“The World is Yours”: Challenging the American Dream in Howard Hawks’ (1932) and Brian De Palma’s (1983) *Scarface* Films

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read “The World is Yours”: Challenging the American Dream in Howard Hawks’ (1932) and Brian De Palma’s (1983) Scarface Films by Madison Root, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts: English Literature at San Francisco State University.

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Since the formation of the United States, the pinnacle of American life has been defined as the attainment of the American Dream: wealth, status, and freedom. Inspired by the success of the robber barons in the late 19th-century, millions of immigrant individuals arrived in America with aspirations of creating a brighter destiny for themselves beyond the impoverishment and oppression they experienced in their mother countries. Despite the promise of unalienable rights, the xenophobic prejudices of the American government and people led to the creation of laws that unfairly barred women, ethnic and religious minorities, and immigrant individuals from equitable access to the American Dream. This thesis argues that the development of the gangster trope in film was due to American anxieties towards immigrant individuals. Moreover, it asserts that these fears were epitomized in the 1932 and 1983 Scarface films. Focusing on the perspective of immigrant individuals, Scarface interrogates the viability of the American Dream and concludes that it is unattainable due to America’s failing system in which white, American-born individuals continue to be privileged over all others. This thesis examines the Scarface films and how each responds to its historical, social, and cultural moment to illustrate the extremities to which individuals in the margins of society are forced to go if they are to attain any semblance of success in the American frontier. The Scarface films demonstrate that, regardless of which path is taken, many individuals are incapable of attaining the American Dream due to unjust laws and racial stereotypes. The films led to the creation of the gangster as an archetypal figure that represents the immigrant individual’s inability to succeed due to American anxieties and fears. All in all, this thesis concludes the Scarface films’ legacy continues to influence the gangster genre today as it continues to reflect the ongoing failures of the American system to deliver on its promise of equitability for all.
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Table of Contents


1. Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 1
   1.1 From American Dreams to Gangsters and Schemes: A Brief Overview................................. 1
   1.2. Dreamers Today, Criminals Tomorrow: Assimilating Italian and Cuban Immigrants into Gangsters.................................................................................................................... 5
   1.3. The Gangster’s American Dream: How the World Can Become Yours According to Scarface............................................................................................................................................... 17

2. Chapter One: Gang Rule in 1930s America: What Are YOU Going to Do About It?..... 20
   2.1 Setting the Stage: The Indoctrination of Crime in Scarface (1932) .................................... 20
   2.2 Gang War: Scenes from Scarface (1932) ........................................................................... 24
   2.3 The World Is Temporarily Yours: Providing the Blueprint for Scarface (1983) ............... 36

   3.1 You Need People Like Tony: Continuing the Legacy of Scarface in 1983 ....................... 39
   3.2 Pushing Crime to the Limit: Scenes from Scarface (1983) ................................................ 43
   3.3 The Last Time Seeing a Bad Guy Like This: The Hypocrisy of the American Dream...... 61

4. Chapter Three: We All Could Be Happier: The Legacy of Scarface in Contemporary Media................................................................................................................................. 65
   4.1 An Introduction to the Growing Gangster Genre ............................................................... 65
   4.2 From Distant Other to Neighbor: Expanding the Gangster’s Landscape ......................... 68
   4.3 We Still Need People Like Him: Conclusion ..................................................................... 79

References.................................................................................................................................................. 82
1. Introduction

1.1 From American Dreams to Gangsters and Schemes: A Brief Overview

The gangster’s life is often depicted as highly lavished and indulgent: money to spend on expensive clothing, fine jewelry, an extravagant home, and any other desire or whim they may have. The seemingly endless wealth and power they enjoy in one moment, however, can be followed by danger or even death in the next. Whether it be a threat to their livelihood, risks that complicate their already lucrative racket, or the unsettling unknown of who around them could overthrow them, their dream of elite status always comes with a mortal cost. Unfortunately for the gangster, this decline in their success is a non-negotiable aspect of their business, for it is the same decline that the gangsters before them experienced, creating the path for generations of gangsters to achieve their rise into riches. Despite the risks involved, the knowledge that anyone can envision, execute, and achieve success is the allure with which the life of a gangster is embossed: if you want it bad enough, the world can be yours.

While this is a central aspect of what it takes to be a successful gangster, it is also a core component of what it means to be a successful American.\textsuperscript{1} Since the formation of the United States in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century and especially during the Industrial Revolution of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, America life has been built upon the premise that “all men are created equal” and they have the unalienable right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”\textsuperscript{2} In other words, anyone can

\textsuperscript{1} For more on the importance of making one’s own successes, see Jim Cullen’s \textit{The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation}; Eugene Rosow’s \textit{Born to Lose: The Gangster Film in America}.

\textsuperscript{2} See “The Declaration of Independence”.
create their own destiny. This ideology, commonly regarded as the American Dream, is what often situates America as a unique land littered with opportunities for anyone who dreams of more in life. Jim Cullen elaborates on this, emphasizing that the central premise of the American Dream is upward mobility in which “anyone can get ahead” (60). Connecting this idea to late 19th-century robber baron Andrew Carnegie as an “archetypal example” of such success, Cullen describes upward mobility as involving classic “tales of poor boys… who, with nothing but pluck and ingenuity, created financial empires that towered over the national imagination” and even “national [landscapes]” in some instances (60). Serving as an early yet fundamental model of American society, the premise of an individual who has nothing to their name and lives in “rags” who then transforms their circumstances into societal wealth or “riches” remains a defining aspect of the American Dream.

As illustrious as the American Dream is, though, the laws, regulations, and restrictions that have been passed over time have permanently shaped the landscape of America and, by consequence, the Dream of what it means to be in America altogether. For those who remained in the status quo, it meant continued privilege and possibility. For those who were outside of the growing vision of who is believed to have rightful claim to the American Dream, however, it meant rejection and exclusion to a dangerous extent. The perhaps well-intentioned yet divisive roots that America was founded upon led to an imbalance in which non-white and non-male individuals were often omitted from many of the opportunities that were considered rightfully

3 See Jim Cullen’s The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation for a history of the American Dream.
4 For more on the rags to riches model, see Rosow, especially chapter two.
theirs, including the American Dream. To this point, laws were unfairly applied to continue barring immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, and women from fully participating in the pursuit of happiness. Being alienated from the scope of a Dream that was said to include all men as equal, many rightfully sought to claim their promise of an American Dream in the same fashion that the settlers of the United States had, yet instead of being seen as justly arguing for their rights, many were labelled as troublemakers, outlaws, outsiders, and gangsters. This tension between the status quo and those outside of it has not only evolved over history but provided the vehicle for the flaws of American ideology to undergo criticism and transformation which, unfortunately, is not always a step in a positive, inclusive, or safe direction. As revealed through various moments in history, those outside of society’s vision of accepted social and cultural milieu disrupt the established core of America and American ideology through their unwillingness to accept or comply with who can achieve the American Dream and how. By straining, skewing, and sublimating the fibers of the American Dream, those who lie on the margins of society create their own pathways to live on the inside. Thus, their infiltration, corruption, and living of the American Dream problematizes the American Dream and American ideology from the outside in to rewrite it. As a result, new status quos are formed yet new people become displaced. Since there seems not to be an anticipated end to this shift in the attainment for a perfect vision, the outsiders shall continue to shape the landscape of the American Dream in ways that elicit new cultural anxieties and fears upon the horizon of a unpromised tomorrow.

5 See Cullen, chapter two, pages 50-53.
6 For more on the abolition and creation process that the United States was founded upon, see “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription”, paragraph two.
In this long tradition of new gangsters rising up as older gangsters fall out, the legacy of *Scarface* takes center stage not just by following the patterns of the genre but by following the gangster into the streets as he unabashedly trudges his way to the top. Whereas darkly lit alleyways or private quarters might be preferential, the *Scarface* protagonists brazenly move through life with the same sense of entitlement as any other successful American might. Despite the typically avoidant and negative attitudes of the people around them, the gangster proudly and publicly flaunts their assimilation into American society from their position as former outsiders. When challenged, the protagonists are quick to protect their status, clearly evidencing that they have earned their place at the top and are just as affluent, cultured, and American as anyone else.

Not only is the ascension and attainment of the American Dream through the gangster’s dangerous, immoral, and illegal means a story that has captivated audiences for nearly ninety years, but the legacy of *Scarface* that has impressed itself upon the gangster genre and American culture is an alternative path towards success. Moreover, their “success” provides a vehicle for identification even while ironically indicting the lawlessness of their pathway to success. With the world and seemingly everyone in it against them, they overcome adversity, climb to the top of societal success, and become everything they have dreamed of.

This thesis is about the 1932 and 1983 *Scarface* films as representing the epitome of the American gangster genre and the perspective of the American Dream through the eyes of immigrants. This discussion of the first film and its remake will examine the history, significance, and contours these films possess in the evolving trope of the gangster in addition to comparing how they continue to influence not just the genre but the meaning of the American Dream. The focus on the American Dream and experience from the perspective of an immigrant
during specific historical moments in time allows the audience an intimate view of the American Dream from an outsider’s perspective despite evoking cultural anxiety and challenging longstanding ideologies. This thesis will demonstrate how the Scarface films interrogate the underlying questions of who truly controls their destiny, desires, and dreams in the American frontier through its examination of othered individuals who have refused to be denied a Dream that is their right to achieve.

1.2. Dreamers Today, Criminals Tomorrow: Assimilating Italian and Cuban Immigrants into Gangsters

1.2.1. The Original Gangsters (OGs): Scarface (1932) and History

Set in the 1920s, Howard Hawk’s Scarface (1932) takes place in the urban industrial landscape of Chicago through the third person point of view of Tony Camonte, an entry-level associate of the South Side gang. The legacy of the robber barons of the Gilded Age in America that sparked the later political and social reform of the early 19th century coupled with the devastation of World War I gave shape to the capitalistic mindset of the gangster in a crumbling and bleak world. A central component to the gangster plot, the industrialization of America that characterized much of the success and innovation of 19th-century America took place in Chicago. While it allowed for unfathomable amounts of wealth for men like Andrew Carnegie, two men in Chicago – Philip Armour and Gustavus Swift – were unique in that they were self-made men: those who worked their way up from low-class jobs like ditch-digging and butcher to

7 See Chapter 2: The Myth of Success in Rosow 22-35.
8 For more on industrialization and its influence on gangster film, see Rosow 3-35.
the elite status of millionaires. Before Chicago’s landscape and history are examined, a more
generalized understanding of Italian immigrants – a central force in Chicago and Scarface – will
establish the history and perspective from which the film situates itself.

As a model of how determination and ingenuity could actualize even the wildest of
dreams, the American Dream inspired not just Americans to pioneer their own success but
immigrants who sought more for their families and themselves. Due to the impoverished
conditions in their mother countries and the promise of being able to create one’s own success,
the late 19th-century and early 20th-century saw significant influxes of immigrants from Europe.
Of the estimated twenty million Europeans that immigrated to America between 1880 and 1920,
four million or one-fifth of these immigrants were Italian. While seemingly welcoming them into
America, the growing sentiment towards them was that they brought crime, poverty, and
dirtiness with them, an association that has had a lasting impact on their lives in America.

Differences in culture, customs, and the start of World War I slowly exacerbated the anxieties of
white Americans and created conflicting attitudes towards immigrants. As a result, immigration
policies were implemented to alleviate the mounting tension that Americans felt with the arrival
of immigrants. In addition, American’s perception of immigrants began to take on an implicit
negative meaning because of how American society and legislation reinforced the image of
immigrants as lesser and even as degenerate in comparison to native-born, white Americans. One
such example is the 1917 Immigration Act, or the Literacy Act, which restricted the immigration

9 See "Industrial Supremacy", directed by Fred Barzyk, for more on Chicago’s industrialization.
10 See “America: The Promised Land – Part Two”, produced for A&E Television Networks, for more on the
statistics of immigration and Fentress for associations on crime in America.
of Europeans who were considered “poorly educated” and, therefore, “undesirable.” Maddalena emphasizes that the Act narrowly passed since it “successfully [exploited] the anti-immigrant hysteria during World War I” (15). She notes the immigration laws that took place in the years following the 1917 Immigration Act culminated in the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. Since much blame was placed on Italian and Jewish immigrants for “social and economic problems ailing the nation,” especially after the end of World War I, the 1924 Act’s ban of nearly all “immigration from Asia” and “the national origins quota system on the Eastern Hemisphere” resulted in only two percent of individuals being admitted to America (43-45).

Even before the passing of the 1924 Act, Italian immigrants, specifically Southern Italians with darker complexions, were regularly marked as “an inferior class of immigrant.” It was even found in a government report published in 1911 that Italians were “the least likely to become citizens” (Marchesi, *Becoming Americans* 00:06:45-00:06:50). The impact that this had on Italian immigrants forced them to subsist in difficult and sometimes fatal conditions.

One of the longstanding impressions formed in American’s minds of Italians as criminals stems from their arrival in New Orleans in the 19th century. After Northern Italy became unified with the South in the mid-19th-century, many impoverished Southern Italians fled from the threats against their livelihood and that of their families to find work in America (Marchesi, *La Famiglia* 00:10:59-00:11:33). Following the path of those before them, many Sicilians

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11 See *Encyclopedia of North American Immigration* for more on the process, passing, and restrictions of the Act, and Maddalena about Italian mobilization against such acts in chapter one.

12 For more on immigration from 1920-1929, see Maddalena, chapter two, and Fentress 169-174.

13 See “Becoming Americans: 1910-1930”, produced by Muriel Soenens, for PBS.

14 For further details on attitudes regarding Italians as belong to a mafia, see *Eminent Gangsters: Immigrants and the Birth of Organized Crime in America* by James Fentress, pages 10-30 and “La Famiglia: 1890-1910”, produced by Muriel Soenens.
travelled to New Orleans, a city not only well-known for its traffic from Europe to the “New World” but having a similar climate as the Mediterranean Sea, thereby allowing Italian immigrants to thrive (Fentress 15). Over the thirty years it took to establish and assimilate into the culture, many were able to live successfully and even open their own businesses free from the threat of being killed by the Italian government (Fentress 14-15, Marchesi *La Famiglia* 00:51:13-00:51:35). In the 1880s, however, Sicilians belonging to the Maranga gang – who also were affiliated with the Stoppaglieri, an Italian “brotherhood/criminal association”– started a feud with the Provenzanos, another Sicilian crime group (Fentress 17-18).15 The importance of this event is the position in which it put New Orleans Police Chief Dave Hennessey and the events that unfolded because of his involvement. Chief Hennessy was known to have good relations with both Italian gangs, yet, although seemingly unrelated, he was assassinated by unknown assailants (18-21). This fueled the rage of the city’s mayor and the police force, who indicted nineteen Italian Americans in a lengthy trial that ended with them being found not guilty (22). Seeing it as a shocking victory of mafia-driven crime, irate community members killed four Italian prisoners to bring the mayor’s earlier wish to fruition when the Italians were initially indicted: to “teach [the mafia] a lesson that they will not forget for all time” (22-24). While New Orleans was seemingly aware of the mafia’s presence well before these events, the murder of Chief Hennessy made their presence more impactful, anxiety-inducing, and, most importantly, public.16 As one of the first sites that drew Italian immigrants even before the more notable

15 For more on this specific event, Fentress 10-14.
periods of immigration that happened later that century, these early incidents contributed to the
notion of Italians as criminals.

