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THE GANGSTER IN FILM AND LITERATURE: A STUDY OF A MODERN AMERICAN MONSTER

Por

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À Dulce, minha amada companheira e aos
meus queridos filhos Lucas e Paula.

Ao meu irmão, Marcelo Vugman.

RESUMO

THE GANGSTER IN FILM AND LITERATURE: A STUDY OF A MODERN AMERICAN MONSTER

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UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA

2001

Orientadora: Anelise Reich Corseuil

O presente trabalho é um estudo do gangster no cinema e na literatura Americana, desde seu aparecimento nas telas no início da década de 1930 --em *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*-- até a década de 1990, com o filme *Pulp Fiction*. Ele é analisado como uma figura mítica moderna e para explicar sua função mitológica única, uma metáfora é aplicada a ele, a metáfora do monstro, isto é, aquela figura criada em todas as sociedades humanas para personificar tudo o que é considerado mal, ou monstruoso, e cuja destruição ou expulsão final representaria a vitória sobre o mal. Assim, a produção Hollywoodiana é abordada como o meio privilegiado para a criação e difusão do universo mitológico americano moderno. Conseqüentemente, cada filme de gênero é definido como uma "narrativa de mito" ou "artefato de mito", uma história que expressa um mito, e de acordo com tal abordagem, cada gênero de filme é descrito como um agrupamento de filmes que apresentam um mesmo mito como o elemento organizador da narrativa. Ademais, o filme de gangster é definido como aquele em que o gangster é o protagonista e herói, isto é, o elemento dominante a quem a trama está subordinada e que define as demais personagens da história. Afirma-se que enquanto a função das personagens hollywoodianas ideologicamente positivas e negativas é sempre a de reafirmar os valores americanos dominantes, o gangster aparece como a única personagem que resiste a desempenhar tal papel, através de sua capacidade para empanar a linha ideológica que separa o bem do mal. Ao longo deste estudo, são analisadas as mudanças na representação do gangster, que se deram de modo que ele pudesse se adaptar e expressar transformações sociais e econômicas significativas que aconteceram nos Estados Unidos durante o século XX.

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ABSTRACT

THE GANGSTER IN FILM AND LITERATURE: A STUDY OF

A MODERN AMERICAN MONSTER

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2001

Supervising Professor: Anelise Reich Corseuil

The present work is a study of the gangster in American film and literature from his first appearance on screen in the early 1930s --in *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*-- through the 1990s, ending with the analysis of *Pulp Fiction*. He is analyzed as a modern mythic figure and in order to explain his unique mythological function a metaphor is applied to him, that of the monster, i.e., that figure created in all human cultures to embody all that is considered evil, or monstrous, and whose eventual destruction or expulsion stands for the conquering of evil. Accordingly, Hollywood output is approached as the privileged medium for the creation and diffusion of the American modern mythological universe. By the same token, each genre film is defined as a "myth narrative", or "myth artifact", a story which expresses a myth, and under such an approach, each film genre is described as the grouping of films which had the same myth as the organizing element of the narrative. In addition, the gangster film is defined as that which has the gangster as protagonist and hero, i.e., the dominant to whom the plot is subordinated and who defines the remaining characters in the story. It is claimed that while the function of both the ideologically positive and negative Hollywoodian characters is always that of reaffirming the American dominant values, the gangster stands alone as the only character who resists playing such a role by his ability to blur the ideological line separating good from evil. Along this study, the changes in the representation of the gangster are analyzed, which occurred so he would adapt and express significant social and economic transformations in the U.S. in the twentieth century.

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The Gangster in Film and Literature: A Study of a Modern American Monster

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The Gangster in Film and Literature: A Study of a Modern American Monster

Introduction

The gangster is so pervasive a character in the American culture that he evokes at once the fictional and the real world. Both the real and the fictional gangster share a number of important similarities: while the real-world gangster was the reference for the characterization of his fictional counterpart, the latter, in his turn, has influenced the "composition" of the former. As put by historian David Ruth, "[f]ascination with Capone produced the most vivid and widely disseminated portrait of the gangster in the twentieth century American Culture" (118). But even if "Al Capone lived in the real of flesh and blood, for most Americans he existed only as a cultural invention" (119), a situation reinforced by Capone's own attitude, as he "worked as hard as any movie star to create a favorable public image" (119).

Such a difficulty for the American public to differentiate real criminals from a fictional figure finds equivalence in the difficulty for film critics and cultural analysts in general to define the gangster in the fictional realm. Evil, perhaps the most obvious adjective for qualifying the gangster, has not passed unnoticed by those who have tried to analyze him as the following examples should illustrate. In *American Film Genres - Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film*, the film critic Stuart Kaminsky, for example, relates the gangster character to the wrongs in the American capitalist system. He sees a similarity between the gangster's style of making business and "our view of American business enterprise in general" (23), only to argue contradictorily in the next breath that the American way of making business "does not conform to this view" (23). Other critics, like John Hess in his "Godfather II: A Deal Coppola Couldn't Refuse," claim that the classic gangsters (those played by Paul Muni, Edward G. Robinson and James

Cagney) are depicted as "freaks", and believes that because they are freaks their final destruction is justified. Hess sustains that to present the gangsters as freaks consists in a move to "mask" the "direct connection between them and capitalism" (88), but he never takes the pain to explain how such a connection between the gangster and capitalism should be understood. Hess does not explain, for example, if the gangster should be associated with the dark vision Kaminsky claims Americans have of capitalism, or to the 'real' capitalism which, contradictorily, Kaminsky sustains that does not conform to such a dark view.

There is, however, another side of the gangster which has often called the attention of different critics, which is a more positive aspect of the character. What is usually seen as positive in the gangster figure is his readiness for action, his ability to be, as put by Robert Warshow, "graceful, moving like a dancer among the crowded dangers of the city" ("Movie Chronicle: the Westerner" 453), while pursuing, efficiently and untiringly, his personal success. Indeed, the gangster character is often depicted as that who exhibits the cunning and bravura necessary to keep alive the pursuit for the American dream in the context of an urban and industrial nation. Indeed, when Thomas Schatz states that the "gangster has little choice but to accommodate his primitive and civilized impulses to that [urban] environment" (*Hollywood Genres* 83), he is implicitly emphasizing how, in his progress, the gangster must face the same problem Americans in general had to face in the beginning of the twentieth century: the adaptation from a life style developed in accordance with a rural environment to a new one, brought by the irresistible industrialization and urbanization of the United States which came along with the twentieth century.

By the same token, in his book *Inventing the Public Enemy* David Ruth, suggests that Capone's mixing of "violence with acts of charity encouraged his audience to confront

the inseparability of good and evil" (139). Although, here, Ruth is making reference to a flesh and blood criminal, this guiding role coming from someone like Capone could only make sense in the context of America's recent urbanization and industrialization. In other words, in the transition from a rural to an urban nation, American society were faced with the necessity to reevaluate their basic organizing principles; in simple terms, they had to decide what should be considered evil and what should be seen as good.

But the reason why a figure like that of the gangster should be chosen by the American public as a reference for a new social code of good and evil does not seem to arise clearly by simply listing the positive and negative traits critics usually attribute to that personage. Thus, it is not seldom that one finds a critic's baffled admission of his/her failure to explain the fascination the gangster exerts over his audience. For example, in the preface of *Pump'Em Full of Lead*, Marilyn Yaquinto considers that perhaps the "gangster keeps drawing us to the movies because we see him as a nightmare vision of our own desires and ambitions run amok" (xiii). She does not seem willing, however, to take a step further and try to explain why one should be so much fascinated, generation after generation, to follow the depiction of one's own failure on screen.

This study will argue that given this figure's ability to concentrate so large a range of symbolism and to attract so great an interest by American audiences, a more fruitful approach to understand the significance of the gangster is to understand him as a mythic figure and Hollywood narrative films as the American modern mythological universe. By the same token, though a more comprehensive definition is offered in Chapter 1, it will be advanced here that for the present study myths are narratives arising from a society's history but which substitute "a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, 'icons,'

'keywords,' or historical clichés" (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 5) for the complexity of the original historical event.

Critics like Schatz, Slotkin and Warshow have already pointed towards that direction. As it will be discussed in the following chapters, they have all suggested a mythic function for the gangster, although they do not to define what would be the gangster's function as a myth, nor offer any definition of myth itself. In his essay "The Structural Influence," Schatz suggests that on top of being the product of a "commercial, highly conventionalized popular art form" (99), Hollywood genres should also be viewed as a "distinct manifestation of contemporary society's basic mythic impulse" (99). Warshow, in his turn, attributes a mythic dimension to the gangster film as he claims that rather than measuring "its emotional and aesthetic impact... in terms of the place of the gangster himself or the importance of the problem of crime in American life" ("The Immediate Experience" 130), the gangster should be understood as that character who "speaks for us, expressing that part of American psyche which rejects the qualities and demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself" (130); that is, for Warshow the gangster would stand for some anti-hero, a "tragic hero" as he put it, who symbolizes the underlying resistance against the dominant view Americans have of themselves, although he does not note how much the gangster does, simultaneously, stand for some of the most significant elements of the dominant self-image Americans hold. Finally, with his work on the American mythology, Slotkin is the one who indicates more directly the gangster's mythic dimension, since he approaches that character as one mythic element within the American mythology as a whole.

But even Slotkin's illuminating work on the American mythology from its origins in the seventeenth century through the last decades of the twentieth century, and which

discusses Hollywood films as myth narratives, fails to see the unique situation of the gangster within the modern American mythic universe. Even if there is, as he claims, a continuity between the "narrative and mythic structures of the gangster film" (*Gunfighter Nation* 260) and that of the Western, his conclusion that both the westerner and the gangster have the same mythic function results from his failure to perceive that while the latter follows the conventions for an ideologically positive hero, the gangster's function is just the opposite: to complicate the relation between the audience and the dominant ideology.

The main hypothesis of this research, however, is that the gangster has a unique situation in the modern American mythology, since he stands alone, amid all Hollywood characters, for a central conflict in American culture, which arises from the fact that the same values on which the American society is founded –individualism, competitiveness, violence and sexual repression—are also those values which threaten its very social stability. In other words, the gangster is the only Hollywoodian character who is capable of displaying at once the positive and the negative sides of the dominant cultural elements in American culture, thus complicating the audience's perception of their own social organization.[1]

What distinguishes the gangster from all other Hollywood characters is that while the latter function in the narrative to by-pass the conflict generated by an impulse toward the common good and the use of violence as a valid means to achieve personal progress and redemption, the gangster, in his turn, is the figure who combines those two conflicting

[1] This conflict originated in the attempt by the Puritans to organize the nascent American society according to the concept of the calling while having to face an environment at once seductive and threatening. In *The Puritan Origin of the American Self*, Sacvan Bercovitch defines the "twofold concept of the calling, [as] the inward call to redemption and the summons to a social vocation, imposed on man by God for the common good" (6). But in order to answer God's calling and find redemption the colonists had to face a Nature and a culture –the Indian's—strange and menacing. In the process, violence became a necessary tool in the search

impulses in just one character. As a consequence, if the other characters allow for the final reassertion of the dominant ideology at the end of each film, the gangster's presence works for the suspension of the references for good and evil, forcing the audience to face a conflict which cannot be solved. In that sense, the gangster is like the asymmetry in the body paintings Levi Strauss found on the Caduveo, an Amerindian people: the expression of an unsolvable cultural contradiction.[2]

Due to the gangster's unique role in the modern American mythology a metaphor was pursued that could make evident the specificity of his mythic function. The metaphor suggested in this study is that of the monster, that is, that figure created in all human cultures to embody all that is considered evil, or monstrous, and whose eventual destruction or expulsion stands for the conquering of evil. The paradoxical aspect of the monster, however, is that his destruction or expulsion can never be final and his inevitable resurrection or return has the effect of blurring the line separating good and evil, since he is part human and part alien.

So far a general contextualization for the investigation of the gangster has been sketched: the difficulty for the American public to distinguish clearly the fictional and the

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for redemption. To be more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 1, such a combination of violence and the desire for redemption was summarized by Slotkin in the phrase "regeneration through violence".

[2] After commenting on the complexity and the characteristic asymmetry in the body paintings of the Caduveo, the Brazilian representatives of the extinct Mbaia, Levi-Strauss describes their social organization as "divided into three castes, each dominated by etiquette. For the noble and to a certain point to the warriors, the essential problem was that of prestige. The descriptions show them paralyzed by the concern over keeping up the appearances... specially of not performing [socially] unequal marriages. Such a society was, then, threatened by segregation... each caste tended to turn upon itself... [and] the endogamy of the castes... would compromise the possibilities for marriages which met the concrete needs of the collective life" (204). "The effort for keeping faithful to those contradictory principles," Levi-Strauss explains, "causes divisions and subdivisions of the social group into allied and opposing sub-groups" (205). But failing to find a solution at the social level, such a contradiction "kept disturbing them, insidiously. And since they could not become consciously aware of the problem and experience it, they began to dream of it. Not in a direct form, though... but to a transposed and, in appearance, harmless way: in their art. If this reasoning is correct, one must interpret the complexity [of their art]... as the ghost of a society who looks for, with unsatisfied passion, the means for symbolically expressing the institutions they would have if their interests and their superstitions did not prevent them" (206). (My translation from Portuguese into English.)

real gangster; the corresponding difficulty by film critics, who find it difficult to move beyond the listing of the positive and negative traits of the gangster without ever explaining how and why such a contradictory combination results is such a resonant character; the historical situation which favored the appearance of such a character, that is, the transition to an urban and industrialized America; the proposition that Hollywood narrative films should be approached as the modern American universe; and the suggestion that the gangster plays a unique role in such a mythic realm. The following sections of this Introduction will advance how the major subjects and concepts included in this dissertation relate to each other.

I.1 Hollywood, Myth and Ideology

The thesis which is presented in this study, that Hollywood should be viewed as the factory of the modern American mythology, presents some implications: the first is the relation between myth and genre. Hollywood genre films are approached in this study as myth narratives; thus, in mythological terms, to belong to a certain genre means that a film functions as a narrative organized around some specific myths. For instance, family melodramas focus on the myths about the bourgeois family being the *ideal* family structure (which implies the championing of patriarchy, heterosexuality, monogamy, etc.). That does not mean that each genre will deal only with one specific group of myths, leaving all other American myths aside. On the contrary, all Hollywood genres are interconnected since they all must refer to the same large mythological universe pertaining American culture. In other words, although each genre is organized based on conventions which serve to emphasize certain myths, the presence of other myths is virtually unavoidable, considering that their source is the same mythological master narrative. Thus, because all Hollywood genres

resort to the same mythological universe they have always shared a certain degree of hybridism (as it will be advanced in the following section and explained in Chapter 1, this study does not pursue any precise definitions for Hollywood genres, but is concerned with investigating both the variations around generic patterns and the dialogue among the different Hollywood).

The second implication is the relation between myth and ideology. Myth is not ideology. Myth "expresses ideology" (Slotkin *GN* 6), and it tends to be conservative as it tends to express and reaffirm the dominant ideology. To speak of ideology, however, is to enter a very controversial theoretical arena (for instance, the view on ideology here sustained differs from that of Hegel and Marx, for whom ideology was a pejorative concept as they related it to false consciousness, although the latter would sometimes refer to it in a non-pejorative way, sometimes implying the possibility of ideology being true). Thus, in Chapter 1 the concept of ideology adopted in this research is discussed. The main points about ideology, presented more thoroughly in the ensuing Chapter, will be advanced here.

The claim that myth expresses and reaffirms the *dominant* ideology implies the existence of subaltern ideologies. In order to continue to be dominant, any given ideology must negotiate and incorporate its subaltern ones. It results that a dominant ideology is never identical with itself. In addition, each person in a given society understands the dominant ideology from his/her own perspective, a fact which attributes to ideology an inherent perspectivism. In other words, in this research ideology will be considered not as a monolith of values imposed by an elite, but, to use Thomas O. Beebee's definition, as the "magnetic force that simultaneously holds a society together by allowing it to communicate with itself in shorthand and pushes society apart by conflicting with people's realities" (*The*

Ideology of Genre 18). As a consequence, Beebee claims, it is "only in the deformations and contradictions of writing and thinking that we can recognize ideology" (18).

Finally, some explanation must be advanced on the relation between the gangster and myth and ideology. As a mythic character (all characters in Hollywood genre films/myth narratives are, by implication, mythic characters) the gangster expresses not so much a specific element of the dominant ideology as is the case of the other Hollywoodian characters, but rather a basic ideological contradiction (see footnote 1 about the conflict generated by the calling and the adverse conditions the Puritans found in the New Land).

I.2 Hollywood and Generic Purity

As it will be detailed in Chapter 1, one cannot investigate the gangster and the gangster film without dealing with the issue of film genres. This study, following the critical views foregrounded by Janet Staiger, Walter Metz and Thomas O. Beebee, suggests that more important than trying to find precise definitions for each Hollywood genre, it seems more profitable to examine how they relate to each other. Or even, to use Staiger's standpoint, to focus on "patterns" rather than on genres, and examine how a given genre film varies around the pattern which was the film's initial reference. In this sense, instead of a 'thing', genre is approached as a "set of handles," in Beebee's phrase, a tool which functions as a reference for the understanding of how a film genre can confirm or betray the audience's expectations, or the other way around, how the audience's expectations influenced the making of the film. By examining genre films with an eye for the variations from the conventional pattern, one can unveil its ideological elements, since those variations presuppose the introduction of elements from other genres. For example, when *Bonnie and Clyde* included elements of family melodrama in the pattern of the gangster

film, a number of ideological conflicts related to the conventional family structure arose; in contrast, during its classic period (1930s through the 1940s) the gangster film does not allow the gangster to have a conventional family, thus bypassing that issue.

Other arguments are offered in this research to support the claim against the generic purity of Hollywood narrative cinema. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson demonstrate why Hollywood films deserve to be considered classical. Their claim is that the "label 'classicism' serves well because it swiftly conveys distinct aesthetic qualities in the narratives presented by Hollywood films (elegance, unity, rule-governed craftsmanship) and historical functions (Hollywood's role as the world's mainstream film style)" (4). Accordingly, the adherence of Hollywood to classical norms assures, too, an interconnectedness among its genres and genre films, considering that if Hollywood films can all be inserted within a classical pattern that presents some major characteristics, such as those mentioned above, films belonging to different genres are also intertwined in the narrative patterns. From a more structuralist approach, Robin Wood lists, in "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," twelve components[3] which can be found in all Hollywood genres and which reveal the "values and assumptions so insistently embodied in and reinforced by the classical Hollywood cinema" (46-7). Thus, one can say that Hollywood genres are interrelated at the ideological level, too. In sum, Hollywood genre films share elements at the mythic, ideological and formal levels, and such a sharing assures a contamination among genres which prevents them from being pure or discrete.

[3] The twelve components in Wood's list are: 1) Capitalism; 2) the work ethic; 3) Marriage; 4) a. Nature as agrarianism; b. Nature as wilderness; 5) Progress, technology; 6) Success/wealth; 7) the Rosebud syndrome; 8) America as the land where everyone is/can be happy; 9) the Ideal Male; 10) the Ideal Female; 11) the settled husband/father; and 12) the erotic woman.

Albeit this study rejects the existence of Hollywood genres as pure or discrete instances, giving preference to the idea of patterns as an investigative tool, that does not mean that there is no place for the idea of genres. Genre is a useful tool when one wants to make reference to a group of films in general terms, without the need for being more specific. Thus, the term 'genre' is not abandoned in this study, specially because it cannot be replaced by the idea of patterns. In Chapter 2, for example, the pattern established by the first three films of the gangster genre (*The Public Enemy, Little Caesar, Scarface*) is described and those films which follow that pattern are deemed 'gangster films'. But this study does not employ the phrases 'gangster film' and 'gangster genre' in the same way. On the contrary, there is no reason not to consider the so called gangster film variations (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) as belonging with the gangster genre, too. In that sense, as a loose way of grouping films, the concept of genre can include, in the case of the gangster, films which share a number of similarities without following the same pattern. In fact, the examination of the contrasts between patterns of films included in the same genre can be an illuminating approach as it allows one to investigate how the different genres relate to each other, since any variation from a pattern implies the borrowing of elements from another genre.

