colored. The lighting used throughout the movie is bright. Tony no longer has to exist merely in the shadows. He can now do his business in the light of day. The view of Miami changes as Tony achieves wealth and power. The audience initially sees Tony in the slums of Miami,

barely making any money. The sets represent the more minimalist approach the original film took. However, the sets become more extravagant as Tony begins to splurge. Unlike the final shootout in the original which took place in a not so extraordinary apartment, the final shootout in the remake takes place in a sweeping mansion complete with surveillance equipment and a fountain near the stair case that becomes Tony's final resting place.

The sweeping shots and extravagant setting used in the film present Montana as larger than life. Unlike the first film which tried to minimize the impact of the gangster by presenting him in a relatively subdued, unimpressive setting, the remake's use of setting only serves to enhance Tony Montana's standing with the audience. The expansive and brightly colored sets suggests Tony is an important character doing important things

Themes

The themes present in *Scarface* center once again around the mafia as a business and the gangster as a sympathetic character. Much like Camonte in the earlier film, Montana moves up in Lopez's organization rapidly until he finally reaches the top. He is first and foremost a businessman, looking to get the best deal for Frank and the organization as a means of turning the most profit. However, unlike the first film, the remake does not paint as flattering a portrait of the police force. The police are corrupt, vicious characters that resort to unethical means to get what they want. The movie can be seen as an indictment on the police force that seeks to bring down the gangster. The mob

has become legit. The audience no longer sees the gangster as a menace; rather he is now simply a businessman trying to make it in a corrupt society.

The theme is clear. The gangster is doing what he does merely to get by. The audience can't help but to root for him. Though he is trying to achieve the American Dream through ways that are once again un-American, he is fighting back against the negative elements in American society as well. Sometimes American society makes it tough for those in the lower class to succeed so the only thing to do is what Tony does in the film and that is fight back.

Characters

Tony Montana is a multi dimensional character, as is Tony Camonte. Unlike Camonte who came across as uncaring and uninvolved, Montana clearly has a heart underneath the gangster exterior as seen when he refuses to kill the journalist's wife and children along with him. Elvira cannot have children because of her cocaine addiction and a womb that is barren. This does not sit well with Tony who wants kids and a family of his own, so when he has to kill a man's family, he cannot go through with it. Not only does this serve to give the gangster a heart and soul, but it lends a sympathetic edge to the character, something that censors would have never allowed in the 1930s. Montana is not the monster the gangsters in the 1930s were and because of this, the audience sees in him something they see in themselves, and they can even cheer for him. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert states that although Tony Montana is a "flawed, evil man," at the same time he is also "human."

Tony Montana isn't so much a gangster as a businessman that has to struggle to achieve the American Dream. Unlike Camonte, the American Dream does not come as easy for him because the times have changed. The cops are corrupt and American society is no longer set up for the immigrant to succeed. Tony still kills with reckless abandon, but now there seems to be almost a justification for his doing so.

Motifs

Motifs in the film are corruption, revenge and violence. It is not the mob however that is the corrupt organization. In the remake, it is the police force that is corrupt. The police receive bribes from the mob in order to ensure that no police action should befall them. While both sides are guilty in the corruption as it seems, the audience places fault on the police officers. After all, it is the police that are supposed to be on the side of good. The audience knows what kind of business dealings the gangster involves himself in. It is expected of him.

Tony wants no part in the corruption and after killing Frank Lopez, Tony kills the corrupt police officer as well. This symbolizes a man fighting back against an evil society. Tony has killed the man that has wronged him, and now he must fight off the evils in society as well. This theme returns later in the film during the scene in which Tony is supposed to assassinate the journalist. Sosa's henchman is sitting next to Tony in the car ready to push the button to detonate the bomb, not caring that the wife and children are in the car as well. However, Tony will have no part of it, shooting him dead before he is able to push it. Once again, Tony is fighting back. He is extracting his revenge on a society that has no problem killing innocent children. However, though

Tony fights off the evils of society, this eventually proves to be his downfall. Sosa extracts his own revenge against Tony at the end of the movie, leaving Tony a martyr. The motif of violence is present throughout the film. Violence is the way to power. Characters are killed in grisly, despicable ways and unlike the first film which chose to not actually show the violence, the gruesome displays are front and center in the remake.