Seeking out different and new opportunities, Italian immigrants traveled across the
Atlantic and up the Mississippi River in search of jobs. With the dramatic increase in
industrialization at the end of the 19th century, Chicago soon flourished and held its place as the
second-largest city in America for twenty years, nearly doubling in population after its first
decade (Fentress 119-20). The expansive increase in the city’s size and population coupled with
the vast range of immigrant cultures led to deeply complex, tense, and divided neighborhoods of
individuals with different principles and views (118-121). This led to the exploitation of
immigrant labor in Chicago’s railroads and agricultural markets, municipal authority that had to
be shared among various leaders who each led with differing politics and policies, and loosely
enforced vice laws that gave Chicago its reputation for “special wickedness” (118, 120-125). The
vices, which were already well-established and a notorious fixture of the city, often took place in
the areas of Chicago that immigrant communities would form given they were more affordable
as opposed to middle- and higher-class areas (124-125). As a result, immigrants were often
blamed for businesses that dealt in vice, such as sex work, gambling, and Sunday drinking and
continued to be viewed as a community of “hoodlums, fugitives from justice, and criminals”
(121, 125). As it will be later established with Scarface (1983)’s history, these numbers often
only comprised a small total of these communities. Yet, in a community where many have
dreams of a better life and abided by the lawful opportunities they were given, there remained

17 See Fentress 118-158, especially 130-133.
individuals who made themselves through business that, despite being illegal, initially provided them with success.

With the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment, marking the start of Prohibition in 1920 in which it became a criminal offense to manufacture, buy, or sell alcoholic liquor, many individuals saw this as an opportunity to gain as much as possible especially since there was nothing left to lose.\(^{18}\) Since Chicago was an industrial marvel that was large and expansive due to its geography, it allowed bootleggers to prosper by smuggling alcohol by truck from New York and by boat from Canada (Fentress 178, 197). The ideology was that the demand for alcohol would not disappear but create new opportunities for untapped business, especially in a market where there was no formal regulation (174-175).\(^{19}\) Prohibition had unintentionally provided a seemingly perfect opportunity for individuals to make a name for themselves in a popular market, even predominantly among those who were “urban upper and middle [class]” (176).\(^{20}\) Additionally, the support of politicians allowed bootleggers to flourish well beyond prohibition. Due to their willingness to accept bribes, bootleggers became “well-connected enough to step into the shoes of the older urban political rings” and blend into the vastness of America where it was difficult to enforce laws to begin with (xi, 169-174). In essence, Prohibition provided organized crime “its show-biz break” by allowing a demand to be supplied (175-176, 267).

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\(^{18}\) For more on the framing of immigration and organized crime, see Fentress vi-xiii and for more on prohibition specifically, see “Prohibition”, produced by Jonathan Martin and Fentress 159-264.

\(^{19}\) See Fentress 176: “What’s Al [Capone] done then? He’s supplied a legitimate demand. Some call it bootlegging. Some call it racketeering. I call it business”.

\(^{20}\) For more on Prohibition as class legislation that sought to impose a “higher standard of moral conduct” for individuals who often indulged in drinking – typically those of working and lower classes – see Fentress 175-176.
The industrialization of Chicago led to a burgeoning job market that drew in many individuals, especially immigrants. The pace with which the city grew, however, led to divisiveness among many immigrant communities to the point of exacerbating longstanding animosities between different groups (Fentress 119). Given the rapid growth of Chicago, the different individuals who inhabited it, and no easy way in which to govern it, these jobs were delegated to multiple authorities who acted on behalf of their respective wards, only dividing it further (120). This vast, highly nuanced, and varied manner of governance by each ward’s authorities allowed individuals to influence the way in which power was wielded. With the emergence of Prohibition, each ward not only responded differently but was susceptible to the influence of criminals who saw Prohibition as a clear and easy path for attaining enormous wealth.

This provides the background and stage with which the first Scarface film takes place while also evidencing the attitudes of Chicago as a particularly wicked and poorly managed city. The first chapter of this essay examines these tensions in a seemingly corrupt landscape that is endlessly divided amongst itself. While additionally marking the emergence of what is considered as the earliest phase of the genre, the first chapter of this essay explores the individuals who were inspired by robber barons but became gangsters through their more overt and direct use of cruel violence. The discussion will explore how immigrant individuals have pursued the American Dream yet, in select instances, their exclusion from the American Dream due to their identity as an ethnic and immigrant minority has forced them for forge an alternative

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21 See Fentress, pages 119-120.
22 For more on the emergence of the gangster genre, see Shadoian, chapter one.
to attain success, a path which was named for what they were considered to be: gangsters. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss how racial disparity, difference in cultural values, and the illegal nature of their business, despite lacking governance and remaining relatively high in demand, allowed gangsters a path to attaining the American Dream but represented them as dangerous. In short, the first chapter examines how the social, cultural, and historical landscape of Chicago birthed the corrupt immigrant individual who used the gray area of the law to attain the American Dream, which later led to the creation of the gangster genre that still resonates with the American public to this day.

1.2.2. Extraordinary Circumstances Spare No Criminal: Scarface (1983) and History

Set in the 1980s, the 1983 remake of Scarface by Brian De Palma follows a Cuban immigrant named Tony Montana after his immediate arrival from Cuba in Miami. The film strategically follows Montana’s rise from processing by U.S. Officials and his placement in a refugee camp beneath a freeway underpass to his eventual elite status as Boss in a secluded mansion seemingly beyond the city. While many of the gangster tropes evolve from the aspects described in the earlier section, they are deeply tied to his immigrant identity. The tense relationship between American and Cuba leading to the release of the film was fueled by Cold War anxieties due to Cuba and the Soviet Union’s close ties and the immigration of refugees in 1981 during the Mariel Boatlift. The Mariel Boatlift provided the central framework for Montana to infiltrate American soil and, ultimately, to shape its landscape.

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23 For more on the enforcement of Prohibition and the resistance to it, see Fentress, 169-176.
24 See Hawk’s and Graham’s account of events leading up to the Mariel Boatlift, 24-27.
25 See Hawk 113 for more on Marielitos as potential spies.
While these earlier experiences provided much of the foundation for the gangster genre, films depicting crime, racketeering, and danger continued to be retold as the xenophobic attitudes of Americans grew with the overwhelming arrival of Cuban refugees in the Spring of 1980. Framing this mass exodus of Cuban people was Fidel Castro’s rise to power in Cuba. Leading a revolutionary movement aimed at the expulsion of the reigning dictator of Cuba in 1959, Castro promised “peace, prosperity, honest government, and… a return to the democratic Constitution of 1940”.26 Within the few short months after he gained control of Cuba, he betrayed these promises of democracy by imprisoning liberals who were in the Cuban government, “established diplomatic relations and forged close economic ties” with the Soviet Union, declared himself a Marxist-Leninist, and ruled over Cuba with a Communist regime (Triay 3-4). Castro’s regime forced Cubans to sacrifice all material and intellectual individuality for the purpose of building a model society (12-16). Castro’s radical consolidation of power over Cuba – which was shaped by the Soviet Union and China – led to Cuba being controlled by a totalitarian governing system with a vast structure that policed its citizens at every level before resorting to imprisonment, extreme political rehabilitation measures, and cutting them off completely with the world (12-16, 20). Although there were individuals who supported Castro’s regime, many Cubans conformed and adhered to the demands of the government as a means of survival, their opposition being closely guarded as a “deeply held secret” that was rarely entrusted to anyone except the confines of family (16).

26 For more on the events leading up to the Mariel Boatlift, see The Mariel Boatlift: A Cuban-American Journey by Victor Andres Triay, especially pages 1-46.
Faced with mounting pressure with Cuba’s failing economy, political tension with the United States, and the desperation of Cubans citizens to flee Castro’s regime, Fidel Castro permitted Cubans to leave for the United States from the port of Mariel.27 Determined to shake the embarrassment of over ten thousand Cubans who sought political asylum at the Peruvian Embassy in Cuba, Castro approved of the boatlift, seeing it as an opportunity to reframe the narrative about life in Cuba, place the responsibility on the United States, to relieve the economic and political pressures of his regime, and to weaponize the refugees (24-31). On April 20, 1980, the Cuban government allowed anyone to leave Cuba if a boat came for them at the port of Mariel, and, within two weeks, 61,928 Cubans had arrived in Florida.28 Over the five-month period before Castro “arbitrarily ended the boatlift in September,” 124,779 Cubans immigrated to the United States (Triay 52, Aguirre et al. 488). For the hardships many had to endure while being isolated from the world for years and sacrificing everything for the hope of a better Cuba, many sought the chance to attain their “profound desire for individual freedom” (Triay 21). Where Castro saw an opportunity to be rid of political opposition, the Cubans saw an opportunity to live free.

Although Cubans immigrating to the United States was not uncommon, the depiction of Cubans as deviants and criminals negatively impacted their reception and assimilation into the country as fear exacerbated American’s perceptions of the refugees.29 Castro strategically spun

27 See Triay’s *The Mariel Boatlift: A Cuban-American Journey*, chapter two, for a more detailed account.
28 See “Marielitos Ten Years Later: The Scarface Legacy” for more on the Mariel Boatlift and the impact this event had on Cubans and earlier Cuban refugees.
29 According to Aguirre et al., Cubans immigrants comprised the “third most sizable immigration flow from the 1950s to the 1970s (489). For additional detail on the reception of Cuban immigrants during the 1980s, see Aguirre et al. “Marielitos Ten Years Later: The Scarface Legacy”, especially 492-495.
the narrative of the Cubans who were immigrating from Mariel as anti-social and undesirable, which included “petty criminals, the mentally ill, alcoholics, vagrants, prostitutes, Jehovah’s Witnesses and members of other religious sects, homosexuals, and others” (Triay 56). The regime went as far as to force them to self-identify as criminals to evidence their undesirability in addition to those who were serving prison sentences or were ex-convicts (Aguirre et al. 491). While it was mainly family who planned to bring their relatives that were left behind in Castro’s Cuba back to the United States, many of the Marielito Cuban immigrants confirmed they were forced to bring strangers with them (Triay 30, 51-52). The strangers were Castro’s attempt to “tarnish the reputation that previous exiles had earned” by forcing them out with the others that were fleeing, characterizing the entire boatlift itself as “doing an excellent job of sanitation” for Cuba by taking these individuals with them (Triay 49, 58). In short, Castro had succeeded: the precarity of their immigration complicated how they were processed and legalized in the United States coupled with the press resulted in the Marielitos receiving “considerable public resentment and hostility” which made “their integration into American society much more difficult” (Aguirre et al. 492-493). They were blamed for rises in crime, were faced with discrimination by Americans, including Cuban Americans, and sparked frustrations toward the economic recession of the time.30

As with the Italian immigrants in the beginning of the century, the Cuban refugees evidenced the power that American anxiety had over their lives. Even as refugees seeking asylum from Castro’s Cuba to survive, their search for freedom from oppression became

30 See Bankston III and Hidalgo 581-585.
trivialized through the politics of the legal process for granting refugee status at the time and the criminals they were forced to leave with.\textsuperscript{31} Their promise of a better life free from the oppression of the government they were seeking refuge from led to them unequal, unsafe, and unjust circumstances.\textsuperscript{32} The false narrative of Marielitos as criminals – which comprised less than two percent of all the refugees – was established by Castro’s standards of what constituted a criminal, many of which offenses “would not have made these people criminals in democratic countries” (Triay 56).\textsuperscript{33} This depiction of Cuban refugees not only damaged their reputation and assimilation into the United States but falsely sensationalized them as criminals. As with the early wave of Italian immigrants, the crime and danger that accounted for miniscule fractions of the immigrant population, publicized, and then accepted as the dominant narrative of who the immigrants were. The second chapter of this essay compares the earlier \textit{Scarface} film with the 1983 remake. As with the first chapter, the second chapter examines the ways in which racial disparity created a climate in which individuals sought alternative paths to be able to attain the American Dream despite their illegal nature. Building upon the gangster genre nearly fifty-one years after the first, the second chapter discusses how less consciously overt themes become increasingly more conscious and intentional.\textsuperscript{34} The result is a film that, like its predecessor, draws on its respective social, cultural, and historical milieu to establish a moral gray area in which the American Dream is problematized. Unlike the first film, however, the second chapter

\textsuperscript{31} For more on the politics of granting the Marielitos refugee status and the opposition associated with it, see Triay 142-144.
\textsuperscript{32} For more on their resettlement, living conditions, and, for some, incarceration that was later ruled illegal, see Triay 146-151.
\textsuperscript{33} For more on this statistical approximation, see Triay 58-59.
\textsuperscript{34} See Shadoian for more on the genre’s growing awareness of itself (29-30).
explores similar themes of divisiveness in a corrupt city, the exploitation of immigrants by Americans, and the gangster’s otherness through the intentional and explicit structure of the film. The culminating result of the second film is the evolution of the gangster as not merely a tragic character who ended up lost on American soil but, much like America’s Founding Fathers, a succession of self-made men who continue to hold on to their vision of the American Dream. While this effort is often realized through illegal racket, the core critique that the gangster illuminates is that the American Dream is not merely attained through corruption, but an unchanged part of it.

1.3. The Gangster’s American Dream: How the World Can Become Yours According to Scarface

Compelled by the promise of the American Dream in which anyone can succeed, immigrants came to America to secure the opportunity of wealth and social mobility yet were quickly formed in the American mind as criminals. Immigration laws came to reflect the deviancy and inferiority that Americans perceived immigrants to be. While many endured by working their way in America’s overtly dangerous jobs towards simpler dreams of surviving, others found ways to transcend survival and attained significant success. It is through the deviated path of fulfilling the unanswered and often illegal demands of white Americans that immigrant individuals took on the vocation of gangster. At the forefront is the gangster who represents an amalgamation of American’s inherited beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of immigrants as criminals, yet they offer a deeper criticism of the viability of the so-called American Dream. The genre’s ability to create worlds that are “inhabited by specific types who engage in specific conflicts” within the oppositional milieu of a given historical time allows for
the gangster to be understood beyond the simple guise of a reckless criminal as an individual with broken promises who takes control of their own dreams (Shadoian 32). This call-to-action stems from an absence of an attainable American Dream, thus pointing to the flaw of American society and “the kind of individual it creates” in them (4). This is the crucial purpose that the representation of the gangster is in service of: to expose this “central problem of the American people” (6). The 1932 and 1983 Scarface films work from this positionality while also interrogating the historical events that have personified the immigrant in the literary form of the gangster. With immigrants becoming a “grand [design]” of the “audience’s fantasies and dreams” through the lens of the gangster, the protagonists reveal the corruption and contradiction of America’s landscape through the elusiveness of the American Dream (Shadoian 29). Moreover, the films trivialize the “self-made man” by showing someone who has “no fear of pain and death, who behaves amorally” until “the world’s weight crushes down on him” (29). For these reasons, the Scarface legacy highlights the contradictory and elusive nature of the American Dream and how their innovation rewards and endangers them in America’s corrupt landscape.