I.3 Hollywood as Supergenre

As mentioned above, when justifying the use of the term "classicism" to characterize Hollywood films, Bordwell points "Hollywood's role as the world's mainstream film style... [as] one of its historical functions" (4). In Chapter 1 it will be argued that more than influencing the film style adopted worldwide, Hollywood classic production has influenced other artistic genres as well. Our starting point is Bakhtin's approach to the novel, which

Michael Holquist believes can be "best conceived either as a supergenre, whose power consists in its ability to engulf and ingest all other genres... together with other stylized but nonliterary forms of language... or not a genre in any strict, traditional sense at all" (in Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* xxix).

After demonstrating the interconnection among Hollywood genres and genre films at the technical, ideological and mythological levels, this study suggests that classic Hollywood production could be seen as a genre in its own right, since it shares the same mode of production, supports the same ideological system and develops a large mythological narrative in which each genre, in spite of differing approaches (comic, tragic, dramatic, etc.) and differing emphasis on this or that myth (the myth of success, the myth of marriage as legalized heterosexual monogamy, etc.), deals with the same minor myths which constitute that modern American mythology.

When Hollywood production is seen as a genre itself, it is possible to make a parallel between those traits which for Bakhtin characterizes the novel, and Hollywood's characteristic elements. Among those traits Bakhtin points as defining the novel and for which this research found equivalence are the "novel's special relationship with extra-literary genres, with the genres of everyday life and with ideological genres" (*DI* 33). In this study it is argued that Hollywood shares another trait indicated by Bakhtin about the novel: that it is a becoming genre. In addition, it will be claimed that if Bakhtin considers the novel a privileged field for hybridization, the same can be said about Hollywood. Finally, it is discussed how the elements found by Bakhtin to consider the novel the dominant genre (with the consequent "novelization" of the other artistic genres) can also be applied to Hollywood's status, thus suggesting the existence of a process of 'cinematization' of other genres like the novel itself. However, one must note that this

study does little more than point at the possibility of approaching Hollywood output by means of Bakhtin's approach to the novel. It is an issue for further research whose initial steps are only indicated here.

I.4 A New Metaphor for the Gangster

The establishment of the gangster as a unique mythic figure in the modern American mythology asked for a metaphor which could better explain this proposed status. The metaphor of the monster has proven, along this study, to be the most fruitful for the discussion of the function of the gangster in the Hollywoodian mythological realm. The monster, here, is to be understood as that mythic figure created by all human societies in order to personify all evil. As the embodiment of all evil, such a mythic figure is meant to support the belief that good and evil can be clearly defined and made distinct from one another. Consequently, the destruction of the monster stands for the symbolic attempt to expel evil from society, in the hope that only the good, the pure, the sacred will remain. But for the monster, its mother society is the only reference. Thus, whenever expelled, it will try to return, whenever destroyed, its destruction is only temporary since its disappearance brings within the promise of resurrection. Only two alternatives would allow the final disappearance of the monster. One can happen only at an ideal plane, that is, if a certain society reaches a situation in which all evil is really conquered. The second alternative occurs when the society at issue goes through some historical transformation radical enough to make the existing monster lose his ability to represent evil. But then, the creation of a new monster, one which can symbolize the new evils brought by the new historical situation, must be created to replace the old one. Accordingly, the gangster was created in

order to stand for the evil arising from an important change in the United States: the transition from a rural to a predominantly urban and industrialized society.

However, while the monster is not expelled or destroyed, it exhibits a confounding capacity. The mere fact of its presence amid the 'good' society has the effect of blurring the limits between right and wrong, good and evil. An example is Frankenstein's creature, whose existence puts in doubt who is more humane and who is more monstrous: those men and women who pursue him, or the monster himself, capable of showing solidarity and the desire for companionship. Monsters want to be like their creators, even if such a goal is beyond their possibilities. If Frankenstein's monster longed for a 'normal' life, with a bride and kids, so is the gangster's desire to become a 'normal' American. As any monster, in his clumsiness to mimic the accepted social behavior, he will ignore the limits for what is acceptable and what is not. If personal success is valued in the American culture, he will pursue it till he is stopped. If Americans soon in their history adopted violence as a valid tool for progress and redemption, he will employ violence with gusto. Because he does evil by means of what is considered positive and praiseworthy methods, the gangster leaves the audience with the only option of electing the bad guy for the hero, while wishing his death as a condition for the 'normal' world to take place again.

As it will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the gangster figure appears together with the feeling that the possibility for geographical expansion within the United States was being exhausted. That meant that the violent impulse, more socially acceptable when it could still be directed towards the conquering of land yet unexplored (as one sees in the Western), had now to be expressed within the tight urban environment. The representation of such a contrast, in Hollywood, can be exemplified by the scene in which

the westerner rides to the sunset in the end of the film, while the gangster, stuck in the city, dies in the gutter.

I.5 Competing Dominants

If there has always occurred a contamination among Hollywood genres, one useful concept to differentiate –but not to offer any final definition of—one genre film from another is that of the dominant. As Bordwell explains, the "Russian Formalist critics suggested that in any text or tradition, a certain component –the *dominant*—subordinate others" (12). Thus, as a working definition, this study will consider a gangster film that which has the gangster as the main protagonist. When such a situation occurs the gangster functions as the film's dominant, thus subordinating all other elements in the story to his own characteristics. Because the gangster stands for the monster, as the dominant he disorganizes the rule which determines that the representatives of good and evil should be clearly distinguished, even if only at the end of the story. In contrast with other genre films in which there is always a 'positive' protagonist and hero, by presenting a monster as the main lead the gangster film can never present a positive character dramatically dense enough to face the gangster, leaving all those characters who function to reaffirm the dominant ideology inconsistent, incomplete or incoherent, as it is demonstrated in Chapter 2. The most evident sign of the effect produced by the gangster protagonist and hero is the impossibility for the gangster film to have the otherwise inevitable happy ending associated with the classical Hollywood narrative.

In addition to the usefulness of the concept of the dominant in the discussion on the structuring of the gangster film, it will prove fruitful in the analysis of the intergeneric dialogue among Hollywood classic films. Here, what is examined is what happens when

the gangster competes with other dominants due to his appearance in films from another genre, like the film noir or the so called gangster film variations, in which one does find some ideologically affirmative character capable of prevailing over the gangster at the end.

I.6 The Founding Gangsters

Chapter 3 begins by discussing some of the so called pre-gangster films, produced during the silent era, including *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1914) by Maurice Tourneur, D. W. Griffith's *The Narrow Road* (1912) and, also by Griffith, *Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912). There it is demonstrated how those silent movies already mixed elements which would eventually be considered as belonging to distinct genres. The main finding in the analysis of those silent films, however, is that for not having the gangster as the protagonist and hero such films could not display neither the conventions nor the overall story structure which would only appear with the advent of sound films.

The films which established the conventions for the gangster genre are discussed next, in the same chapter. They comprise the classic gangster trilogy, and are represented by Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* (1930), William Wellman's *The Public Enemy* (1931), and Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1932). In that section of Chapter 3, the analysis of those films, rather than seeking some final definition for the gangster genre, is more concerned with discussing the conventions they established with a twofold objective: to offer a reference for a diachronic investigation of the gangster and the gangster film, and to guide the discussion on the contrasts which appear when the gangster is included in other genre films.

By the same token, it demonstrates that the metaphor of the gangster as monster —and its consequences on Hollywood's mythological universe—can be applied to the founding trilogy of the gangster genre with illuminating perceptions. It is in that chapter that the

characterization of the gangster as monster is demonstrated to be valid, as well as the fact that when the gangster is the protagonist and hero all the other characters fail to carry out the ideological function they fulfill when appearing in films from other Hollywood genres.

I.7 The Gangster Evolves

Based on the findings in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 examines the presence of the gangster in films considered variations of the gangster genre (Wyler's *Dead End*), in the film *noir* (*The Big Sleep*, both novel and film)[4], as well as in those two films generally considered the last attempt to produce a classic gangster film: Huston's *Key Largo* (1948) and Walsh's *White Heat* (1949).

Thus, while Chapter 3 analyzes silent films which preceded the classic gangster films, Chapter 4 is concerned with what happens to both the gangster protagonist and the gangster film after the classic period of the genre. So in the subsequent section of that chapter a discussion is developed on the works produced after the classic period and which were responsible for some significant changes in the gangster film: Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather*, which is analyzed together with its adaptation to the screen by Francis Ford Coppola in 1972. *The Godfather*'s two sequels are discussed with a special interest in the consequences for the gangster caused by the changes originated in *Bonnie and Clyde* and in the first film of *The Godfather* trilogy, like the creation of a 'normal' family for the gangster hero.

The last section of that chapter focuses on Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, selected as an example of a postmodern gangster film. One relevant issue discussed in the

[4] It is worth noting that the script for *The Big Sleep* was written by William Faulkner, together with Jules Furthman and Leigh Brackett.

final sections of Chapter 4 is that of generic hybridism in Hollywood output. There it is argued that in both the classic and the modern gangster films intergeneric borrowings functioned to polarize good and evil as a strategy to undermine the gangster's ideologically confounding capacity. For example, the inclusion of elements from the family melodrama in *The Public Enemy* is an attempt to present the gangster protagonist's brother as an ideologically positive hero (representing good), which would make the gangster stand solely for evil, thus annulling his capacity to suspend the ideological limits which determine good and evil, right and wrong, moral and immoral. In other words, in all those gangster films elements and characters are borrowed from other genres with the function of offering an ideologically positive alternative to the gangster's confounding capacity. Nonetheless, although in varying degrees, the effect of the presence of the gangster is never completely undermined.

In contrast, in a postmodern film as *Pulp Fiction* the presence of elements borrowed from other genres is so overwhelming that the gangster's ability to spread ideological confusion is seriously weakened, if not erased, since so intense a mixing of generic elements functions to complicate the relation between the film and the real world. That occurs because while in the gangster films produced before the postmodern stage (as in all myth narratives) there is a direct relation between the mythology on the screen and reality,[5] in Tarantino's film all myths refer not to the audience's real world in a direct mode, but filtered through the Hollywoodian mythological universe itself. A consequence is that *Pulp Fiction* deals with a fictional world as its original inspiring source, a world in which, as

[5] Notwithstanding the necessary erasure of the historical complexity which results from the condensation of history inherent to the process of the creation of myths, all myths must relate to a society's reality, or it would not make any sense at all.

Robin Wood observes, "America [is presented] as the land where everyone actually is/can be happy;" ("Ideology, Genre, Auteur" 47), that is, the myths in such a postmodern film make reference not to the ideological conflicts in real America, but to the 'reality' in a fictional world characterized by not having any ideological conflicts which cannot be solved with the conventional happy ending.

Now that some of the major subjects and concepts presented in this research were advanced with some detail, a brief summary of the themes discussed in each chapter will be made.

In Chapter 1, a discussion on myth and its relations to classic Hollywood narrative films is carried out. Since a claim is made that both myths and Hollywood output have an ideological role, the concept of ideology is also discussed in that chapter, and the definition adopted in this study is presented. In addition, the issue of Hollywood genres is discussed, considering that it is not possible to analyze the gangster film without advancing some definition for film genres. Finally, a suggestion is made that the Hollywoodian narrative films can be approached as a supergenre, according to some of the considerations Mikhail Bakhtin makes on the issue of genre.

In Chapter 2 the social and historical setting in which the gangster figure appears is analyzed, with a focus on the need for the American mythology to adapt in order to include the new cultural elements brought up by the transformation of the United States into a predominantly urban and industrialized country in which capitalism is the major organizing force. Next, a detailed discussion is carried out on the metaphor of the monster as a valid and fruitful tool to understand the gangster's mythic function. Taking profit from the conclusions reached in Chapter 1 about Hollywood genres it is suggested that to work with patterns instead of clear cut definitions for genres can offer richer interpretive possibilities.

This chapter ends with an analysis of the consequences for the structuring of the gangster film which arise when the gangster is the protagonist in the film.

Chapter 3 is concerned with determining the conventions which became paradigmatic for the gangster film. It begins with the analysis of some of the so called pre-gangster films, illustrated by silent era productions as Maurice Tourneur's *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1914) and *The Narrow Road* (1912) and *Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), both by D.W. Griffith. Next, a detailed discussion is made on the three films that are generally considered to have established the gangster film conventions, namely Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* (1930), William Wellman's *The Public Enemy* (1931), and Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1932).

Finally, Chapter 4 begins by examining what occurs when the gangster visits other genres, as the film *noir* and gangster-film variations as the rural gangster or 'bandit' films. Next, John Huston's *Key Largo* (1948) and Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949) are approached as the two films which mark the end of the genre's classic form. Appearing on screen almost twenty years later, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) is discussed as the film which signals the beginning of a new stage in which some significant changes are included in the genre, especially the appearance of the gangster family and the pursuit of redemption. The gangster family (which will be contrasted to the conventional Hollywoodian family and discussed together with the Family, i.e., the crime organization) and the pursuit of redemption, foreshadowed by Penn's film is definitely encompassed by the gangster story in Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather* and in the trilogy adapted from that same novel by Puzo himself and by director Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather, The Godfather II* and *III*); those are the works examined after *Bonnie and Clyde*. Finally, Puzo's novel *The Last Don* and Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) are approached as

examples of postmodern gangster stories, with a special attention to the fate of the gangster in a time when all master narratives experience a crisis and the function of the high degree of generic hybridization found in those works, which results in postmodern "texts" in which the very function of the American modern mythology, as a master narrative, is weakened, perhaps to the point in which myths have been supplanted by meta-myths, incapable of expressing and referring to real anxieties, but only able to deal with social problems and conflicts that exist in a fictional universe alone.

Chapter 1

The Gangster and the American Mythological Universe

> "'Every show you watch, more and more you pick up somebody,' enthused one alleged capo. 'What characters!'"[6]

1.1 America and Myth in the Twentieth Century

It is not uncommon to find the idea of myth associated with Hollywood even if critics vary in their view on the relation between films and myths, as well as on what they understand by the concept of myth. For anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, "the object of myth is to offer a logical model to solve a contradiction (an unfeasible task when the contradiction is real)" (*Antropologia Estrutural* 254)[7] ("... o objeto do mito é fornecer um modêlo lógico para resolver uma contradição (tarefa irrealizável quando a contradição é real)). At the same time, Lévi-Strauss claims that "a myth always concerns events in the past... But the intrinsic value attributed to the myth comes from the fact that those events, which supposedly originate in a moment in time, also form a permanent structure, which relates simultaneously to the past, to the present and to the future" (*Antropologia Estrutural* 241) ("um mito diz respeito, sempre, a acontecimentos passados... Mas o valor intrínseco atribuído ao mito provém de que esses acontecimentos, que decorrem supostamente em um momento do tempo, formam também uma estrutura permanente... [que] se relaciona simultaneamente ao passado, ao presente e ao futuro").

Will Wright, another structuralist, approaches Hollywood's Western as a myth in his *Sixguns & Society, a Structural Study of the Western.* However, he argues against the claim

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[6] From surveillance tapes of reputed members of New Jersey's DeCavalcante crime family. Poniewozik, James. "They Pull You Back In – David Chase's Sopranos returns for another hit job." Time, Jan., 2000.

[7] The translation into English of the Brazilian edition of Lévi-Strauss's work is mine.

made both by anthropologist Levi-Strauss and literary critics like Northrop Frye and Leslie Fiedler that "modern societies do not have myths in the sense of popular stories that serve to locate and interpret social experience" since they "have history and science to explain origins and nature and literature to express the archetypes of the collective unconscious" (185). While he does agree with those authors that "both tribal myths and our myths, including the Western, are about the past," and that while modern societies have history to explain it, "tribal societies do not" (187), he reasons that history's function of explaining the past is not enough to prevent modern societies from making their myths as popular stories to help interpret social experience. Thus, Wright follows Levi-Strauss's claim that in the case of tribal societies, because "life is cyclical" the only past they know is the mythic one, but points that "[f]or us, the past is history; it is necessarily different from the present" (187). So, according to Wright,

> for this very reason, history is not enough: it can explain the present in terms of the past, but it cannot provide an indication of how to act in the present based on the past, since by definition the past is categorically different from the present. Myths however, can use the setting of the past to create and resolve the conflicts of the present. (187)

As Wright explains, there is a connection between tribal myths and modern stories, since they both are narratives. The first implication he sees is that since "[s]tories appear in every human society" and are universally "entertaining" (192) myths are popular because they are narratives. But another implication, perhaps more important than that, is that presented in a narrative form, myths have to follow the narrative sequence: "a beginning and ending description of one situation with a middle statement that explains a change in

that situation" (Wright 186). Within such a structure, "characters are created and the conflicts are resolved in a story" (186). When such a form is applied to a myth and the "characters represent social types or principles in a structure of oppositions, then the narrative structure offers a model of social action by presenting identifiable social types and showing how they interact" (186). By ignoring their "narrative dimension," he claims, most commentators on myth would tend to construe them as "revealing universal archetypes, biological traumas, or mental structures rather than as conceptual models for everyday life" (186).

Thus, according to Wright "modern America does have myths in the sense of popular stories" (like the Western); its function being "similar to that of myths in other societies" (185), that is, to "reconcile deep social conflicts through models of action" (191). To function as myth the Western creates a "model of the present [with]... images [of] the conceptual conflicts of modern America" while locating it in a "historical setting" (190), or more precisely a mythic past (the Old West). Hence, "[i]f the myth of the past is to provide a model for action in the present, then relevant aspects of the present must take on the meanings of that myth" (190). But a myth must not necessarily resort to a setting in the past, like in the Western. Indeed, what makes a narrative function as myth is its ability to reproduce some original myth, no matter how the present story was formally transformed and adapted through time. In other words, even a very updated narrative as in the case of the gangster films whose plot develops in the present can retell some old myth that originated in that society's historical past.

At this point Richard Slotkin's definition of "myth-artifact" should help refine Wright's notion of myth. In his *Regeneration Through Violence* Slotkin defines the "legends and stories we commonly call myths" as "artifacts of the myth" (8). And such

stories would "retain their mythic powers only so long as they can continue to evoke in the minds of succeeding generations a vision analogous in its compelling power to that of the original mythopoeic perception" (*RV* 8). Hence, though the gangster stories develop in a setting contemporaneous to that of the audience, they will still keep a link to the past as long as they are able to evoke some original myth. As Slotkin observes "[m]yth can only have an historical foundation, although its historical sources may be concealed" (*Fatal Environment* 20). Accordingly, the difference between the setting in the Western and that in the gangster film lies only in that the "historical source" is apparently less concealed in the former than in the latter, both being idealized settings depicting some myth formed in the American past. In fact, as it will be further discussed in the next chapter, there is a "continuity of theme and structure that links Westerns and gangster films...primarily [as] the result of their common function as vehicles for a continuously developing mythology" (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 265).

In his discussion of the Western films –hereupon, and including Hollywood narrative films in general, understood as "myth-artifacts" or myth narratives-- Wright claims that possibly the "most characteristic feature of myths, as opposed to other stories, is that their images are structured in binary oppositions" (194). Against Levi-Strauss's view, who claims that the binary oppositions in myths reflect the structure of the mind, Wright offers a more reasonable explanation, i.e., that such "oppositions create the symbolic difference necessary for binary structure of understanding together with the maximum resources for conceptual abstraction" (194). Put differently, the simplicity of the "binary structure enables the images of myths to signify general and complex concepts (nature/culture, good/bad) and make them socially available" (194). Indeed, such a simplicity, together with its familiar and entertaining narrative structure allows myth to

interpellate the audience by implicitly "demand[ing] that we make of the story a guide to perception and behavior [while]... insist[ing] that we acknowledge and affirm the social and political doctrines its terms imply" (Slotkin *FE* 19). Such an effect is what Roland Barthes called the "imperative, buttonholing character [of myth]: stemming out from an historical concept (a Latin class, a threatened Empire), it is *I* whom it has come to seek" (*Mythologies* 124). Not by chance such a strategy is the same one finds in Hollywood genre films.

