

**GANGSTER FLICKS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
RESERVOIR DOGS, SCARFACE, AND BELLY**
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Throughout American history, artistic mediums of communication have often been used to spread social and political messages. Since the early twentieth century, the medium of film has been used not only entertain audiences, but also to spread social and political awareness of certain subjects. Most films find their subjects, themes, and plots in the contemporary issues of the time period in which they are produced. As a result, a great many films have political subtexts and undertones. However, the gangster genre has evolved through the revitalization of standard thematic motifs. While the gangster films of the past established the conventions of the genre, more modern gangster films, such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Scarface*, and *Belly* have subverted the conventional to create themes that apply to modern political and social themes.

In order to understand the elements that make a gangster film “political,” one must be familiar with the time period in which the gangster film genre developed. The gangster genre was created in 1932, at the political climax of the Great Depression (Gianos 75), with the film *Little Caesar*. The time period in which *Little Caesar* debuted was one of severe economic dislocation, high sensitivity to social status, and increasing lack of faith in established political and economic institutions (Gianos 76). These perceptions shaped the themes of the gangster genre. Consequently, the tone set in many gangster movies was a dark, violent portrayal of the life of a working class immigrant, living outside of the law and doing what was necessary to survive. This character, the economically dispossessed and socially downtrodden underdog fighting against the established social order, was an individual that most audiences of the time could relate with.

There are several elements that are integral to the gangster film. That is, certain fundamental conventions exist that appear in almost every gangster film, past and present. The foremost of these conventions is the gangster persona. The main character is often a loner, an

individual who has been let down by existing social and political institutions such as family, friends, the law, and the economy. This character is usually focused on the core of the American dream: wealth, power, stability, and success.

The early gangster movies, such as the *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* established that the traditional gangster lived in an alternate society with different perceptions, values, and rules. This society, which operates outside of the law, offers alternate systems of mobility, wealth, and power for the economically deprived; a system apart from the system which the dispossessed are denied access (Gianos 78). In this society, the gangster creates and lives by his own rules.

As a result of living in this system, the gangster, left without any institutions from which to seek aid, is the consummate individual, always seeking to assert his individuality. However, another common theme of gangster films is that it is dangerous to be alone. Ironically, the conditions of success in the gangster system make it almost impossible not to be alone, because success is, according to Warshaw, “the establishment of individual preeminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically aroused hatred. The gangster’s whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual...and he always dies because he is an individual (Gianos 77).” So the conditions for the gangster’s success ultimately bring about his downfall. For the most part, the system in which the gangster operates revolves around the accumulation of wealth and power. Little attention is given to the cause of the main character’s plight or the motivations for his actions. More important are the situations in which he is placed, how he deals with the situations, and the consequences of his actions.

Another important element in gangster films is revenge. In the gangster genre, revenge symbolizes the triumph of the little man, the underdog, the very least in American society (Gianos 79). Along with the theme of revenge comes the ever-present element of violence in gangster movies. Violence is often used to illustrate the lack of sympathy that exists in the

gangster's society. The system in which the gangster operates is illegitimate, so the gangster's method of dealing with problems is illegitimate as well, and usually involves violence.

Another interesting gangster convention is the lack of consequences to the violence exhibited by the gangster. Little or no consequences are enforced because of the diminished presence of law enforcement. In the gangster's society, the law is either an obstacle to be overcome, completely incompetent, or corrupt. This perception of the law and law enforcement officers is symbolic of the failure of established institutions. City and state governments are at the best indifferent, and at the worst corrupt (Gianos 79).

Despite these perceptions and the bleak situations into which the main character is often placed, gangster movies are usually stories of success. The gangster goes from being a working class nobody to being somebody. Although he inevitably dies, the gangster does achieve some degree of success, and, in his own way, the American dream. Taking into account these conventions that have been established by the gangster genre classics, one may analyze newer gangster films to find how these conventions have been used to apply to more modern political themes.

The Quentin Tarantino film *Reservoir Dogs*, instead of trying to make political implications through the characters, provides several good examples of the conventional usage of gangster genre myths. *Reservoir Dogs* tells the story of a jewel heist gone wrong and the gangsters caught in the middle. Initially, the characters are not presented as individuals, but as a group of gangsters. The men are all dressed alike, which seems to be a break from convention, because individuality is not asserted. However, this perception is quickly reversed when it is revealed that the men are relative strangers and do not address each other by their real names. By remaining anonymous, they affirm their individuality.