The first and second chapters explore specific moments from each film and how the protagonists’ deviation from the conventional route of the American Dream to forge their own path challenge the viability of the American Dream. Situated in historical moments that often offer misrepresented promises for immigrants, the films call attention to the cracks in American ideology, revealing the corrupt, unequal, and unjust system of success. Furthermore, their alignment with immigrant and substance-affiliated laws serves as evidence for the contradictory and exploitative nature upon which American society functions. Each film operates as a satirical
criticism of their respective cultural milieus. Whereas the 1932 film achieves this through an inadvertent and implicit representation of the gangster’s reality, the 1983 builds upon this structure in an explicit and self-conscious manner. While the early film contributed to the solidification of the immigrant in America’s imagination – resulting in the gangster genre – the later adaptation built upon these more subtle and unconscious features, resulting in the gangster being employed more overtly as a literary vehicle to critique American society. What resulted from these actions – which is briefly outlined in the concluding chapter – is the impact of *Scarface’s* legacy on other texts, popular culture, and the gangster genre as it has progressed over time. Ultimately, what *Scarface* contributes is an illustration of how creating one’s own successes, although such attempts may deviate from America’s more traditionally prescribed path, allows for generations of gangsters, immigrants, and individualists to make the world theirs.

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35 For more on the transition from the genre’s origin as unconscious to self-aware, see Shadoian 15-20.
2. Chapter One: Gang Rule in 1930s America: What Are YOU Going to Do About It?

2.1 Setting the Stage: The Indoctrination of Crime in *Scarface* (1932)

Set in the 1920s, Howard Hawk’s *Scarface* (1932) takes place in the urban industrial landscape of Chicago through the third person point of view of Tony Camonte, an entry-level associate of the South Side gang. The film emphasizes that different ethnicities lead gangs, including Camonte, an Italian man who is epitomized in the opening of the film by his assassination of lead gangster “Big” Louis Costillo. From that moment forward, Camonte’s self-confidence and insatiable desire to rise to the top of all the gangsters in Chicago leads him to take risky, arrogant, and ultimately foolish steps towards achieving it. *Scarface* (1932) interrogates the core tenants that American life was founded upon, namely the pursuit of the American Dream, through the perspective of immigrant individuals. Although it arguably showcased immigrants as ruthless gangsters who were corrupting American values, the film illustrates American’s anxieties with immigrant individuals through their stereotypical portrayal as dangerous and uncontrollable criminals without regard for anyone but themselves.

This chapter explores the representation of Italian people in *Scarface* (1932) and contends that the historical injustices they experienced as immigrants led to them being further stereotyped in film as amoral individuals destroying the American landscape and American values.36 It highlights the tense production process the film underwent, including the many changes that

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36 In Carla Mereu Keating’s “‘The Italian Color’: Race, Crime Iconography and Dubbing Conversations in the Italian-language Versions of Scarface (1932),” she examines the film’s reception by Italian and Italian-American communities at the time of its release. She asserts that the Italian communities were aggrieved by the “tendency of many film producers to label cinematic bootleggers and gangsters as Italian” for they considered it to be a “cinematic campaign against the Italian race” (109).
were implemented due to the criticism it received for allegedly glorifying the lives of gangsters rather than its intended purpose, which was to serve as a pointed critique of the viability of the American Dream. These disparagements, while maintaining and denouncing the gangsters of the film, demonized individuals of different ethnicities that the film centers around. Lastly, this chapter focuses on moments from the film that exemplify how the cultural, historical, and social milieu fails to successfully acclimate the immigrant into American life but leads them to seek out their own method of supplying demand, a role that became defined as being a gangster. Unlike the robber barons, however, his illegal racketeering often leads to treacherous ends since each gangsters crowds the limited path to success. In a developing city where many immigrants are struggling to survive, it is the gangster’s pioneer-like determination that satisfies in one moment but lead to death in the next.37

Embarking on their own adventure to spearhead their success, the arrival of millions of Italian immigrants provided an opportunity for Americans to exploit them for cheap labor, yet their determination to live a life more in-line with the American Dream led to the creation of the trope of the gangster within film. Jonathan Cavallero argues in “Gangsters, Fessos, Tricksters, and Sopranos: The Historical Roots of Italian American Stereotype Anxiety” that understanding American’s prejudices and stereotypes of Italian Americans during the 1920s and 1930s is key to how these translate into the representations that are seen within film (51-53). He asserts that film not only represented Italians in a prejudiced and stereotypical manner but allowed “audience members to distance themselves” from the challenges they faced in attaining the American

37 See “La Famiglia: 1890-1910” (00:09:30-00:09:41).
Dream to an extent that they also “[blame] their failure not on [American mythology itself] but on the ethnic characters that corrupted [them]” (53). This resulted in some Americans interpreting this as a “warning… about the corrupting influences of ethnic others” (53). Rosow similarly argues for this point, maintaining that “[as] an immigrant, the gangster [is] even more readily a scapegoat” (218). Many Italian immigrants travelled to the United States to escape the oppressive and dire circumstances of life in Italy for the promise of a better life in America. Due to fugitives who escaped Italy and were actively wanted by the Italian Counsel, many Italians were unfairly persecuted, leading to the developing belief that Italian customs and cultural practices were indicative of a predisposition towards crime.\(^\text{38}\) In short, the history of Italians immigrating to America connects to their portrayal as debased criminals in film where such stereotypes became reinforced, thereby providing the foundation for American prejudice and continued disparities.

Before examining scenes from the film, this chapter will briefly examine the production process to illuminate the degree that these racial disparities extend to. John McCarty details the process in his book *Bullets Over Hollywood: The American Gangster Picture from the Silents to The Sopranos*. He identifies the trouble the film encountered early on with the Hays Office as the result of producers Howard Hawks’ and Howard Hughes’ non-polemic glamorization of the world of gangsters as relentless murder and mayhem (122-123). J. E. Smyth also notes the difficult production of *Scarface* in *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: From Cimarron to Citizen Kane*, characterizing it as “one of the most highly censored films in Hollywood

\(^{38}\) For more specifics on fugitives and rivalries that were moved from Italy to America, see Fentress, 15-18. For a brief examination of their cultural and historical practices, see “La Famiglia: 1890-1910” (00:12:52-00:13:54).
Since the film was initially aimed towards being a biopic, Smyth illustrates that the censors were originally concerned with what it might “do to the reputation of the film business and, most embarrassingly, to the government” (556). Ultimately, *Scarface* was reworked to appease the state censors by “more blatantly denunciating… the gangster phenomenon” through added scenes and the subtitle “The Shame of the Nation” to further reinforce this positionality (McCarty 123). While the censors did not directly connect these issues to race, the efforts made by the Hays Office to take a clear stance against the world of gangsters – a world which is created upon explicit stereotypes of Italians and other ethnic groups – contributed to the image of immigrants as dangerous. This implies that the issue of the American Dream is not the failure of American society but rather the immigrant’s inability to assimilate and be successful within America.\(^{39}\) While the film intended to represent a traditional biopic or “souped-up history of the 1920s Chicago gang wars,” *Scarface* “reaffirmed… cultural prejudices and granted cinema the high moral ground of documenting and denouncing [the] real delinquency” of immigrant communities (Smyth 78, Bertellini 388).\(^{40}\) *Scarface* epitomizes this phenomenon in the early gangster genre by representing the extremities of America’s xenophobic sentiments and by both forcibly and implicitly creating an Italian figure as the ultimate evil who betrays and corrupts the lives of white Americans, their landscape, and even his own community of immigrants. In the end, *Scarface’s* Camonte is represented as single-

\(^{39}\) For a more in-depth discussion, see Cavallero (52-55) and Keating (109-110).

\(^{40}\) See also McCarty, 130.
handedly causing the destruction of not just himself, those around him, and the reputation of Italians themselves, but arguably the genre itself.  

2.2 Gang War: Scenes from *Scarface* (1932)

Title cards introduced at the start of the film set the tone by immediately incriminating the individuals within it and emphasizing that the present status of the United States is in jeopardy. Before any characters appear on screen or engage in any actions, they are implicated as callously indifferent to their impact on non-immigrant Americans, which is intended to elicit feelings of fear and anxiety in audiences by deciding for them that this is an attack on “our safety and liberty” (Hawks 00:01:28). While the title cards establish that the intent is to demand that the government determine what is going to be done about the present situation, the final title card ultimately ascribes the responsibility to the viewer (00:01:44-00:02:09). Beginning with a threat to the audience’s life as they know it and placing the onus on them to act creates a sense of urgency that that resembles the anxiety-inducing fight-or-flight response.  

Psychologically preparing the audience to witness and eventually combat these gang activities in this manner is framed as them entering war-like combat in which their life is at stake, such as is denoted within the first title card (Hawks 00:01:28).

The motif of danger recurs shortly after the first scene when the word “war” is strategically implemented by the editor of *The Daily Record*, a newspaper reporting on local issues (00:06:39). The editor, when deciding on a lead for the title of the next issue, clearly states

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41 For more on the implications of this film on Hughes’ career and the gangster genre, see Dainotto, page 78-80.
42 Sigmund Freud’s *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* briefly touches on this response as an attempt to curtail “excessively strong stimuli” or “unpleasure” that originates as a signal of danger from the external world (14-15).
that what he wants is the title “Costillo murder starts gang war” (Hawks 00:05:56-00:06:01). The editor explains his reasoning by underscoring the importance of this single event, pointing to it being indicative of a war that is to come. He urges that the murder of Costillo has left the “town up for the grabs” since he was “the last of the old-fashioned gang leaders,” which will lead to new gangsters “shooting each other like rabbits for the control of the booze business” (00:06:09-00:06:31). After explaining his reasoning, he determines that this word perfectly captures the events that will transpire for “the next five years”: “That’s it, ‘war’… Gang war” (00:06:05-00:06:08, 00:06:32-00:06:36). The immediate insistence upon the viewer to take responsibility for gang activity from the start layered with an unexplained murder and the editor’s underscoring of the throes of gang war force the audience into a biased and fearful mindset when it comes to immigrant individuals. Although America abides by the legal principle that “every person is presumed to be innocent until he is proved guilty,” the gangster is immediately implicated as dangerous (Scheb and Stephens 723). Moreover, Cavallero observes that the use of “our” in the title cards raises the question of whose safety and liberty is in danger, for it seems to suggest that it “does not include all Americans” (53). Stemming from a historically xenophobic fear of Italian immigrants, the vision of the film as a documentation of life in Chicago serves to further denigrate Italian immigrants by providing a narrow scope in which an imagined character becomes representative of the larger group. The efforts of the state censors reduce Camonte’s character into a limited trope that calls upon longstanding assumptions further creates a divide between the Italian immigrant community and white Americans.43 Lastly, by shifting focus onto

43 For a more in-depth discussion on the implications of vilifying Italians in cinema, see Cavallero, page 55.
the motif of war, the tension that the film creates echoes the anxiety surrounding World War I and other legislature which implicates immigrants as inherently dangerous people.

The principle of America’s pioneerism – the reward of which is often the achievement of the American Dream – is presented as corruption to further fuel the xenophobia that Italians often face. A central component of the gangster genre and *Scarface* itself is being a self-made man who creates his own success. Rosow establishes this point, stating that robber barons made efforts to “organize and centralize the corporation” by having “members sign a pledge” to “[eliminate] competition by any means necessary” (14, 16). Rosow suggests that this tends to take place during a meeting where “an ambitious boss calls together all the independent gangsters” to form an alliance with one another so they “avoid ruinous competition and run the bootlegging industry more efficiently” (14). This act of pioneerism can be seen in *Scarface* when Johnny Lovo calls a meeting with the gang leaders of the South Side of town so he can publicly claim the title of President for himself.44 When arriving at the meeting location, Lovo – accompanied by Tony Camonte and his friend “L’il Boy” Rinaldo – casually gestures with relaxed smirk on his face to a door. Made partially from wood at the bottom that frames the glass bearing Louis Costillo’s name with the word “President” underneath, Camonte gently holds back Lovo as he heads toward the door, points to it with a similarly casual gesture, and picks up a vase at the bottom of the door. Equipped with the vase in his right hand, Camonte playfully bounces it an inch into the air and catches it before forcefully throwing it through the glass. The men on the other side who are playing pool, reading newspapers, smoking, and drinking, abruptly react by

44 See *Scarface* (1932) from 00:22:05-00:25:17.
either rising to their feet and reaching into their coats or by crouching behind the pool table. Camonte then opens the door and enters with a cartoonish comedic gusto, saying “that’s all right, boys… just changing the name on the door.” The camera then focuses on Camonte and Lovo with the door still in the frame as Camonte then points to his right and says, “meet the new president, Johnny Lovo.” Shortly after, Lovo addresses the room, telling the group that they are “gonna get organized” because selling beer “is a business” so he is “gonna run it like a business.” When one gangster says he wants to run things independently, Camonte punches him in the stomach and in the face, which Lovo uses as a jumping-off point to ask the other men if they are “in or out.” All the men agree they are “in,” and those men who did not attend are automatically deemed as “out” and, therefore, targeted as competition. The scene concludes with Lovo naming Camonte – his good friend – as the point man for taking orders to sell to the businesses and his immediate departure to get started.

This scene epitomizes what it means to create upward social mobility for oneself in the same manner as the robber barons of Chicago did, for it is at the expense of others that they are able to gain wealth, power, and respect. Lovo ordered the hit on Costillo through Camonte, and he is the one who risks everything – his life, place of belonging, and family’s well-being – to create space for himself near the top. Camonte’s grander ideas on the benefits of controlling the entirety of the business in Chicago presents a parallel to what made the robber barons wildly successful. Inciting fear in others by throwing the vase and beating up an associate to demand compliance is an act that is initiated by Camonte and ultimately fuels his inevitable decision to take all of Chicago, including the North Side and his boss, Lovo. The violent vision that Camonte dreams up of how to optimize the racket, his power, and his wealth similarly echo the
reckless, unmanageable, and unjust perception that people had of the robber barons and thus begin to have of him (Rosow 21).

Corrupting the robber baron model further beyond this initial violence is the betrayal of the partnership between Camonte and Lovo due to competing visions of how the business should be run. Shortly after this conversation, Camonte shares an entrepreneurial perspective as to what can be achieved to ensure a rise to the top. When Camonte meets with his boss Johnny Lovo to discuss the aftermath of killing Costillo. Lovo commends him for the contract killing and assures Camonte that, if he works alongside Lovo and listens to him, that he will be “walking around with lace pants and a gold hat” despite already being given a raise of double what he was making before (00:14:55-00:15:08). With this, Lovo is offering Camonte characteristic entrapments of the American Dream for gangsters: wealth, power, and clothing that symbolizes this achievement.45 When Camonte proposes that they expand their empire to include the North Side as well, Lovo’s demeanor changes from being celebratory to stern (00:15:09-00:15:20). To underscore the intensity, the camera focuses on Lovo from the shoulders up as he clearly states to Camonte his position on eliminating O’Hara, the North Side boss, as competition (00:15:20-00:15:30). As Lovo brings a close to the idea of waiting to obtain the North Side, declaring that “what [he says] goes” and Camonte should never forget it, the camera shifts to show Camonte’s expression. Staring intently into Lovo’s eyes, Camonte holds his head tilted forward, narrows his eyes, looks him up, and maintains a scowl before sinisterly smirking at him (00:15:28-00:15:34). To break the tension, Camonte issues a casual, downward-pulled frown, raises his eyebrows, and

45 See Rosow, pages 30-32.
coolly replies “you’re the boss” (00:15:35-00:15:36). Shortly after Camonte leaves with L’il Boy in the car, gives him a portion of the money he earned from the Costillo hit, and tells him that they will continue to get plenty of money since “[there’s] business just waiting for some guy to come and run it right, and [he’s] got ideas” (00:17:08-00:17:18). When L’il Boy attempts to clarify what he means by asking whether they are still working for Lovo, Camonte rhetorically asks “[who’s] Lovo” in a playful manner before saying that he’s “soft” and “a little bit more smart than Big Louis,” the man he murdered (00:17:19-00:17:30). He concludes the conversation and the scene by telling L’il Boy that they just “gotta wait” at this point before he runs “the whole works” since the only law in business is “[do] it first, do it yourself and keep on doing it” (00:17:31-00:17:58).