In truth, it is by deconstructing the binary structure in Hollywood films, as well as Wright's proposed binary relation between Hollywood and the American society, that one can grasp the ideology buried in the mythology that they reinforce. Even if one acknowledges the usefulness of searching for binary oppositions as a tool in the analysis of myths-artifacts in order to unveil their hidden ideology, the structural method still proves limited when faced with the complexity of myth narratives like Hollywood genre films and their relation to a complex modern society. The use of a good/bad opposition to understand the gangster figure, for instance, may end in a similar simplification of his significance, inviting one to see him as a bad capitalist, a view too limited as it will be more thoroughly discussed in the following Chapter. More than that, Wright fails to notice the peculiar situation of a film as myth-artifact. After "exhibit[ing] the structure of a myth in order to discover its social meaning" (17), he then opposes some specific element in the plot of a group of films to some correspondent "model of social action of the same type" (28) in an unproblematic and direct relationship; such an approach elects some specific social behavior in capitalist America as the origin of a myth, which, in its turn, will be expressed in the plot structure in the Western. The problem is that by simply pursuing "social meaning" as reflected onto films, the method ignores the reciprocal contamination of the one by the other.

Wright justifies his choice for studying Western films —and only those in the "industry list of top money makers of the year" (13)-- because "it is through the movies that the myth has become part of the cultural language by which America understands itself" (12). To avoid the contention that "Westerns are not myths but commercial products made by professionals for the sake of profit" (13), he argues that while there were Westerns with great stars and massive publicity who were commercial failures, there were also smaller productions that achieved enormous commercial success. The first problem here is the circularity of that kind of explanation. Thus: certain films are popular because they convey some "popular social myth" (13), whereas only because they are popular they must transmit some social myth. By taking Western films popularity for granted he fails to discuss why films, and not novels, for instance, have acquired so great an audience in America in our century. One possible answer is that even when both novels and films reinforce the same myths, it is cinema, as a medium and as an industry, that more readily reproduces the rise and development of the industrial mode of production characteristic of the twentieth-century America. In contrast with the solitary reading of a book, going to the movies brings the audience to a close contact with a new technology and forces one to walk or drive through the crowded streets of the urban environment. Going to the movies brings the audience to a close contact with the very environment that engenders the social conflicts and anxieties that have been experienced by twentieth-century Americans.[8]

Hence, Wright's structural approach assumes the preexistence of an economic and social structure that is translated into the binary oppositions in the Western which, in its

[8] For more information about narrative differences between the novel and film, as well as other contrasting effects produced by film and the literary text, see Seymour Chatman's "What Novels Can Do that Films Can't (and Vice Versa)", and Gerald Gillespie's "Camparative Literature of the 1990s in the USA". (For complete reference, see Bibliography.)

turn, resolves the conflicts generated within that social and economic system in an enjoyable form. But what makes going to the movies enjoyable is not just their narrative form or the simplicity of the binary oppositions; it is also the film industry's ability to offer one of the most engaging myths of capitalism: that of the endless technological advancement. When he asserts that in spite of the "large and faithful audience" of Western novels it has been through films that the "myth has become part of the cultural language by which America understands itself" (12), Wright explains the privileged situation of films by the ability of the "cinematic imagery" to "truly express" the "central significance of the land" (12). Though implicitly acknowledging the power of that medium's technology, the author does not pursue the issue any further.

Indeed, the importance of the relation between the technological aspect of the movies and the popularity of that medium as myth-artifact should not be ignored. In that sense a parallel can be traced between the evolution of the twentieth-century American mythology and what occurred in the beginning of the elaboration of the American mythology in the seventeenth century. In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Slotkin claims that the "fact that the colonial experience began in the age of the printing press gave... a [specific] pattern of evolution for the American myth... that is somewhat different from the pattern... for primitive cultures" (15-6). The printing press allowed the colonists to develop the blooming American mythology borrowing from a "literary tradition and a medium of communication that had been highly structured and conventionalized through centuries of European practice" (16). Thus, if the use of print gave way to the "writer to draw on a vast vocabulary of literary conventions in making his case for America" (15), thus bringing traits of European culture into the burgeoning American mythology, so the film technology has influenced the evolution of American mythology in the context of the twentieth

century. As a technological novelty film would not only reproduce the American dream of constant technological progress, but also become itself a symbol for that same myth. The first Westerns and gangster films, for example, would not only reinforce and adapt myths comprising the American dream, as the "success myth" (22) in the land of opportunity, but they would also reinforce such a myth as they are products of an industry capable of creating personal fortunes and of absorbing immigrants into the production line.

Thus, Wright's view of the Western as a myth-artifact that expresses and resolves those contradictions originating in the economic system ignores its condition as a commodity of an industry that is itself part of that same economic system. One implication of film as industry and as commodity is the need for it to reproduce and adapt the American mythology in defense of the capitalist system while bearing within the same contradictions and limitations of capitalism itself. In that respect, Hollywood's peculiar situation becomes clearer when one compares it to, say, the car industry. When Wright focuses on the Western as a narrative of a myth, he forgets that in a Model T Ford it is also possible to find the American bourgeoisie's myth of the inevitability of continual "technical, scientific progress" and "unlimited transformation of nature" (Barthes 141-2), in the same way a Hollywood film does; that is, in addition to being a narrative, a story, the film must also be analyzed as a commodity in the capitalist system. As the product of a capitalist industry, Hollywood output must obey the law of profit. The films it produces must be marketable: entertaining, technically new, and convincing as myth-artifacts. The problem lies in the need to be convincing: on the one hand each film has to be realistic enough in the sense that if the audience finds it too far from their own reality, it will run the risk of losing interest and becoming a commercial failure; at the same time, it must reproduce and reinforce the bourgeois ideology, with all the contradictions it embodies. In the first condition, the film

has to include in the story the problems, conflicts and anxieties generated by the American bourgeois society. In the second, it must avoid making the connection between those social problems and the need for some radical social and economic transformation. The result becomes evident in the strategy of offering the resolution of those same conflicts and anxieties not as a call for social change but, on the contrary, as a way to reaffirm the existing status quo. It is a move which is only possible in an imaginary, or mythical, world, in spite of the tension it generates for bringing up deep social anxieties while only postponing, interminably, any alternative or solution.[9]

At this point, as the function of myth in Hollywood genre films is being discussed, it is necessary to refine once more a working definition of myth by differentiating it from ideology. As a provisional definition, in this study ideology is to be understood as the "basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society's way of interpreting its place in the cosmos and the meaning of its history" (Slotkin *GN* 5). In addition, the term ideology, here, will refer to the "dominant conceptual categories that inform the society's words and practices, abstracted by analysis as a set of propositions, formulas, or rules" (Slotkin *GN* 5). On the other hand, and still following Slotkin, myths are

> stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness –with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain. Over time, through frequent

[9] In that sense, the Hollywoodian "happy ending" functions to assure the audience that all conflicts which appeared on the screen are solvable within the dominant ideology; it functions to mitigate the anxiety eventually generated by the conflicts presented. As it will be explained in Chapter 2, the presence of the gangster, especially as the protagonist, eliminates the possibility for a happy ending, thus making it more difficult to alleviate the audience's anxieties.

> retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, "icons," "keywords," or historical clichés. (*GN* 5)

From the definitions above some issues must be raised. First, and here Wright and Slotkin agree, it is through the narrative form that myth "expresses ideology, rather than [in] discursive or argumentative, structure" (*GN* 6). As myth manifests the dominant worldview --in the present case the bourgeois values and beliefs—it tends to be conservative. Secondly, one must understand that what Slotkin calls "myth/ideological system" (*GN* 6) changes through time in order to encompass significant changes in the history of a given society, since it is the "problems that arise in the course of historical experience" (*GN* 6) that myths come to explain. But in spite of the fact that myth emanates from history myth also effaces history. In Barthes' words, "[m]yth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates" (*Mythologies* 151). The effacement of history happens as a certain historical event undergoes a process of condensation, till all its complexity is reduced to a simplified set of symbols that become easily available to anyone. Those symbols are condensed because while they seem to allude to a complex historical situation, what they do, in truth, is to simplify history to a small number of resonant ideas. As history is reduced, or "evaporated," myth is then made eternal: free enterprise, for instance, is taken as something that has always existed: "since the beginning of time, it has been made for the bourgeois man" (*Mythologies* 151), as if free enterprise and individualism were elements of man's nature. Another way to put it is to say that myth "transforms history into nature" (*Mythologies* 129), since what was once part of history –

therefore a narrative of events caused by man—is presented as coming from nowhere, always already existent and surely eternal: myths are givens, like Nature.

But another aspect of myth mentioned above is its need to adapt to significant changes in the course of history. Those can be great natural catastrophes, diseases, defeat in war, or modifications in the mode of production. Such events, Slotkin observes, "cannot be fully explained or controlled by invoking the received wisdom embodied in myth" (*GN* 6). In such situations there is a disruption in the "identification of ideological principles with the narratives of myth" (*GN* 6), thus causing a revision of its ideological content. However, as the "historical experience of crisis" is processed, the "revised ideology acquires its own mythology, typically blending formulas with new ideas or concerns" (*GN* 6). As we have seen, in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century America shifted from a rural to a predominantly urban and industrial country; so its mythology had to adapt. As the initial organization of the film industry coincided with, and was a significant part of that social and economic transformation, the nascent Hollywood proved to be the privileged medium to perform the necessary mythological changes in the narratives it reproduced. In the twentieth century, Hollywood has been a significant medium for the "mythologization of American history [in a process that] contains within its structure both a representation of historical reality and an ideological apology or polemic that distorts reality in the service of particular interests" (Slotkin *FE* 34).

1.2 Hollywood's Generic Instability and America's Mythic World

In the beginning of this century, as American society was taking its first steps as an industrial and urban nation, so was Hollywood, as part of the process, carrying out its first attempts to become an industry. While Henry Ford was developing his assembly-line

method of production in order to offer an accessible automobile to the larger public, filmmakers in America were moving forward in creating, as put by Barry Keith Grant, an "industrial model based on mass production" (*"Introduction"* xv) that would make people come and pay to watch their films. As a new technology, film had to borrow themes and conventions from other more traditional arts as drama and literature, from which the studios would extract formulas aiming at a commercial success at the box office. In such an efficient system "genre movies... [were] the Model T's or the Colt revolvers with interchangeable parts" (Grant xv).

In the context described above Hollywood genre films had to obey a certain 'reasoning' of industrial capitalism; as a mass produced commodity, they shared two characteristics: first, each step in their production was carried out by different workers or team of workers, who lacked the ability to view the film/commodity as a whole; second, they had always to be something that is simultaneously the same and different, as happened with the car industry whose products are all the same –cars--, but different – sports cars, luxury models, economic and so on. In this sense, the studios all invested in the production of the same thing: genre films. But in order to conquer a slice in the marketplace, they had to offer something that would make their product different from those by the other studios. So

> MGM was a studio of stars,... Paramount was a studio of writers and directors,... Warner Brothers... was more dependent on good talk... and specialized in gangster films, biographies, and musicals,... Twentieth Century-Fox excelled in historical and adventure films,... R.K.O. [invested in] smooth musicals... [and] the suave comedies... and both the adventure and comic films..., [while] Universal excelled in the horror films..., [and the] two 'minor'

studios, Republic and Monogram, specialized in cheap Westerns and cheap hoodlum pictures respectively" (Gerald Mast *A Short History of the Movies* 285).

Hence the appearance of distinct genres was not just a consequence of borrowing from different and more traditional arts and media. Though a somewhat obvious and inevitable expedient, the borrowing from literature, drama, opera and even from the daily press (as in the case of the gangster genre) was also an attempt from the producers to search for specific preferences from the audience, i.e., the public as consumers. It was both an artistic as well as a commercial strategy. It was also the result from the experimentation with the different technical possibilities offered by the new medium (use of camera, lighting, mise-en-scene, sound track, editing, etc.) motivated by filmmakers aesthetic impulse (but also impelled by the ideological imperative to always innovate technologically), as well as by the audience's response to its outcome on screen. Be it due to a commercial move, aesthetic impulse or technical experimentation, what each studio was doing while concentrating in the development of one or two genres was to try to offer a narrative that would be simultaneously profitable, entertaining and capable of dealing with the social conflicts and anxieties faced by the audience in their everyday life. Any attempt to make an "artistic" or a "revolutionary" film would be limited by the constraints of having, on the one hand, to raise the questions that trouble the audience (how many would go to the movies to see, again and again, the philosophical conflicts of the Japanese?)[10] and, on the other, to avoid offering alternatives that would call for the supplantation of the capitalist system from which Hollywood industry nourished itself.

But the very commercial, artistic and technical impulses that lead to the development of different film genres were also those that assured a connection among all Hollywood genres. In other words, the same impetus that called for the creation of distinct genres also assured at least some level of hybridity among them from the start, since all Hollywood genres had to face the same contradiction between presenting to the audience/consumers a narrative on their lives while avoiding any radical solution outside of the capitalist system. Besides, Hollywood filmmakers had to work with basically the same technology, while their artistic impulses had also to conform to both the commercial and technical conditions just described. Concurrently, as each genre film would reinforce American capitalist ideology in the form of myth, one can also think of the connection among the different genres as that which combines those distinct myths into one larger mythology. If one accepts the idea of Hollywood as the factory of a mythic world, then it is possible to look at the different genres it produces as parts of one interconnected universe, with an inevitable overlapping of their borders. Indeed, after decades of critical attempts to define each Hollywood genre separately, such a goal seems as far from being reached as before. On the contrary, a number of critics have offered new explanations for the reasons why Hollywood films were never really generically pure.

In fact, more than one critic has claimed the hybridism between genres to be inescapable. In "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History" critic Janet Staiger, for one, claims that "Hollywood films have never been 'pure'" (6). Her essay will deserve a somewhat long discussion in the following pages due to her ability to foreground the notion that instead of having pure genres, the Hollywood classical narrative

[10] Provided it is not a story which develops in Japan, but which is really about American cultural anxieties as in *Sayonara* (1957), in which an Army major assigned to a Japanese airbase during the Korean conflict faces

have always intermixed elements from supposedly distinct genres. Another important point for this research is her suggestion that it would be more fruitful to discuss Hollywood output in terms of "patterns" than in terms of any idea of films generically pure.

Staiger begins her essay by calling attention to two closely related theses in recent film scholarship. One thesis would favor the idea that "films produced in Hollywood in the past forty years or so are persistently instances of genre mixing" (5). Among the supporters of such a claim she mentions Jim Collins and John Cawelti, the latter having located the beginning of that process of generic transformation in the "early 1970's" (5). The second thesis indicated by Staiger, and supported by critics like Rick Altman, Tom Gunning, and Adam Knee, argues that "genre studies has been handicapped by its failure to sort out just exactly what critics are doing when they think about 'genre'" (5). Staiger understands that the increase in the attention given to genre studies together with the problems found to define the concept of "genre" can be explained by the fact that "[a]ll that has been pure has been sincere attempts to find order among variety" (6), since there never were generically pure Hollywood films.

Nonetheless, Staiger acknowledges that if "Hollywood films have never been pure instances of genres... [that doesn't mean] that Hollywood films do not evince patterns" (6). The usefulness of patterns, she argues, lies, for instance, in the "freshness" a text acquires through variations on the preestablished pattern as well as in the possibility for "commentary about issues raised within the standard pattern" (6). In addition, the "tactics of grouping films by genre" (6), in spite of the eclecticism of such a move, are helpful for the critics to "elucidate what producers and consumers of films do" (6), i.e., it allows them to analyze "films against a hypothesized pattern based on viewing other films" (6). On the

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racial problems when he decides to marry a Japanese dancer.

other hand, however, Staiger notes that while there are good reasons for looking for order in Hollywood production, one must avoid what she terms "historicist fallacy," which occurs when a "subjective order visible in the present is mapped onto the past and then assumed to be the order visible in the past" (6). Put differently, Staiger claims that historicist fallacy occurs when, for instance, one observes that the current pattern of Hollywood films is defined by a high level of genre mixing, and then assumes that in the past both the audience and the filmmakers viewed films as pure generic instances. In a second theoretical move, then, the "past pattern" is taken as a model of purity against a present that is considered the "transformation, deterioration, or hybridization of a pure essence and origin" (6). On the contrary, she claims that "films produced during that period [Fordian] were perceived by the producers and audiences to potentially belong to several categories" (15). Thus, an "historicist fallacy" applied to film genre analysis would consist in the observation that since the 1970s Hollywood genre films are "typified by a recombinant force" (6), and then, based on such an observation, conclude that in the preceding period Hollywood genres were pure and should be both taken as a reference and analyzed as such.

Accordingly, Staiger claims that to consider films produced by "New Hollywood" as characterized by a "recombinant force" of elements from previously clear cut generic films is to "misunderstand seriously 'Old Hollywood'" (6). Such critical misunderstanding, she claims, would come from "our own critical apparatus that has led us to believe erroneously that Hollywood films and genres were once pure" (6). In addition, she replaces the phrase "Old Hollywood" for "Fordian Hollywood", and "Post-Fordian Hollywood" for "New Hollywood" (6). She rejects the term "new" for representing Hollywood after the World War II as she prefers to consider "Hollywood's industrial structure, modes of

production, signifying practices, and modes of reception as an intensification of monopoly capitalism" (17). According to this relabeling, "Fordian Hollywood" would refer to the period from "1917 to around 1960," while the period after 1960 would be referred to as "post-Fordian Hollywood," a move that Staiger believes helps "emphasize the strong linkages to the past as well as the industry's accommodations to late monopoly capitalism" (18).

In any case, in order to sustain her assertion on the theoretical and historical falsity of the "genre purity thesis" Staiger analyses two scholarly theoretical trends in film genre studies. The first one, followed by critics who call attention to the "eclectic practices and [their] failures... to delineate clear, coherent, and consistent categories for films" (8-9), is the attempt to justify the inability to find and describe well defined genres not as a result of the nonexistence of generically pure Hollywood films, but on the "assumption that human behavior and labeling can never be controlled so that critics would know a 'pure' genre of genre film" (9). In other words, that such theoretical failure would depend on the impossibility of authors, distributors, audiences and critics to "agree on how to categorize films" (9). To that argument she opposes by reasoning that if critics could have found a "suitable method for describing genres" (7) they would have achieved such a goal by now.

The second theoretical stand, which she contrasts with the one specified above, is that of the poststructuralist approach. As an example of the poststructuralist view on genre, Staiger selects Thomas O. Beebee's book *The Ideology of Genre*.[11] Staiger points to Beebee's argument that "since a 'single' genre is only recognizable as difference, as a

[11] Staiger does not mention Beebee's concept of generic "use-value", which could cast some light on the reasons why critics, producers and audience can never agree on the definition of each Hollywood genre. Beebee's application of the concept of use-value to the analysis of genres will deserve a more extensive discussion.

foregrounding against the background of its neighboring genres, every work involves more than one genre, even if only implicitly" (Beebee *The Ideology of Genre* 28). The latter position being that "every text inherently displays what it is not" (9). So if both kinds of strategies –the one dealing with "eclectic practices and failures" and the poststructuralist approach-- offer theoretical reasons for rejecting the idea that "Fordian Hollywood ever produced pure examples of genre films" (10), then why should a number of critics see genre hybridity as a new trait in post-Fordian Hollywood films?

For Staiger, the answer can be found in that contemporary critics like Cawelti and Collins analyze post-Fordian films against generic descriptions made by film critics (Robert Warshow and James Agee in the 1940s, and, following them in the academy, the New Critics, structuralists and semioticians) "observing a limited set of films produced mostly between 1930 and 1960" (10). Furthermore, she claims, "those founding generic descriptions display the definitional fallacies" (10) already pointed out. Additionally, those generic descriptions following critical procedures as New Criticism, structuralism and semiotics are the outcome of methods that "*by their very methodology* offer one genre category by which to label and analyze the text" (10). Thus, she concludes, if one looks at post-Fordian films in contrast with "fixed" generic definitions by the critical methods from the 1960s that "sought coherence and purity" (11), then it does not come as a surprise that more recent Hollywood films "appear to be suddenly transforming in the 1970s or hybriding in the 1990s" (11). In sum, Staiger claims that the categorization of pure and hybrid genres is, thus, the result of the critics' approach, rather than elements that were in the texts themselves.

