

## Why Are They So Disturbing?: A Study of Classic American Gangster Movies

(何故かくも不穏なのか? : 古典アメリカ  
ギャング映画論考)

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**SUMMARY IN JAPANESE:** 1930年代に続けて制作された『犯罪王リコ』(1931)、『民衆の敵』(1931)、『暗黒街の顔役』(1932)は長い伝統を持つアメリカギャング映画の中で「古典」とみなされる。これらの作品はウィル・ヘイズによる悪名高い制作倫理規定により、当局に厳しく検閲され、何度も脚本の修正を余儀なくされた。しかしながら現代に続くギャング映画の制作者たち(フランシス・フォード・コッポラ、マーティン・スコセッシ、デーヴィッド・チェースなど)は自分たちの作品でこれら古典作品への言及や引用を行い、三作品のあせない魅力、それらがいかにジャンルの原型となっているかを伝える。

古典ギャング映画についての研究も多数存在し、これらの映画は多角的に論じられる。例えば語りのパターンや特定アイコンの使用、その近代性、人種や民族性についての表象、ジェンダー問題、ヘイズ・コードの影響、アル・カポネなどの実在のギャングとフィクションとの関連性、といったものだ。これらの研究からアメリカギャング映画はアメリカ成功の夢、アメリカ社会の制度と矛盾に対する批評となっていることが窺える。こうした理由から当局は容赦なく作品の検閲を繰り返したのか。結局は死んでしまう「悪役」が主人公の映画はどこが問題なのか。

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以上をふまえ本稿は古典ギャング映画において当局が本当に恐れた要因を探る。これらの映画の共通項を概観し、「古典」とまとめて論じられがちな三作品の微妙な差異を検討した上で、具体的な問題点を明らかにする。それは先行研究で繰り返し指摘されたように、映画がアメリカ成功の夢の不可能性を浮き彫りにすることはもちろん、他にも通常言語化がはばかれる女性性の忌避や男性の同性愛、兄妹の近親相姦への傾倒といったタブーを視覚化し、観客の無意識を刺激する点あげられる。さらに映画では観客の「笑い」を喚起するコミカルな側面が大きく、ギャング映画という暴力的な映像や非道な内容にもかかわらず、先の「不穏」なメッセージを娯楽の一環として観客に容易に消費させていた点にあったと考える。

## Introduction

The genre of American gangster movies has been a lasting tradition since the beginning of the twentieth century. Those interested in this genre may remember recent productions of the popular HBO TV series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and biopics such as *American Gangster* (2007) and *Public Enemies* (2009).<sup>1</sup> The latest from Warner Bros., *Gangster Squad* (2012), proves the viability and attraction of the genre to audiences as well as to moviemakers. Here, I would like to define the genre: gangster films feature a gangster as the protagonist and realistically describe his or her life of crime with the use of icons, such as guns and cigars. Due to the films' negative influence on audiences,<sup>2</sup> authorities censored the scripts and severely regulated the genre with the notorious Hays Code,<sup>3</sup> which was adopted in 1930. Films of this era typically ended with the gangster being gunned down, but postmodern gangster movies oftentimes have open endings, suggesting the possibility that the protagonist may have survived.<sup>4</sup>

Even though movies of the genre today develop and offer new perspectives on mobsters, directors from Francis Ford Coppola to Martin Scorsese and David Chase point to three movies from the 1930s that are now considered classics: *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface: The Shame of a Nation* (1932). In addition to filmmakers, film critics also study these movies and offer their accumulated analyses of the films.<sup>5</sup> A survey of these academic works shows exactly how influential and popular these classic films have been, which is partially because they serve as prototypes for later works. Critics are eager to shed light on the movies' various dimensions: their narrative patterns, peculiar icons, modernity, representation of race and ethnicity (associated with crime in the context of immigration history), gender issues (e.g., representation of masculinity and the treatment of female characters), the Hays Code and its textual changes, the real mobsters (especially Al Capone), and so on. One can obtain the impression from the discourse on the above studies that the classic American gangster movies are a critique of the American dream of success as well as of American society/institutions and their contradictions. Is this what the authorities had feared when they repeatedly censored the movies? Is there anything wrong with the movies other than the fact that the "bad guy" is portrayed as the hero and dies at the end? There may be some room to

answer these questions and further the preceding argument. In this essay, I would like to examine these classic movies to explore what it was that really disturbed the authorities in the 1930s. By presenting an overview of the common patterns observed in these movies, the first section will consider the subtle differences among the three classics. The second section will focus on “disturbing” factors in the movies: how the movies dare to touch upon taboo issues and still appeal to audiences. The third section will then highlight other fascinating dimensions of these movies, such as the unexpected humor they create. Another objective of this section is to expand on one aspect of the genre, namely its subversive comical power,<sup>6</sup> which has not been paid much attention.

## 1. Common Patterns and Differences

*Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface* share many commonalities. As indicated in Robert Warshaw’s famous essay “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” these films share the rise-and-fall narrative pattern of a gangster in a modern urban city environment,<sup>7</sup> which is key because it is the locale where an immigrant protagonist can pursue his desire for the American dream of success. In response to censorship, *Little Caesar* includes an epigraph that quotes the Bible, while *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* include both opening and closing messages to remind audiences that the movies are not meant to encourage a life of crime or criminal activities.<sup>8</sup> Regarding this point, Richard Maltby writes, “[The] motion picture industry was well aware that it needed to address the persistent criticism that movies were a source of inspiration for criminal behavior and knowledge of criminal technique, in both its general statements of intent and its justification of individual pictures.”<sup>9</sup>

In the classics, the typical narratives are similar to the following: the protagonist gangster appears with his “pal” and establishes a strong homosocial tie, and they then engage in their “business” together. Although the hero considers his partner to be his sole confidant, the “pal” usually finds his own heterosexual partner. Matt Doyle from *The Public Enemy*, for example, marries his girlfriend Mamie. Similarly, Guino Rinaldo from *Scarface* ends up marrying protagonist Tony Camonte’s younger sister Cesca.