Instead of adhering to the typical path of success to attain the American, Camonte further accelerates his rise into riches due to a fierce desire to eliminate competition, control the market, and pioneer his own individual ascent into power. Although individuality to an extreme was regarded as increasingly obsolete, Camonte’s unrelenting determination to achieve his vision despite the impact it has on those around him further establishes him as un-American, other, and dangerous. Cavallero argues that this affords “non-ethnic Americans… the opportunity to blame the failure of American myths during the Great Depression on the individual ethnic characters and their respective ethnic groups rather than on the failure of the myths themselves” (53). Rather than implicating the American Dream and the system that puts immigrants at a disproportionate disadvantage historically, culturally, economically, and socially, the immigrant and their respective ethnic community becomes representative of failure, corruption, and danger (Cavallero 54).
their way to the top of the mob world for no reason except their desire to be in charge” with “no respect for loyalty, intelligence, tact, or human life” (54). Reaping a reward from the murder of another in the racket and planning a future in which Lovo will be superseded, Camonte represents an extremity of the gangster trope that is concerned with the American Dream to a destructive extent. His lack of morality, desire to make himself into a resounding success, and impulsively violent temperament is why Scarface is considered one of the most “potent,” “iconic,” and “controversial” gangster films of its time (McCarty 124, Yogerst 134, Dainotto 55). Camonte’s unquenchable desire for wealth, power, and status has no boundaries; he operates without regard or remorse for others and “[takes] what he wants when he wants it” (Wilson 2). His voraciousness to secure these values despite the havoc he wreaks, sacrificing and even betraying those in his own community serves as the pinnacle of anxiety for such actions to be stopped. By representing the gangster and his actions as war tactics, it continues to strain historical tensions, cultural misunderstandings, and the further isolation of immigrants as America entered a period of economic depression and the threat of war continued to loom (Cavallero 52-53). Popular media’s utilization of select stories and themes that further perpetuate stereotypes of immigrants led to their continued denigration as a community and exploitation for the failures of a country that was ill-equipped and ill-informed when it came to accommodating their pursuit of a new life.46

Despite the efforts of other gangsters who sought to remove Camonte from his position of complete power over both the South and North sides of the city, it is the police who lawfully

46 For more on the desire for gangsters in cinema, see Dainotto, pages 56-57 and Keating, pages 109-110.
save the new frontier of Chicago from the gangster. With the draw of industrialization came the promise of jobs and opportunities, allowing the gangster to illustrate how this vision is grossly misrepresented due to the exploitation and disadvantages that his community faces. The traditional roles and stories that formerly characterized the heroes and villains of America shifted to represent the changes of industrialization. While the common battle between the two retains a dichotomized sense of good versus evil, the outlaw’s role evolved into one that reflects the historical period and culture of 1930s America. The outlaw still acts outside of the law for personal gain, but in the urban setting of industrial Chicago, he reflects a “proto-revolutionary consciousness” that acts on behalf of the “necessity of widespread social change” and “justice” (Rosow 7). In *Scarface*, the police – who are representative of the urban cowboy – acts as an agent of law, social order, and justice on behalf of the government. The gangster, who is the urban outlaw, functions similarly to his predecessor while also absconding the law as a means of problematizing key failures of the system he is a part of.

Unlike the frontier of the past, the present landscape has a social, cultural, and economic contour that has been formed over time. Since the underpinnings of the society are already well-established, the individual who cannot assimilate, reconcile with its norms, or allow a system that does not operate in an equitable manner becomes compelled to act outside of these rules, thereby earning them the title of gangster. Falling in line with earlier arguments, the gangster oftentimes is not what society defines as traditionally American: a person who is white, cis, and heteronormative. Although contemporary America, aside from Indigenous Peoples, is understood

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47 See Rosow for more on the shifting meaning of the American frontier as it becomes industrialized (8).
48 Rosow defines these traditional roles as cowboy heroes and Western outlaws (6).
as being a nation of immigrants, many individuals who do not fit this traditional definition are regarded as less American or not American altogether. In this attempt to distance or other individuals from the American identity, many immigrants were regarded with a status of being a “lesser American” and, therefore, were treated accordingly. In particular, the traditional methods of acquiring wealth, power, and status were often inaccessible for them as they were being exploited for cheap labor and villainized as a larger group for smaller incidents that were singular offenses. As an act of rebellion against a problematic system, the gangster acts with a sense of confidence, rightful entitlement, and pioneerism to gain access to the American Dream, something that most immigrant individuals were falsely promised or given in a diluted form. While his own path is formed from controlling unclaimed markets, the American perspective sides with that of the police: it is illegal, unlawful, and an unjustifiable means of attaining the American Dream. Scarface exemplifies this tension between good versus evil, cowboy versus outlaw, and, in the film, the police versus the gangster in the most reductive of ways by eliminating the gangster’s call for justice in an unjust system and making him unequivocally evil. The result is an oversimplification of the purpose of the gangster trope which defaults his pursuit to American stereotypes of immigrants failing to succeed in America and the American system rather than understanding that it is a pointed critique of the ways in which the system fails people and needs to be changed.

49 Al Capone – the Chicago gangster that Scarface director Howard Hawks attempted to make the film a biopic of – is commended for his summary of the doubled view of Prohibition: “They call Capone a bootlegger. Yes. It’s a bootleg when it’s on the trucks, but when you host in the club, in the locker room or on the Gold Coast hands it to you on a silver platter, it’s hospitality. What’s Al done then? He’s supplied a legitimate demand. Some call it bootlegging. Some call it racketeering. I call it business” (Fentress 176).
Scarface problematizes the American landscape by highlighting the corruption that exists with Prohibition on both the side of the gangster and the police, further emphasizing the gangster’s point that America is a system with cracks and failures that privileges groups of individuals differently depending on who they are. The police both enforce the transportation and sale of alcohol as illegal but were often be bribed and allowed it to continue to flourish (Fentress 173). Prohibition became a cause for assimilating and moralizing the urban immigrant worker into an American with a “higher standard of moral conduct” after the many acts were already in place to ease America’s growing foreigner anxiety (174-175). The consumption of alcohol, however, was permitted, changing America from “a drinking man’s country to a country where the drinking man had to fight … to get a drink at the bar” (174). Prohibition became an issue where many under-privileged minorities resisted the restrictions on work to sustain themselves at a time when many struggled to meet their basic needs (175-176).

The police in Scarface anticipate the downfall of the gangster who continues to act amorally, especially Camonte who is charged with many different crimes (00:09:06-00:09:27). For the duration of the time that he is questioned shortly after the beginning of the film, Camonte remains relatively composed, even making the occasional joke, before eventually being released by a writ of habeas corpus (00:09:28-00:11:41). The police officer leading the questioning, however, makes a clear point to Camonte that he expects him to “stumble and fall down in the gutter, right where the horses have been standing, right where [he] belongs” (00:11:53-00:11:57). Camonte retorts by sarcastically that the officer has “got [him] all figured out” (00:11:58-00:12:00). The officer states his final remarks, telling Camonte that since he’s “spent [his] life mixing with [Camonte’s] breed,” he knows that there is no amount of corruption will spare him
from getting him in the end “just like we got all the rest” (00:12:01-00:12:12). The officer’s
comments are aimed at demeaning his character for his criminal history, especially after he is
suspected of murdering Costillo. His presumption of Camonte, although likely stemming from
his past charges, has an anti-immigrant quality to it, for the word “breed” connotes a derogatory
nod towards Camonte’s ethnicity. This targeted meaning similarly applies to the anticipation of
Camonte in a gutter where horses stand, for it implies that he is lesser than other people and even
animalistic. This insinuates that Camonte will succumb to defeat like others have, which further
reinforces the officer’s comments because he is forming these assumptions from Camonte’s
character despite not knowing beyond a reasonable doubt. These denigrating predictions suggests
that the officer has a bias against immigrants, for he shares disliking interactions with people of
Camonte’s “breed.” While the officer may be seen as having a legitimate suspicion, his remarks
condemn Camonte from the start similarly to how the title cards did at the beginning of the film.
By using Camonte’s ethnicity to support his suspicion, the officer is dooming Camonte without
probable cause. This supports the take on Scarface as a modern Western by focusing the
audience’s attention on this potentially dangerous individual while incriminating him primarily
due to his ethnicity, racial stereotypes, and without any resounding evidence. In short, he builds
his suspicion against Camonte partially on the evidence of past charges and associations but
makes a point to incorporate and degrade aspects of his ethnicity despite their failure to attribute
factual or credible evidence to his case.

As a final escalation of the issue of justice in a failing system emerges on behalf of
conscerned citizens and organizations who, as the title card encourages, speak out against the
glorification of criminals, only to again reduce the issue to a matter of xenophobic anxiety. When
the small group raises issue with the publicizing of the killings committed by gangsters, the
publisher responds by addressing not just the individual who makes these problems known to
him but the audience as well (00:51:55-00:52:21). The publisher argues that it is ridiculous to
ignore the efforts of the gangster and, while making eye contact with the audience, states that
“[you’re] playing right into his hands” and that we must “[run] him out of the country” to keep
him off the front pages (00:52:09-00:52:21). When a man asks what private citizens might do to
combat the crime and gang wars since the police are seemingly incapable of stopping the
transgressions, the publisher tells the group and the audience that they themselves are the
government and they need to act (00:52:39-00:53:00). The publisher recommends that they
“[put] teeth in the Deportation Act” because the gangsters, half of which are not citizens, do not
belong in their country (00:53:08-00:53:13). Adding support to the racially fueled beliefs of the
police force, the citizens frame the issue of crime as a natural-occurring aspect that stems from
immigrants’ lives rather than investigating the underlying causes and offenders of the murders.
They implicate the ethnic other as corrupt by nature and point to their lack of citizenship as the
immigrant’s failure to successfully assimilate and legally adhere to American laws. The response
from the publisher is to push for additional laws that place limits and restrictions on immigration,
specifically the Deportation Act or The Immigration Act of 1924, which was prejudiced against
Southern Italian immigrants because it regarded them as some of the most inferior immigrants
and regularly made it difficult for them to even become citizens.⁵⁰ Of those in the group, a man
who identifies himself as Italian even supports this idea, stating that it is true that many of the

⁵⁰ See “Becoming Americans: 1910-1930”, produced by Muriel Soenens, for PBS.
immigrants are not citizens and only bring disgrace upon the immigrant community, an effort which Cavallero characterizes as a warning of assimilation in which even those from a similar ethnic background feel encouraged to “distance themselves from their ethnic identities” (Hawks 00:52:12-00:52:17, Cavallero 53). Similarly to the police, who the publisher says are not at fault, the group attributes the crime to stereotypes without interrogating the underlying motivations behind the gangster’s attacks on one another. Furthermore, the indirect involvement of local businesses and citizens as unintended targets within the larger scope of the gangster’s fights further frames the conflict as an assault on white Americans and American values, something the publisher encourages citizens to continue to protect through legislature despite its failure to support these individuals from the start. Xenophobic fears about immigration, the declining economy, and the failure of the American system serves as a backdrop to the continued failure of immigrants, a majority of which are not gangsters. The gangster becomes the representative for the larger community, as attested to by the citizen who considers them to be a disgrace, and their efforts to attain the American Dream become a competition against other individuals who are similarly seeking to survive in a system that disproportionately puts them at a disadvantage and makes social mobility nearly impossible. The comments of the publisher contribute to the exploitation of immigrant people, making the actions of the gangster necessary to achieve change in their lives.

2.3 The World Is Temporarily Yours: Providing the Blueprint for *Scarface* (1983)

Before moving on to the history of the 1983 remake, it is important to note that these various aspects of life in America during the early 20th century and even before resulted in the construction of a historical narrative that defined the efforts of immigrants in America. The
robber barons of the later 19th century provided a model of what it meant to be a self-made American, yet the immigrant’s pursuit of this shared vision became characterized as a corrupt version of the American Dream. Compelled by the promise of the American Dream in which anyone can succeed, immigrants came to America to secure the opportunity of wealth and social mobility, even if it only meant being able to provide better lives for them and their families. Their assimilation into mainstream America proved difficult given their strong community ties and cultural beliefs, which led them to be negatively perceived and even targeted by non-immigrants. Their image slowly became that of the criminal due to American’s perception of them, and immigration laws at the time reflected the inferiority that they were regarded with by further oppressing them. While many endured the treatment to supply the demand of workers in overtly dangerous jobs given their dire needs, others used the demand of Americans to create their own vocation. It is through this deviated path that a small number of individuals took that many immigrants were regarded as gangsters. The culmination of historical events allowed the gangster to take on a literary form as a “grand [design]” of the “audience’s fantasies and dreams” as “self-made men who has, like us, no fear of pain and death, who behaves amorally and as though oblivious of his mortality until the world’s weight crushes down on him” (Shadoian 29). The history of America in the early 20th century enabled Scarface, arguably the “ultimate expression of the [gangster] genre’s early phase,” to provide a straight-forward and “naively representational” depiction of the perception of immigrants as criminals (Shadoian 31). As the subsequent chapter will expand on, these historical elements coupled with the “elaborate, powerful, and disturbing” elements that led to the “immediate [call] for this bolder brand of gangster movie to end” enabled Scarface to illuminate existing anxieties, oppositions,
opportunities, and events that existed at the time (Rosow 203, Yamato 37). What resulted, however, was a controversial film that only became more controversial with the 1983 remake.
3. Chapter Two: The Arrival of Criminals in 1980s America: Who Do You Trust?

3.1 You Need People Like Tony: Continuing the Legacy of *Scarface* in 1983

Set in the 1980s, the 1983 remake of *Scarface* by Brian De Palma follows a Cuban immigrant named Tony Montana after his immediate arrival from Cuba in Miami. The film showcases Montana’s rise from his initial placement in a refugee camp beneath a freeway underpass to his ascension into elite status as Boss in a secluded mansion seemingly beyond the city. While many gangster tropes evolve from aspects described in the previous chapter, this film emphasizes how the immigrant’s pursuit of success in America explicitly highlights the contradictions of the American Dream. Moreover, the tense relationship between American and Cuba that was fueled by Cold War was strategically employed in the film to point to similar xenophobic anxieties that were evoked during the first film’s release. While the 1930s film demonized immigrants as gangsters by making implicit ties to their seemingly inherent predisposition to crime, Brian De Palma’s 1983 *Scarface* is overtly centered around Tony Montana’s identity as an immigrant in 1980s America during the Mariel Boatlift. This framework is not merely a modern adaptation of Hawks’ *Scarface* but a criticism of the American Dream by evidencing the poor treatment of refugees by the American government, their ability to attain success in American society by creating their own path to it, and the continued exploitation that immigrant individuals experience for America’s gain.