Aside from the theoretical justifications Staiger also presents a historical rationale for rejecting the generic "purity thesis." She notes that a number of both economic and

ideological forces played a role in the "normative construction of the conventions of the classical film produced by Fordian Hollywood," (11) from which two would stand out: the need by the filmmakers to "standardize and differentiate products," and "market movies to many individuals" (11). So in order to fulfill these two commercial and industrial needs (standardization plus differentiation together with a good box office) Fordian Hollywood was interested in producing films that would appeal to a "variety of audiences" (11) as a means to secure smaller investments and commercial success. To make films with a potential to attract different kinds of audiences, one strategy employed by Fordian Hollywood was to make films "typified by usually having two plots –one often being a heterosexual romance" (11), while the second plot could be that of an investigation, the pursuit of a monster, the competition between two men in search for a treasure, etc. Already noted by other film critics as Annette Kuhn, who observes that in *The Big Sleep*, for instance, [o]verlaid on an investigatory narrative... is the trajectory of a heterosexual romance" (84), that "dual-plot line," Staiger argues, functions as an "appeal to multiple subgroups of taste" (11). In terms of differentiating their product, the combination of two plot lines in one film allowed for a number of "[c]ombinations and arrangements of formulas" (11).

She bases her reasoning on two points. The first is that to compare Hollywood production during the two periods in terms of purity versus hybridity would leave the alternative of claiming that the films from both periods are hybrids, a claim that Staiger does not pursue, since she is working with the idea of "patterns" and "pattern-mixing." Although she never offers a clearer definition of what she calls patterns, it seems to be implied that in contrast with the idea of genre, a pattern would be a certain standardized way of combining elements in order to achieve a determinate effect. For example, a

detective film will exhibit the usual pattern of the search for the truth, but is free to include elements of the melodrama or the gangster film. The usefulness of the concept of patterns for this research lies in the possibility it offers of attributing to the gangster film a specific pattern[12] while avoiding the theoretical trap of having to deal with it as a pure genre.

Her second contention is that to apply the thesis of hybridity to American genre films would be to lower the "potential value that the theory of hybridity has for cultural scholars" (15). Staiger notes that the concept of hybridity came originally from the botanical and zoological sciences and was used to describe the "cross-breeding of separate species" (15). She points that Mikhail Bakhtin applied such a concept to literature to define the "meeting of two different 'styles' or 'languages' derived from different cultures" (15). Understood as such, Staiger's main argument against the use of the concept of hybridity to characterize the "mixing of genres in Post-Fordian Hollywood cinema" (16) is that one cannot allege that such a mixing among genres (during both Fordian and Post-Fordian periods) is an encounter between two truly distinct languages or cultures, but an encounter of different patterns of the same language (the language here being Hollywood narrative cinema), and, one must add, of the same culture, i.e., the culture of mythic America, a culture which follows the precepts of the dominant ideology in the United States. Instead, the "breeding occurring is not cross-cultural, but perhaps... even a *case of inbreeding*" (17). She prefers to apply the concept of hybridity to the films made by American "minority or subordinated groups" (17) who produce generic mixing as a strategy to resist the dominant, a kind of film she calls "internal hybrid" (17). Hybridity, she acknowledges, would refer to

[12] This study considers a gangster film that which has the gangster as its protagonist and hero. As it will be detailed in Chapter 3, when that occurs all gangster films obey the same pattern.

those films produced outside the U.S. which participate in the exchange of generic elements "throughout the world economy of signs" (17).

The suggestion that all Hollywood genres are in fact part of the same language and that the interchange of elements among them should be seen as a kind of "inbreeding" opens interesting theoretical possibilities. For example, one could think of the different genres, or "patterns," as groupings of myth-narratives where each group would organize itself around a dominant myth or a dominant mythic figure, while the combination of all those groups of films would form a whole modern mythology for the American audience. Such an approach would not disregard that together with that mythical connection among all genres and among each genre film (as mythic narratives from a larger mythic universe) there are the commercial and technical/technological elements that link them all as well.

1.3 Ideological Implications of a Hollywoodian Mythology

Thomas Schatz, for one, is a critic who sees the theoretical potential of examining Hollywood films as myth-artifacts. In his essay "The Structural Influence," for instance, he considers the issue of the genre film from a "dual perspective" (99). On the one hand, the genre film is

> a product of a commercial, highly conventionalized popular art form and subject to certain demands imposed by both the audience and the cinematic system itself. On the other hand, the genre film represents a distinct manifestation of contemporary society's basic mythic impulse, its desire to confront elemental conflicts inherent in modern culture while

> at the same time participating in the projection of an idealized collective self-image. (99)

The consequences of attributing the role of myth to genre films is further emphasized by Schatz as he notes that when one looks at Hollywood production as "functioning as a form of contemporary mythic ritual, we establish a basis for examining genres not only as individual, isolated forms, but also as related systems that exhibit fundamentally similar characteristics" (97).

One should note, in addition, that while suggesting an interconnectedness among American genre films as myth narratives within a larger mythological universe, Schatz is also attributing a function to Hollywood genre films, i.e., that of allowing a "contemporary mythic ritual." Although from a different perspective other critics explore the idea of generic function, as well. Walter Metz, for one, follows that line of critical approach as he uses the concept of "genre function," a phrase, he notes, coined by James Naremore[13] after adapting the ideas Foucault developed in his "post-structuralist critique of authorship" (39). According to Metz the "genre function replaces concerns with the actual generic make-up of a text and instead concentrates on the effect the perception of the genre has on the interpretation of the text" (39). Beebee's delineation of the concept is not much different. As he explains he began to see "genre as a set of 'handles' on texts, and to realize that a text's genre is its *use-value*" (14). He brings up the definition offered by Paul Hernadi's of the "pragmatic genre theory... [as] the differentiation of genres by the varying effects they have on the readers' minds" (14). Beebee explains that in contrast his own approach "could almost be described as the reverse of this" (14). In other words, for him genre would be the

[13] While Schatz seems to look at the intrinsic relations established by t he text, Naremore looks at the audiences and how they can affect the text and its readings.

effect of the readers' expectations over the text, though one should never forget that those same expectations are always already molded by the texts of the genre in a dialectical relation.

Another important point raised by Beebee refers to the relation between use-value and ideology. Indeed, the claim previously made that myth artifacts express ideology asks, at this point, for a definition of such a concept as adopted in this study, especially when one thinks of the innumerous different and even contrasting definitions that concept has received from those authors concerned with the issue. In the following pages arguments will be presented to explain the use of the term ideology not as a monolith of values which can be imposed by an elite over the public in general, but as something that changes according to the perspective of each member of society, a force which must always redefine itself as it must constantly negotiate with (and incorporate) all subaltern ideologies. Thus, although dominant, the ideology expressed by Hollywood output is not a set of values controlled by the American film industry to be unproblematically imposed upon the viewers.

In his book, Beebee gives examples of the utilization of the concept of use-value by critics as Janice Radway, Will Wright and Jürgen Habermas while noting that such a concept "has been virtually absent from genre theory per se" (14). He adds that since the use-value those critics find "at the heart of the romance, the western, and philosophy are social rather than private (reading as a hidden, imaginary form of social action), genre theory in their works inevitably becomes a form of ideology" (14-5). Here it must be remembered that, as it was asserted above, Hollywood films have to face the contradictory task of reinforcing bourgeois ideology (since Hollywood depends on the American capitalist system to survive) while forced to present and deal with the conflicts and

anxieties generated by that same ideological system (considering that its output must deal with the American reality as a precondition for attracting the interest of the American audience). In addition, ideology was provisionally defined as the "basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society's way of interpreting its place in the cosmos and the meaning of its history" (Slotkin *GN* 5), a definition closely related to that offered by Althusser. At the same time, when referred to without any additional comment, ideology is to be understood in this study as the "dominant conceptual categories that inform the society's words and practices, abstracted by analysis as a set of propositions, formulas, or rules" (Slotkin *GN* 5).

But one must not forget that to speak of a dominant ideology means implicitly to acknowledge the existence of other competing ideologies, since the former must be defined against the latter, and vice-versa. It should be stressed, as does Ross Chambers in "Irony and the Canon," that an "ideology is not a doctrine to be accepted or not but a discursive proposition that positions subjects in relations of power," power being a "differential phenomenon, existing only through being unevenly distributed" (qtd in Beebee 15). For Chambers, "[i]deology necessarily produces these subjects relationally" (qtd in Beebee 15). As a consequence of "these subjects being differently positioned regarding the system that produces them," they see it in "differing perspectives" (qtd in Beebee 15). That is, "in order to function, an ideology cannot be identical with itself, a phenomenon he [Chambers] calls ideological split" (Beebee 15). It is worth reproducing here Terry Eagleton's similar, though more overtly political, view of the same concept of ideology as non-identical to itself:

> A dominant ideology has continually to negotiate with the ideologies of its subordinates, and this essential open-

> endedness will prevent it from achieving any kind of pure self-identity.... A successful ruling ideology... must engage significantly with genuine wants, needs, and desires; but this is also its Achilles heel, forcing it to recognize an 'other' to itself and inscribing this otherness as a potentially disruptive force within its own forms. (qt. in Beebee 15)

In addition, according to Louis Althusser (from whose work, Beebee notes, Chambers derives his view on ideology), since ideology expresses "*the way* they [men] live the relation between them and their conditions of existence," one must infer that there occurs "both a real relation and an '*imaginary,' lived* relation" (qtd in Beebee 15-6).[14] As a Marxist, Althusser still deems ideology as "false" since for him in ideology the "real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (qtd in Beebee 16).

As noted by Beebee, though Althusser "rejects the notion of ideology as a belief system open to choice... he nevertheless still identifies ideology as false" (16), an assumption that becomes clear in the contrast he makes between the word "imaginary" and the phrase "describing a reality". Still, according to Beebee instead of the contrast of imagination and reality one finds in Althusser's conception of ideology, "contemporary

[14] The original passage from Althusser, on which Beebee supports his reasoning: "Ideology is a matter of the *lived* relation between men and their world... In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but *the way* they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an '*imaginary', lived* relation. Ideology... is the expression of the relation between men and their 'world,' that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence. In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses will* (conservative, conformist or revolutionary) a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (*For Marx*. (trans.) Bem Brewster. New York: Random House, 1970; 233-4).

cultural critics tend to contrast the imaginary order against the symbolic and to identify ideology with the eccentric subject created by their correlation –reality being what is unavailable to either realm[7] (16). Here, the "imaginary operates on a metaphysics of wholeness, on the illusory identification of the subject with a unified body, whereas the symbolic implies culture's creation of subjects as products of its discursive systems" (16). At this point, though, some clarification is asked on the idea of "discursive systems", a phrase that sends us back to Foucault.

First of all, one must bear in mind that since Foucault, as noted by David Hawkes, takes "Nietzsche's aphorism that there is no subject, no 'doer,' that 'the deed is everything,' as his methodological basis" (161), the very notion of ideology finds no room in the French critic's work.. If Althusser, as already mentioned, still retains the notion of ideology as false consciousness, from his pupil's (Foucault) standpoint "terms such as 'true,' 'false,' or even 'consciousness'" (Hawkes 161) make no sense if used in absolute terms. According to Hawkes, what Foucault proposes, instead, is the idea of "discourses" that have originated "truth effects." But the fact that those discourses "have been produced by human beings is enough [for Foucault]... to deprive them of any objectively veridical character" (161). By the same token, the "institutions and practices –the family, the school, the church—which function as to produce the sense that we are individual subjects with independent consciousness" (Hawkes 161) are also ephemeral and in no way can serve as absolute or real referents. In contrast, Hawkes notes, under the Foucauldian perspective "[w]hat are real are the sets of rules, the patterns of classification, which allow us to make sense of the chaotic wealth of empirical data which daily rushes in on us from all sides" (161). Put

differently, what is real is this "ultimate 'order,' the 'conditions of possibility' (xxii)[15] for knowledge at any given historical moment, which allows us to make sense of the world" (Hawkes 161). Thus, if such a preexisting order is what orders human societies, then there is no room for a manmade ideology in Foucault's theories.

However, such an "order," as something always already present and in the absence of a self-governing or self-conscious subject, appears as a "transcendent, determining entity, albeit one which is never fully present in the world" (Hawkes 162). Nonetheless, Foucault does believe that there is no such thing as history as a "narrative acted out by a coherent subject" (Hawkes 162). For him the notion that history is "continuous and [that] human consciousness [is] the original subject of all historical development and all action" (qt. in Hawkes 162) is only understandable as a result of our attempt "to impose upon it the ostensibly unified, apparently conscious form of our own subjectivity" (Hawkes 162). Such notion is only possible, Hawkes explains, "when it is artificially removed from the objective context which generates it" (162). For Foucault such a theoretical procedure is unacceptable.

Foucault, as Hawkes explains, offers the concept of discursive systems as an alternative to the "Hegelian concept of an ideal sphere whose developing relationship with the material dimension guides and moulds the course of history" (163). By attacking Hegel's "Spirit," Hawkes notes, Foucault is not claiming that in the "absence of a coherent narrative of history, events are purely random and indeterminate. On the contrary, his [Foucault's] notion of discourse is rigidly determinist" (163). As an illustration of such determinist trait, Hawkes quotes Foucault's assertion that "'we must show why it

[15] Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith. Pantheon Books: New York, 1970.

[discourse] *could not be other than it was* (emphasis mine), in what respect it is exclusive of any other, how it assumes... a place that no other could occupy'" (qt. in Hawkes 163).

So after this very brief clarification about Foucault's notion of "discursive systems" and its relation to the concept of ideology we can now resume from the point where it was stated that instead of the contrast of imagination and reality one finds in Althusser's conception of ideology, there is a contemporary trend in cultural criticism which contrasts the imaginary order against the symbolic as a means to identify ideology with the "eccentric subject created by their correlation" (Beebee 16). Under this new perspective the "imaginary" is related to the "illusory identification of the subject with a unified body, whereas the symbolic implies culture's creation of subjects as products of its discursive systems" (Beebee 16). Following that theoretical rationale, "Althusser's 'lived relation' of ideology has become a discursive relation. According to John Frow, it has become "the production and the conditions of production of categories and entities within the field of discourse" (qt. in Beebee 16-7), which would include the "category of the subject on which ideology is supposed to act" (Beebee 17).

According to Beebee, Chambers –who, as we saw earlier, sustains that no ideology is identical with itself-- "adds two additional nuances to that notion of ideology" (17) as a discursive relation. First, Beebee points out that according to the Foucauldian view of power "ideology, which creates power by repositioning subjects, must then necessarily appear differently to those different subjects" (17). That means that ideology, which in Marx was false consciousness, becomes in Beebee's words a "controlled perspectivism" (17). Put differently, ideology will vary "according to the perspective of those who participate in it" (17), though not randomly, since as we saw in Foucault there are those limits established by that order which dominates each historical moment. Secondly, Beebee

notes, Chambers names "this perspectivist element of a totalizing system 'noise'" (17). Beebee then explains that the concept of noise, "adapted from communication theory by social and cultural theorists, tells us that categories and entities can only be developed against a background of non-entities and non-categories" (17). In other words, "systems... can only function by means of the non-systemic they necessarily produce... [so that] the non-systemic is simultaneously inside and outside the system" (17).

Next, Beebee tells us, Chambers "applies this concept of 'noise' directly to sites of literary conflict such as canonicity" (17). Thus:

> As the mediation that produces power, then, the system of ideology necessarily produces 'noise,' a degree of play without which it would not be a system and consequently could not function to produce power. Canonicity is the site of such noise, a place of play within the system. (qt. in Beebee 17)

With such a concept of ideology as a system non-identical with itself and its consequent "perspectivism" together with Chambers's concept of "noise", Beebee proceeds with his own reasoning by pointing that both canonicity and genre are related since the "act of canonizing is one of the potential use-values associated with certain genres" (17). In addition, he contends that "aside from canonicity, whose institutional power is quite obvious, genre is also a site of such noise, the cusp between different use-values of texts and between discursive entity and non-entity" (17). Beebee then concludes that "not only are genre systems ideological, but their cusps provide a most advantageous place from which to observe the workings of ideology in literature" (17).

However, Beebee does not fail to notice that if the notion of ideology derived from the ideas of Chambers and Frow "solves old problems... [it also] creates new ones" (18). On the one hand such a notion does propose a new solution for the problem of "literature's relation to ideology" (18): "literature is almost never simply an embodiment of ideology (the 'system' in Chambers's description), ... [since] it is also equally its negation (the 'noise' in that system)" (18). Indeed, this notion of ideology as a system allows one to claim that "literature can be considered fully ideological [i.e., inescapably ideological], because ideology is never fully identical with itself anyway" (18). On the other hand, Beebee ponders that it becomes quite difficult to continue discussing ideology when it is not taken anymore as a "set of beliefs to be accepted or denied" (18). In this new situation in which one can no longer describe ideology as the "summary of a number of ideas... [nor as] something that can be represented or paraphrased" (18), a different approach is asked. Hence, as something "noticeable and perhaps existent only in its interaction with the material world (which includes thought)" (18) Beebee posits that ideology

> is the magnetic force that simultaneously holds a society together by allowing it to communicate with itself in shorthand and pushes society apart by conflicting with people's realities. It is only in the deformations and contradictions of writing and thinking that we can recognize ideology; genre is one of those observable deformations, a pattern in the iron filing of cultural products that reveals the force of ideology. (18)

In relation to genre, one thing that makes it ideological, Beebee claims, is "our practice of speaking of it as a 'thing' rather than as the expression of a relationship between

user and text, a practice similar to that identified by Marx as 'commodity fetishism'" (18). According to Slavoj Zizek commodity fetishism occurs when "it appears as if the concrete content of a commodity (its use-value) is an expression of its abstract universality (its exchange-value)" (qt. in Beebee 18-9). As an illustration, one can think of the car, whose use-value is to be a means of transportation, but which becomes a fetish when its value is ascertained based on the social status it can give to its owner. Likewise, Beebee observes, "[s]chemes identifying different genres with different universal values have been erected in most historical periods" (19). He points, for instance, the treatment dispensed to painting during the "French neoclassical period... (genre painting was ranked above portraiture, which was ranked above still-life) and literature (tragedy ranks above satire, as Boileau points out)" (19). In conclusion, Beebee states that as a "form of ideology, genre is also never fully identical with itself, nor are texts fully identical with their genres" (19). Consequently, "if genre is a form of ideology, the struggle against or the deviations from genre are ideological struggles" (19). By now it should be easier to understand the already mentioned claim by Beebee that the "ideological nature of genre explains not only its necessity but also its instability" (15). By the same token, Hollywood genres can also be said to be unstable, an instability that is also potentially revealing of their ideological content. And the same is valid for genre films, particularly if one takes myth as their "use-value" (in Beebee's terms) or as their "function" (as put by Thomas Schatz and Walter Metz).

1.4 A Bakhtinian Look on Hollywood

If Thomas Beebee searches within a text from a certain genre for passages which supposedly belong to another genre (for example, the legal terms of a will in a novel or a

novelistic style underlying an anthropological text), in order to find their "use-value" (i.e., the effect of the readers' expectations over the text, expectations which are always already molded by the texts of the genre in a dialectical relation) and unveil buried ideological meanings (both of the text and of the "intrusive" passages),[17] Walter Metz will also look for intertextual and intergeneric interplay as a method for ideological disclosures. In "Toward a Post-structural Influence in Film Genre Study: Intertextuality and *The Shining*", Metz examines the "political differences between seeing *The Shining* as a horror film and seeing it as a melodrama" (44). Underlying his analytical move is the reasoning that instead of concentrating on the attempt of "organizing an individual film's narrative and aesthetic components" (44), it would prove more fruitful to use the "post-structural concept of intertextuality" (44). And here Metz is referring to two complementary post-structural strategies. The first, intertextuality, is based on the assumption that one should give precedence to the "relation between a text and other texts and discourses... over the relationship between a text and its author, or between a text and some stable reality which it merely serves to reinforce" (44). The second, and a consequence of the first move, is to probe a text according to its function. Applied to cinema, that implies in reading a film according to different generic functions, as well as examining how the overlapping borders of different genres unveil what they have in common: "Seeing *The Shining* in dialectical

[17] In Chapter 2 it will be demonstrated how the 'intrusion' in a film of elements from another genre has, inherently, an ideological function. For example, the intrusion of elements from melodrama as an attempt to weaken the status of the gangster as the protagonist and hero. The examination of the intrusive elements from melodrama in the gangster film can unveil the attempt to weaken the resistance to the dominant ideology (for which the gangster stands) by means of the inclusion of ideologically affirmative characters (the good guy, the redemptive woman, etc.).

relationship to the genre films which its readers activate exposes a system of similarities and differences which enable a comparative political reading of the film" (W. Metz 44).[18]

Consonant with those critics who see genre as the locus of ideological struggle this study will examine how ideology operates in Hollywood genres –with a special emphasis on the generic interplay between the gangster genre and some of the other American film genres. Close attention will be given to the ideological implications both of the presence of the gangster as protagonist and hero in his own genre and of the ideological tension generated by his appearance in other genres as well. But as put above, the ideological elements appearing in Hollywood genre films will be discussed within the context of myth-artifacts --narratives that reinforce the dominant ideology in American society through a process of historical condensation in which a reality full of conflict and anxiety is presented as natural and coherent. In that sense, it still remains to be better discussed the implications for the definition of genre that come when Hollywood production is seen as myth, an issue whose discussion will follow now.