Props

Once again, guns play an important role in the film along with the other main prop in the film, cocaine. The guns in *Scarface* are much louder and cause more damage than the guns in the original. The final body count of the film is in 44, with 42 of those deaths coming by way of the gun. Bullets fly throughout the film striking down character after character. The gun is Montana's source of power, his "little friend." Instead of using the gun to fight on the side of evil however, Tony uses it to fight back against society. Cocaine plays a bigger role in the remake than alcohol did in the original. Tony becomes addicted to the substance, leading to an intense paranoia, whereas Camonte is not shown drinking at all in the original. The cocaine's role is front and center, almost becoming a character in the film. Towards the end of the film, it is the sole motivator of Tony's actions. He can only function while he is high. Cocaine plays the role of an evil in society that Tony cannot overcome. While he can take on corruption and evil, cocaine is simply too much for him.

Summary

Tony's ultra violent death only solidifies his role as a tragic anti-hero. Though he cannot be hailed as a hero, simply because of his lifestyle, Tony has many qualities that

suggest a heroic status. “He remains an idol for everyone from Wall Street businessman to ghetto hoods because he never admits defeat, the ‘yes’ to the great American ‘no’”(Yes, it’s the great, 2003) While Camonte clearly had what was coming to him, Montana is a man that was done in by the evils of an unjust and unfair society. He is a character that has become revered in the 25 years since the movie has been released. Audiences, especially those of the lower to middle class, see something in him that is admirable and something they wish they had inside themselves. Even the upper class can root for Tony as he fights off the IRS and the unfair banking policies. Tony Montana has an everyman quality to him. He is the hero of the disenfranchised in the country, no matter what class they may belong to.

Genre Analysis

Though there are some similarities in the way the six conventions are shown in both films, there are clear differences which reflect the changing nature of the genre. Both films follow the same basic elements that are needed for the films to qualify as gangster films. Both films follow the classic rise and fall narrative that centers around the life of a gangster character and his exploits. Weapons, especially guns, play a major role in the gangster film, and they are prevalent in both films. Where the films differ though is in their respective portrayals of the gangster character and this is established through a change in the conventions from the 1932 film to the 1983 film.

As far as setting goes, the 1932 follows the more established darker setting that was common for a majority of the gangster films from 1912’s *Musketeers of Pig Alley* to the film noir films of the 1940s and 1950s. Gangster characters often lurked in the dark.

This portrayed them as brutal, demonic characters that could not exist in the light of day. Without the night as their setting, the classic gangster as seen in the 1932 version could not survive. However, Tony Montana exists in the daylight and because of this, we have a more favorable view of him. The fact that he is seen in the daylight and not merely in the shadows lends legitimacy to his actions. Most businessmen work in the daytime, and Tony Montana is merely one of them. This setting change is important to an understanding of the genre shift that took place. The gangster rarely stepped out in the light of day in the classic films of the genre, making him appear like a monster from a horror film. The setting change did happen gradually over time. Rather, the introduction of films like *Bonnie & Clyde* and *The Godfather* in the late 1960s and early 1970s were instrumental in this happening.

While the plot of both films is similar, there is one key moment in the 1983 *Scarface* that serves to make Tony Montana a sympathetic character. When he cannot go through with the assassination of the journalist because his wife and kids are in the car with him, Montana shows that he has a heart. This was something lacking in the gangsters of the 1930s and Tony Camonte. Camonte is relentless throughout the original film and murders with an almost child like glee. Only after he murders Guino does he feel the slightest hint of remorse for what he has done. This is not to say that Montana is not a murderous villain because that is not true. However, unlike Camonte, Montana is humanized through his one act of salvation. He takes pity on an innocent wife and children and instead murders the assassin sent by Sosa to assist with the killing. Montana

here is on the side of good, extracting revenge against a society that would kill an innocent woman and children without hesitation.

Because of Tony's salvation, he is murdered by Sosa's henchmen. His kindness ultimately leads to his downfall and in that, he becomes a martyr. Montana dies as a result of doing something that any decent human being would do, though it is through a means that is as violent as the nature of the gangster. With his life of crime, he obtained money, women and status, but his one redeemable act led to his downfall. It is likely any kind of scene of this nature would have been cut from the original for fear of humanizing the gangster. However, with the transformation of the gangster character into a more legitimate hero, Montana is allowed to be characterized in this way.

Unlike Camonte who is fighting for his own survival, Montana is fighting back against the evils of society. Montana stands up to crooked cops and unfair banking policies with some success. He becomes a hero for the common man. While Montana does suffer from the same hubris that proves to be the downfall of Camonte, Montana shows that he has the ability to care for others unlike Camonte who only cares about himself. Tony's refusal to go through with the murder of the family clearly stems from the fact that he wants a family of his own. However, due to her massive drug consumption, Elvira is unable to have children. Montana wants to be the family man, much like that which was portrayed in *The Godfather*. However, his business unfortunately gets in the way with that.