Early in the film it is established that the men, although working together, do not have any true allegiance to one another. This is supported by various plot twists in the film, such as a scene when one of the main characters, Mr. Orange, is wounded, and the remaining gangsters will

not take him to a hospital without the consent of their “boss.” The men remain individuals, and do not help each other, even when Mr. Orange’s life is at stake.

The film also presents a negative portrayal of law enforcement. The police officers that encounter the jewel heist in progress are not able to stop it. Several of the thieves escape, killing policemen and civilians in their way. The gangster’s perceptions of police officers is revealed in a discussion between two of the main characters, when Mr. White asks Mr. Pink, “Did you kill anybody?” Mr. Pink replies, “No real people, just cops.” The establishment is also undermined in another way: the gangster Mr. Orange is actually an undercover police officer. However, during the robbery, he kills a civilian. This hints not only to the ineptitude of established institutions, but also implies that despite his duty as a police officer, perhaps Mr. Orange has a desire to live outside the law as well. Mr. Orange does not follow the rules that would apply to a law enforcement official in his position. Because he is a representative of established social and political institutions, his character is integral in making a political statement. Although Mr. Orange may not necessarily be corrupt, he kills an innocent person because he is overly focused on playing the part of a gangster and catching the bad guys.

The amount of shocking, unpredictable violence in *Reservoir Dogs* is something that definitely sets it apart from other conventional gangster films. The film includes numerous shootouts, chase scenes, mutilation, and murder. In *Reservoir Dogs*, violence is primarily used to reaffirm the alternate reality that the gangsters live in. Ultimately, the film reaffirms conventional gangster genre myths by killing off all of the characters. Although several of the main characters survive the robbery and succeed in making it to a rendezvous point, their lack of trust in each other and inability to make decisions eventually leads to their deaths.

The irony, and perhaps the underlying point in the story, is illustrated in the fact that the gangsters, who are supposedly allies, are the ones who kill each other. In the alternate reality of the gangsters, one’s friends are one’s enemies as well. Even when they win, they lose, not because of the system, but rather because of themselves.

Director Brian DePalma's 1983 remake of the gangster classic *Scarface* is an excellent example of the use of gangster genre conventions applied to contemporary social and political issues. *Scarface* premiered in U. S. theaters three years after the famous Mariel, Cuba boatlift, which released approximately 25,000 Cuban convicts into the United States. The political atmosphere in the United States at the time was one of severe negative attitudes toward Cubans involved in crime and drugs, especially in the Miami, Florida area known as "Little Havana." The film is a detailed depiction of the rise and fall of Cuban prisoner turned gangster Antonio Montana. The producer, Martin Bregman, claims that he was attempting to make an "anti-drug film," but the negative portrayal of Cubans and Latin Americans in general led to protests by South Florida residents, forcing the production crew to relocate the shooting of *Scarface* to Los Angeles, California.

From the very beginning of *Scarface*, parallels between the film and reality can be identified. In the opening scene of the movie, during an interrogation, Tony claims that he is a "political prisoner," and asserts that he wants his "human rights, now!" It seems as though the law enforcement officials have no choice but to allow Tony passage into Miami. This reaffirms certain public attitudes that the United States offers open borders, even to illegal aliens and foreign criminals.

The character of Tony Montana, masterfully portrayed by Al Pacino, is an excellent revampment of the classic gangster. The scar across Tony's face immediately establishes his individuality, and even adds an element of wildness, or danger to the character. Tony establishes his personality and attitudes early in the film. In order to receive a green card, he kills an enemy of Fidel Castro in the Miami internment camp ironically named Freedomtown. The process Tony undergoes to become a legitimate citizen in the United States is sparked by an illegitimate action. Following his release from Freedomtown, Tony rejects legitimate job opportunities in favor of delivering drugs. He is not interested in working hard and establishing a respectable reputation in

society. He is only interested in making a quick buck. This was his perception of the America as a “land of opportunity.”

The gangster convention of individualism is asserted throughout the movie in several ways. First of all, Tony is rarely in the company of more than one or two people. He states that he doesn't trust anyone, even his head of security and best friend, Manny Ray. Tony's prevailing self-interest causes repeated conflicts between himself and his boss, Frank Lopez. These conflicts eventually lead to Lopez's betrayal of Tony, inspiring Tony to kill Lopez and take over his drug empire. Despite the fact that Tony has finally reached the level of success that he aspired to, his situation only leaves him in a further state of alienation. Every possible social and political institution lets him down. Tony's friends betray him, his mother rejects him, his wife, Elvira, is unable to bear children, and the bankers, politicians, and police in his world are all corrupt.