Some of the consequences of taking Hollywood production as a process, as a developing mass mythology for American society in the twentieth century are, first, that in general genre films tend to be conservative while they work to reinforce the dominant ideology (a tendency of the myth function, according to Slotkin). Secondly, as minor myths within the larger Hollywoodian mythology all film genres have their generic borders weakened, since there is necessarily a borrowing of mythic elements among all genres. Thirdly, as noted before in Schatz's comment, when one speaks of genre films as myth-

[18] According to Metz, the "reading of *The Shining* as working in the melodramatic mode centers around the way the film develops a critique of the American class structure" (51), while if "taken as a contemporary horror film, the gender political [and racial] implications of *The Shining* emerge along quite different lines" (53).

artifacts one is implicitly referring to their function. Finally, as parts of a developing mythology, Hollywood genres might be seen as parts of a supergenre in a similar perspective to that of Bakhtin in respect to the novel. All these consequences shall be more thoroughly discussed in this final section of this Chapter.

As noted above, and resorting to Slotkin, rather than the argumentative or discursive structure it is the narrative structure in the myth that better expresses ideology. The fact that myths have a narrative structure (initial equilibrium—crisis—new equilibrium) is important for the conservative character of myth as it suggests the possibility of an ordered world among chaos. The comfort it offers comes from the feeling it gives one that there is order in life, contrary to the everyday perception that real events are arbitrary and often violent. The price for such a comfort is the effacement and domestication of the real conflicts and contradictions produced by unsolvable crises within the ideological system. Thus, the myth functions to domesticate ideological conflicts. Hollywood genre films, in their turn, follow a similar structuring. Their narrative form tells the audience that in spite of the downfalls faced by the hero/heroine all will inevitably progress toward a happy ending. Thus, in genre films the initial equilibrium appears as 'life as it is,' with its buried crises that come forward only to be resolved so a final and better equilibrium is eventually reached. This final status is better than the one in the beginning of the story because it is, supposedly, 'life as it is but now without any buried crises to worry about.' Another way to put it is to say that Hollywood genre films tell a story in which the conflicts and anxieties generated by American capitalist ideology are progressively solved until a happy and balanced life is reached without the need to change the system itself.

Indeed, in "Ideology, Genre, Auteur" critic Robin Wood makes a tentative list of the "values and assumptions so insistently embodied in and reinforced by the classical

Hollywood cinema" (46). From the twelve items in the "drastic[ally] simplifi[ed]" (46) list he presents the eighth item, which is reproduced bellow, corresponds to the effect of the progressive structure of American genre films just mentioned:

> America as the land where everyone actually is/can be happy; hence the land where all problems are solvable within the existing system (which may need a bit of reform here and there but no *radical* change. Subversive systems are assimilated wherever possible to serve the dominant ideology. Andrew Britton, in a characteristically brilliant article on Hitchcok's SPELLBOUND, argues that there even Freudian psychoanalysis becomes an instrument of ideological repression. Above all, this assumption gives us that most striking and persistent of all classical Hollywood phenomena, the Happy Ending: often a mere 'emergency exit' (Sirk's phrase) for the spectator, a barely plausible pretense that the problems the film has raised are now resolved. (47)

In that passage one finds some of the issues already raised on myth and ideology. For instance, the statement that the dominant ideology assimilates "subversive systems" in Hollywood films reminds one of the interplay between the dominant ideological system and its subaltern ones that prevents the former from being identical with itself. As myth narratives which manifest the dominant worldview --in the present case the bourgeois values and beliefs— genre films must include those "subversive systems" that will create the ideological tension always present in those same films. To put it in Wood's own words,

what strikes one "about this list is that it presents an ideology that far from being monolithic, is *inherently* riddled with hopeless contradictions and unresolved tensions" (47). As for the claim that in American genre films "everyone actually is/can be happy" in America, it is no more than the repetition of the old myth of the New World as the place for a new Golden Age; a myth that dates from the seventeenth century and which was renewed by the turn of this century with its wave of immigrants looking for the land of opportunity.

Accordingly, other components in Wood's list can also be related to American myths. The first one he lists is Capitalism proper, as the "right of ownership, private enterprise, personal initiative; the setting of the land" (47). That would correspond to the basic myth underlying all others in the sense that it is the capitalist system that originated and still nourishes the Hollywood system. The fourth component is twofold: "Nature as agrarianism; the virgin land as Garden of Eden" (47), and "Nature as the wilderness, the indians, on whose subjugation civilization is built" (47). Both views of Nature spring from the Myth of the Frontier, what Slotkin calls in *The Fatal Environment* "arguably the longest-lived of American myths, with origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture" (15). Slotkin claims that the

> ideological underpinnings [of the Myth of the Frontier] are those same 'laws' of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of Social Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' as a rationale for social order, and of 'Manifest Destiny' that have been the building blocks of our dominant historiographical tradition and political ideology. (*FE* 15)

At the root of the Frontier Myth one finds the unresolved contradiction faced by the colonists of Nature as Eden and Nature as chaos. The former view was part of the hopes of

the European colonists when leaving the Metropolis towards America, while the latter image included the "Puritans' sexual anxieties, reflected in their feeling that the Indians were lewd and sexually 'unclean'." (Slotkin *RTV* 76).

In Wood's list --"Marriage (legalized heterosexual monogamy) and family" (47)-- can be also related to another myth expressing a historical situation. In the same way they had to conquer and destroy Nature in order to expand the frontiers of their new Eden the colonists tended to demonize the uncivilized sexual habits and family relations of the Indians. If for the Indians, based on their own sexual myths, "sexual freedom for the unmarried was an assumed right" (Slotkin *RTV* 47), the attitude of the Puritans "toward the way in which myths express man's passional nature" (*RTV* 47) was very different. For the latter,

> [s]exual expression was synonymous with the sin of lust, save where such expression was placed under patriarchal authority in marriage and where the passional element was repressed in favor of more reasoned and social behaviors. (*RTV* 47)

So for the Puritans the myths about "man's passional nature" favored an institution of marriage that served to assure the transmission of their religious and moral values to the next generations, but also functioned to justify their belief on the right to property and its transmission to the following generations. The "economic philosophy of the Puritans," Slotkin explains, "was intensely bound up with the concept of private property, absolutely possessed by its owner" (*RTV* 43). Such relation to the land was in sharp contrast with the view of the Indians, for whom "[t]ribal lands were tribal property" (*RTV* 43). Elaborated as myths those beliefs help to support Wood's claim that the patriarchal monogamic family in

Hollywood narrative films both validates and reinforces the capitalist system (the first component in his list) as well as the "work ethic: the notion that 'honest toil' is in itself and for itself morally admirable" (47), the second item in the list.

The other items in Wood's list of ideological values and assumptions, which will be discussed in more detail along the next chapters, include "[p]rogress, technology, the city" (fifth) (47), which finds its translation in the already mentioned bourgeois myth of constant technological improvement; "[s]uccess/wealth" (47) (sixth), which Wood considers a "value of which Hollywood ideology is also deeply ashamed, so that, while hundreds of films play on its allure, very few can allow themselves openly to extol it" (47); the "Rosebud syndrome" (seventh) (47) that says that "[m]oney isn't everything; money corrupts; the poor are happier" (47); the "Ideal Male" and the "Ideal Female" (items 9 and 10) (47); and the "settled husband/father" and the "erotic woman" (11 and 12) (47). Wood believes that in such a list of "ideological contradictions" one can find the roots for the "development of the [Hollywood] genres" (47). Indeed, he claims that one of the main "obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre has been the tendency to treat the genres as discrete" (47). An alternative, he prompts, could be an "ideological approach [that] might suggest why they can't be [seen as discrete genres]: at best, they represent different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tension" (47).

In accordance with Wood's proposition that the same ideological tensions pervade all Hollywood genres, one can say that the myths that express and reinforce the ideological elements in the capitalist system pervade, too, all genres. Wood notes that in the "classical Hollywood cinema motifs cross repeatedly from genre to genre" (47). He offers some examples: the "home/wandering opposition that Peter Wollen rightly sees as central to Ford is not central *only* to Ford or even to the Western; it structures a remarkably large number

of American films covering all genres" (47). Another example, the "explicit comparison of women to cats connects screwball comedy (BRINGING UP BABY), horror film (RAMPAGE), and psychological thriller (MARNIE)" (47). In addition, if such pervasiveness of ideological motifs works to prevent Hollywood genres from being "discrete," so does the pervasiveness of myths help to weaken the boundaries that supposedly define and delimit those genres. But if it is true that a number of motifs appear repeatedly in many distinct genres, that does not mean that they have the same weight in every film and every genre. Does the analogy between women and cats play the same role in *Bringing Up Baby*, *Cat People*, *Rampage* and *Marnie*? Probably not. Put differently, though one could claim that the analogy women/cats have the same meaning in all those films, the relative importance of that analogy in the structuring of each film will vary. Or, still, one could say that one same motif appearing in two films will have a different "function" or "use-value" in each. Likewise, this study will claim that a number of myths appear in and structure different genre films, though with a different weight in the organization of each genre. Similarly, whereas a certain myth may appear in films from different genres it will have a different function or use-value in each.

Nonetheless, to function as an American modern mythology Hollywood narrative films went through a process similar to that undergone by the novel in its creation and further development as proposed by Bakhtin. According to him in *The Dialogic Imagination* the "language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other" (47), which makes it "impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language" (47). As put by Michael Holquist (Bakhtin's translator) in the "Introduction," for the Russian critic the novel is "thus best conceived either as a supergenre, whose power consists in its ability to engulf and ingest all other

genres... together with other stylized but nonliterary forms of language... or not a genre in any strict, traditional sense at all" (xxix). Though it is not within the scope of this study to present Bakhtin's ideas in depth, it is worth examining how some of them could be applied to the issue of genre in Hollywood production.

Thus, when opposing the novel to the epic in order to find the elements that are distinctive of the former, one element Bakhtin points is the "novel's special relationship with extra-literary genres, with the genres of everyday life and with ideological genres" (33). In "its earliest stages", Bakhtin says, "the novel and its preparatory genres had relied upon various extra-literary forms of personal and social reality, and especially those of rhetoric" (33), while in the "later stages of its development the novel makes wide and substantial use of letters, diaries, confession, the forms and methods of rhetoric associated with recently established courts and so fourth" (33). Such an inclusion of extra-literary forms by the novel (thus giving them a literary, or novelistic, function or use-value) contrasts with the epic in that the novel, as Holquist explains, "thrives on precisely the kind of diversity the epic (and by extension, myth and all other traditional forms of narrative) sets out to purge from its world" (in *Dialogical Imagination* xxxii). In this sense, one might say that Hollywood narrative films have followed a similar strategy, that is, they have included other forms of discourse both literary and nonliterary like texts from the press (as in the Western and the gangster genre), documentary, historical narratives, pulp fiction, opera, drama, military and scientific texts, and so on. As Bakhtin states, although the "ground was being prepared in ancient times for the rise of the novel, a genre formed of many styles and many voices... the novel could not *at that time* [ancient times] gather unto itself and make use of all the material that language images had made available" (60). Hollywood cinema, analogously, has a prehistory that had to wait for the appearance of

film technology in order to gather and make use of all that already available material in order to originate as a "supergenre" itself.

In addition, such an ability to incorporate other "languages"[20] characterizes the "novel as a developing genre" (33). After all, Bakhtin reminds us, the "boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven" (33), but are the product of specific historical situations. In other words, the "shift of boundaries between various strata (including literature)" (33) will change along time considering that those boundaries themselves are always evolving. In Bakhtin's words, the "growth of literature is not merely development and change within the fixed boundaries of any given definition; the boundaries themselves are constantly changing" (33). Hollywood films also exhibit that same characteristic of an evolving genre as it incorporates new "languages," for example that of the electronic medium or slang used by minorities or even from television shows. And if Bakhtin claims that these "symptoms of change appear considerably more often in the novel than they do elsewhere... [and] are sharper and more significant because the novel is in the vanguard of change" (33)[21], it seems reasonable to say that Hollywood narrative films experience a similar situation.

But to view the novel as an evolving genre, a process of inclusiveness, capable of incorporating so great a number of other "languages" and genres implies in seeing it also as a hybrid genre from the start. Indeed, Bakhtin does observe that such a potential for hybridity is not just true in relation to the novel, since "there never was a single strictly

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[20] In the "Glossary" of *The Dialogical Imagination* Holquist tells us that Bakhtin "seems to endorse that broad definition of language offered by Jurij Lotman in *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, 'any communication system employing sings that are ordered in a particular manner' " (430).

[21] Although it is argued here that Hollywood is ideologically conservative, it nevertheless produces change due to its pursuit of technological progress, its mixing of different languages and its ability to spread worldwide all kinds of information.

straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse –artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday—that did not have its own parodying and travestying double, its own comic *contre-partie*" (53). But in contrast to other genres, it is in the novel, Bakhtin claims, that "[l]iterary language is not represented... as a unitary, completely finished off, indubitably adequate language –it is represented precisely as a living mix of a varied and opposing voices" (49). Bakhtin adds that in "its germination and early development, the novelistic word reflected a primordial struggle between tribes, peoples, cultures and languages... [being] still full of echoes of this ancient struggle" (50). "In essence," he says, "this [novelistic] discourse always developed on the boundary line between cultures and languages" (50). In a like manner, as narrative films Hollywood production can also be said to have initiated in and is still developing on the frontier of a number of cultures and languages. The Hollywood industry emerges in a place and time of intense linguistic and cultural interchange: the making of films by immigrant Europeans, by Jews both American and from abroad, the incorporation of 'national dialects' as the English spoken by African-Americans, by Americans descending from peoples from Spanish speaking countries, the technical jargon springing from a newly automated industry, and other languages already mentioned.

In addition to being a privileged field for hybridization –a feature Hollywood production shares—the novel is considered by Bakhtin as the current "dominant genre." This happened, he claims, "with special force and clarity beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century" (5). The consequence of an "era when the novel reigns supreme," Bakhtin poses, is that "almost all the remaining genres are to a greater of lesser extent 'novelized'" (5). And "those other genres that stubbornly preserve their old canonic nature begin to feel like a stylization, a stylization taken to the point of parody, despite the artistic

intent of the author" (6). He cautions us, however, to the fact that it is "impossible to explain the phenomenon of novelization purely by reference to the direct and unmediated influence of the novel itself" (7). One must take into consideration that together with the influence of the novel there are those "direct changes in reality itself that also determine the novel and that condition its dominance in a given era" (7). In this sense, because it is the "only developing genre," the novel is able to "reflect more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of unfolding" (7). In fact, Bakhtin maintains that the "novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it" (7).

Once more it is possible to find analogies between Bakhtin's stand on the novel and Hollywood narrative cinema when it is understood as a genre in its own right. First, as was noted in the first pages of this Chapter, the twentieth-century America began with significant historical changes –accelerated industrialization, intense immigration, widespread urbanization—followed by other important events like the advent of the mass media and the invention and popularization of the computer. As both the product and active participant in those socioeconomic and cultural changes, Hollywood narrative films appeared as the logical candidate to undertake the role of the dominant genre, at least in the U.S., though one can hardly deny the influence of Hollywood over the film industry around the world. As the economy of the United States evolved from an industrial to a postindustrial form of capitalism, with the dominance of the market, the postmodern

weakening of the word and the rise of the image,[23] the crisis of the absolute referents and the consequent blurring of generic borders, all that favored not only American narrative cinema as the dominant genre in our century, but it also favored, possibly, the 'cinematization' so to speak of the majority of other genres. One should note, however, that for Bakhtin the "novelization of literature does not imply attaching to already completed genres a generic canon that is alien to them, not theirs" (39), since the novel "has no canon of its own... [i]t is plasticity itself... a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review" (39). In this sense, he argues, the process of novelization of other genres does not mean their "subjection to an alien generic canon; on the contrary, novelization implies their liberation from all that serves as a brake to their unique development" (39).

Like Bakhtin's novel, American genre films could also be defined as "plasticity itself", that is, malleable enough to be in a continuous process of change. About Hollywood narrative films one can repeat what Bakhtin says about the novel, that it "has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making" (7). And Hollywood films both reflect and are important actors in the making of the world, be it for its creation of a successful American mythology, be it for attracting so many novelists, journalists and playwrights, and later on, music video producers and people from the advertising industry. Among the "salient features" of the novelization of other genres Bakhtin claims to be of the most importance that "the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain

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[23] The issue of the dominance of the image over the word in the transition from modernity to postmodernity is discussed at length in my M. A. thesis *From Master Narratives to Simulacra: Analysis of Orwell's 1984 and Terry Gilliam's Brazil.*

semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality" (7). Accordingly, one cannot deny how much the American cinema has influenced the other genres in the sense of bringing them closer to contemporary reality, especially when one thinks of the relatively recent tendency of the novel itself to be written already with an eye to the possibility of receiving a filmic version. The same influence can be observed on the structure of the contemporary novels, full of narrative breaks and flashbacks, a symptom of its 'cinematization.' Another genre, the comic strips/books genre, also exhibits a sign of cinematization, as in Will Eisner's *Spirit* series, with its varied 'camera angles' and lighting so inspired on the film *noir*, or in Moebius's graphic cyberspace. And one can see that same influence even on rock music, now so dependent on video clips, a visual "language" already ingested by the film industry.

To study Hollywood production as a "supergenre" should prove, of course, a very complex and lengthy matter, and what was presented here about Bakhtin's ideas serves only to indicate that potentially rich theoretical possibility. For this study, the possibility of comprehending Hollywood as a supergenre reinforces the point of view arising from the arguments presented here by critics like Schatz, Staiger, Metz, Beebee, and Wood, that there is an interconnectedness among Hollywood genres that work to blur generic boundaries. Still in relation to the issue of film genres, it must be stressed that it is not within the scope of this study to make a thorough investigation of all Hollywood genres, since our focus will be both the gangster as character and his genre. Though some more is yet to be discussed about them in the following chapters, such a discussion will serve more to contextualize our analysis of the gangster.

In this Chapter it was argued that Hollywood narratives films are myth artifacts expressing the dominant ideology in American society. Accordingly, it was claimed that

such a dominant ideology, characterized by a perspectivism which prevents it from being identical with itself cannot be dealt with as a monolith worldview to be imposed upon the public. In relation to film genres, though the concept of genre was not abandoned as a tool useful for a broad classification of film types, it was stressed how ineffectual it is to pursue clear cut genre definitions, being much more fruitful to focus on the intergeneric dialogue which takes place among all Hollywood genre films as a strategy to unveil ideological elements. Finally, and as an issue for further research, a suggestion was made that the Hollywoodian narrative films can be approached as a supergenre, according to some of the considerations Mikhail Bakhtin makes on the issue of genre.

From the next chapter on the already discussed concepts of myth, genre, and ideology shall be applied to an investigation of the gangster since his origins in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2

The Rise of the Gangster in Urban America

2.1 A New Horizon: From the Western Frontier to the Urban Landscape

This chapter will focus on the first decades of the twentieth century, when Americans felt that the possibility for the expansion of the agrarian frontier was coming to an end, while the country was becoming predominantly urban and industrialized. Such a significant historical transformation demanded an adaptation in the American mythology which could express the conflicts and anxieties generated by that new economic, cultural and social context. It will be discussed why the film industry came as the privileged medium to convey America's new mythological universe, with a special attention to similarities between the Western and the gangster film and the significance of individual violence in American culture and its mythic representation by the westerner and the gangster. Finally, a discussion will be carried out on the metaphor of the gangster as monster and on the pattern followed by the gangster film, which is established when he is the protagonist and hero.