Yet, both the “pals” die soon after they get married. Only Joe Massara from *Little Caesar*, who eventually becomes a professional dancer, succeeds in escaping from the gang with the help of his dancing/life partner Olga.

Unlike their “pals,” the gangster heroes remain single and die alone, as if to suggest the magnitude of their punishment. Another conspicuous characteristic is the three movies’ emphasis on the culture of consumption in America. The gangster has a humble origin, but as he rises in the gang, he prospers materially and shows off the familiar items: bundles of notes, flashy attire (tailored suit, tie, and hat), expensive cigarettes, fast cars, gaudy jewelry, and molls (prostitutes). These are his status symbols. The gangster then moves to a fancy mansion and lives lavishly. Here, the women are not considered human beings; instead, they are viewed as collectibles or “acquisitions.”<sup>10</sup>

The gangster protagonists seem to fear female characters. This is obvious in the case of Caesar Enrico (Rico) Bandello from *Little Caesar*. In the original novel, author William Burnett refers to this aspect: “What he feared most in women . . . was . . . their ability to relax a man, to make him soft and slack, like Joe Massara. Rico had never been deeply involved with a woman.”<sup>11</sup> Tom Powers and Tony Camonte are portrayed more as womanizers than Rico, as they follow their passion and chase women. Yet neither man seeks a domestic relationship with a woman other than his mother; however prodigal they are, both Powers and Camonte go home to eat mama’s dishes.

With prohibition as the background, the bootlegging “business” comes to the fore in *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*. Although it is set somewhere in the east, *Little Caesar* seems to reflect the existence of Al Capone and his following, reminding viewers of the prohibition era. As if to reflect the real gangster wars, the movies present powerful fighting scenes; they depict the gangsters shooting machine guns and bombing restaurants and stores from fast-moving cars. Funeral scenes are repeatedly included: a long procession in *Little Caesar*, an intimate funeral for Powers’ friend in *The Public Enemy*, and a reference to a large funeral through the display of newspaper headlines in *Scarface*. The heroes are gunned down in the streets, either by the cops (*Little Caesar* and *Scarface*) or by rival mobsters (*The Public Enemy*). In the talkies, the gunshots and screams are effectively used in these scenes.<sup>12</sup>

From the above analysis, we have seen what constitutes the archetypal

elements of the classic gangster movie. In spite of these commonalities and the general tendency to group them as one, close observation of these films reveals subtle yet important differences. As some critics argue,<sup>13</sup> while *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* portray the world of Italian-American immigrants, *The Public Enemy* presents an immigrant group with an Irish background. It is noteworthy that *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* associate a certain ethnic group (i.e., Italian-Americans) with crime even before *The Godfather*<sup>14</sup> had been released. Compared to *Little Caesar*, *Scarface* is more modern in the sense that it lacks the old-fashioned, humane dimension Rico demonstrates when he overpowers his boss while still showing respect for him. Rico says: “No hard feelings, eh, Sam? We gotta stick together. There’s a rope around my neck right now, and they only hang you once. If anybody gets yellow and squeals—my gun’s gonna speak its piece.” Tony Camonte, on the other hand, demonstrates his ruthless egotism and savage childishness. The protagonist neither hesitates nor feels guilt when betraying his former bosses twice in *Scarface*. From Johnny Lovo, his second boss, Tony takes away his status as well as his mistress Poppy, with whom he is gratified to view the Cook’s Tourists neon sign: “The World Is Yours.” In *Scarface*, the story’s fast development gives viewers the feeling that contemporary movies are being blended with the following hastily switching scenes: the barber, the gang’s office, the apartment houses, the shabby home, the new mansion, a restaurant, a hospital, a theater, a bowling center, a store, and streets. Moreover, the showing of many dead bodies in *Scarface* goes beyond the genteel restriction of the time and precedes today’s direct portrayal of bloody scenes with corpses. Fran Mason points out that the “excess” in terms of violence and pleasure is what aroused the concern of the Hays Office and helped to end the classic cycle.<sup>15</sup>

*The Public Enemy* is different from the other two movies in question. What is important in this movie is not only material success but also friendship and loyalty<sup>16</sup>—in short, human bonds. The film certainly critiques the futile promise of the American dream, but the protagonist is not as ambitious and greedy as Rico Bandello and Tony Camonte, who desire to be “somebody.” As indicated by Christopher Shannon, “loyalty” and “friendship” are underscored throughout the story.<sup>17</sup> True friendship is rewarded with loyalty, while unfaithfulness deserves to be punished. Tom Powers serves three bosses: Putty Nose, Paddy Ryan, and Nails Nathan.

Tom never forgives Nose, who pretends to be his friend and involves Tom and Matt in his robbery, but deserts them when pursued by the police. Years later, when he meets up with them again, Tom ruthlessly kills Nose, who pleads with Tom to spare his life. Nathan's accidental death by falling off his horse is recompensed by Tom's shooting the animal. Throughout the latter part of the movie, Ryan, who first teaches Tom and Matt the importance of friendship, maintains allegiance to his words and proves his merit by sacrificing his territory to rescue Tom, who has been kidnapped. On his sickbed, even the protagonist, a gangster who regrets his former deeds in life, is reconciled with his estranged older brother and promises his mother he will come "home." The "bad" characters thus have absolute faith in friendship and loyalty to an admirable extent; familial ties—those of blood family as well as of business family—are much respected. Such a spirit in *The Public Enemy*, reminiscent of the Japanese *yakuza*'s chivalry codes, gives quite a different and rather old-fashioned impression compared to *Little Caesar* and *Scarface*, both of which feature self-centered heroes. The barren ending of the movie—Tom's return home as a bandaged mummy corpse—perhaps suggests the futility of believing in such codes in the modern world. Thus, the three classic movies illustrate complexities and richnesses of their own, along with their common features. They offered "realistic" portrayals of the gangsters. Moreover, these movies seemed to arouse the audiences' imagination, as they were likely curious to learn about contemporary mobsters. In this sense, the movies definitely satisfied the public's desire for thrills and excitement. The next section, then, will examine what could have disturbed the authorities in these texts.