While the gangster in the 1930s lived an opulent lifestyle, it was often difficult to see this because of the dark nature of the films. Camonte had a nice car, nice clothing,

and jewelry, but these items are downplayed considerably in the film. Camonte on the other hand revels in excess. He has a luxury automobile, a huge mansion, the finest clothes, and he drinks the finest champagne. Though both characters have seemingly made it to the top, it is only Camonte that seems extraordinary. A viewing of both films makes it quite clear to the audience just who has “the world and everything in it.”

Though Montana shares many of the same qualities, he is not the ruthless homicidal monster that Camonte is. Rather, he is merely a businessman that must murder in order to achieve the so-called American Dream. Though he does kill many, his humanity shines through during the seminal moment in the film where he chooses not to assassinate the journalist and his family. He also takes on corrupt police officers and a banking system that is unfair. He is merely fighting back against a world that is unfair. This humanity is completely lacking in Camonte. Thereby the gangster created by Hawks and Hecht is not someone that the audience can admire. He is a coward and a scoundrel that murders because he can. The audience understands that Montana murders because he has to. It is his only means of survival in a corrupt and unfair world. Though he may not exactly be a character the audience can identify with, the audience understands why he does what he does. This cannot be said of Camonte

V. Discussion

The gangster has been one of the most successful and enduring characters in the history of cinema. From its early beginnings in the silent era, to its modern day incarnation in both television and film, the gangster has seen many changes. It is the ability of the character to embrace change that makes it as vital today as it was during its golden era in the early 1930s. Gangster films are not made today at the same rate they were in the early 1930s with nine made in 1930, 26 in 1931, 28 in 1932, and 15 in 1933 (Springhall, 1998), but they still appear with some regularity, and they still remain popular. 2007's *American Gangster* grossed \$130 million at the box office making it the 19th most popular movie of 2007 (Box Office Mojo). On television, 2007 saw the series finale of HBO's megahit *The Sopranos*. The final episode was viewed by 11.7 million people making it the second most watched show of the week, even though HBO is available in only 30 million homes, far less than that of its broadcast television counterparts (*Sopranos' Ratings Beat*, 2007).

Genre Analysis

It is Schatz that best sums up why Tony Camonte is not a redeemable character in the same way that Tony Montana is. "Tony Camonte's primitive brutality, simple minded naiveté, and sexual confusion made him a figure with little charisma and with virtually no redeeming qualities" (p.91). Camonte is not a character that is worthy of admiration. He is nothing more than a monster and a coward. This is seen most clearly during the film's

climax when Camonte tries to run when the police close in on him and he is without his gun. While Camonte tries to take the cowardly way out, Montana, riddled with bullets, fights until the bitter end.

Montana dies in a heroic fashion, while Camonte dies a loser. Camonte is ultimately killed for his selfishness, while Montana is killed for his compassion. Montana is humanized through his efforts, and this allows the audience to view him in a more positive light. Though Camonte's Scarface is more indicative of the lowlife, demented character seen in the gangster films of the 1930s, Montana is more representative of the Don Corleone and Bonnie and Clyde view of the gangster. Through its use and manipulation of genre conventions, *Scarface* (1983) turns the gangster into a humanized if not sympathetic character. Though this is mainly due to the manipulation of the genre conventions, the impact of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather* cannot be understated. If those films had not laid the groundwork for the changing image of the gangster, it is unlikely that Tony Montana would be any different than Camonte.

A genre criticism best suited this project because it provides a valid assessment of two films that were released 51 years apart. While the conventions of the genre have been adapted in those 50 years as demonstrated in this thesis, the basic conventions of the genre remain in tact. That is why parallels between the two films could be made. Though the films have stark contrasts, they still share the same basic gangster genre conventions. The 50 years between the two films also allows the films to be placed in a historical perspective. The four decades in between their release was not only a time of change for the film industry and Hollywood but for the country as a whole. Hollywood has always

been interested in the social problem film as seen with the popularity of the gangster film in the 1930s. These films have always gone hand in hand with more escapist fare such as musicals and comedies. No research could be found that points to a specific incident or a distinct ideological change in Hollywood that would allow for a once critically chastised character to gain the level of acceptance that it did. The shift to a more acceptable view of the gangster is likely to be generational. A different generation of filmmaker was responsible for films like *The Godfather* and *Scarface*. A move away from the studio system may have also had an impact. The studio system of the 1930s produced films almost like a product. They followed relatively the same formula that other successful films of the era had followed. The studio system was no longer in place in the 1960s and filmmakers were allowed more freedom to film the story they wanted to tell. Genres still played an essential role in getting people to the theater, but the creative freedom given to the filmmakers and the script writers presented new ideas to audiences that they had most likely not been exposed to before.