According to Richard Slotkin, Frederick Jackson Turner's speech titled "'The Significance of the Frontier in American History'... has come to symbolize a turning point in American history and historiography" (*Gunfighter Nation* 29). In that speech (addressed to "a meeting of American historians at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago" on July 12, 1893), Turner claimed that the year of 1890 marked the end of an epoch in which the expansion of the agrarian frontier had supported the democratic and economic triumphs in the United States. Though such a claim was based on the mistaken view that the territorial occupation of the American territory had come to a halt (in fact, "[m]ore public land would be taken up and brought into production between 1890 and 1920 than during

the supposed heyday of the western frontier" (Slotkin *GN* 30)), Turner was right in his perception of a change:

> The social order envisioned in republican ideology and the Frontier Myth was one in which class tensions were disarmed by the broad diffusion of wealth and power, by the relatively slight differentials between wealthy and working classes, and by the promise of upward mobility. By 1890 it was clear that the industrialization of the country had produced a social order in which wealth and power would increasingly be concentrated in the hands of a relatively few men, and a few powerful (and even monopolistic) industrial and financial "trusts". (Slotkin *GN* 31).

Indeed, while industrial capitalism gained greater impetuses as the country's main organizing force Americans began to face the conflicts and anxieties of a new environment and the new social relations arising from it. The American dream had now to make room for a tougher competition in the marketplace and to deal with the problems of the big cities. In the big city wealth and poverty had to share the tight urban environment, causing higher rates of crime. The city also brought a taste for consumerism and the germ of the American film industry. In other words, the turn of the century saw the appearance of the perfect context for the gangster, both the real one and his fictional counterpart. As noted by Tom Schatz the "mythology of the classic gangster film, like that of the Western, concerns the transformation of nature into culture under the auspices of modern civilization" (*HG* 82). Unlike the Western, though, which tells a story situated in a distant context, both geographically and in time, when nature was still the predominant environment for most

Americans, the gangster film links more directly the audience to their present in the urban milieu. In contrast with the Western "[t]here is no limitless horizon, no sunset in the distance for the urban renegade" (Schatz *HG* 83). As Schatz observes,

> America's gradual shift from a primarily rural-agricultural to an urban-industrial nation, compounded by the Depression, Prohibition, and the other vagaries of city life, generated considerable cultural confusion and caused an extensive reexamination of our traditional value system. (*HG* 84)

But if the moment was ripe for the appearance of the gangster, that also meant that a larger mythological change was under way. It was already said in Chapter 1 that a myth/ideological system changes through time in order to encompass significant changes in the history of a given society, considering that myths come to explain the "problems that arise in the course of historical experience" (Slotkin *GN* 6). The historical moment described above by Schatz was one of those moments that called for a readaptation of the mythology of a nation. And an important national myth that had to readapt was the Myth of the Frontier, which Slotkin defines as the "conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top" (*RTV* 5). And Slotkin does offer some reasons why films proved to be the privileged "vehicles for mythography" (*GN* 232) in the process of mythic change asked by that new historical situation Americans were facing in the first decades of the twentieth century.

First, he explains, when comparing films and novels, in the case of the former the "[d]ependence on the visual also creates in both viewer and filmmaker a bias toward literal readings of the observed action" in contrast to the latter since "metaphors are harder to

make in movies than in novels" (*GN* 232). In addition, to create the "illusion of narrative coherence [the viewer] depends on a set of prior understandings" (232). In simple terms, Slotkin concludes, for "cinematic storytelling... [to work] mnemonic cues are given visually through a set of images that invite the viewer to associate the story with others of similar kind of 'genre' that he or she may know" (232-3). And, he notes, the "most essential cues are established through the development of a powerful association between particular kinds of setting and particular story-forms" (233).

That kind of basic Hollywoodian strategy for creating successful formulas liable to be used again and again combines the very technical (visual and aural) features of film with the industrialized mode of production that was so efficient in making profit. Notwithstanding the issue of Hollywood generic purity, one can say that as a formula a film genre is the product of a process of "conception, elaboration, and acceptance of a special kind of space: an imagined landscape which evokes authentic places and times, but which becomes, in the end, completely identified with the fictions created about it" (*GN* 233). It is thus that the

> ... 'mean streets' of gangster movies, the horror-movie castle rearing up into a stormy sky, ...[or] the western town of false-front saloons and board sidewalks are as instantly familiar to us, as recognizable, and as dense with memory and meaning, as the streets we grew up on. We know that they mean, on some level, to be representative of places that historically existed. Yet genre worlds are also never-never lands whose special rules and meanings have more to do with

> conventions, myths, and ideologies than with historical representation. (*GN* 233)

Summing up Slotkin's view of genre space as mythic space is that "[g]enre space is also *mythic space*" (*GN* 234), that is, a space where history is condensed and naturalized, resulting in the effacement of historical complexity in favor of its portrayal as a given while making it conform to a stable and simplified narrative structure which usually reinforces the dominant ideology.

Slotkin notes that such a process of condensation and naturalization of history "is particularly true of the Western, whose roots go deeper into the American cultural past then those of any other movie genre" (*GN* 234), and which "developed so early in the history of American filmmaking that its origins have been confounded with those of the medium itself" (*GN* 234). More than that, the Western genre relies on a preexisting mythologized space, developed previously in the "formulas, images, and allegorizing traditions of the Wild West show and cheap literature" (*GN* 234), so that in contrast to other film genres it is the Western that for the "American audiences" is best "associated with the Myth of the Frontier" (*GN* 234). In terms of cinematic technology, the Western "had a significant impact on the development of the new medium and of the industry that produced it" (*GN* 254), especially as it "helped shape producers' understanding of the importance of setting, and the appeal of the star" (*GN* 254). Concurrently,

> the new medium and the industry succeeded in appropriating the literary and historical tradition of the Myth of the Frontier and translating its symbols and references and its peculiar way of blending fiction and history into cinematic terms. As a result, Western movies were established as a primary vehicle

> for the transmission of that myth/ideology, rivaling or exceeding in importance the pulp novel. (*GN* 254)

As Schatz says, that as "America's first popular and industrial mass art form, the commercial cinema assumed a privileged but paradoxical function in its development of the Western myth" (*HG* 46). On the one hand, as a "narrative mass medium, the cinema provided an ideal vehicle for disseminating the Western formula to the culture at large" (*HG* 46). On the other, as a "commercial industry, it embodied those very socioeconomic and technological values which the Western anticipated in tracing the steady progression of American civilization" (*HG* 46).

But according to Slotkin there was a "sudden and precipitous... drop-off in the production of 'A' Western features," which coincided with "most of the Depression decade" (*GN* 255), although in "1939 there was a 'renaissance' of the Western" (*GN* 256). More than a coincidence, he sees a definite relation between the Depression and the "genre's [temporary] decline" (*GN* 256). To locate the relation between that historical and economic crisis and a period of oblivion of that genre, Slotkin calls one's attention to the fact that the "formulas of the silent Western (and especially the epic)," which was so successful during the 1920s, were based on "historical or literary references... [which] evoked a mythology ineluctably linked with the heroic age of American expansion and the dream of limitless growth" (*GN* 256). By the same token, Schatz also believes that as "cultural and historical documents, the earliest silent Westerns differ from the later Westerns" (*HG* 46). Indeed, he attributes to the former films a "unique and somewhat paradoxical position: although they were made on the virtual threshold of the Modern Age, they also came at a time when westward expansion was winding down" (*HG* 46), meaning that there begun to appear some difficulties for the creed on a "steady progression" of the

U.S. By the same token, Slotkin argues that in "1932-35 it may have seemed that that vision of history [of limitless expansion and growth] was... no longer useful, that to speak to the needs of the moment projective fantasies had at least to entertain... the failure of the progressive dream that had been embodied in the Myth of the Frontier" (*GN* 256). Such a moment in American history was illustrated by Franklin D. Roosevelt in a 1932 address:

> Our last frontier has long since been reached.... There is no safety valve in the form of a Western Prairie.... Our task is not the discovery or exploitation of natural resources.... It is the less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand... of distributing wealth and products equitably. (qtd. in Slotkin *GN* 257)

Nonetheless, while the Western based on the silent film formula faced its momentary crisis, other Hollywood film genres appeared which "had no real equivalent in the silent era" (Slotkin *GN* 258), like the gangster, the musical comedy, and the hard-boiled detective film. But if the Depression brought along the need for American mythology to find a way to include failure in its belief of unending progress, the "thirties also saw the development of new genres that arose in response to changes in the industry (the shift to sound) as well" (*GN* 259). Among them Slotkin points to the gangster film, which "offered a dark parody of the Horatio Alger[24] success story in which the characteristically American dream of success is perverted by the hypocrisy and greed of the Roaring Twenties" (*GN* 259). Yet, Slotkin observes that the "narrative and mythic structures of the gangster film

[24] Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832-1899) was, according to the 15th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a "most popular author in the U.S. in the last 30 years of the 19th century and perhaps the most influential writer of his generation... [he wrote stories] of poor boys who rose from rags to riches that were to make him famous and contribute the 'Horatio Alger hero' to the American language" (vol. 1 236).

were continuous with those of the Western" (*GN* 260). For instance, both the Western and the gangster film "focus on the career of a social outlaw in a narrative that is generally terse, 'gritty' in style, and 'realistic' in its pretensions" (260). In addition, both take a "hard-boiled view of male character and motives in general, and of politicians in particular" (260). And the two types of film also "deploy female figures (mothers, 'good women,' and 'bad girls') as the symbols of moral force that point the hero toward redemption or damnation" (260). But while Slotkin was right about some of the similarities he pointed between the Western and the gangster film, he failed to see that the westerner and the gangster were in fact very different types of "social outlaws." He failed to notice, as it will be more thoroughly discussed above, that while the former was an ideologically affirmative character, the latter's role was just the opposite: to challenge the definition for right and wrong offered by the dominant ideology expressed by Hollywood output.

Still other critics pointed to similarities between the westerner and the gangster. In fact, such a parallel between those two genres and their protagonists is not new. Robert Warshow explores it in his "Movie Chronicle: the Westerner," which he begins by claiming the "gangster and the Westerner" as the "two most successful creations of the American movies" then to observe one first common trait between them: that they are both "men with guns" (453). And from that initial similarity, Warshow proceeds by indicating how the westerner and the gangster move away from each other: where the latter's "peculiarity... is his unceasing, nervous activity" (453), the former "is a figure in repose" (454); while one, as an effective businessman, "can state definitely what he wants: to take over the North Side, to own a hundred suits, to be Number One," (454), the other is "par excellence a man of leisure [so that] [e]ven when he wears the badge of a marshal or, more rarely, owns a ranch, he appears to be unemployed". Thus, as we've seen, after finding in the gun an

initial similarity between the westerner and the gangster, Warshow proceeds by pointing their differences, including how they use it.

However, focusing a little longer on the issue of the gun might prove fruitful. The gun seems to constitute such a defining prop in both the western and the gangster genres, that one is tempted to ask what is its function. In mythical terms the gun has a central role in American culture. Take, for instance, the colonization of the New World which begun with the coming of "particular European communities" and their "metropolitan culture... to a wilderness... where conditions were generally more primitive than those at home" (Slotkin *GN* 11). In fact, for the "Puritan... evil was of the world, of nature; the good was transcendent and supernatural. Hence it was quite appropriate do destroy the natural wilderness in the name of a higher good" (Slotkin *RTV* 51). Nonetheless, those initial colonies, Slotkin describes, "would expand by reproducing themselves in subcolonial settlements, projected at some distance from the colonial metropolis into a further and more primitive wilderness" (*GN* 11). Such a process of multiplication and territorial penetration of the colonies was thus "linked from the beginning to a historical narrative in which repeated cycles of *separation* and *regression* were necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune" (*GN* 11). To that Slotkin adds the significance of "conflict" as a "central and peculiar feature of the process" (*GN* 11), considering that the colonists had to "struggle against an unfamiliar natural environment and against non-European, non-White natives for whom the wilderness was home" (*GN* 11). It is based on such a combination that Slotkin claims that "[v]iolence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation" (*GN* 11).

But if, as shown by Slotkin, the struggle against wilderness and natives "defined one boundary of American identity: though we were people of 'the wilderness,' we were *not*

savages" (*GN* 11), the process of definition of the other boundary was translated in the "conflicts between the colonies and the 'mother country'" (*GN* 11). Under those historical circumstances it seems only natural that the Myth of the Frontier would develop always relating the "achievement of 'progress' to a particular form or scenario of violent action" (*GN* 11). As a result, along all stages of American history the "Myth [of the Frontier] represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" (*GN* 12). After reminding his readers that rather than part of American history "mass genocides of modern times belong... to Europe, Asia, and Africa" (*GN* 13), Slotkin argues that what is "distinctly 'American' is... the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced, the forms of symbolic violence we imagine or invent, and the political uses to which we put that symbolism" (*GN* 13). Slotkin concludes:

> When history is translated into myth, the complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or 'heroes.' The narrative of the hero's action exemplifies and tests the political and/or moral validity of a particular approach to the use of human powers in the material world. The hero's inner life –his or her code of values, moral or psychic ambivalence, mixtures of motive—reduces to personal motive the complex and contradictory mixture of ideological imperatives that shape a society's response to a crucial event. (*GN* 14)

But he cautions one that in such a "symbolizing process" the "complexity and contradiction" are not simply suppressed, but "focused" (*GN* 14). In other words, the function of the [h]eroes of myth [is to] embody something like the full range of ideological contradictions around which the life of the culture evolves" (*GN* 14). So while there is a movement towards a cultural and historical compression in the composition of the mythic hero there is also, on the other hand, the seed for challenging the dominant ideology, since "their adventures suggest the range of possible resolutions that the culture's lore provides" (*GN* 14).

2.2 Violence and the Gun in Mythic America

Yet, at the center of a number of American myths one finds a white male hero and his gun, which functions as an essential tool for progress. Take, for instance, the "hunter myth... [in which] the sex of the hunter hero is always masculine and he enters the wilderness willingly, even enthusiastically, where the [white] captive is dragged kicking and screaming beyond the boundaries of society" (Slotkin *FE* 64). The "symbolism of the hunter myth derives initially from historical sources, specifically from literary treatment of the lives of a series of real frontiersmen, beginning with Benjamin Church... and culminating (but not concluding) with Daniel Boone... [and including] Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Bill" (64). These heroes, in Slotkin's words, are the protagonists of a myth which "speaks to the love-hate response of Americans to the process of social and economic development, to their civilization and its discontents" (65). And although they fight for the "values of a 'natural' and 'unfettered' precapitalist Eden... [their action] facilitates the spread of progress and civilization" (65). In fact, Slotkin notes, the hunter-hero "embodies the go-getter values, the willful and dominant temperament, the pragmatic

turn of mind, and the belief in racial superiority that characterized nineteenth-century bourgeois culture" (65) and, except for the belief in racial superiority, it can also be said to characterize the gangster protagonist.

By now it must be clear how the gun has had a central social function in the paradoxical process of progress through destruction both in American history and mythology. And in both instances it is in the hands of the white individualist male that the gun is employed as a tool for progress. Likewise, be it in the hands of the westerner or in the hands of the gangster, the ability to use the gun reassures the audience that being "one's own man" is the way to succeed in life. When the westerner eventually restores order to the community because he is the fastest draw in the West he is repeating a behavior to the audience that is part of a familiar myth that says that the individual act is the way to overcome the surrounding social conflicts and reinstate social balance. In the same way, the gangster's readiness to shoot his way through his enemies up to the "top of the world" reinforces the audience's belief in individualist action.

But the gun can be analyzed from different approaches as well. For example, in *The Fantastic*, at one point Tzvetan Todorov makes a distinction "between a *literary function* and a *social function* of the supernatural" (158) in the fantastic genre. Similarly, and following Todorov's structuralist method, both types of function will be now briefly pursued in relation to the gun in the Western and gangster genres. By first examining the social function of the gun in each genre one should be able to disclose some of the different social issues the Western and the gangster films address.

So if Slotkin sees a "continuity of theme and structure" (*GN* 265) linking the Western and gangster genre, it is basically due to their "common function as vehicles for a continuously developing mythology" (265). If one can agree that both genres are vehicles

for the same mythological background, it is doubtful that gangster films "absorbed a central element of the mythic charge of the Western and adapted its mythic material to the concerns and imagery of the Depression and the New Deal" (265) in a direct way. The difference is that while he sees a continuity between the protagonist of the Western and the gangster in terms of the "good-badman" story (the good guy who can't live according to social rules but who eventually is conducted to normal social life after marrying a good woman)[25], he fails to acknowledge that such an assumed continuity does not explain why the westerner's action ends with the reaffirmation of white civilization, while the gangster's always questions the very foundations of that civilization the westerner fights for. Thus, his claim that the good badman formula constituted the "conventional device for exploring the meaning of the transition from Frontier to Civilization, from the regime of wild male freedom to that of order and domesticity" (265) may be true in relation to the Western, but fall short of depicting the ideologically challenging role of the gangster.

However, while in the Western the protagonist's gun functions as a symbol for the possibility of reinstating social equilibrium, the gangster's gun stands for the very act of challenging the social balance. And such a difference might be explained by the very different social contexts to which those two genres appeal. About the Western, Schatz notes that "despite its historical and geographical distance from most viewers, [it] confronts real and immediate social conflicts: individual versus community, town versus wilderness, order versus anarchy" (*HG* 30). But while not disagreeing that Western films do convey a close relation to the audience's immediate social anxieties, neither Schatz nor Slotkin acknowledge that while the fact remains that here the gun is situated in a distant context,

[25] According to Slotkin, the "good-badman" action formula was developed by William S. Hart, "the most important silent-Western star" (*Gunfighter Nation* 243-52).

both geographically and in time, the gangster's gun is brought to the present of the audience's urban milieu, a relevant difference: the Western addresses a social structure and social values of a time that the viewer longs for, but which are being destroyed in the very historical leap that calls for the creation of the gangster.

Schatz suggests a similarity between those two protagonists in his broad division of genre types, a similarity which is challenged as one focuses, too, on their relation to the gun. By placing the Western and the gangster film in the category of "genres of order" Schatz attributes to both the thematic of "utopia-as-promise" in opposition to the "utopia-as-reality" thematic in those films belonging to the "genres of integration", like the "musical, screwball comedy, family drama"(*HG* 35). In the former case, Schatz points, the resolution of the conflict comes when the "threatening external force... [is] destroyed and eliminated as an ideological threat" (31). In the latter case, the "vital lover's spontaneity and lack of social inhibition" open the way to the eventual fulfilling of romantic love (31). But, as we focus back on how the conflict is resolved in the Western and in the gangster film, both classified as genre-of-order films by Schatz, a number of distinctions arise.

In the case of the Western, the paradoxical coexistence of individualism and collective life in, for example, John Ford's *The Searchers*, as well as in Westerns in general, depends on a historical situation that will disappear as America turns from a rural country into an industrial society. In Ford's film, the hero's role as an agent of civilization is to protect the community against external forces. Paradoxically, the individualist who doesn't fit in the community is the force that ensures society's progress towards civilization, i.e., the possibility of utopia. But when the stage of appropriation of the land from the non-civilized (Nature and the Indians) gives room to its industrial exploitation the external threats disappear. Now, in order to survive one has to fight his neighbors and the

threat to utopia seems to come from within; a situation which, as mentioned above, was described by Roosevelt as the "less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand..." (qtd. in Slotkin *GN* 257). In the dream of rural America the Western hero's gun was always ready to return from the sunset to defend the white man's utopia against the forces of the wilderness, thus rendering such an individualist as positive, though still problematic, character.[26] But in industrial America that individualist drive represented by the gangster's gun is not willing to await in self-exile for the moment when it will be called to save the promise of utopia. In fact, there is no place to go, since there is no horizon for the sun to set. In the urban society where the audience live, beyond civilization lies civilization. And in the gangster film scenario, the positive value of individualism becomes more complicated.