In advance of examining scenes from *Scarface*, a brief discussion will detail the importance of director Brian De Palma’s efforts to showcase the contradiction of the American Dream through American’s treatment of immigrant people. What further complicates the American success story is the participation, compliance, and involvement of Americans in the
unlawful endeavors and activities of the gangster. Douglas Keesey expands on this point in *Brian De Palma’s Split-Screen*, with specific reference to De Palma’s intentions with *Scarface* in his chapter “Scarface (1983).” Keesey provides a contrast between Tony Montana, the central gangster and protagonist of the film, and the wealthy American elite that he both belongs to but does not belong to. The author observes that, while Montana is “upfront” about his drug use, the elite people around him feign ignorance despite “secretly [profiting] from his illegal activities and [snorting] his cocaine behind closed doors” (162). Keesey builds on the parallel by pointing to the response of Hollywood to De Palma’s film. The author contests that the elite of Hollywood “snootily disparaged the film for its depictions of excessive drug use at a time” even though “so many in the film community were themselves doing drugs” (162). Director Martin Scorsese validated the commentary about this contradictory behavior by stating that Hollywood would detest the film at the time of its release because it reflects their own selves. Martin Bregman, the producer of the film, added to Scorsese’s claims, affirming that the Hollywood elite and executives who demonized the depictions of drug use within the film ironically had “a bowl of white powder as you entered the house parties … at that time” (162). De Palma provides the final criticism by asserting that the Hollywood elite have “piles of cocaine on the table at parties that are every bit as big as the one Pacino [as Tony] had” (162). The film, both in its reception and depiction of America, underscores the underlying hypocrisy of American culture, society, and values through the same contradictions that Shadoian observes: society encourages
you to succeed yet does not want you to succeed all while reaping the rewards of the gangster’s success.\footnote{See Shadoian, page 6.}

This paradigm suggests that American society and culture support individualism and success so long as the elite can profit from it and not be publicly connected to having any involvement in it. The elite remain untouchable and seemingly lawful despite their contradictory behaviors, yet those who are determined to succeed and involve themselves in the same activities as the elite but are not elite are criminalized and punished. Shadoian directs attention toward the American cinema and maintains that “crime films are often disguised parables of social mobility as a punishable deviation from one’s assigned place” (6). Unlike the wealthy in fictional or non-fictional American society, \textit{Scarface} argues that the gangster is the one who becomes the scapegoat because “[they’re] honest” about who they are; “there is no disjunction between what he professes to be and what he is and does” (Keesey 162, Shadoian 7). What results is the gangster as “a vehicle to expose this central problem of the American people,” and the gangster’s portrayal in film serves as a “a metaphor for that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and demands of modern life” (Shadoian 6, Wilson 4). The gangster trope provides “law-abiding citizens who conduct [their] lives legitimately” a sense of catharsis through the seemingly fantastical experience of viewing another succeed in the ways that those who abide by the law either cannot or dare not (Shadoian 5). Lastly, the gangster continues to perpetuate the contradictions present within American society by making the ability to attain one’s dreams possible but brings attention to the difficulty of it since it is a part of the American fantasy that
society positions and treats all people equally and, therefore, people have equal opportunities for success (Wilson 5). If success is largely marked through a rise in social mobility in which many can become as wealthy as the elite, the basic assertion that everyone has equal access to the American Dream suggests that it is indeed possible for all. The gangster, however, evidences the extent to which the American Dream is a farce given that he deviates from the traditional path leading to the American Dream and attain success that surpasses both in time and value beyond what others typically achieve. In short, Scarface shatters the foundational premise of the American Dream as equally attainable by highlighting Montana’s treatment by Americans as he ascends and descends in social mobility through a non-traditional path.

This chapter examines the overtly critical perspective of the American Dream in Scarface (1983) through the treatment of protagonist Tony Montana. Although Montana has seemingly immigrated to the United States, his unique positionality as a refugee of Cuba further emphasizes the racial disparities that are a part of America’s social structure to strategically complicate their ability to attain the elusive American Dream. This chapter will explore the progression of the gangster from being treated with the subtle xenophobia in the 1932 film to that where his identity evokes explicit and overtly xenophobic treatment. While both films have evolved from the historical assumption that immigrants are inherently dangerous and predisposed to crime, the circumstances of Montana’s immigration to the United States evidence issue of racial disparity, pointing to flaws in the core tenants that America was founded upon.52 The 1983 film not only sustains the gangster genre as an interrogation of the American Dream but presents the gradual

52 See “The Declaration of Independence”.
evil that Montana becomes because of his treatment and limited opportunities as a refugee. Well after its release, the 1983 film became symbolic of a desire for an American Dream which is equally viable for all. While the film has often been reduced to gratuitous violence and the glamorization of the gangster’s life, it builds upon the legacy of the gangster as a devious immigrant whose motivations are to deceive, destroy, and corrupt American society.53 Unlike the 1932 film, however, the director and the film itself intentionally set out to dispel the gangster as a villainous and amoral outsider but rather a product of his circumstances as an immigrant who is exploited and treated unequally by the American system. Ultimately, *Scarface* imparted a significant impact on American society that led to a legacy which will be detailed in the concluding chapter.

### 3.2 Pushing Crime to the Limit: Scenes from *Scarface* (1983)

The history leading up to the events of 1981 provides the context of the film which begins with Cubans seeking political asylum in the Peruvian embassy.54 Fidel Castro, the leader of Cuba, decided that this was an opportune moment and he “opened the port of Mariel [on April 20] to all those who wished to leave the island and to anyone who wished to ferry discontented Cubans to Florida” (Bankston III and Hidalgo 582). Desperate to leave Castro’s “communization” of Cuba, approximately 125,000 Cuban people sought refuge in Miami, Florida (Bankston III and Hidalgo 582-583, Triay 47-56). Among the refugees were people that

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53 A scene and line that has often become emblematic of the film is Montana’s final stand in his mansion against many of Sosa’s guards in which Montana brandishes a gun with a grenade launching mechanism and says “‘Say hello to my little friend!’” (02:40:35-02:40:37).
54 Hawk’s *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980* and Bankston III and Hidalgo’s “Mariel Boatlift” describe the events of the boatlift.
Cuban authorities wanted out of their country: criminals, the mentally ill, and homosexuals (Bankston III and Hidalgo 582, Triay 56). The presence of criminals among the refugees caused the Marielitos, Cuban refugees who individually identified and named themselves after their departure from the port of Mariel, to endure multiple forms of backlash from Americans. After being relocated to detention camps, the Marielitos rioted, resulting in the closure of the camps, which forced them to continue to seek means of survival in surrounding communities (Bankston III and Hidalgo 583). They were blamed for rises in crime, were faced with discrimination by Americans, including Cuban Americans, and fueled frustrations toward the economic recession of the time (Bankston III and Hidalgo 581-585).

The Mariel Boatlift provided the central framework for Montana to infiltrate American soil and to shape its landscape.\textsuperscript{55} Situating itself within the midst of the Mariel Boatlift, \textit{Scarface} (1983) presents these facts in title cards throughout the beginning of the film. Focusing on a given period of time during the Mariel Boatlift, the film states that “\([within]\) seventy-two hours, 3,000 U.S. Boats were headed for Cuba.”\textsuperscript{56} It soon became evident that Castro was forcing the boat owners to carry back with them not only their relatives but the dregs of his jails. Of the 125,000 refugees that landed in Florida, an estimated 25,000 had criminal records” (00:00:21-00:00:50). Shortly thereafter, a snippet shows Castro giving a speech about the Marielitos as “not wanted,” followed by a crowd seemingly cheering him on (00:00:52-00:01:04).\textsuperscript{57} Interspersed with the film is actual footage from the Mariel Boatlift between opening credits of the film’s

\textsuperscript{55} See Hawk (113) for more on Marielitos as potential spies.
\textsuperscript{56} For the complete opening scene, see \textit{Scarface} (1983) 00:00:20-00:03:34.
\textsuperscript{57} See Triay, pages 49 and 58, for a likely connection to Castro’s plan to framing the mass exodus as an opportunity to expel undesirables and force them upon the United States.
production company and cast, showing the progressive process of travel that the Marielitos took. Beginning with footage from Mariel Harbor in Cuba to people arriving in the United States, the initial scene that is shown is the boats arriving in the Cuban harbor, empty and ready to take individuals to the United States, followed by the boats being substantially filled with refugees who travel to the United States (00:01:07-00:02:18). From 00:02:21 to 00:02:25, a man who is holding a baby in his arms is shown pointing upwards while saying mira repeatedly, and, upon the baby’s adjusted position from his shoulder toward the direction of his finger in which it is revealed that the baby is crying, the frame shifts from the two who are on the boat to America to an American flag that is waving in the wind.\textsuperscript{58} The last of the footage depicts their arrival on the shore of Miami as one boat of Marielitos is shown cheering as U.S. officials outline instructions for their processing as they start to make their way onto the American soil (00:02:28-00:03:22).

\textit{Scarface} opens with the looming threat of criminal refugees heading to America and situates itself in the contradictions of America’s attitude towards refugees and the refugees' experience in America. America offered itself and welcomed the refugees while it simultaneously disparaged Cuba for the number of refugees who requested asylum. Additionally, America attempted to provide protection and shelter for the refugees, yet it besmirched and criminalized them for being Cuban. This made their acclimation into American society difficult, for it offered contradicting messages to the refugees: we want you here, but we don’t want you here; you deserve protection, but you are criminals who are undeserving of safety. Even though many refugees were not criminals, the title cards frame the film in a similar manner as the 1932

\textsuperscript{58} Mira is a Spanish word that, in the context of how it was used, often translates to “look” in reference to a sight, person, object, or event.
film by focusing the audience’s attention on the 25,000 Cuban criminals who are destined to come to America.\textsuperscript{59} While the 1983 film does not urge the audience to take a form of action, it intensifies the feeling of imminent fear and danger by showing actual footage of the Marielitos as they sail for the United States. This suggestion may be a fictionalized tale of one refugee among many, yet that character – without having seen them or heard from them – is already assumed to be a threat to society.

Building upon longstanding assumptions of immigrants as criminal does not easily allow for them to be seen outside of this definition and, therefore, presupposes them as guilty without any proof beyond a reasonable doubt. The aspect of generalizing a group and its individuals based off an assumption is thematically significant, for many key scenes provide a foundational understanding to Montana’s aspirations to attain the American Dream. Although Hawks incorporated the title slides and the xenophobic feelings evolved from the prompt of the title cards alone, De Palma’s film utilizes the anxiety surrounding the Cuban’s arrival to create conflicting feelings that lead to the poor treatment of the refugees. Regardless of their criminal history, many of the Cuban refugees were sent to encampments that did not adequately meet their diverse needs, which led to unsafe conditions since they were living among criminal offenders.\textsuperscript{60} The conflicting feelings that arise from these circumstances aim to create conflict in the viewer and have them question what is truly equitable with the arrival of people who are escaping the hardships of Cuba and placing them in a situation where survival is imperative and necessary by most means. By oscillating between being generous and selfish, welcoming and

\textsuperscript{59} See Aguirre et al. (495-496) and Triay (58).
\textsuperscript{60} For more on the refugee’s resettlement, see Triay, pages 144-151.
fearful, and sympathetic but wholly uninvested, the film problematizes America’s treatment of immigrants, especially as it pertains to their reception and assimilation into the country. Even though America is regarded as a country that welcomes all, including those who are exiles and “[yearn] to breathe [freely],” the default to historical assumptions about immigrants and crime signals that the anxieties of Americans take priority over those of the refugees who are desperately escaping to a country and taking a chance on a new country where there was a promise of a new and better life (Lazarus, Triay 120). 61 Regardless of their risky voyage and general enthusiasm for being in America, xenophobia prevailed over the assimilation of the refugees. 62 In short, the title cards continue to evoke fear of immigrants despite the unsafe conditions they are seeking refuge from and continues to perpetuate their poor treatment by prioritizing the comfort of Americans over assisting in their successful integration into American society and culture. Rather than attempting to humanize them or showing Montana’s willingness to work as a dishwasher at a café, the film strategically opens with a glaringly problematic view of the refugees then dehumanizes them by having them be interrogated by American officials who are solely aiming to discover what precisely makes them criminals. Montana, therefore, comes into the film having to not only answer for himself as a refugee but to combat the problematic perceptions that others have already made of him. By pushing Montana to the margins of society he must find a way to overcome the corruption of the system if he is to survive or have any opportunity at making a life for himself.

61 See The New Colossus, a poem written by Emma Lazarus that addresses the issue of immigration and opportunity for new arrivals.
62 For more of some of the reactions to arriving in the United States, see De Palma (00:02:24-00:02:36).
Montana’s first appearance in the film continues the legacy of gangster while also confirming the fears of American who are anticipating the arrival of refugees from Cuba. Sitting in a chair as U.S. Officials circle around him, Montana’s face becomes visible as the camera pans past the shoulder of one official and Montana introduces himself (00:03:35-00:03:42). During their line of questioning, Montana is asked if he is homosexual or “if he likes men,” if he likes to dress up as a woman, or if he has even been in a mental hospital (00:04:21-00:05:33). Not only is Montana the first refugee that the audience intimately encounters but his interrogation makes the uncertainties, paranoia, and dread of America tangible by representing the line of questioning and processing that the Cubans underwent. While the officials must be diligent and thorough in their jobs, Montana has a more lighthearted approach, suggesting that he is untrustworthy due to a lack of sincerity in his actions that signal a deep desire to be recognized as American. Eventually Montana is forced to reconcile with the severity of the situation when he is confronted about a tattoo he has on his hand, something which the U.S. official claims to have seen on many of the criminals he has investigated, which now includes Montana (00:05:33-00:05:46). When offered the opportunity to take responsibility for his actions, Montana confesses that it was because he was “buying dollars” (00:05:47-00:05:59). What is significant about this moment is the official’s disinterest in hearing his explanation, for knowing that he has a criminal history seems to sufficiently convey his lack of morality and justifying the official’s treatment of him (00:06:00-00:06:07). While Tony is willing to attest to the fact that his actions were wrong and it was a means of survival in a communist country, the official has no sympathy for Montana and seeks to provide the bare minimum for him so he can continue processing additional refugees (00:06:07-00:07:21).
The interrogation of Montana shortly after the threat of criminals arriving from Cuba evidences American attitudes towards the refugees and the failure of America’s system to properly support them. In the film, the officials do not offer sympathy or compassion after he shares having escaped oppression in Cuba and successfully finding refuge in the United States. Their primary goal is to determine whether Montana belongs to the generalized classification of criminals that Castro was sending to America as is evidenced by the scene. This similarity echoes the tendency of government representatives in the 1932 film to stereotype and assume criminality in individuals purely upon the basis of their ethnicity. The discovery of Montana’s tattoo provides an avenue of inquiry for the official to try and establish the reason behind his time in jail without having to consider the circumstances that led to Montana’s arrest (00:05:34-00:06:06). Montana initially claims that it is for his “sweetheart,” but the official recognizes it as something many of the refugees who were previously incarcerated had tattooed on themselves, so he offers Montana the opportunity to talk or be detained in the detention center (00:05:34-05:51). Montana determines that he must be honest or risk his freedom, so he attempts to redeem his character by being accountable for the reason for his arrest. He describes the circumstances from which he came: having no intellectual or emotional freedom, being exploited for labor without compensation, and having every movement monitored by the Cuban government (00:06:07-00:06:48). Before concluding, Montana poses a rhetorical question to the official as to whether he should have done nothing given these conditions, and, after insisting that he isn’t a criminal but a former political prisoner, he states that he wants human rights (00:06:50-

63 See Triay for the historical details on this process for the Cuban refugees (121).
Montana is believed by the officials, especially after the discovery of his tattoo, to be nothing more than a criminal. Even after Montana describes the oppression and hardship that forced him to find ways to subsist, the official determines that it is not believable and that “[the refugees] all sound the same,” which is precisely the method of stereotyping that the leading officer in the 1932 film uses to generalize and ignore the experiences of immigrant individuals (00:07:11-00:07:21).