## 2. Challenging Taboos

As previously mentioned, the three movies serve as a social critique of the American dream. *The Public Enemy* shows how Tom and Matt grew up; from boyhood on, they cheat, steal, drink alcohol, and play truant from school. The story suggests that Matt's father is in jail, while Tom's stern father, a policeman, repeatedly inflicts corporal punishment on his son, which does not remedy Tom's behavior. By presenting the realities of immigrants in the so-called "promised" land, the film tacitly explains why being a gangster

can be a “realistic” successful career option for boys who come from such a wretched environment. *Little Caesar* does not delineate the personal background of Rico, but it does keep track of how a male immigrant who has aspired to rise from the “gutter” becomes “somebody.” This is nothing but the American mentality and way of life set in the criminal world. Similarly, Tony Camonte expresses a pioneering spirit and a strong desire to be at the top. He says: “Do it fast, do it yourself, and keep on doing it!” These characters not only embody American values and ethos but also disclose the fact that they are particularly handicapped socially and are deprived of fair opportunities to succeed in Anglo-Saxon corporate America, giving them no other option to attain their dreams than resorting to crime.

Moreover, the movies convey unspeakable messages that people repress in their subconscious: *Little Caesar* depicts a homosocial world and a kind of misogyny.<sup>18</sup> *The Public Enemy* presents the protagonist as a mama’s boy who is never able to develop a mature relationship with a woman. *Scarface* suggests an incestuous desire between a brother and a sister.

Let us examine the respective movies from the above angle. Rico Bandello, in *Little Caesar*, nearly succeeds in his rise to the top. What baffles him is his obsession with his former crime partner, Joe Massara. In the movie, Rico rises in the criminal world and obtains almost everything he wishes for, except for Joe, who refuses to rejoin the gang despite Rico’s request. Even though Rico tries to kill Joe, the betrayer, he cannot shoot him. As Jack Shadoian suggests, the camera work in this confrontation scene is conspicuous.<sup>19</sup> In the first half of the story, the camera films Rico from a broad angle, offering many wide scopes. The camera is identified with Rico’s eyes, so things must be seen from outside. Close-ups are used only when Rico pays attention to certain objects, such as jewelry and a watch. In the latter half of the story, however, the camera starts showing Rico’s inner emotions through the use of close-ups. This is after he rises to the top in the group. In the scene where Rico tries to harm Joe, the close-up reveals the protagonist’s deep agony and hesitation. In fact, throughout the movie, Rico rarely reveals his true emotions, except for anger, hostility toward others, or an occasional grin after experiencing success.

The brotherhood between Rico and Otero, Rico’s new right-hand man, suggests the latter’s homoerotic desire for the protagonist. The way Otero adores his “boss” is portrayed in a clown-like manner. The picture of Otero



kneeling down and looking up at Rico with a big smile is symbolic of Otero's subservient, masochistic status. Yet he seriously adores and worships Rico. It is probably out of jealousy that Otero shoots Joe for Rico, who is paralyzed by excessive emotion in the confrontation scene. *Little Caesar* continues to show Otero's loyalty to his boss. When shot later in the story, Otero falls down in the street but urges Rico to escape and demonstrates his devotion to his boss.

As mentioned, "molls" are status symbols for gangsters, but Rico's lifestyle without alcohol and women perhaps suggests that he is not fully developed as a gangster, rather than implying that he is stoical. It seems that Rico avoids these intoxicating factors. As in the original novel, Rico's seeming misogyny reflects his deep fear of women; he prefers male company. It is worth mentioning here that the name "Joe" can be used for both men and women (e.g., Jo March from *Little Women*). The name makes the namesake's gender ambiguous. Like his name, Joe Massara's gender becomes ambiguous in his relationship with Rico. Tall, feminine-looking Joe loves to dance, which Rico considers sissy. Being submissive and gentle, Joe Massara plays the female role; Rico with Joe can be referred to as a little man with a big wife. At his fear of losing Joe, Rico urges Joe to separate from Olga, of whom he is very jealous. Curiously, Joe voluntarily informs Rico of another gang's plot and saves his life. In addition, he does not actually report Rico to the police. It is Olga who telephones and reveals the details of Rico's crime to the police; Joe remains silent to the questions asked by the police in their efforts to confirm that Rico has murdered the crime commissioner.

The couple's ambiguous relationship lasts until the real woman, Olga, intervenes in the homosocial sphere. Placing Rico's dead body underneath the advertisement of a new musical starring Joe and Olga—*Tipsy, Topsy, Turvy*—offers a contrast. Joe, Rico's accomplice, somehow escapes punishment, and his success as a rising dancer with Olga—his resurrection—is implied. The movie suggests that being a gangster and loving someone of the same sex are doubly unpardonable.