In contrast to the westerner, in the modern city the gangster has to act within its unconquerable frontiers. He is not allowed just to *be*, just to exist in society. As a heir of a civilizing process supported by violence, the gangster lacks the possibility of crossing the borders between white civilization and wilderness. For him Nature is only an unreachable dream from a dead past, as it happens to Dix, the gangster played by Sterling Hayden in John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle* (1950), who escapes back to the countryside only to die, in one of the last films of the classical period of the genre. So it is in the competitive environment of the urban capitalist society that the gangster will use his gun. With wilderness out of reach, the gun is not the borrowed tool for social progress, which the westerner would take away from town after social balance was achieved. With only the city to wander, the gangster does, too, use his gun as a tool for progress, but since he cannot ride

[26] One should note that although the gangster always belongs to a non-WASP ethnic group, he stands for the hero in a way that other non-white characters cannot.

to the sunset in the end he must stay and become integrated and strive for his *personal* progress. Forced to live in the urban environment the gangster must be, in Warshow's words, "graceful, moving like a dancer among the crowded dangers of the city" ("Movie Chronicle" 453). In the tough competition of the market, the gangster is like the entrepreneur and the capitalist's problem becomes the "gangster's problem: there will always be somebody trying to kill him" ("Movie Chronicle" 461). Within this setting, the gun is a business tool to eliminate competition. There is no more room for the westerner's draw as a moment of pure self-expression, a moment in which the westerner expresses his coolness, self-control and life-style. Above all, the gangster's gun must be efficient, and when he draws, it is to express only his power. As Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) bluntly teaches in *Scarface*: "Do it first, do it yourself, and keep on doing it".

In the last instance, while the westerner's gun is an instrument for self-expression, the gangster's is one for self-fulfillment. The gangster's ability with the gun can be seen as the successful capitalist's ability to overcome competition. In the modern city where ambition and opportunity are the moving force, the gangster's "career is a nightmare inversion of the values of ambition and opportunity" ("Movie Chronicle" 454). In the land of utopia the westerner's gun stands for the "purity of his own image—in fact his honor" ("Movie Chronicle" 457). In the modern city of the conquered space the gangster's gun represents what is needed for one to accomplish the American dream, even if with a nightmarish tint.

Finally, there is the syntactical function of the gun. That is, how the gun participates in the film's narrative process. And for the purposes of the following discussion a very basic understanding of the narrative process in general will be used. Be it in the Western or in the gangster genre films, Todorov's idea that "[a]ll narrative is a movement between two

equilibriums which are similar but not identical" (163) will provide a theoretical background for this study. In the Western, the gun may be part of a film's narrative in a number of ways. Indeed, the gun can be the supporting element for the initial narrative equilibrium. For instance, when a community is under the rule of the "bad guy" due to his fast draw or to his ability to hire skilled gunmen. The gun can also participate in the disruption of the initial equilibrium, say, through the killing of some important character in the story. Finally, as it has already been indicated, it is the instrument that allows the protagonist to reestablish the initial lost balance in the story. In short, the gun participates in all three basic moments of the narrative structure in Western films.

In the case of the gangster genre, the gun also appears as a central element in the film's plot development. It is the superior cunning and readiness with which the gangster protagonist uses the gun that will define his rise in the underworld and even his eventual fall. As in the Western, the gun in the gangster films will prove essential in all three stages of the basic narrative structure. It is the implied instrument that contributed to install the initial equilibrium, in which the first leading gangster maintains, for a while, his power over the rest of the gang. The gun functions, then, as the tool for the destruction of the first gangster boss, in the process that takes the protagonist gangster to the top position in a move that corresponds to the stage of the disruption of the initial balance. Ultimately, the gun is instrumental in the attainment of the final narrative balance, with the gangster protagonist killed, the indication of a new crime chief (who now holds *the* gun), and the social order temporarily restored.

2.3 The Monstrosity of the Gangster

The metaphor of the monster, when applied to the gangster, functions to define him as a unique character in the Hollywoodian mythological universe. It helps to explain the similarities and the fundamental differences he exhibits when compared to positive heroes like the detective or the westerner. When contrasting the Western and the classical gangster film one can see that both "stand on the border between two regimes and eras, one bound to a violent past, the other looking to a progressive future" (Slotkin *GN* 261). But the progress longed for by white society had already come and that, together with the closure of the western frontier for further expansion, opened the way for the creation of a 'progressive' hero rather different from the westerner. Put differently, compelled to face a significant historical change caused by the coming of industrial capitalism as the main organizing force in the country, Americans had to reexamine their traditional value system. Indeed, one can say that they were actually attempting a dramatic redefinition of what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil in the land where white civilization had finally overcome the dark forces of the wilderness. Such is the kind of cultural situation, when the uncertainty about the dominant definition for good and evil is intensified that has lead human societies to try to input all evil to one figure: the monster. As mentioned in the Chapter 1, the use of a good/bad opposition in an effort to understand the gangster can lead to a very biased perspective of the character. And since this study will rely heavily on the conception of the gangster as monster as an alternative to the common view of the gangster as "bad" capitalist it is important to offer some explanation on how the idea of the monster might prove more instrumental in the examination of the gangster.

It is not uncommon to find the gangster characterized as the dark side of the businessman or as representing the negative face of capitalism. The critic Stuart Kaminsky, for instance, notes that "the business milieu of the gangster film reflects our view of

American business enterprise in general, even if we happen to be part of a business structure which does not conform to this view" (23). John Hess observes that in the "conventional gangster film, the characters played by Robinson, Muni, and Cagney set out pathological quests for wealth and power"; by depicting them as "freaks", Hess reasons, their final destruction is justified, while the "direct connection between them and capitalism is masked by this distortion" (88). Commenting on *Little Caesar* John Raeburn notices that in a scene where Rico --the gangster protagonist-- is being honored by his colleagues, the banquet they offer him is "an imitation of similar ceremonial occasions sponsored by businessmen or politicians" (49). As insightful as these observations might be, because they compare the gangster to the bad capitalist, or relate him to the dark side of capitalism, they fall prey to all the limitations implied in this kind of approach, since, as it was discussed previously, to consider the gangster a bad capitalist results in the opposing category of a good capitalist, or a good capitalism in which the gangster does not take part. Indeed, as will be discussed in this study, the very portrayal of the gangster as a "bad" capitalist implies the idea, difficult to uphold, of the existence of a "good" capitalist. But the existence of such a well meaning capitalist is something that the fictional gangster at once attempts to affirm and resists to acknowledge, since it is because he is bad that he becomes a hero; the more he stands for the violent, competitive, individualist and behavior in capitalism the more he seduces his audience. Such an ambiguity in his representation calls for a metaphor capable of offering a more multifarious understanding of the gangster figure. And the metaphor suggested here is that of the gangster as monster.

2.4 A Brief Word on Literary Monsters

For the present discussion, the usefulness of the metaphor of the monster lies less in its characteristics as an element in the gothic genre than in its general cultural meaning or social function. Every culture creates its monster in order to define normality: the monster is what is abnormal, evil, socially unacceptable. Throughout history monsters have represented the borders which separate the human from the non-human, the civilized from the non-civilized, the good from evil. While standing for the "other", monsters have functioned as a reference, although negative, to what it means to be human, good or civilized. One other trait of the monster following the idea of the human/monster frontier is its always latent ability and desire to cross that border separating humans from monsters, which has moved along time. In geographical terms, for instance, Caliban, the monster in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, was situated in an unknown island; hence, a monster living entirely outside of the civilized world. If one takes Mr. Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as an example of a more recent monster, then one will see a monster generated within the very center of the civilized world --London-- without ever leaving it. In this sense, Victor Frankenstein's creature (in Mary Shelley's novel) can be situated half the way between both: he moves from the civilized Europe to the limits of the known world, in the North Pole, or dreaming of a happy monster life in the jungles of South America with his monster wife and, one assumes, monster children.

In addition, in the evolution of literary monsters --still taking the three ones mentioned above as a reference-- one can observe a tendency to intensify the predominance of masculine characterization of the world in which they were generated. Thus, although all of them appear in societies dominated by men, one should note that while Caliban does have a mother, Frankenstein's monster is the motherless son of a reluctant father, and Mr. Hyde is

born within the very body and soul of a man in an environment almost completely devoid of female characters. Besides, while Caliban and Frankenstein's creature show a desire for a female companion, Mr. Hyde never gives a thought to that possibility, unless one considers spanking prostitutes an interest in female companionship. So there is also a sexual element related to the modeling of monsters, with a propensity to exclude women from their universe.

Another element in defining monsters is their ignorance about the civilized ways, though they will always strive to learn or mimic the manners of the civilized. The education of the monster can already be observed in *The Tempest*, as civilized language is taught to Caliban. Of course, being a monster, Caliban will never reach the status of a civilized human being; rather, his use of language will be subversive and... monstrous. In the story by Mary Shelley, in its turn, the education of the monster plays an important role. A long passage in the book describes how the monster learns what it means to be human. In the woods, Victor's creature learns the language of the humans, learns human history, and is exposed to the good feelings human beings can have towards one another. In fact, the monster eventually proves to be much more morally mature than his creator and more human than him in many senses. Still, the monster created by Frankenstein will be repelled by human society and will share the eventual fate of monsters in general: destruction or expulsion back to the dark side of the line. As for Mr. Hyde, he is born with the ability of Dr. Jekyll to deal with the simple rules of civilized society (he can dress appropriately, deal with money, etc.) and with his creator's scientific knowledge, but both his intellectual gain and emotional development will only prove his inadequacy to live in civilized and good society. As such, it is fated to stay forever at the margins of society; indeed, the monster is meant to inhabit the dark side of the line separating good and evil. But the monster is

menacing not so much because it lurks in the shadows, rather the more it comes to the open when crossing that line separating him from the mainstream the more its menacing nature is revealed. Created to personify evil, thus enabling it to be expelled, the monster is doomed to for ever seek to return to that same society which at once created and rejects him. And whenever he crosses back the line to his origins the monster reveals how evil still pervades his mother society.

Created only to be rejected but impossible to be destroyed or never to reappear, monsters are "doubly deceptive", notes Marie-Helene Huet, since their "strange appearance" presents a "misleading likeness to another species, for example," thus disguising the "otherwise rigorous law that offspring should resemble their parents" (4). But, Huet concludes, though the "monster was first defined as that which did not resemble him who engendered it, it nevertheless displayed some sort of resemblance, albeit a false resemblance, to an object external to its conception" (4). Such a false resemblance to something alien to its creators is the sign of monstrosity that the 'good' or 'civilized' will readily identify and help differentiate the monster from the good children of society. The other side of that paradox is that the very need to give the monster an identifying sign shows how hard it can be to tell how different it is from its well-meaning creators. In other words, the creation of the monster is a move that, while an attempt to embody evil in one creature so to free society from all evil, fails to do so exactly because of the real semblance the monster must carry to its creators (thus obeying the "rigorous" and natural law that offspring must resemble their parents). Frankenstein's creature, built from the parts of different human bodies, and Mr. Hyde, generated from the very soul of a man, stand as examples of such a dual resemblance to their human progenitors and to something alien to the human race.

Accordingly, the creation of the gangster follows those trends just determined for literary monsters. Consonant with the difficulties Caliban, Frankenstein's creature, and Mr. Hyde showed in dealing with females, the gangster will also exhibit problems with establishing an harmonic relation with women, though his tendency to abuse them puts him closer to Mr. Hyde. The masculine atmosphere of the environment where the gangster moves is another trait he shares more closely with a more recent and modern monster like Mr. Hyde. And the gangster's greater similarity to Dr. Jekyll's double shows again in his inhabiting the heart of the civilized world –the (fictional) gangster appears when the U.S. was about to become the economic and political center of the world. Finally, and obeying that general characteristic of monsters pointed out by Huet, the gangster is, too, "doubly deceptive" in his external appearance and his bearing, as one can see in his exaggerated attempts to mimic the VIP and his inability to follow appropriately the civilized behavior. In fact, one can even find the sign of monstrosity in the body of gangsters, like the scar resembling a cross on Tony Camonte's face (*Scarface*), or the gangster played by Humphrey Bogart in *Dead End*, who shows up in his old neighborhood disguised by a plastic surgery, or even in the final scene of *Public Enemy*, in which Tom Powers (Cagney) is shown dead and all wrapped up resembling a mummy.

In "*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation" John Cawelti claims that the "underlying myth of this [gangster] genre affirms the limits of individual aggression in a society that tolerates and even encourages a high degree of personal enterprise and ambition" (241).[27] But when the gangster is defined as a monster, one is tempted to argue that what happens in the gangster film is exactly the opposite, that is, it shows that to affirm the limits for

[27] As it happens so often in the work of critics about the gangster, Cawelti refers to the "underlying myth of the gangster genre" without never taking the pains to put forward his view of the gangster's mythic quality.

violence in a society that encourages it as a valid tool for achieving progress is an insurmountable task, considering that, historically, the individual violence without limits has been one foundation in the construction of America as a nation. So, again, one finds it difficult to agree with Cawelti when he concludes that the "gangster becomes a tragic figure not because he is inherently evil, but because he fails to recognize these limits" (241). As monster, the gangster is supposed to be evil itself and his heroism comes from the gusto he displays in being evil; he is the embodiment of America's inability to overcome the founding contradiction that to create a good and prosperous society Americans have always resorted to evil methods, a situation which industrial capitalism made more evident and truer.

But one should note, however, that to see the gangster as monster does not exclude understanding him as a "tragic hero", to use the phrase coined by Robert Warshow in his "The Gangster as Tragic Hero". Warshow's explanation for considering the gangster a tragic hero begins in defining America as a modern equalitarian society:

> Modern equalitarian societies... whether democratic or authoritarian in their political forms, always base themselves on the claim that they are making life happier; the avowed function of the modern state, at least in its ultimate terms, is not only to regulate social relations, but also to determine the quality and the possibilities of human life in general. Happiness thus becomes the chief political issue --in a sense, the only political issue-- and for that reason it can never be treated as an issue at all. (127)

As a consequence, "it becomes an obligation of citizenship to be cheerful" (127), and "every production of mass culture... must conform with accepted notions of the public good" (128). Nonetheless, whatever the "effectiveness [of mass culture products] as a source of consolation and a means of pressure for maintaining 'positive' social attitudes, this optimism is fundamentally satisfying to no one, not even those who would be most disoriented without its support" (128). In such a context "[e]ven within the area of mass culture, there always exists a current of opposition, seeking to express by whatever means are available to it that sense of desperation and inevitable failure which optimism itself helps to create" (128-9). Accordingly, the gangster film "fills the need for disguise [the sense of desperation] (though not sufficiently to avoid arousing uneasiness) without requiring any serious distortion" (129). The "gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself" (130).

Such a view of the role of the gangster does not differ much from the social role of the monster as already defined here. In the same manner of the character depicted by Warshow, the gangster as monster also undermines the optimism (evil can be destroyed) that is at the base of Americanism itself. Yet, Warshow proceeds by reasoning that even if the "gangster's activity is actually a form of rational enterprise, involving fairly definite goals and various techniques for achieving them" (131), all that "is usually no more than a vague background... [and] his activity becomes a kind of pure criminality: he hurts people" (131). Notwithstanding that the audience's "response to the gangster film is most consistently and most universally a response to sadism; [in which] we gain the double satisfaction of participating vicariously in the gangster's sadism and then seeing it turned against the gangster himself" (131-2), there is "another level [in which] the quality of irrational

brutality and the quality of rational enterprise become one" (132). Here, once more, one can see Slotkin's claim to be true, that in American tradition violence is a necessary means for success. And Warshow concludes:

> In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, *all* means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is *punished* for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous, is –ultimately—impossible The effect of the gangster film is to embody this dilemma in the person of the gangster and resolve it by his death. The dilemma is resolved because it is *his* death, not ours. We are safe; for the moment, we can acquiesce in our failure, we can choose to fail. (133)

Thus, one could say that the gangster is a tragic hero because he is doomed to perish in order to allow the audience a moment's relief from that inescapable American dilemma. To that one could add that the gangster is indeed a tragic figure because, hero and monster, his fate is to embody all evil and his greatness lies in his acceptance to die alone for it.

2.5 The Gangster Film: Genre and Patterns

In Chapter 1 it was argued that there are no grounds for trying to define Hollywood genres in some pure form. Janet Staiger's stand on the issue, one must remember, is that there has always existed some level of hybridity in all Hollywood genres, even if she acknowledges that the "tactics of grouping films by genre" (6) are helpful for the critics to

analyze "films against a hypothesized pattern based on viewing other films" (6). In other words, though the concept of pure film genres should be abandoned and a clear cut definition of any Hollywood genre should be considered out of reach, the grouping of films in accordance to some previously established criteria can prove fruitful in evincing possible new meanings in Hollywood production. On the other hand, Staiger does acknowledge that if "Hollywood films have never been pure instances of genres... [that doesn't mean] that Hollywood films do not evince patterns" (6). As she observes, "patterns are valuable material for deviation, dialogue, and critique" (6), i.e., patterns can be employed as analytical tools. And she adds: "[v]ariations from patterns may occur for making a text fresh or for commentary about the issues raised within the standard pattern, and both aesthetic and ideological functions of variations make no sense without a notion of some pattern or order" (6).

Thus, one can already point some advantages of working with "patterns" instead of pursuing any stable and final definition for genres. First, the delineation of a pure genre (never convincingly achieved) will always offer a list of included films and another of excluded ones. That leaves open the door for questioning what to do with those films left out of the defined genre and, consequently, to question, on the grounds of the excluded films themselves, the criteria on which rests the suggested definition of genre. As Steve Neale asks in "Questions of Genre", at "what point do westerns become musicals like *Oklahoma!*... At what point do singing westerns become musicals? At what point do comedies with songs... become musical comedies?" (171). In addition, no matter how inclusive the list of films resulting from some given definition for some pure genre, that kind of tactic tends to turn one's eye from the dialogue that occurs among all Hollywood films, notwithstanding to what genre they might belong. On the other hand, to try to find, as

Staiger puts it, "order among variety" (6) based on the identification of patterns allows one to suggest a grouping of films while never ignoring the ongoing dialogue that occurs among them. For one same pattern can be found in films otherwise different enough that they could easily be classified as belonging with distinct genres; think, for instance, of a gangster film and a comedy with gangsters. Rather than concentrating on deciding whether the latter belongs with the gangster genre or with the comedy, a more fruitful approach would be to focus exactly on those patterns which appear in both films and ask how these patterns differ in one or another film. Rather than establishing criteria for building lists of films, it seems more productive to analyze what would be the effect of the audience's expectations over those patterns, never forgetting that those same expectations are always already molded by the appearance of those patterns in different genres in a process of mutual influence. Under such an approach genre should be understood more as a guide for reading films, but also as a process in which the definition of a certain genre can be transformed by the adoption of some new pattern, the exclusion of some pattern that was already a convention for that genre, or even the change in the function (Beebee's "use-value" or W. Metz's "function") of a pattern within a genre. The advantage of working with patterns is that it becomes less important to fit a film in some well defined genre than investigating how those patterns participate in a cinematic production which has evolved along an intergeneric dialogue.

Hence, the presence of a certain pattern in films that, at least at first sight, seem not to belong to the same generic classification should instigate the critic to try to identify in which way that pattern approximates the films in question and how it helps to differentiate them. For example, the gun, seen as a pattern in the conventions of representation for both the Western and the gangster film, can indicate continuities as well as differences between

the two genres, as discussed above in this Chapter. Another possibility for working with patterns is to determine what are the patterns appearing in the films which have originated some genre and then follow them in succeeding films. Such a procedure will ask from the critic to verify the function and significance of the found patterns for the construction of the film. It will also allow the critic to analyze how that function has changed –or not— along the evolution of the genre.

Take, for instance, the gangster film. The three films that according to the great majority of the critics established the gangster genre were *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932). It seems reasonable to claim that the most obvious pattern in those three films is the presence of the gangster. But then, would any film with gangsters be a gangster film? Not necessarily, for it is not merely the presence of the gangster which constitutes a pattern in *Little Caesar, Public Enemy* and *Scarface*, but his presence as the protagonist. Accordingly the gangster as protagonist presents a number of generic implications that can be better discussed when one borrows some of the ideas on genre that Rick Altman presents in his "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre." In that text, after acknowledging that there is "no general agreement on the exact frontier separating semantic from syntactic views" (30) Altman nevertheless claims that it is possible...

> ... as a whole [to] distinguish between generic definitions that depend on a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like –thus stressing the semantic elements that make up the genre-- and definitions that play instead certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders --relationships that

> might be called the genre's fundamental syntax. The semantic approach thus stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged. (30)

Each kind of approach has its own advantage and disadvantage. In brief, Altman explains, while the "semantic approach has little explanatory power, it is applicable to a larger number of films" (31). On the other hand, the "syntactic approach surrenders broad applicability in return for the ability to isolate a genre's specific meaning-bearing structures" (31). As an alternative Altman argues for a "semantic/syntactic approach to genre study" (32).