Significance

This thesis looks at the gangster character's portrayal across a 50 year span with the earlier gangster despised and the later gangster accepted. Therefore, this project looks at the value systems of two generations of Americans and describes their differences when it comes to what is accepted and what is not in terms of the films they see. Film has always been a very powerful communication tool since its inception and its ever changing nature allows one generation of people to view a character in a completely different way than a later generation. The acceptance of the gangster represents a cultural

shift in America that allows people to view a seemingly evil character with affection. Tony Camonte does not have what we as humans value in ourselves and other humans and that is compassion. Therefore, we cannot see him as anything more than a psychopath, with no redeeming qualities. Montana may be evil, but he shows compassion, something that allows us as humans to relate to him.

Because we, as the audience, can relate to him in some albeit sinister way, Tony Montana has become a cultural icon, gracing everything from posters to lamps to t-shirts. The character has become a cultural phenomenon since the film was released in 1983, most widely accepted by the hip-hop community as a modern day messiah of sorts. The ability of a film and a character to become a cultural phenomenon shows what kind of impact films have on society.

Limitations and Future Research

Though *Scarface* (1983) had its fair share of admirers, it has had its fair share of detractors as well. Nash and Ross (1985-7) state, “the fact that every character profiled in this scum-producing potboiler deserves to die and does not mitigate the film’s existence.” Film critic Pauline Kael had a similar view of the film, but it is extremely rare that a film receives universal acclaim, and negative reviews do little to diminish the impact *Scarface* has had on society. The original had its fair share of negative reviews as well. The gangster character simply cannot appeal to everyone. For every moviegoer that applauds the gangster character, there will be another moviegoer that despises the character. Once again, this is nothing out of the ordinary. No genre is meant for everyone. Rather,

we as filmgoers get to choose the genres we enjoy and seek out films that fit into those genres.

Although the 50 years between the two films provides an adequate cross-section of the genre, in order to fully investigate the genre shifts present, this thesis would have to give more time to other seminal films of the genre. Although *The Godfather* and *Bonnie and Clyde* are discussed, a thorough examination of both films and their influence requires far more analysis than what is provided in this thesis.

Finally, this thesis does not take into account any future genre shift that could have taken place after the release of 1983's *Scarface*. Though films of the 1990s and 2000s are referenced throughout, there is no in depth analysis given to them. Doing so would have made this study too broad and would have served to weaken the project overall. The films chosen provide significant sources for analysis, but analyzing a film from the 1990s or 2000s may have made this study more modern in its scope.

Opportunities for future research should focus on the “gangsta” films of the 1990s and their similarities and differences to the original gangster films of the 1930s. Films from both decades received heavy criticism and censorship so it would be interesting to determine whether the gangsta pictures of the 1990s have become the gangster pictures of the 1930s. Though the fervor has died down considerably since the early 1990s, the gangsta films still play a role in the history of the gangster film similar to that of the films of the early 1930s. Both had relatively short life spans, but both still have an impact on the gangster character we see at the cinema today.

Future research into the cultural phenomenon that has become *Scarface* (1983) could also provide an interesting avenue for study. An analysis of the film's cultural impact, especially for African-American audiences, since its release would provide a wealth of information and a better understanding of what quality or qualities are most desirable in the gangster.

An analysis of *The Sopranos* and its impact on the gangster genre provides a final avenue of study. The show harkens back to the family dynamic seen in *The Godfather* but is it a mere imitation of *The Godfather* or does it break new ground? The show once again made the gangster fodder for discussion and debate and its success on a pay network promotes the idea that the middle to upper class that so despised the gangster films of the 1930s found something in the show that appealed to them.

Finally, the gangster film will continue to experience change as long as it remains a viable genre and as long as the character remains popular. This thesis has attempted to show the genre evolution that took place from 1932 to 1983 which served to humanize the gangster, something the Hays Office would have never allowed in the 1930s. The very nature of film is one that must continually change, especially in the present and into the future as there become more and more avenues of entertainment for the public to give their attention to. While the future of the gangster cannot be determined, it is likely the character will remain as vital to American and World Cinema as it always has been.

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