In *The Public Enemy*, Tom Powers remains a mama's boy, no matter how old or unlawful he becomes. Intriguingly, the protagonist is often called "My baby," "Tommy boy," "My bashful boy," and the like by his mother and his girlfriend. Like Rico, Tom never actually grows up. While Tom cannot bear a traditional "domestic" relationship with women apart from his mother,

he is very interested in women. Yet he seems to find it very difficult to form a serious relationship with a woman. Domesticity appears like a trap to this protagonist, who loves to move around freely. The famous breakfast table scene, where Tom smashes a half-cut grapefruit into his girlfriend Kitty's face, proves Tom's rejection of being domesticated by a woman. Only the mysterious upper-class call girl, Gwen Allen, can half seduce Tom; the love scene, however, is interrupted by the news of Nails Nathan's death. Tom opts to go out with Matt, explicitly expressing his respect for male comradeship over his relations with women. Although Tom explains to Gwen that he does not like to "merry-go-round" with women, it is actually the fear of women, who could take away his freedom and rule him, rather than general misogyny, that explains Tom's inability to establish a mature heterosexual relationship. He would rather choose to be a naughty boy than an ideal husband, as he promises his mother that he will return home in the hospital scene.

*Scarface* boldly depicts the incestuous desire between the protagonist and his younger sister.<sup>20</sup> It comes as no surprise when Tony demands that Cesca stay home and prohibits her unrestrained behavior with other men. Tony instantly becomes enraged whenever he witnesses her licentiousness. Cesca's retort is suggestive: "You act more like . . . I don't know. Sometimes I think. . . ." It sounds as if she is resentful of his double standards, not allowing her to have any freedom, while he himself has "fun" with many women. Tony's attitude does not come from believing that a patriarch should guard the chastity of his family's female members but rather from his possessiveness. It is no wonder that Tony even kills Rinaldo, his loyal sidekick, without hesitation; he cannot allow anyone to touch his most desired object. Of course, Cesca does love Rinaldo and bitterly blames Tony for killing her husband. Nonetheless, she cannot pull the trigger when she tries to avenge her husband's death. Cesca utters another suggestive line to Tony, who asks why she does not shoot him: "You're me, and I'm you," she says. This spiritual identification withdraws the sister's desire for her brother. After this, Cesca and Tony fight together with the surrounding police; yet the sister is shot first and dies, calling Rinaldo's name, not Tony's. The incestuous relationship is dissolved, and the factor of danger is removed by the death of Cesca.

We have thus seen how the movies treat untouchable situations. First, the subject of gangsters is troublesome when it comes to censorship.

Furthermore, the audacious presentation of taboo or unacceptable topics related to gender issues is probably threatening. What seems striking in the three movies is the male fear of femininity, even though they seemingly portray strong masculinity. Such fear is somewhat projected onto the distorted representation of the female characters. Gangster movies primarily classify women into two categories: the Virgin Mary Mother type and the seductive, voluptuous moll type.<sup>21</sup> Along with the typical misogyny in gangster culture, such representation suggests the deep fear of females in terms of sexuality, intelligence, and intuition, which enable women to have control over men. Dominique Mainon suggests the importance of female characters in the genre:

Again and again, we see the importance of a woman's physical assets, quick wit, and proper adornment, and display of herself as an integral part of gangster films and the formulation of the gangster himself. Furs, jewels, and evening gowns all serve as key signs of power, but masculine and phallic imagery is also incorporated in many cases.<sup>22</sup>

Categorizing women as objects of sexual desire is one solution to such fear.

Apart from the molls, male fear is projected upon the total degradation of motherhood, which is epitomized in the figure of Ma Powers not being given a first name. She fits into the cult of womanhood;<sup>23</sup> she is submissive and never retorts back to her male family members; she is a virtuous widow and remains faithful to her late husband; she is religious as well as moral. As to her childrearing and morality, some questions remain. Being a competent mother requires more than simply being affectionate. In the Powers family, the strict father was the literal embodiment of discipline and morals in his police uniform. On the other hand, the mother remains a devoted caretaker. Without her husband, however, Ma Powers cannot morally direct her impish son, which allows him to go astray and find evil mentors, from Putty Nose to the later gang leaders. Ma ironically exerts her female destructive power at home.

Other mothers appear quite helpless in these movies, though Colin McArthur suggests "a touchstone of normality is usually present."<sup>24</sup> Rico's mother does not appear in *Little Caesar*, but the mother of one mobster nearly redeems her son, Antonino, who is eventually killed by Rico before

confessing his crimes to a priest. In this case, the mother figure is presented as a kind of moral guide. Tony Camonte's mother is similarly ineffective, as she cannot prevent her son or daughter from leaving home and becoming illegitimate and demoralized. Instead, she deplors the status quo and counts on her son, even though she finds him to be crooked.<sup>25</sup> One cannot expect the redemption of gangsters by their mothers, the supposedly sole guiding women in the genre. It is ironic that a distorted vision of motherhood is the other side of the coin of the macho world of gangsters.

Such sensational content and the deaths of the protagonists in gangster movies may leave a nasty aftertaste, even though they may satisfy the voyeurism of audiences. The authorities could reject the movies as being vulgar, offensive, and excessively violent. Why, then, did they bother to severely censor them? Part of the answer may lie in the movies' comical aspects,<sup>26</sup> which will be analyzed next.

### 3. Gangster Movies and Humor

Each classic gangster movie offers humor along with some pathos. Throughout the lurid plots, one can observe many comical scenes. In the case of *Little Caesar*, Rico's exaggerated narcissism and vanity would surely amuse audiences. The direction of *The Public Enemy* probably succeeds in causing laughter. *Scarface* offers unforgettable comic relief, along with the overstated childishness of the protagonist.