Rather than being willing to listen and understand the conditions that the Cubans escaped from, the U.S. officials merely viewed the refugees, including Montana, as political pawns used by Castro in a larger-scaled war on the United States with Communism. The official’s dismissal of Montana’s life in Cuba signified a disconnect with what the Cuban refugees had endured, suggesting that what he was not able to believe was twofold. First, the official seemed unable to believe the truth of what life in Communist Cuba was like, especially that Cuban citizens did not live freely and independently but had to forfeit many basic human rights that are often taken for granted for Americans. The unwillingness and disinterest in understanding the lived experiences of immigrant individuals is also a prevalent issue that impacted the lives of Italian immigrants which reduced their history into faults that they had, not practices that had cultural significance. Secondly, he seems unconvinced that Montana, a Cuban individual, was not inherently a criminal but forced to survive in a system that had individuals sacrifice everything, including intellectual individuality, on behalf of serving Cuba. Moreover, many of the crimes

64 For a detailed explanation of the events that led to the refugees leaving for the United States, see Triay 18-46. 
65 For more on the living conditions in Cuba at the time of Castro’s rise into power, see Triay, pages 1-17. 
66 See Triay, pages 12-20.
Moments before he is sent away, Montana tells the U.S. officials that “there is nothing you can do to me that Castro has not already done” (00:07:21-00:07:30). Montana is declaring to the official that he will continue to persevere and survive in any conditions since he was able to endure life under Castro’s regime. Moreover, this demonstrates Montana’s assimilation into a new country with a new government that is meant to support him as simply moving him into the next phase of resettlement to continue processing the new refugees. By delaying support and putting Montana in a transitory but indefinite space with other refugees, it shows that these immigrants and the suffering that they survived continues to be ignored. Rather, by placing the refugees in resettlement camps for an indeterminate amount of time, the United States prioritizes the anxieties of white Americans by avoiding the refugee’s integration into society.

The processing of the Cuban refugees signals a cultural consensus that Americans want to appear as though they are doing the lawful act of supporting the refugees, but their actions lead to a delay of the Cuban’s refugee status and forces them into cruel and unjust conditions within their refugee camp for an unspecified amount of time. Although the intention is to send the refugees to a temporary resettlement camp where they are no longer living under the oppression of Castro’s regime, they continue to experience oppression by being confined to the camps while their status is not yet finalized. En route to Freedomentum, Montana, his friend Manny Ribera who Montana formerly knew from Cuba’s prison and the army, and other Cuban refugees are shown riding in a school bus that has been painted forest green as they travel on a

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67 See Aguirre et al. (491) and Triay (56).
freeway (00:08:11-00:08:16).68 After the film signals that one month has passed, the camera uses a long shot to slowly shift from the freeway and sweeps across the surrounding area, which shows many Cuban refugees walking around the base of the freeway underpass as they enter, exit, or stand next to a series of tents that are the same forest-green color as the bus (00:08:17-00:08:42). The color of the transport and the tents suggest that, while the refugees are given shelter as persons who were granted political asylum from Castro’s oppressive regime, they are still being oppressed by Americans in the confines of Freedomtown. As a pointed criticism of the American system, the film ironically situates the Cuban refugees as being freed from oppression but being forced to live in unsafe conditions (Triay 144-147). Moreover, despite the name of “Freedomtown” which suggests that it is a place that allows the refugees to embrace the American cultural value of freedom, every aspect of the camp negates freedom, including access to the spaces outside of it. The film further situates this doubled irony through the notion of a freeway itself. Their placement in a displaced, non-visible, and transitory location points to American’s disposition toward the Cuban refugees as unimportant, unwanted, and potentially dangerous. Finally, it highlights America’s xenophobia towards the refugees by suggesting that they do not wish to integrate them fully into society, the military presence is necessary since any one of them could be criminals, and that further oppressing and endangering their lives is preferential to them properly becoming a part of society.

68 For more on the relocation of refugees, including to a camp located at a freeway underpass, see Triay, page 145.
Montana’s transformation into a fully-fledged gangster provides him a pathway into American society and an opportunity at a life beyond the confines of the underpass.\textsuperscript{69} For his freedom from Freedomtown, Montana is told that he must commit the unlawful act of killing Emilio Rebenga, one of Castro’s former generals (00:09:39-00:10:54). This moment serves as the initiating task that allows Montana to become an American and strives towards his hope of achieving a core component of the American Dream: freedom. For Camonte, this initiation also occurred very early on in the film and granted him access to social status and money which are also central aspects of the American Dream. Unlike Montana, however, his initiation and ascent in rank did not necessarily hold any significance beyond the incremental acquisition of the American Dream. Continuing with the symbolism of Rebenga’s death, this killing signifies, in part, the skewing of the hard road to success through his inversion of unalienable rights that the United States said it would offer the refugees but has yet to deliver on the promise. Ultimately, Montana determines that he must acquire these rights by himself if he wants them. An additional implication is the psychological satisfaction that Montana can achieve by killing the former general, which allows him to do to Castro what was done to him. Offered to him both as freedom and self-satisfaction, Montana enacts symbolic revenge on a person that, to him, is symbolically synonymous of Castro and his regime. Montana tells Ribera that he would “kill a Communist for fun,” but since there is a green card attached to this task, he will make sure to “carve him up real nice” (00:10:41-00:10:53). Since Montana considers himself a former political prisoner under Castro’s rule, the opportunity to contribute to the dismantling of the Communist system and to

\textsuperscript{69} For the full scene, see De Palma, 00:09:15-00:13:39.
belong to a country where his dreams for his life are possible are worth the brutal contract killing he was hired to complete. During the ongoing riot where refugees rebelled against the unsafe conditions they were placed in and their indefinite detention in the underpass, Montana, Ribera, and other refugees isolate Rebenga as they chant “libertad” (00:10:55-12:51). As Rebenga attempts to escape, he exits through a door where Montana has been waiting when suddenly his belly becomes penetrated by Montana’s knife while Montana leans into his ear and says “from the friends you fucked” (00:12:52-00:12:57).

From the opening scene when Montana first claims that there is nothing that can be done to him that Castro has not already done to him, it is evident that Montana has become traumatized on a psychological level by the events that transpired in Cuba. While Montana asserts that nothing can be done to him anymore that will impact him in the way his past experiences did, murdering Rebenga affords Montana a cathartic psychological outlet for his repressed emotions. Furthermore, the line “from the friends you fucked” suggests that the hardships he endured in Cuba still linger on some level in his mind. The killing of Rebenga is symbolically freeing for Montana, for it allows him to act against a regime that oppressed him and finally to be free. Rebenga’s death also enables Montana to obtain a green card and become legally recognized as an American. Even though the Cuban immigrants were promised refugee status and the support that came with such recognition, it is only when Montana takes an alternative and illegal path that he believes will yield success that he is able to achieve forward

70 See Triay for contributing factors, page 144-146. An additional note is that libertad is a Spanish word that literally translates to “liberty” but can also be translated and understood to mean “freedom.”
progress. Whereas the President of the United States and the government officials ensured that refugee status was inevitable, Montana leveraged his position to successfully secure his freedom despite his actions being precisely what white Americans had anxiety about. In short, it took Montana becoming a criminal by American definition to become free, unlike before when he was criminalized within the Cuban definition of a criminal and, therefore, not able to be free. The irony of Montana’s residence in a resettlement camp called Freedomtown and the act of becoming a criminal to gain freedom epitomize the failures of American society while also reaffirming Montana’s ascent into society per the gangster trope that defines him: he “[takes] what he wants when he wants it” (Wilson 2).

While this act provides Montana with initial success by allowing him to gain freedom, he quickly comes to realize that he must continue to create his own path in the world if he is to attain the American Dream. After getting his green card, Montana begins working with Ribera as a dishwasher at the Little Havana Restaurante. As they work to prepare the orders for the three customers that are seated at the stand, Montana comments to Ribera that he “didn’t come to the United States to break [his] fuckin’ back,” signifying that Montana has envisioned an easier means of succeeding in America (Wilson 2). Shortly after all the customers have left, the camera cuts to the Little Havana club located across the street and slowly zooms out to reveal Montana and Ribera staring at it from the café. Observing how attractive the women are that are standing out front as well as the men they are with, Montana

71 For further details about the legal process behind the Marielito’s status, see Triay pages 142-144 and 178-179.
72 See Triay, pages 142-144.
73 For the full scene, see De Palma, 00:13:39-00:19:00.
asks Ribera “[what he’s] got that [he] doesn’t have” (00:14:50-00:14:53). Ribera replies by noting how the men are dressed and decides that what they have is likely the financial means to go out (00:15:02-00:15:10). As Ribera offers this conclusion, two men – Waldo and Omar – arrive in a car and offer Montana and Ribera a job opportunity to unload twenty-five tons of marijuana from a boat for five hundred dollars (00:15:28-00:16:17). Dissatisfied with the proposition, Montana responds critically, saying that the money they are being offered is not nearly enough compensation (00:16:21-00:16:37). They are then made a new offer to pick up two keys of cocaine and be paid five thousand dollars each, an offer they accept (00:17:15-00:18:04). Even though the exchange with the Columbian coke suppliers ends up becoming a shootout that almost causes Montana his life, Montana decides to bypass the chain of command in completing the job so he can directly deliver it to Frank Lopez, the person in charge of the cocaine drug trade in Miami.74

In this scene, Montana can be seen as oscillating between maintaining his course and staying on the path of traditional success in America or accepting an opportunity to spring himself forward into the success that he yearns for. For Camonte, this mainly manifested as a longing for material wealth. He became motivated by this desire to exponentially accelerate the speed at which he attained this aspect of the American Dream despite the increased risk. While Montana uses his wealth to dress the part as many gangsters before him traditionally have done, his focus is primarily on dominating the market and consolidating a powerful yet protected

74 To view this scene in its entirety, see De Palma, 00:19:01-00:29:18.
position at the top of the chain of command. This priority can be seen in Montana within this early scene as he is presented with two opportunities for work. On one side of the same street is the café he is working for, which entails difficult work for a small payoff, whereas across the street the men and women are dressed beautifully and are free to enjoy themselves. In asking Ribera what the men have that he doesn’t, Montana comes to realize that he must take control over his life’s narrative if he is to make anything of it beyond the limited scope that America has afforded him. For this reason, Montana decides to become a part of the illegal drug racket, which allows him to feel confident enough that he will attain the success he is looking for since he discards his dishwasher’s uniform, throws it at his boss, and tells him that he “retires” (00:18:34-00:18:50). As Montana walks in the direction of the club, Montana’s “retirement” from the dishwashing profession can be seen as symbolic for two reasons. First, he retires, he does not quit. This suggests that Montana has no intention of ever returning to a traditional American profession that only affords him a small semblance of the American Dream. Secondly, Montana’s decision to walk toward the club establishes his intentions to pursue the American Dream as he saw it unfolding from across the street minutes earlier. Additionally, the opportunity Montana fought to have with drug trafficking demonstrates that he is willing to pioneer his own success and do what it takes to rise in social status so he can achieve the wealth and power that the American Dream has become synonymous with. Even with a green card, Montana is still challenged to find work with livable wages. While this may not necessarily resemble the ideals of American society, it exposes the corruption that lies at the core of it, which is that people may

75 See Rosow, 30-32.
be regarded as equals based off the premise of legal status, but, ultimately, there are still disparities between the opportunities that different individuals have access to, especially considering the context under which Montana came to the United States. In essence, Montana has come to the realization that he can either remain at his current position or, with seemingly nowhere else to go but up, he can continue to forge his own path to the top of society. Montana’s predicament and ultimate decision to get involved in the drug industry is a critique that success in America is not always equally rewarded for hard work nor does all work reward people equally, but the foundational tenets of individualism and being a pioneer of one’s own success oftentimes rewards those in American society. Remembering Ribera’s comments that coke money doesn’t necessarily hurt to have, Montana uses this knowledge to exert authorial control over his narrative by refusing to continue to be taken advantage of, even if it threatens his life. Despite working in opposition to what American society outlines as yielding success, Montana chooses to find a way to survive in a corrupt system by exploiting it just as it has exploited him, a choice that is then rewarded with a significant rise in status, wealth, and power.

Even after Montana has attained the American Dream of wealth, power, home ownership, and success with full rule over Miami, his perspective from the top of society compels him to speak to the ongoing xenophobia between American society and himself as a refugee. Seated at one of the few standing tables in an up-scale restaurant, Montana, his wife Elvira, and Ribera are surrounded by predominantly white patrons who are sitting in red leather booths with gold trim, the tables covered with white linen tablecloths, fine porcelain china with gold trim, and lit
The dining room is decorated with flowers, intricate wallpaper and moldings, and crystal chandeliers above each booth. Dressed in a tuxedo and expensive jewelry, Montana looks at his wife – who is wearing a thinly strapped sparkling rose gold dress with dangling diamond earrings as she presses her hand against her nose to ingest cocaine – before asking Manny if “this is what all of this is about” (02:08:46-02:08:50). He continues by reflecting on his present position in life in the second person and where he envisions his life going: “You’re fifty. You got a bag for a belly… You got a liver, and they got spots on it, and you’re eating’ this fuckin’ shit, and you’re lookin’ like these rich fuckin’ mummies in here”’ (02:09:02-02:09:30). After heavily criticizing Elvira, she tells him he is nothing more than a gangster who deals drugs and kills people, only to end on the sarcastic note of it being a “real contribution to human history” (02:10:33-02:10:39). As Elvira criticizes him for being morally and socially bankrupt and destroying any chance they could have to life an authentic version of the American Dream, she asks him if he is able to see that they are losers (02:10:40-02:11:25). Montana uses this opportunity to perform a monologue to an audience of stunned dining room of patrons in which he tells them that they “don’t have the guts to be who [they] want to be” because they need people like him “so [they] can point [their] fuckin’ fingers and say that’s the bad guy” (02:12:12-02:12:52). Before bringing a close to the scene, Montana poses a rhetorical question to the audience of whether they think that their position as American-born citizens who likely earned their success in the traditional manner makes them the good guys, to which he responds that it doesn’t, it only means that they know how to hide and how to lie, unlike him, who always tells

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76 For the full scene, see De Palma, 02:07:00-02:13:50.
the truth, even when he lies (02:12:54-02:13:26). Having reached the pinnacle of success in America, or the dream of acquiring incredible wealth, power, a home, and a family, Montana realizes that there is nowhere left to go but to his demise. While Camonte fully embraces the luxuries he has access to once he’s reached the top and basks in the glory of being the top boss, Montana becomes increasingly numb and painfully conscious that there is no conquering left for him to do, therefore all that is left for him is to protect his coveted position, a task which becomes an unhealthy paranoia. With nothing left in his life to reach other than old age, he begins to criticize the American Dream that the United States upholds as the highest achievement possible by essentializing and debasing it as being nothing more than “eating, drinking, fucking, sucking, [and] snorting…” until one dies (02:08:53-02:09:00).