Once again, violence is used to portray the alternate reality of Tony's world. This was a parallel to reality at the time of the film's release in theatres, because many areas of South Florida were plagued by violence such as open daylight killings, car bombings, and shootouts. Tony is efficient in using violence to solve his problems. He kills his boss, his best friend, and his sister, and effectively wreaks havoc and destruction everywhere he goes. Fittingly, the most violent scene in the movie involves Tony's death, as he is left face down in a pool of his own blood under a statue of the earth that reads, “The World is Yours.”

In regard to the Freedomtown hit, Tony stated, “I'll kill a Communist for fun.” However, by the end of the film, the violence has a different purpose: it is a tool for Tony's accumulation of wealth. The theme created by Scarface is that wealth is corruptive. Tony achieves the American dream, but he cannot love. He cannot connect with anyone. The only object of his affection in the film is his sister, Gina. His love is defined by blood, which is why he wants a child. However, all of his attempts to connect with anything real are destroyed by his materialism. For Tony, cocaine becomes gold. The American dream gone crazy is confirmed in

the finale, as Tony destroys himself. In its essence, *Scarface* is the consummate gangster genre classic, revitalized to apply to the United States in the mid-1980's.

The 1998 film *Belly* is a twist on the normal gangster genre film. *Belly*, directed by Hype Williams, embraces gangster conventions and breaks them at the same time. *Belly* is the story of two young black males, Tommy and Sincere, who are modern age gangsters in Queens, New York. Now, on the verge of the big time, their ambitions are beginning to diverge. Tommy is brash and eager to gain success in the dope game. Sincere, influenced by his wife and child, is starting to look for more legitimate opportunities for success.

The film stays true to gangster conventions through its presentation of characters and plotlines. In *Belly*, as in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Scarface*, the good guys are also the bad guys, and the main characters are often left without anyone to trust, not even each other. Unlike *Reservoir Dogs*, however, the characters in *Belly* are presented with legitimate opportunities for success. Although Sincere accepts, Tommy does not, and the two become more and more distant. Their respective individualities begin as their similarities end.

Belly breaks the mold of the typical gangster movie on several levels through the use of not only dialogue, but symbolism and metaphor as well. The characters do not reveal as much about themselves as do the environments they are placed in. Whenever Tommy, the more ambitious of the two characters, is present onscreen, there is always marijuana onscreen as well. This breaks from convention by allowing some insight to the causes of the dilemmas faced by the main characters. The elements of light (or lack thereof) and color are also used to create a sort of "film noir" darkness. It should be noted that *Scarface* achieved this effect as well, although primarily through the screenplay, script, and acting, not the look of the film.

Belly strays from convention further by allowing both characters free will that is not motivated by the desire to accumulate wealth. Tommy and Sincere both make decisions that do not directly involve money. Instead, these decisions involve the direction that their lives will take. For example, Tommy is forced by the corrupted government to take part in an assassination

plot against a spiritual leader. Just as he is about to pull the trigger, the leader asks Tommy, “Will you choose light over darkness?” Tommy reconsiders. Redemption, in Williams’ view, is an option for even the most unrepentant of sinners.

Belly makes the implication that man has not gone corrupt, but perhaps society has. The negative influences of society force the characters down the paths they take. However, it is made clear that the characters have a choice. This element is the key separator of *Belly* from *Reservoir Dogs* and *Scarface*. After a certain point, the characters in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Scarface* are left without anywhere to go except into further turmoil. The gangsters in *Belly* are presented with the opportunity to escape from their violent, reality.

Because this subculture of African-American gangsters did not exist when the gangster genre was developed in the early 1930’s, *Belly* provides an excellent example of the durability of the gangster genre. The fundamental themes and elements of the gangster movies were adapted to fit new characters and a new story. The result of this adaptation is an evolution in the direction that gangster movies may take, providing hope and a chance of survival instead of imminent death.

The gangster genre is believed by many media critics to be the most durable of any film genre because the themes and storylines of the films can be manipulated and adapted to apply to many contemporary situations. *Reservoir Dogs* provides examples of the most basic elements of the gangster genre incorporated into a modern film. *Scarface* offers an excellent look at how gangster movies can be used to make political and social statements about issues facing the United States. *Belly* allows a glimpse into a new era of gangster movies, one that attempts to provide a positive message, and does not focus mainly on the destruction that occurs in the lives of the characters. Each of these films has made a significant contribution to the gangster genre. The gangster genre of film remains a primary tool for producers and directors to make social and political statements about issues facing the United States and countries abroad.