Edward G. Robinson creates single-minded, tough but funny Rico Bandello. Rico loves to reflect on himself in front of a mirror and a camera. The scene of Rico combing his hair, even in the middle of a gang war, is repeated with the subtitles: "Rico continued to take care of himself, his hair and his gun—with excellent results." Rico's posing in the newly tailored tuxedo is so comical that the adoring Otero on his knees looks like a buffoon. Despite another gang leader's warning to avoid publicity, Rico willingly lets a reporter take his picture for the newspaper; he sticks out his chest and beams wholeheartedly. He has to confirm his self-image in the newspaper and buys many for the record. Rico's enormous ego is further satisfied on receiving the diamond watch, a stolen gift from other gangsters. Rico's vanity when he rises to the top and his bottomless desire for material things are other sources

of comic relief. Andrew Sarris further points out the comicalness of “oh-yeah tough-guy mannerisms” represented by Rico.<sup>27</sup>

The exaggerated characterization of the protagonist is another humorous factor. His excitable character and plain speech appear stereotypical. At the banquet, the words he uses to eloquently wrap up his speech show his personality. Rico says: “Yeah, only I wish you birds wouldn’t get drunk and raise a lot of Cain cause that’s the way a lot of birds get bumped off.” Here, one can observe an animal-like instinct and debased humanity. His words are so direct that other guests and probably viewers cannot help laughing.

Simultaneously, the gap between Rico’s gang-likeness and his un-gang-likeness contributes to the comicalness of the movies—that is, despite being so macho, Rico neither drinks nor chases after women. Therefore, toward the end, the scene where Rico drinks in his misery and poverty stands out as particularly pitiful after we have witnessed all his narcissistic behavior. Edward G. Robinson acts in a theatrical manner, giving an even more excessive impression in this context. This characterization of Rico adds humor and some pathos to the movie, balancing out the robberies and gun shooting.

What about *The Public Enemy*? Is Tom Powers similar to Rico Bandello? The most amusing part of *The Public Enemy* is the protagonist’s childish naughtiness, the portrayal of the contrasting brothers, and the unique stage effects. From his boyhood, Tom Powers mimics a grown man. Although audiences know that it is illegal, we find Tom drinking beer as a kid while he childishly blows the froth, leaving audiences smiling. Such charm does not disappear when James Cagney plays grown Tom. Like Robinson, he acts flamboyantly, showing traces of a theatrical performance. One such scene is when Tom is knocked down by his older brother Mike, and the result is a completely broken chair. Another memorable moment is the famous scene where the protagonist stumbles and falls down on the street in the pouring rain, saying, “I ain’t so tough.” (This scene appears just after Tom is badly wounded from singlehandedly raiding the rival mobsters to avenge Matt’s death.) These scenes from *The Public Enemy* are certainly exaggerated as well as amusing.

What is striking in this movie is the contrast of the Powers brothers. Tom’s older brother Mike looks reliable and righteous. Nevertheless, Tom, who is considered a villain, looks livelier and more charming compared to

his gloomy older brother, who is a good man. Martha P. Nochimson refers to a similar point: “Tommy Powers was much more physically alive than his wooden, good, older brother Michael.”<sup>28</sup> From his childhood, Mike behaves like a little patriarch; the girl next door reports Tom’s misbehavior to Mike, and he preaches to his younger brother. When Mike becomes a young man, he gets a job with a streetcar business during the daytime and studies at school in the evening. Commenting on his older brother, Tom says, “He’s learning how to be poor.” Before participating in World War I, Mike marries the now beautifully grown-up girl next door, Molly. Being hardworking, domestic, and patriotic, Mike appears to be a respectable and ideal American citizen. When he comes back from the war with a medal, however, Mike becomes gloomier. Perhaps this is because he returns with a limp and is likely experiencing combat fatigue. Despite his honorable actions, he gives a dismal impression of himself.

The movie includes scenes of confrontation between the two brothers. The first confrontation occurs before Mike leaves for the war. Even though Mike preaches, the younger brother retorts and bluntly points out Mike’s weakness, revealing the reality of this “good man” as a petty thief. The second scene takes place at the dinner table after Mike returns from the war. To celebrate his return, Tom and Matt bring in a beer keg, a sign of their involvement in the illegal alcohol business. Mike flatly rejects the offer of a drink, saying, “That’s beer and blood!” Again, Tom retorts, saying Mike killed Germans in the war and he liked it, disclosing the dark inner being of a supposedly honorable man. Tom Powers, thus, easily ignores the meaning of diligence to obtain success in American society. Working all day makes Mike neither rich nor happy; his cheerless expression endorses it. His frustration with the outcome of his hard work could lead to his stealing from the company, resulting in his getting fired and being obliged to find a new job in the military. The truth of Mike’s going to war, therefore, is not based on his patriotism or his honor. Furthermore, Tom relentlessly verbalizes the meaning of a war hero and his patriotism: homicide. The younger brother plainly discloses the hypocrisy of nationalist discourse. A scene omitted from the movie by the censor points to the real nature of war; after the corpse of Tom is delivered, Mike opens a case of grenades hidden in his room to avenge his brother’s death.<sup>29</sup>

The clear contrast of what the Powers brothers do contributes to creating

dark humor. For example, whenever Tom makes a sharp comment, Mike hits him first or explodes in violent anger, which is very different from his usual personality. Such exaggerated action is funny and suggests how Tom touches Mike's sore spots and guilty conscience, which is why Tom looks composed even after being struck. The gaps between reality and the expected images of both characters are sources of horror as well as bitter amusement. Mike is probably vaguely aware that his efforts do not pay off; he may find unpardonable pleasure in stealing and killing people, as his younger brother says. Looking at the two brothers, we can see that the honorable way to success is in fact difficult; Mike knows his younger brother takes a quicker, easier path to success. In other words, a career as a gangster looks more promising and profitable than honest daily toiling. As if to demonstrate such an idea, Tom appears full of energy and vivacity. He can even afford to offer some money and kind words to his mother, unlike his poorer older brother. The contrast between the two brothers thus resonantly critiques the American dream of success with satirical humor.