As a political refugee from Cuba who was destined to work late nights as a dishwasher, he swindled his way into living an American Dream only to become swindled by his belief that he could ever live the American Dream. Once Montana comes to this realization, he then addresses the audience, which includes the viewer of the film, and comes to terms with the fact that he may be the bad guy who had to swindle his way to the top. He reminds them, however that just because they may have lawfully attained the same American Dream as he did, it does not mean that they are any less complicit in the corruption, a fact that the consumers of Camonte’s alcohol supply were never confronted with. Although they might say goodnight to him as the bad guy in this cultural moment, he maintains that he will not hide from and lie about the corruption that the audience willingly allows, for he and the other gangsters will continue to use the corrupt American system to their profit which simultaneously allows them to use their lives as a means of problematizing it. Moreover, it is at the height of his social position within
society and just before his downfall that Montana addresses the contradictions that are at the core of the American Dream. He underscores that his exploitation of the American system supplies the demands of white Americans, and just as he was caught in the cracks of corrupt systems, it is the same act of corruption and exploitation that enabled him to rise to the top of American society. Rather than allowing his role as a gangster to define who he is, he leverages this knowledge to place blame on America for necessitating him to have to seek alternative paths for success. His desire to be a part of society was denied and indefinitely suspended, then, after having to kill for his freedom, he was still unable to realistically pursue his dreams since his refugee identity limited him. In this moment, the most significant audience member that Montana is addressing is not the room of diners but rather the audience watching the film. The meta-awareness of his position and the structures in place that have hindered and empowered his ascent serve as an overt critique of American society. His rise in social mobility and ability to attain the American Dream is a testimony that the American system has been corrupt even before his arrival; he merely had to find his footing within the faults of it to raise himself up. Directly pointing to the Americans who participate in and benefit from his racket yet still treat him as an outcast exemplifies the xenophobia that is at the heart of American society, for he is never fully acknowledged or assimilated as an American but perpetually kept on the periphery.

3.3 The Last Time Seeing a Bad Guy Like This: The Hypocrisy of the American Dream

In essence, Scarface (1983) allows for the path that the gangster creates for himself to be understood as a necessary means of survival in a corrupt and xenophobic system. The 1932 film creates the foundation of the genre as concerned with racial disparity by casting the Italian immigrant in the role of the gangster. This is structured around the cultural assumption on the
part of Americans that immigrants are dangerous and criminal by nature, therefore no additional context is put into place for the audience to be able to understand that the gangster is an amoral and destructive figure who is a detriment to society. Although the film does make a point to frame the film as a warning of the gangster, it fails to provide nuance to the history of immigrant individuals, their unique culture, and dispel the myths that the community, just as any other community, is not inherently criminal. This continued to fuel anti-immigrant sentiments, anxiety about the state of the core values that America strives to uphold, and further perpetuate harmful stereotypes about immigrants, placing blame on them for being unable to lawfully achieve the American Dream. The 1983 remake adds context and nuance that the original film lacked to present a satirical criticism of American society. Montana’s inability to succeed is deeply rooted in the historical events of the time and framed as a failure on the part of the United States government to effectively support and assimilate Cuban refugees into society. Moreover, it made the slow suffocation of the refugee’s dreams highly visible through their experience in being suspended in time as they waited on an empty promise underneath a freeway in a crowded and unsafe resettlement camp. Scarface (1983) underscored the contradiction of the American Dream from the beginning by illustrating the dangerous circumstances that the refugees were forced to live in and highlighting the xenophobia that kept them in these spaces. What Camonte and Montana have in common is that they are unable to be seen outside of their ethnic differences and, therefore, never truly have a world that is theirs because it is a world that was never an option of being theirs. In isolated circumstances, they can seem to have the trappings of the American Dream wholly within their control, but the gangster genre itself is what keeps them on the margins of this authentic achievement. Their American Dream never allows them to belong
to society but to co-exist in spaces with others who can belong, move, and participate in society without the encumbrances that Americans have made for those who are different ethnicities. In short, the American Dream is a creation of the white individuals who lay claim to having founded the United States, and it is a system that continues to disproportionately privilege, profit, and prioritize them despite the fifty-one years of time that had elapsed between the production of the two films. Therefore, it is with the remake that the same faults, failures, and xenophobic attitudes can be seen as an unchanged standard that defines the genre, for even with different historical, cultural, and social circumstances, they continue to demonize the immigrant as a natural deviant who seeks to infiltrate, corrupt, and destroy life in America.

To conclude, *Scarface* reveals that, no matter which path is taken, immigrants are precluded from achieving an authentic and permanent version of the American Dream because it was created by white Americans who have made it inaccessible to people of different races. *Scarface* remains a crucial interrogation of the American Dream and one that remains residually in the minds of the American imaginary due to American disbelief that this system does not deliver on its promise of social mobility or equality. The films establish a pattern of casting an archetypal figure that represents aspects that are other than American, such as being an immigrant, to locate the fault in them as an abject individual who extorts Americans to profit off them and serve their corrupt desires. In the end, *Scarface* centers around a historical scapegoat that Americans can pin their anxieties and paranoia onto to problematize individuals who are other as opposed to questioning the viability of their country and ultimately identity as Americans. It is for this reason that the films remain pertinent today and why it continues to be remade: they challenge core tenants upon which America was built as being fundamentally contradictory and corrupt all
while soothing the American ego. In the end, the focus on one individual from a larger group of individuals merely serves as a lightning rod for the fears, generalizations, and pervasive evil that Americans believe to be the fault as to why the system continues to fail. The final chapter will explore the influence that *Scarface* has had on not only the gangster trope but society. It explores how the films have set a benchmark for achievement that is idolized and coveted by many Americans and is a prevalent part of what the American success story has evolved into over the years. Lastly, it considers the purpose of the genre as an interrogation of the viability of the American Dream through the eyes of the immigrant and how this perspective has developed to further include those who are historically, culturally, and socially disadvantaged. The result is a more expansive insight into the deep faults within the foundation of America’s core values and beliefs as well as provides insight as to what the developing meaning of the American Dream is by including perspectives beyond that of the white American.
4. Chapter Three: We All Could Be Happier: The Legacy of \textit{Scarface} in Contemporary Media

4.1 An Introduction to the Growing Gangster Genre

Starting as a pulp magazine series that became the novel that would inspire Hawk’s film, \textit{Scarface} has had a nearly century-long impact on American society.\textsuperscript{77} From music, TV shows, films, video games, and the next planned remake of \textit{Scarface}, Tony’s legacy continues to reaffirm the important of a new type of American success story.\textsuperscript{78} Unlike the conventional routes that centered white Americans, Tony’s story as a marginalized immigrant seeking the American Dream illuminates a cultural shift in the gangster genre where aspects of American society are problematized through the generations of gangsters that came after him. The 1930s gangster was coded as a non-American who was corrupting the American system, which placed blame not on the individual but the immigrant community for failing to achieve success and assimilate into American society. In essence, the gangster trope was intended to represent how American society would become skewed by the immigrant’s rise into power, wealth, and status, including that of an American. His clothing and mannerisms were gaudy, and his means of conducting business was amoral and fatal. The gangster was nothing more than a spectacle meant to horrify, disturb, and incite fear into Americans, the result of which was the continued injurious treatment towards immigrants. The 1980s \textit{Scarface} film, however, utilized the implicit racism embedded in the gangster trope as a blatant criticism of American social, cultural, historical, and political influences that demonized immigrant’s dreams of a better life for themselves. The gangster

\textsuperscript{77} See Clarens, page 73, and Smyth in his note on Armitage Trail’s pulp magazine publications on page 76.

\textsuperscript{78} See director Luca Guadagnino’s interview for BadTaste.it titled “Luca Guadagnino talks to us about his \textit{Scarface}.”
became a satirical caricature: he exposed the corruption of the American system, painted the American Dream as a glittering ideal bankrupt of any meaning, acted with excessive extravagance to more fully embrace yet patronize stereotypes of the trope, and, in true gangster fashion, blatantly critiqued his exploitation by pointing to the contradictory treatments he experiences as a gangster and an immigrant.

The *Scarface* legacy highlights that the racial disparity experienced by immigrant individuals within their respective historical, cultural, and social milieu is what led to the gangster becoming America’s newest iteration of the outlaw. His life serves as an unveiled and grotesque representation of how American capitalism functions. He runs a business that supplies a demand for goods without much concern for ethics of his racket’s impact and he forces his competitors out of business for control of the market. Whereas robber barons of the late 19th-century were able to profit from the exploitation of their workers and the uncontrolled market, the illegal nature of the gangster’s supply is what primarily defined their chosen path into success as being crooked. Moreover, attaining wealth, power, and social mobility betrays the exclusionist barriers set in place by America to limit the success of immigrants who were seen as dangerous and lesser individuals. The gangster problematizes the unattainability of the American Dream by showing the extremes that individuals will undergo for significant wealth, yet the deterioration of the self that occurs as a result. Moreover, their inability to reconcile the grandiose promise of what the American Dream is with the dissatisfying reality of living in America, especially for those who are people of color, is a symbolic representation that the

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79 See Rosow, page 5-6.
gangster is doomed not by their obligation to succeed but by the brutal realism of who can attain the American Dream. The *Scarface* films successfully highlight that the gangster can be understood as more than a gratuitously violent individual who kills without purpose, but rather an individual who sacrificed everything for a misrepresented promise and was forced to go rogue in a failed system to achieve his dreams of a life beyond merely surviving. Simply put, Tony is not merely a “symptom of the American [Dream]” but one of many potential prognoses for an individual who pursues the American Dream and will never be able to maintain a viable version of it due to his identity as an outsider (Badtaste.it 00:01:56-00:02:30). He represents an ideal yet ironically tragic story of successfully achieving the American Dream that is representative of many other individuals' attempts at life, liberty, and happiness.

This chapter will briefly highlight texts that sustain the tenor and legacy of the *Scarface* films. They will examine how they draw on *Scarface*’s central message by interrogating the fallacies and failings of American society. Additionally, it will illustrate how texts continue to call attention to moral and ethical boundaries of the lived human experience. This chapter showcases some of the next generation of individuals who represent the growing genre of the gangsters, for their rise into wealth, status, and power is largely from the margins of society. They utilize the grandeur of the genre to underscore the extremes that individuals undergo to survive and succeed in life. Moreover, it illustrates a progression in the genre as it moves from an unrelatable other who uses excessive violence and corruption of the American system to rise to the top to a gangster who is not just human but relatable beyond the American landscape. The

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80 See Wilson, page 4.
purpose of these texts not only is to sustain the growing criticism of the failing American system but to provide a departure from the gangster trope that has been largely established in terms of the gangster’s race, class, immigrant status, and assumed intention for that of a person who has circumstances that contribute to their decision to act outside of the law. Furthermore, the contemporary gangster genre attempts to move beyond these defining aspects of the genre to examine the motivations, purpose, and contributing factors that drives someone to becoming a gangster. The development of the genre moves beyond xenophobic stereotypes and racial disparities that often led to individuals being defined as gangsters to examines the factors that force individuals into the margins of society and into the path of the gangster in addition to the extremities of the genre as a shared human pursuit for happiness. In the end, the progression of the genre has provided a perspective of the gangster as not merely a glamorous and fantastical monster but a relatable person chasing their dreams as they navigate the challenges of their society, culture, present history, and life.

4.2 From Distant Other to Neighbor: Expanding the Gangster’s Landscape

The story of *Scarface*, in the simplest of terms, is the story of an individual who was able to overcome prejudice and adversity to eventually achieve success. Despite utilizing violence and eventually suffering a violent death, the gangster is still a model of success in a society that rejected and sought to suppress his aspirations. The *Scarface* protagonists are well-regarded not only for their success and ability to implement the American values of hard-work and determination, but their struggles highlight the obstacles and barriers that impede the lives of many individuals who are pursuing similar ends. Rather than depicting yet another popular, traditional, or financially secure individual who achieved and sustained success, Tony’s
challenges as a non-white individual spotlight some the contradictions of the American Dream that individuals grapple with in their own lives. It is a story of success in which the protagonists strategically use the corruption that is deeply embedded in American society to attain their dreams and live successfully despite the eventual downfall that comes with moving beyond one’s place in society.

Many traditional tropes of the gangster genre were largely established during the early 20th century with films such as Hawk’s 1932 *Scarface* and continued to remain a core influence for many television shows and films, including the 1983 remake. While most *Scarface* references often quote or allude to Tony Montana in the 1983 film’s excessive coke use and the line “say hello to my little friend,” the portrayal of a person who must brazenly survive the world they live in despite the bleak odds they face as a person on the margins of society is a core tenant of the films (De Palma 02:40:35-02:40:37). Tony’s confidence that borders on arrogance, ingenuity, and fearless determination in the face of adversity are key aspects that have imparted themselves in the gangster genre decades after the release of the films. One movie that maintains a strong sense of this legacy is *GoodFellas* (1990). Directed by Martin Scorsese, the film follows Henry Hill, an Irish-Italian boy who had wanted to be a gangster ever since he was a youngster and, under the wing of Paulie Cicero, eventually rose into his own success as a gangster (00:02:45-00:03:17). Drawing on many prevalent elements from *Scarface*, *GoodFellas* illustrates the gangster’s ascent into riches, his descent into paranoia and drug abuse, and a demise that the

81 In many different interviews, Al Pacino – who plays Tony Montana in the 1983 De Palma film – is often said to point to his experience seeing Paul Muni as Tony Camonte in the 1932 film as his main inspiration and desire to remake the film. For a few of these interviews, see Konow “Writing in a Very Dark Room,” Hoffman “The Making of Scarface (1983),” and Weinraub “A Foul Mouth With a Following.”
genre has come to define as being the most shameful means of ending one’s legacy. Much like the *Scarface* protagonists, Hill’s determination to provide for his family leads him to smuggle and sell illegal goods, a business he maintains even after his release. Similarly to *Scarface*, Hill’s inability to resist power, money, and indulge in his own supply results in him losing the illustrious American Dream for that of a protected witness, a title that all former gangsters wear with shame and fear.\(^{82}\) Contributing to the ongoing thematic of Italians as belonging to the mafia, especially those of Sicilian descent given Hill’s heritage, *GoodFellas* traces the bold determination of the *Scarface* protagonists in a young teen who admires the power and status that comes with the role.\(^{83}\) Eventually achieving this, Hill’s gangster identity becomes all-encompassing to the point that it extends beyond achieving the American Dream and becomes a central characteristic of who he is. Just as Camonte and Montana sacrifice their lives out of a bloodlust to maintain power, Hill sacrifices the real possibility to settling into the American Dream – something he regards as dull complacency – to experience the high of being a gangster. Finally, as a more direct additive to the fear and anxiety of the genre, *GoodFellas* not only criticizes the American Dream as being monotonous but that even the youth are susceptible to the glamor of the gangster’s life just as Hill was.

Adding intensity to the genre with a conflicting resolution, director Ridley Scott’s *American Gangster* (2007) provides an alternative perspective of attaining the American Dream and eventual demise for the gangster with character Frank Lucas. Opening with the brutal

\(^{82}\) The downfall of Montana in the 1983 film is often attributed to his failure to heed his former boss Frank’s lessons in being a gangster: “Don’t get high on your own supply” (De Palma 00:36:47-00:36:57).