There are many novel stage effects in the movie. The last scene, where Tom is wrapped in bandages in a mummy-like figure, is very shocking but hilarious. When Tom steals a gun, his polite manners and words at the shop and the succeeding holdup create further humor. Tom's light tap dancing when he sees Gwen off prompts a smile from the viewer. In addition to Cagney's famous improvisation<sup>30</sup> of smashing the grapefruit into his girlfriend's face, the stage effects of the dinner scene are unforgettable. Suggestive of the original title *Beer and Blood*, the beer keg occupies the center of the dinner table. The characters have to look beyond the keg to communicate with each other. The keg becomes the central character, suggesting the merging lines of the legitimate and illegitimate. Although this seems unnatural, the way the characters take it for granted and converse over the keg is quite entertaining.

Compared to *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, *Scarface* seems less funny. Yet it does offer remarkable comic relief. The entire narrative of *Scarface* is, as discussed, doomed to destruction with the incest motif and the bottomless desires of the protagonist. The sidekick of Tony Camonte, Angelo, gives a humorous tone to the story. Angelo starts working as Tony's secretary. He is a character who embodies public prejudice against Italian immigrants; he is illiterate,<sup>31</sup> cannot speak decent English, does not know

how to use a telephone, and blurts out what is on his mind, something like his wish to kill someone. Even the aggressive Tony has to stop him when Angelo tries to shoot the telephone when the speaker at the other end of the phone seems to have offended the secretary. Angelo's confession that he cannot write seems pathetic, though he always tries to do his best for his boss. It is comical to see how Tony corrects Angelo's English, who calls himself "sectary," "Sec-re-tary, you dope." Furthermore, Angelo's seriousness about pursuing his duties appears both funny and pathetic. No matter what the situation is, Angelo dutifully tries to answer the phone, even during machine gun shooting. He says: "This is Mr. Camonte's secretary . . . I can't hear what you've said. . . ." He does not escape from the scene, although the hot water tank starts leaking due to a gunshot and directly hits him; his twisting his body to avoid the hot water and earnestly answering the phone make for a big comic effect in the situation. His last scene, however, does not look funny because he is seriously answering the phone rather than attending to his own gunshot wound. It is ironic that he can finally answer the phone properly right before he dies. Angelo is the lovable character who blends humor with pathos in the movie.

The exaggerated, childish characterization of the protagonist provides a comic factor, as well. Especially when compared to his cool right-hand man, Rinaldo, "Scarface" Tony looks like an animal. Heavily accented English, childishness, and overconfidence characterize this protagonist. There are many close-ups of Tony's impish features, focusing on the X mark on his left cheek; he is driven by the desire for material success and status. While his big smile looks horrid, his childish delight in using a machine gun like a toy is somewhat eerie. The entire image of Tony perhaps reflects a xenophobic fear toward southern European immigrants.<sup>32</sup> Paul Muni's performance successfully creates the hilarious uncanny gangster Tony Camonte, whom contemporary audiences such as "proper" American citizens could feel superior to and ridicule. Compared to *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, the humor of *Scarface* is much darker because it intends to exclude social outcasts and enemy aliens from society and the movie. Still, because of the comic relief offered by Angelo, audiences are drawn into a whirlwind of laughter during most of the movie.

The comical dimensions of these gangster movies could have multiplied the authorities' fears. Because of the various kinds of humor presented in



these movies, audiences can forget (even if only temporarily) that they are watching an asocial, violent medium and consume it as literal entertainment. After watching fictional characters display no degree of restraint in releasing their forbidden desires, audiences may become aware of their own repressed desires and seek to release them, or they may recognize the real inequalities of American society, which could lead to social agitation. While the authorities emphasized the importance of discouraging the criminal behaviors represented in the movies, what they would have found very disturbing is that the movies assumed the guise of an exciting entertainment that was actually permeated with threatening messages. Although critics have not stressed the significance of the use of humor in gangster movies, more attention needs to be paid to this in order to better understand the genre's subversive potential.

## Conclusion

The problem with classic American gangster movies is not merely that the criminals are the main characters; the movies attempt to subvert what audiences of that era took for granted—that is, that everyone had the opportunity to realize the American dream. For the majority, especially underprivileged immigrants, the official path to success was very long and thorny, as seen in the case of Mike Powers in *The Public Enemy*. Diligence was not always rewarded in the manner of Horatio Alger stories. Although taking the illegitimate path was the other option, one would still find something or someone standing in the way, such as the police or rival gangsters. Even when one had realized the dream, the prime time to experience it did not last long in the competitive world.

Furthermore, the narrative order remains disturbed by the bustling gangsters. The movies mention the deaths of the main characters, suggesting tentative peace. Nonetheless, we do not see any powerful good intervening in the stories, which is particularly disturbing. In the vivid contrast between good and evil, which is the basic structure of gangster movies, we usually expect the good to be victorious by overthrowing evil (or for evil to perish on its own or perhaps even be redeemed). In these movies, however, it is hard to observe any outstandingly “good” figure. Even the supposedly good man is not innocent (i.e., Mike Powers in *The Public Enemy*). In the final

scene where Rico Bandello is arrested in *Little Caesar*, even though the policemen outnumber him, they seem like cowards, as Sergeant Flaherty uses his machine gun and shoots for a long time just to take down one weakened criminal. The same can be said in the last scene of *Scarface*, where Tony Camonte is shot repeatedly by many policemen. In the case of *The Public Enemy*, it is the rival gangster who puts an end to Tom's life, not the police; the police and other authoritative powers are not effective or powerful enough. By presenting a world where evil dominates, the lack of absolute good suggests a chaotic world in reality. Neither a happy ending nor restoration of fictional order with peace and harmony is available. Such unconventionality, along with barren scenes presenting the protagonist in his loneliness or with an unhappy family, is the disturbing element in classic gangster movies.

In addition to such tacit messages, the sensational portraits of gangsters were surely what the authorities disliked. The movies visualize the repressed subconscious of the public: glorifying the male homosocial world, the worshipping of mothers by sons, the misogyny of macho men, and the mutual incestuous desire between a brother and sister. These are too horrifying to explicitly verbalize. The comical aspects of these movies allowed such disturbing contents to be easily conveyed. Beyond time and place, the humor presented in these gangster movies can evoke laughter from audiences; the quality of the humor seems to be "universal." Although the authorities strictly regulated the violent scenes and lines, these comical aspects seemed to have escaped their control, because the movies were as funny as possible, especially given the theme. In this sense, humor served as a more powerful weapon than the gangsters' firearms, as it helped these disturbing movies to be consumed, possibly inspiring the audiences' desires and allaying radical ideas that the authorities would likely not accept in America.

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Appendix

*Little Caesar* (1931)

First National Pictures

Director: Mervyn LeRoy, Screenplay: Francis Edwards Faragoh,  
Based on the novel *Little Caesar* by W. R. Burnett

Caesar Enrico Bandello (Little Caesar)..... Edward G. Robinson  
Joe Massara.....Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.  
Olga Stasoff.....Glenda Farrell  
Otero .....George E. Stone  
Tony Passa.....William Collier, Jr.  
Sam Vettori .....Stanley Fields  
“Big Boy”.....Sidney Blackmer  
Sergeant Flaherty..... Thomas Jackson

*The Public Enemy* (1931)

Warner Bros. Pictures

Director: William A. Wellman, Story:  
Kubec Glasmon and John Bright, Adaptation: Harvey Thew,  
from the novel *Beer and Blood: The Story of a Couple o’ Wrong Guys* by  
Glasmon and Bright

Tom Powers ..... James Cagney  
Matt Doyle..... Edward Woods  
Mike Powers..... Donald Cook  
Ma Powers..... Beryl Mercer  
Kitty ..... Mae Clarke  
Gwen Allen..... Jean Harlow  
Mamie..... Joan Blondell  
Putty Nose..... Murray Kinnell  
Nails Nathan..... Leslie Fenton  
Paddy Ryan..... Robert O’Connor

*Scarface: The Shame of a Nation* (1932)  
United Artists Howard Hughes Production

Director: Howard Hawks, Screenplay: Ben Hecht,  
Secton I. Miller, John Lee Mahin, and W. R. Burnett  
Based on the novel *Scarface* by Armitage Trail

Tony Camonte ..... Paul Muni  
Guino Rinaldo..... George Raft  
Cesca Camonte ..... Ann Dvorak  
Poppy .....Karen Morley  
Angelo ..... Vince Barnett  
Tony's Mother.....Inez Palange  
Johnny Lovo..... Osgood Perkins  
Guarino..... C. Henry Gordon

## Notes

1. While *The Sopranos* depicts the fictional life of New Jersey mobsters, Tony Soprano and his family, *American Gangster* is about Frank Lucas, a black gangster who smuggled heroin from Vietnam, and *Public Enemies* portrays John Dillinger, the so-called "Public Enemy Number One."
2. Here, the contemporary audiences for these gangster movies are considered immigrants, who "constituted a remarkable portion of New York's film audience." Giorgio Bertellini, "Black Hands and White Hearts: Southern Italian Immigrants, Crime, and Race in Early American Cinema," *Mob Culture*, ed. Lee Grieveson et al. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 217.
3. The details of the Hays Code can be seen here: <http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html> (accessed July 5, 2012). Marilyn Roberts examines how the Hays Office pressured the producers to rewrite the *Scarface* script in her comparative study of the movie and *The Great Gatsby*: "*Scarface, The Great Gatsby, and the American Dream*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 34, no.1 (2006): 71-78. J. E. Smyth examines the classic gangster movies as a kind of historical document and illustrates how "historical gangster pictures" become "dangerous" to the censors in his essay, "Revisioning Modern American History in the Age of *Scarface* (1932)," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no.4 (2004): 535-63.
4. One good example is *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (1999). This film is reminiscent of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), but the tough new couple are so resilient that they could repel their antagonists.
5. Following Robert Warshow's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," *The Immediate Experience* (1948; New York: Atheneum Books, 1979), 127-33, the major genre criticism starts from the 1970s, focusing on its

- iconography, narrative, and ideology: Colin McArthur, *Underworld U.S.A.* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972); Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*, 2nd ed. (1977; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Eugene Roscow, *Born to Lose: The Gangster Film in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Other key monographs are chronologically listed as follows: Stephen Louis Karpf, *The Gangster Film: Emergence, Variation and Decay of a Genre 1930-1940* (New York: Arno Press, 1973); although in the 1980s, the critical focus shifted primarily to postmodernism rather than the genre itself, the 1990s welcomed further discussion on the subject: David E. Ruth, *Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture, 1918-1934* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Marilyn Yaquinto, *Pump 'Em Full of Lead: A Look at Gangsters on Film* (New York: Twayne, 1998); Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1999); in the twenty-first century, further scholarship continues: J. David Slocum, ed., *Violence and American Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001); Fran Mason, *American Gangster Cinema: From Little Caesar to Pulp Fiction* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002); Lee Grievenson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield eds., *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Alain Silver and James Ursini eds., *Gangster Film Reader* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight Editions, 2007); Catherine Ross Nickerson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). In addition to these monographs, there are many articles that illustrate how gangster movies are seminal and challenging for critics.
6. The three essays from *Gangster Film Reader* mention the comical dimensions of gangster movies. Robin Wood in "Scarface" argues the movie of the title "belongs with the comedies" (19); Andrew Sarris refers to one scene from *Little Caesar* that "evokes laughter in seventies audiences" in "The Hollywood Gangster, 1927-1933" (88); Catherine Don Diego's "Hits, Whacks, and Smokes: The Celluloid Gangster as Horror Icon" briefly refers to "shocking and absurdly comic" characteristics of *The Sopranos*, the successor of the classic American gangster movies (340).
  7. Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," 132.
  8. *Little Caesar* starts with a quotation from Matthew 26:52: "For all thou that take the sword shall perish with the sword." The opening of *The Public Enemy* begins like this: "Foreword: It is the ambition of the authors of '*The Public Enemy*' to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal. / While the story of '*The Public Enemy*' is essentially a true story, all names and characters appearing herein are purely fictional. Warner Bros. Pictures Inc." Similarly, *Scarface* presents the following message: "This picture is an indictment of gang rule in America and of 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?'"
  9. Richard Maltby, "Why Boys Go Wrong: Gangsters, Hoodlums, and the Natural History of Delinquent Careers," *Mob Culture*, 42.
  10. Yaquinto, *Pump 'Em Full of Lead*, 44; Stuart M. Kaminsky, "Little Caesar and Its Role in the Gangster Film Genre," *Gangster Film Reader*, 54.
  11. W. R. Burnett, *Little Caesar* (1929; New York: Bantam, 1959), 82-83.