\(^{83}\) The shared Sicilian identity and area where they came from in Sicily is why Hill’s mother was initially pleased for her son to work for Cicero, which played a part in the development of the gangster trope (00:04:12-00:04:49).
murder of a Spanish-speaking person, *American Gangster* depicts the abrupt ascent of Lucas during the height of the Vietnam War when his boss Ellsworth “Bumpy” Johnson abruptly passes away. Reflecting on his boss’s last words in which he claims that “no one is in charge,” Lucas decides to solidify his position in the world of crime by taking over his boss’s racket, improving it by directly dealing with the heroin suppliers in Vietnam, and building his empire by providing the most potent drug of anyone in his line of business (00:03:56-00:04:32). His success allows him to achieve the defining aspects of the American Dream: wealth, status, power, and the ability to provide for his family, some of which support the growth of his empire. Despite his trust in family and dedication to the quality of the product he sells, Lucas’s control over the market falls apart due to his family’s corroboration with the police.

Contributing to backdrop of war and politics, *American Gangster* echoes *Scarface’s* legacy of the war on illegal racket, the corruption of American society, and the dangerous reputation of people of color. Despite Bumpy’s racist criticism about Asian people taking away the livelihood of American people, Lucas is depicted as inciting war against white Americans by selling heroin sourced out of Vietnam, a symbolic act that intends to portray Lucas as being just as dangerous as the Vietnamese people are depicted to be during this moment in time (00:03:42-00:03:51). Lucas’s racket creates a war on American soil just as Camonte and Montana similarly brought drugs and weapons that were in demand due to white American’s interest in procuring them. Additionally, his bribery of local officials further exemplifies how far his corruption extends in addition to illuminating the depth of corruption that exists and can be used for profit in American society, a point that Lucas and the cop who captures him make sure comes to
light. Unlike Camonte, Montana, or Henry Hill from *GoodFellas*, Frank Lucas’s choice to cooperate with government officials provided him a shortened prison term and eventually resulted in him returning to society. Even though Hill cooperated, he was unable to resist the lure of the gangster lifestyle and returned to racketeering, a lifestyle that Lucas now considers to be foolish given his second chance (02:47:58-02:48:10). *American Gangster* not only showcases an individual who aligns himself with the alleged enemy of white Americans during a time of war but illustrates a rise and inevitable fall from power that does not lead to his death. While many gangsters remain dedicated to their cause, Lucas willingly implicates not just his family but corrupt officials in positions that were intended to protect Americans. Although Lucas’s decision may be seen as a betrayal of his gangster title, he chooses to incriminate family members – or “rats,” as those in his line of business often refer to snitches as – who led to his capture and those who contributed to the American system’s corruption. In essence, Lucas does not betray anyone who has not already betrayed him. This not only allows him to redeem himself for the lives he indirectly killed through his dangerous product but to maintain his integrity as a gangster by upholding the implied code of not cooperating with authorities even if it means life in prison. In short, *American Gangster* depicts the rise of Lucas’s power in America during war and his nuanced fall out of the American Dream and the lifestyle altogether. Much like *Scarface’s* legacy, the intention of *American Gangster* is to highlight the relationship between

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84 For the full scene of Lucas’s cooperation after his capture and its effects, see 02:41:01-02:44:30.
85 Lucas was initially sentenced to seventy years in prison, but the term was reduced to fifteen with the support of former police officer Richie Roberts who changed careers from the Prosecutor’s office to defense attorney (02:43:40-02:44:42).
the actions of gangsters and war, especially during the final transit of the heroin in the caskets of fallen soldiers, to evoke anger, disgust, and anxiety for the gangster’s distasteful greed and how far he is willing to go to achieve his own selfish means.  

Moving beyond film, *Scarface’s* legacy also extends to television where high school science teachers like Walter White in Vince Gilligan’s *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) must search along the margins of society to sustain his American Dream and survive America’s corruption. Shortly after he celebrates his fiftieth birthday with his pregnant wife, son, and friends at the start of the pilot episode, Walter is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer with the odds of living a few years should he chose to participate in chemotherapy. Given their financial standing, his dedication to his family, and the baby that he and his wife are expecting, White decides halfway through the episode that the money he could earn from producing meth during the few years he has left could allow him to provide the money that he will be unable to once he passes. While White grapples with taking his own life or continuing in the already dangerous line of business he sought to join, the episode concludes with White cleaning the money he earned in his household dryer and becoming intimate with his wife, two things that were indicated as lacking earlier in this first episode. While many future episodes establish connections to the *Scarface* legacy, the first episode succinctly establishes White and the show within the scope of the gangster genre. Confronted with the bleak outcome of his survival that most gangsters only experience on the latter half of their success story, White choses to fight against his odds and provide his family with the American Dream that they have struggled to maintain. Although

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87 See 02:22:40-02:24:12.
88 For all the scenes that are mentioned in this initial paragraph, see *Breaking Bad*, season one, episode one.
Walter White is a white American man and his struggles cannot compare to the hundreds of years of extensive injustice that people of color have historically experienced, the adversity he faces when his life and the livelihood of his family is suddenly threatened reflects the lack of privilege and support that many non-affluent individuals experience in America. Despite his contributions to educating generations of youth and abiding by the laws of society, he is forced to search for alternative paths to securing the American Dream for his family. Unlike Scarface, GoodFellas, and American Gangster, Breaking Bad complicates the straightforward narrative of a morally bankrupt and inherently bad person by focusing on an individual who previously lived in accordance with society’s laws who eventually becomes cornered into making amoral decisions. While gangsters embrace their ascent into wealth, status, and power, White seeks to maintain his material existence and sense of self as it has always been, although he must grapple with the fine, morally ambiguous line he walks. Moreover, this forces the viewer to confront their own morality and the outcomes the American system yields for a suburban, middle-class family such as the Whites. By featuring a traditional, ordinary family by white-American standards, the series not only showcases an everyday person who is forced into choosing the life of a gangster but establishes the gangster genre in real, everyday life beyond the screen as opposed to the more fantastical setting of a time separate from the present.

In other modern iterations of the genre, the gangster does not just provide insight into the fractures of society but the gangster himself. The Sopranos by David Chase stars James Gandolfini as Tony Soprano, a mafia boss who runs various racket efforts in New Jersey. More

89 For the scope of this project, this discussion will focus on the first episode of The Sopranos titled “Pilot.”
importantly, Soprano is carrying on his father’s legacy as a mob boss with the support, strife, and criticism of his father’s brother Junior Soprano, his mother Livia, and his father’s various friends in addition to the stresses of his own family. However, the pressure he faces in his life prove to be insurmountable, as his efforts to maintain control come crashing down as unexpected panic attacks that lead him to attend therapy sessions. Whereas generations of gangsters have been understood through their actions and attitudes when speaking to different individuals, *The Sopranos* provides an intimate perspective into the gangster’s psyche and his own developing understanding of himself. Similarly to the gangsters before him, Soprano argues that, in his world, therapy is not something that “goes down” (00:27:54-00:28:03). Despite his best efforts, Soprano finds himself returning to therapy time and time again to get support for the panic attacks he continues to suffer from. *The Sopranos* attempts to reconcile the image of the gangster as a carelessly violent person using corruption to gain access to the American Dream by humanizing him with relatable worries, concerns, and familial struggles. The show continues the legacy of the gangster – especially the Italian xenophobia and stereotypes that have been perpetuated since the beginning of the genre with *Scarface* 1932 – while also illustrating that the American Dream is not a perfect end to the gangster’s problems. Rather, Soprano illustrates that his problems continue to persist, for he is pressured to provide for his family in new ways and carry on the legacy of his family and the gangster tradition. Moreover, *The Sopranos* humanize the gangster by exposing the vulnerabilities, traumas, and faults that are at his core despite the external presentation he must maintain. Although Soprano may seem to continue to glamorize the life of the gangster to outsiders through the privileges he provides his family with, it also sheds light on the consequences of his chosen path through the loss of people he loves, the
relationships that deteriorate, and the betrayals that he and everyone experiences in his line of work. *The Sopranos* progress the gangster trope by examining the psyche of a gangster that has attained a semblance of the American Dream but struggles to maintain it. In the end, it is by humanizing the gangster and exposing the relatable vulnerabilities he faces that he becomes more nuanced and more easily understood as trying to sustain happiness not simply as a gangster but a human being.

Finally, there are instances where the contemporary gangster genre has moved beyond the traditional structure of a non-white or disparate person corrupting the American landscape to having an American explore the corrupt version of the American Dream that exists in other countries. The biographical TV show *Narcos: Mexico* offers a dual perspective on the aspirations of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo and Kiki Camarena. Similarly to *Scarface* 1983, *Narcos: Mexico* situates itself during a war that “doesn’t have an ending at all” but presents an active danger which provides the imperative for the narrator to make this undesirable story known to an audience that is willing to listen (00:00:06-00:01:38). By framing the show’s premise as ongoing threat that many “trusted institutions” have participated in creating, one that has cost nearly half a million lives and involves a war that has no foreseeable ending, the series evokes an immediate anxiety that *Scarface* 1983 cultivated in its introduction for which there is no predictable relief from (00:00:22-00:01:34).

Fueling this fear are the two perspectives of the drug war in Mexico from two unlikely protagonists who further challenge assumptions of American audiences and who they can truly

90 For the purposes of the present essay, the discussion of *Narcos: Mexico* will focus primarily on the first episode of the first season titled “Camelot.”
trust. Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, one of the two central protagonists of the show, is introduced in the show in his role as a police officer in the state of Sinaloa, Mexico who negotiates with Rafa, a wanted marijuana trafficker. After successfully capturing Rafa, he returns to his home to find his wife and two children hiding in a bomb shelter in their backyard. Shortly after helping them, Rafa suddenly appears. As Gallardo begins to uncuffs him, Rafa shares disappointment that his green house is broken, yet Gallardo’s wife Maria Elvira informs him that not everything has been destroyed. When he peers into the shelter and becomes excited that there is enough marijuana to rebuild what was lost, Gallardo and his wife come to the decision that survival for a few months is not enough, so they must gain their own footing within the drug empire. Gallardo’s aspirations are constructed against the backdrop of providing his family with a sustainable life outside of basic survival. However, by betraying the trust of the audience from the start, Gallardo’s fraudulence as a policeman who is meant to protect people and partnership with a known drug trafficker illustrates the depth to which the corruption exists in the world of the gangster. Although it is presented metaphorically as an opportunity for Gallardo to bring his family up from the dark desperation that the country of Mexico faces, his dedication to providing for his family cannot be overshadowed by his disloyalty to fighting the war on drugs when he chooses to contribute to the very death that threatens everything that he loves.

Adding an alternative perspective to the show, Kiki Camarena – the other central protagonist – is introduced during a sit-down with a marijuana supplier with which he is trying to establish as his source. As the deal comes close to being agreed upon, local police break

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91 For the full scene, see 00:06:25-00:15:06.
92 For the full scene, see 00:17:01-00:22:06
through the door and arrest everyone. Despite Camarena’s efforts to tell the police that he is a DEA officer, his colleagues must intervene and verify that he is indeed with the DEA. As he is being uncuffed by the officer, he criticizes him for intervening in the undercover operation that cost them a more meaningful outcome, to which the officer tells Camarena that it is “tough telling the good hombres from the bad sometimes” (00:21:51-00:22:01). Shortly after, Camarena is told that the transfer he wanted is not going to happen, however he is offered the opportunity to work in Guadalajara, Mexico, a position he later accepts as an opportunity to continue providing for his growing family and his standstill career (00:30:02-00:31:59). Camarena eventually discovers in the second episode of the series that the Guadalajara DEA officers often let crime occur and accepts bribes to allow it to go largely unnoticed, prompting Camarena to go rogue and enact real change during the drug war.93

Perhaps one of the most modern and innovative iterations of the gangster genre, Narcos: Mexico pushes the boundaries of the genre by interrogating American values, aspirations, and morality through reversed roles. Whereas non-white people are often depicted as inherently evil, Narcos: Mexico often depicts white individuals as privileged, occasionally racist, and corrupt. Camarena is often overlooked and ridiculed by his colleagues for his eccentric determination to capture criminals, causing him to stop short of success and doubt himself when combating the trafficking of drugs. Despite striving for his version of the American Dream, Camarena is given an array of obstacles that lead to this achievement always being just out of reach. Similarly, Gallardo’s dreams and aspirations fall neatly in-line with those that are characterized as

93 See the opening scene for Narcos: Mexico season two, episode two titled “The Plaza System” (00:00:17-00:04:48)
American: a pioneer-like attitude for status, wealth, stability, and the ability to provide for his family. Establishing this narrative not only outside of America but with a successful Mexican protagonist contributes to the anxiety that the Scarface films illustrated when a non-white or ethnic “other” attains the American Dream. Oscillating between the Mexican gangster and the Mexican DEA agent, Narcos: Mexico problematizes the American Dream as not belonging solely to Americans nor the American landscape but suggests that it is a fundamentally human pursuit. This series attempts to refocus the conventions of the genre onto the human struggle for basic desires that have been previously defined as American. While the conversation around racial disparities and xenophobic attitudes are still utilizes to challenge American audiences – such as with the reversed roles of the two protagonists – Narcos: Mexico pushes for a gangster trope that is more socially, historically, and culturally focused on a shared humanity that forces individuals to extremes if they want to survive and succeed.

4.3 We Still Need People Like Him: Conclusion

In essence, Scarface reveals that, no matter which path is taken, many individuals are precluded from achieving the American Dream in its totality because of the inaccessibility of the Dream itself. Scarface continues to remain residually in the minds of the American imaginary due to American disbelief that this system does not deliver on its promise of social mobility or equality, and so it casts Tony - an archetypal figure representative of aspects that are other than American, such as being an immigrant - as an abject individual who extorts Americans to profit off them and serve his corrupt desires. In the end, Scarface becomes the scapegoat that Americans can pin their anxieties and paranoia onto to problematize individuals as opposed to questioning the viability of the American system and their complicity in perpetuating a system
that privileges some over others. It is for this reason that the films remain pertinent today and why they continue to be remade: they challenge core tenants upon which America was built upon as being fundamentally contradictory yet soothe the American psyche by focusing on one character from a larger group of individuals who serves as a lightning rod for the fears, generalizations, and pervasive evil that plagues the country. Moreover, it is also a potential reason as to why Luca Guadagnino is projected to be releasing a second remake of *Scarface* in 2023, forty years after Brian De Palma’s 1983 remake, and ninety-one years after Howard Hawks first released *Scarface* in 1932. Guadagnino claims that the character of Tony Montana is more than a gangster but an “archetypal human figure” that still “affects the imaginary of the audience” because Montana is a “symptom of the American Dream” (Badtaste.it 00:00:39-00:02:30). Rather than a symptom, however, Tony Camonte and Tony Montana are better understood as offering one of many potential prognoses for an individual who pursues the American Dream. More specifically, the character of Tony in particular highlights that being an immigrant and operating outside of the law are symptoms of someone who will never manifest and maintain a viable version of the American Dream. Furthermore, the gangster genre continues the legacy of *Scarface* by maintaining the same purpose: it does not strive to make the gangster an entirely sympathetic character, it aims to reshape the corruption, complicity, and failures of people’s ability to attain their dreams. The contemporary efforts of the genre portray the gangster’s action as more than the efforts of an outsider figure determined to corrupt America and cause meaningless violence. It strives to illuminate the path of marginalized individuals who feel their only option is to embrace non-traditional paths if they are ever to truly be successful. Rather than another popular and wealthy individual achieving success, the gangster’s alternative
path represents the challenges of many individuals as they grapple with attaining happiness and success in their own lives. In the end, it is up to everyone to decide what is moral, how attainable one’s dream are, and who the bad guy truly is.
References


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