## Why Are They So Disturbing?: A Study of Classic American Gangster Movies

12. Mason points out the importance of gunshot sounds in the development of the genre in association with its modernity. See *American Gangster Cinema*, 4.
13. A compact discussion is seen in Norma Bouchard, "Ethnicity and the Classical Gangster Film: Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* and Howard Hawks' *Scarface*," *Mafia Movies: A Reader*, ed. Dana Renga (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 68-75; Jonathan J. Cavallero, "Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32, no.2 (2004): 50-63.
14. As to this point, Lee Grieveson further refers to the rhetoric of "white slave gangs" and their association with southern European immigrants and Jewish groups, "tying in with the nativist and anti-Semitic rhetoric that informed eugenics and eugenic criminology." See "Gangsters and Governance in the Sound Era," *Mob Culture*, 21.
15. Mason, *American Gangster Cinema*, 24-25.
16. Richard Maltby explains this as "an earlier mode of criminal behavior" based on friendship, loyalty, and affection, which are not much respected in the newly rising gangs like Al Capone's in "Why Boys Go Wrong" (51).
17. Christopher Shannon, "Public Enemies, Local Heroes: The Irish-American Gangster Film in Classic Hollywood Cinema," *New Hibernia Review/Iris Eireannach Nua: A Quarterly Record of Irish Studies* 9, no.4 (2005): 51.
18. Gaylyn Studlar discusses "Hollywood's fragile negotiation of homoeroticism within gangster-derived depictions of masculinity": how the Production Code Administration tried to monitor and control "nonverbal aspects" of films, such as perversion and homosexuality. Although the main period of focus is later than the 1930s, the critic refers to these classics. See "A Gungsel Is Being Beaten: Gangster Masculinity and the Homoerotics of the Crime Film, 1941-1942," *Mob Culture*, 120-45.
19. Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends*, 47.
20. This is considered to have some reference to the Borgias. See Mason, *American Gangster Cinema*, 28.
21. Dominique Mainon suggests that basically two types of female characters appear in the genre. One is "monstrously seductive," the other is a "victim," and some women are both. In the classic gangster cycle, the female characters are distorted but not always victimized. "A New Kind of Girl for a New Kind of World," *Gangster Film Reader*, 289.
22. Mainon, *Gangster Film Reader*, 286.
23. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *The American Quarterly* 18, no.2 (1966): 151-74. Although the setting is a little later, these movies seemingly esteem the traditional domestic values to worship what Welter calls the true womanhood of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."
24. Colin McArthur, "Iconography of the Gangster Film," *Gangster Film Reader*, 40.
25. Such representation of degraded motherhood may reflect the general fear of mass immigration from southern Europe. As to discussion of the ethnic issue and gangster movies, see Bouchard, "Ethnicity and the Classical Gangster Film: Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* and Howard Hawks' *Scarface*," *Mafia Movies: A Reader*, 68-75.
26. Robin Wood considers that *Scarface* belongs to the comedies without the social context; Tony Camonte's destructive innocence is examined in "Scarface," *Gangster Film Reader*, 19-27.
27. Sarris, "The Hollywood Gangster," 88.

28. Martha P. Nochimson, "Waddaya Lookin' At?: Rereading the Gangster Film through *The Sopranos*," *Mob Culture*, 191.
29. Smyth, "Revisioning Modern American History in the Age of *Scarface*," 547.
30. Yaquinto writes that the actress Mae Clarke had "no idea James Cagney was going to smash a grapefruit in her face and left the set . . . crying" (34). However, in her autobiography, Mae Clarke wrote that Cagney told her what he was going to do before the scene was shot. See James Curtis, ed., *Featured Player: An Oral History of Mae Clarke* (Lanham, Md., & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1996), 68-69.
31. Bertellini points out that the "unassimilated Italian criminals" in the gangster movies are "often illiterate" in "Black Hands and White Hearts" (218).
32. Catherine Don Diego clearly refers to the "horror of facing a superflux of alterity in the darker races' immigration into major U.S. cities" in *Scarface* in "Hits, Whacks, and Smokes: The Celluloid Gangster as Horror Icon," *Gangster Film Reader*, 327-30. Jonathan J. Cavallero indicates that unlike *The Public Enemy* (the Irish immigrants), which indicts the social ills caused by poverty, *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* (the Italian immigrants) are blamed for their own characters without reference to their social background; "the division between good and evil was drawn along ethnic lines." See "Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos," 50-63.