The first advantage Altman sees in the approach he proposes is its ability to deal with the fact that "not all genre films relate to their genre in the same way or to the same extent" (33). The simultaneous acceptance of the "semantic and syntactic notions of genre," he argues, "avail ourselves of a possible way to deal with differing levels of 'genericity'... [as well as] a far more accurate description of the numerous intergeneric connections typically suppressed by single-minded approaches" (33). By acknowledging that not all genre films follow in equal terms the 'recipe' offered by the definition of a genre Altman permits one to connect his statement to Staiger's proposition about patterns, since for her rather than the concern for establishing a generic definition, most important is how the repetition of or deviation from the identified patterns give freshness to a text or helps one to comment on the "issues raised within the standard pattern" (6). Besides, his mentioning of the "numerous intergeneric connections" is consistent with the impossibility of arriving at pure genre definitions, as it has been stated in this study. In addition, he suggests that "genres arise in one of two fundamental ways: either a relatively stable set of semantic

givens is developed through syntactic experimentation into a coherent and durable syntax, or an already existing syntax adopts a new set of semantic elements" (34). From such a "working hypothesis" (34), Altman sees one second advantage, that is, it allows one to "study the interrelationships between semantic elements and syntactic bonds" (34) in a way that combines both a synchronic and a diachronic analysis of the semantic and syntactic relationship in the evolution of a genre.

In addition, Altman argues that despite how a certain genre is formed –either as a group of semantic elements which eventually is organized into some better defined syntax, or as a preexisting syntax which adopts new semantic elements-- in its development the "relationship between the semantic and the syntactic constitutes the very site of negotiation between Hollywood and its audience, and thus between ritual and ideological uses of genre" (35). Indeed, he understands that the explanation for the conflict between "ritual and ideological genre theoreticians" (35) lies in the "fundamentally bivalent nature of any relatively stable generic syntax" (36). That is, both the "structure of Hollywood cinema... [and that] of American popular mythology as a whole, serve to mask the very distinction between ritual and ideological functions" (36). In other words, Altman is arguing that "Hollywood does not simply lend its voice to the public's desires, nor does it simply manipulate the audience" (36). Instead, in the evolution of a genre there is a negotiation between Hollywood and its audience during which the "public's desires are fitted to Hollywood's priorities (and vice-versa)" (36). Such a negotiation was defined earlier in the Introduction as a consequence of the impossibility for the dominant ideology to be identical with itself, be it because it must include subaltern ideologies, be it because even when adopted by individuals not from the dominant elite, the dominant ideology will vary according to the perspective of each individual.

Thus, Altman's analytical approach can be adapted in a fruitful way to some of the theoretical choices already made in this study. For one, it illuminates Staiger's concept of patterns, as it proposes two general types of patterns: semantic and syntactic. By analyzing those patterns under the light of the "semantic/syntactic distinction... [one can better understand] how meaning of one kind contributes to and eventually establishes meaning of another" (Altman 38). Secondly, Altman's proposition includes a flexible understanding of the relation between ideology and myth/ritual, as he accepts the reciprocal influence of one by another, thus leaving room for a view on those two concepts in accordance to what was posited in the discussions already presented here. As it will be discussed in the following section the presence of the gangster as protagonist in *Little Caesar, Public Enemy* and *Scarface* should be defined as a semantic pattern.

2.6 The Gangster as Protagonist

In the classical gangster-film trilogy the gangster as protagonist is not just a semantic pattern, it constitutes the most significant one. Indeed, it is around such a semantic element that the syntax of those films is established, specially when the gangster is understood as monster. Because Rico Bandello (Robinson), Tommy Powers (Cagney), and Tony Camonte (Muni) are the protagonists in the filmic universe they dwell the 'normal' world inhabited by white American bourgeoisie is virtually reduced to the point of disappearance. As the monster becomes the main character in the story, basic references for what is civilized and uncivilized (monstrous), good an evil, right and wrong are challenged,

and the line separating positive from negative social values is suspended.[28] The presence of a relevant character standing for the moral and ideological superiority of the 'American values' is complicated when the plot develops in a scenario where the very differentiation between good and evil becomes a complex task. In short, the possibility of separating good and evil is arrested when the monster becomes the hero.

Because the monster is the dominant semantic element in those three films a characteristic syntactic organization results. Examples, which are going to be analyzed in the following paragraphs, include the dramatic subjection or the replacement of Robin Wood's "Ideal Female" (*I,G,A* 47) by what Slotkin --referring to Gwen (Jean Harlow), a "classy dame" in *Public Enemy*-- defines as "an impossible combination of whore and mother" (*GN* 262); the substitution of monstrous family relations for the conventional Hollywoodian family; the blurring of the limits between home and office, resulting in the home/office or the 'terrible house' of the gangster; the substitution of the monster for Wood's "Ideal Male" (*I,G,A* 47); and, of course, the resolution of the story through the death of the gangster instead of the otherwise inevitable Happy Ending, only possible when there is a hero and/or heroine standing for the positive values for American culture.

One can begin with the definition of some other semantic elements and proceed by demonstrating their specific syntactic organization within the plot of the classic gangster film. For instance, Robin Wood's definition for the Ideal Female: "wife and mother, perfect companion, endlessly dependable, mainstay of hearth and home" (*I,G,A* 47). For Slotkin the origins of such a female myth-figure in America dates back from the late seventeenth century, with appearance of the captivity narratives. He states that nearly from the

[28] The destruction of the gangster/monster at the end of each film does not signal that positive and negative values are still there, much to the contrary, his eventual destruction stands for the dominant values' last

beginning the "New England Indian captivity narrative functioned as a myth, reducing the Puritan state of mind and world view, along with the events of colonization and settlement, into archetypal drama" (*RTV* 94). Indeed, Slotkin observes that the "great and continuing popularity of these narratives, the uses to which they were put, and the nature and symbolism employed in them are evidence that the captivity narratives constitute the first coherent myth-literature developed in America for American audiences" (*RTV* 95). In those narratives, he explains, "a single individual, usually a woman, stands passively under the strokes of evil [the Indians], awaiting rescue by the grace of God [by a white male]" (*RTV* 94). Greatly simplifying, in those stories the white female would stand for the values of Christian civilization which had to be rescued from the evil forces of the wilderness: sexual restraint, heterosexual monogamic marriage, the right to property. In mythic terms, she is what Slotkin calls the "redemptive woman" (*GN* 206), chaste, docile, understanding, dependable and bastion of civilization.

Slotkin claims that the "gangster film follows the Western in identifying virtue and redemption with a woman" (*GN* 262). In discussing *Public Enemy* he notes that "[t]hree different women offer a kind of salvation to Tom Powers [the gangster protagonist]" (*GN* 262). He does acknowledge, however, that the "form of each offer reveals that, in the 'new' America even the symbols of redemption have become problematic" (*GN* 262). Problematic indeed, and certainly in the gangster film. And the Hollywoodian index for the problems in the now urbanized and industrialized America is the appearance of a protagonist characterized as the gangster. As the protagonist, the gangster is at once a criminal but a successful businessman; a man who kills people, but who is also --in accordance with the narrative conventions of Hollywood for the protagonist-- the hero of

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attempt to reinstate normality, where good and evil can be (supposedly) differentiated.

the story. He is both, the fictional character who enrages the social and religious institutions and that who becomes almost an instant hero (both in real life and on the screen) from his appearance throughout the twentieth century for so many generations in the United States.

When the gangster is both hero and monster, there can be no final redemption, no final victory of 'civilization' through the protagonist, and consequently, there is no room for the redemptive woman. Instead, the classical gangster film becomes the privileged place for another kind of female character, who Wood calls, in his list of persistent ideological elements in Hollywood cinema, the "erotic woman", defined by him as "adventuress, gambling lady, saloon 'entertainer'... fascinating but dangerous, liable to betray the hero or turn into a black panther" (*I,G,A* 47). Yet, the history of such an "erotic woman" can also be traced back to the beginnings of American mythology. For Slotkin, the Puritans, ignoring the "rigor of Indian taboos against marital infidelity" (*RTV* 76), saw the "absolute sexual freedom of the unmarried Indians... [as] a sign of corrupt lechery" (76). For the Puritans related the Indians' sexual behavior to the dark power of the wilderness, to their inability to build an organized society and to their uncivilized religious customs that both repelled and attracted them. As Slotkin explains,

> Indian sexual customs were entirely different from the Puritan, but dealt with the facts of human sexuality that Christian likewise recognized and attempted to control. Racially the Indians seemed alien, yet they were undoubtedly (in many instances) a physically and morally attractive people, not fundamentally dissimilar from the colonists in shape and sympathies. And were their religious customs so very different from the remnants of pagan worship that

> remained in practice in their own English countryside? The strangeness of the Indian was a threat to the outer man and to Puritan society; the Indian's familiarity, his resemblance to the primitive inner man, was a threat to the Puritan's soul, his sense of himself as English, white, and Christian. (*RTV* 55)

Thus since the seventeenth century there is an ambiguous connection between an immodest or erotic behavior and the elements related to the destruction of the positive moral and religious values that supported white Christian civilization. Later, in James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, one finds Cora Munro, a female character who "combines the sensuous and erotic appeal of the 'dark woman' with the spiritual gifts of the White or 'redemptive' woman" (Slotkin *GN* 206). Slotkin observes that in her Cooper combines an "inability to blush, which was taken as the biological sign of shamelessness in non-Whites" (*GN* 206), dark hair and dark eyes with a moral chastity she reveals in "her costume [which] seeks to conceal her sensuous and womanly character" (*GN* 206). However, "[w]omen of this kind," Slotkin notes, "are destroyed in novels of the Cooper tradition, because they tempt the White hero to a miscegenate union that would compromise the White and civilized character of the new American nation" (*GN* 206).

Later still, in the nineteenth century when "it appeared that the supply of frontier land was approaching a point of exhaustion" (Slotkin *FE* 138), thus creating the feeling that soon there would be no more safety valve for the "competition of classes for limited resources" (Slotkin *FE* 138), there was an adaptation by the "literary mythology of the period" (Slotkin *FE* 138). That new literary mythology had to adapt the "vocabulary of the Frontier Myth" (*FE* 138) to the new historical situation. It presented a view of the city "as the place in which America's future was being created" (*FE* 138), with so much

"entrepreneurial energy as the West... [and as] places to which the ambitious artisan or the underemployed farmer's child could go to earn wages and better his or her condition" (Slotkin *FE* 138). But Slotkin notes that even if in that literature the "new regime of the Metropolis is regarded as positive and progressive development" (*FE* 138), it had to cope with the abandonment of the "belief in the traditional democratic ethic of aggrandizing and liberating the individual" (139) because of the "bases of class conflicts" (139) passed on by the Frontier Myth. Those "fictions of an idealized Metropolis" (139) had, on the one hand, to "reject the nation of land-hungry and ambitious men-on-the-make conceived in the Myth of the Frontier" (139), while, on the other, "present[ed] instead a citizenry whose essential instincts are docile, dependent, and domestic" (139).

According to Slotkin, such a "reconception of the character of citizenry" (*FE* 139) was, in a sense, a "restatement of the Jefferson/Cooper ideal of the yeoman farmer" (139). He explains that as the

> mythical Jacksonian yeoman ceased to be the deferential subordinate of the squire and became the upwardly mobile farmer-speculator-entrepreneur, his abandoned characteristics of dependence, docility, and domesticity were projected onto subordinate races, classes, and sexes –Indians, blacks, women, and children... precisely the classes who were the first targets of the aggressive expansionism of the Jacksonian period (139),

in the first decades of the nineteenth century. That ideological move supported the "contrast between the active (male) white citizen of the Frontier Myth and the passive (female) nonwhite laborer of the Metropolis" (139). But in the period of industrialization in the

beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, when the "demand for unskilled labor... brought waves of foreign immigrants" (139-40) the distinction between the "independent 'mechanics' and artisans" – until then, enjoyed by the "native-born white male workers"-- and the predominantly female and black "wage worker without property", whose status was equivalent to that of an "unsexing and a racial 'degradation'" (139), could not support itself anymore, and the "white man's acceptance of the status of proletarian (wage worker without property) is equivalent to accepting an unsexing and a racial 'degradation'" (Slotkin *FE* 139). Noted by Slotkin, in the "ideology of social relations arising from these developments we can see the beginnings of a dangerous contradiction in American values" (*FE* 139). Such a new situation asked for a renewal of the "values embodied in the Frontier Myth" (140).

In Slotkin's words, the "central structure of this new ideology was the political arrangement of 'paternalism', or... 'domestication'" (*FE* 140). That would involve the "projection onto the social and political realms of the values and power relationships characteristic of a 'traditional' (read 'idealized') bourgeois family" (140). In such an idealized situation the "ruler of his microcosm is a benign but powerful father, whose moral authority and political legitimacy is authenticated by the 'natural' sentiments of spousal and filial affection and respect" (140). The father, on the other hand, "mitigates the rigor of his authority by the essentially affectionate and protective attitude he takes toward his dependents; and the dependents, for their part, accept their place in his universe" (140).

As one can see, the "erotic woman" can only play a subversive role in such a "paternalistic" idealized world. By showing sexual initiative she threatens the status of the white man as the Father, who has already to face the feminization that the industrial and urban milieu tend to impose on male wage laborers. Her taste for a life of consumerism

situates her outside the hearth and inside the masculine realm of the streets and speakeasies; as both an object of desire and a potential competitor she makes it more difficult for the men to be sure about their place in society. Though she may depend financially on her men, she is not willing or able to abandon her life of adventures. In addition, her immodest behavior brings up immediately the negative values imputed to sex outside marriage since the first Puritans in America: chaos in contrast with civilization, racial inferiority in contrast with white superiority, and wilderness as the source of evil in contrast with the goodness in Christianity. But such is the female myth-figure who must replace the redemptive woman in the classical gangster films. A woman who, as stated by Slotkin, combines the redemptive qualities of motherhood with eroticism, can not bring the hope for redemption. But it is her who will have a place in the gangster film, since the presence of a gangster as the dominant element prevents the redemptive woman to play her conventional role, and his involvement with an erotic woman functions to imply his inability to integrate the good society and to procreate.

A third consequence of the gangster-protagonist for the syntactic organization of the three classical gangster films is the subversion of the conventional, or idealized, bourgeois family and its relations. One characteristic of the Hollywoodian bourgeois family is the father as the provider and protector of the household, following the paternalistic family model. For such a family structure to work one condition must be satisfied: the father (who must also be the hero) will compete in the outside world for the money to support his family. On the other hand, he must be loving and protective towards his dependents when he is back home. For that contradictory male figure to function there must be a sharp division between office and home, his family unaware of the everyday violence which exists in the competitive world of capitalist relations. However, it is impossible for the

gangster to separate the two places. Crime is his business and since he is a criminal notwithstanding where he is, he can't help but take business with him wherever he goes, thus transforming his home/office into a place where family relations mix with the violent business relations.

Thus the gangster's home becomes some sort of a Terrible House. In "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" Wood tells us that the "image of the 'Terrible House' stems from a long tradition in American (and Western capitalist) culture" (212). "Traditionally," he explains, "it represents an extension or 'objectification' of the personalities of the inhabitants" (212). Accordingly, in the three films that established the gangster genre, the Terrible house of the gangster indicates the violent, ambitious and competitive personality of its owner. Its inability to accommodate an ideal family displays its inability to separate the realm of business from the home, an inability which is part of the gangster's personality itself. As the gangster's monstrosity lies in his gift for dissolving the borderline separating good and evil, so does his Terrible House stand simultaneously for the place for a home and the site for all the violence that American culture values as a useful and valid means for success.

Finally, the suspension of the references for right and wrong caused by the gangster as protagonist also prevents the classical gangster film from having a positive hero. Although the gangster does exhibit the qualities Wood offers in defining the Hollywoodian "Ideal Male", namely the "virile adventurer, potent, untrammeled man of action" (*I,G,A*), he resists to be characterized as a means for the realization of the bourgeois ideal world since his use of those qualities are focused against the very values that the American bourgeoisie hold as redemptive. Indeed, the Ideal Male stems from a long sequence of mythic heroes in the Frontier Myth. As seen above, in the captivity narratives are centered

around a "captive," a white woman, who "symbolizes the values of Christianity and civilization that are imperiled in the wilderness war" (Slotkin *GN* 14). In those narratives it is the white male who returns the captive woman to her Christian home, thus enacting the mythic plunge into the forces of darkness where he can be transformed and recover his civilized identity by means of violent action. Later, as pointed out by Slotkin, in the "early decades of the eighteenth century a second type of narrative was developed" (*GN* 15). As he explains, the "earliest exemplar of the type [of hero] was... Benjamin Church, a man... [characterized by his] intimate knowledge of Indians and skill in adapting their tactics" (*GN* 15). According to Slotkin, "Church is the prototype for a version of the American hero-as-Indian-fighter that reached full historical expression in the career (and public celebrity) of Daniel Boone (1784 and after), and in the literary mythology of the nineteenth century" (*GN* 15). Such a mythic hero must be both civilized and also somehow an expert in Indian warfare and way of life. The inherent contradictions of this white male hero who (like the "good badman" hero in the Western) can wander both in the realm of white civilization and in the dark of wilderness, but who doesn't belong to any, will finally surface in the figure of the gangster.

Such are the main syntactic consequences of the gangster as protagonist, a new convention which appears for the first time in the gangster film trilogy which established the genre. In fact, Altman's thesis on genre as deployed in this discussion does have a resemblance to the theory of the dominant by the Russian Formalists. As Tony Bennett explains in *Outside Literature*, the "dominant is conceived [according to Jakobson] as 'the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components'" (83). In Bennett's words, where this happens, "genres are comprised of texts in which the same formal trait performs the structuring and organizing role of the dominant,

subordinating all other traits to its ruling influence" (83). On the other hand, the "mere occurrence of this trait is not a sufficient criterion for a text's inclusion in a genre" (83). If the gangster as protagonist is a dominant pattern in all three classical gangster films, one must notice that such is not just a *formal* element. The gangster-protagonist as dominant functions also as a *semantic* dominant as it will imply the semantic universe of those films in which he occurs.

Bennett, however, discusses the deployment of the concept of the dominant in analyses of the novel in order to indicate some difficulties one faces when using a method based on such a concept. First, and after pointing that the "procedure of defining genres in terms of their dominants has proved more influential within the sociology of genres" (84), he calls one's attention to two general characteristics shared by those studies of the novel which follow the logic of the dominant. "First, they are largely agreed in viewing the novel as a distinctively modern genre whose origins and evolution are held to be coincident with the rise and development of capitalism" (86). Second, he claims that those studies "theorise the relationship between the novel and capitalism in terms of a 'master-text' of capitalism which most clearly distinguish capitalism from other economic and social systems" (86). He then notes that the "result of these two procedures is the organization of two diachronic series, each conceived in terms of a dominant" (86), that is, one concerning the "origins and development of the generic dominant of the novel, and [the other concerning] the origins and development of the social dominant of capitalism" (86). Then, Bennett notes, "by tracing a set of correspondences between those two series... [the] social dominant is usually construed as a set of real social relations which exist prior to and independently of the novel" (86-7) thus establishing the social dominant as a primary source while the generic

dominant is taken as a "secondary effect" (87) from elements outside the literary sphere" (87).

At this point one should note that, even if following the logic of the dominant, the present study does not propose, in contrast with the above described procedure, the real social relations as the primary determinant of the generic dominant. That would imply a view of the literary text as a sphere somehow outside society. Rather, what one sees is a mutual influence: though the fictional gangster did spring from a new social and economic reality in America (which includes the appearance of new technologies like film, fast urbanization, and the increase in urban crime), the gangster character has also influenced and stimulated the advancement of the very social and economic conditions which fostered his creation. In short, literature –and film as well—is not just a reflection of social conditions but a constitutive part of them; the twentieth-century American mythology appears on screen as the result of a negotiation among the industry, the general public and the artists in Hollywood. Following Tony Bennett, who proposes to theorize the "literary/social relations... by thinking literary relations *as* social relations, this study suggests the same approach to Hollywood genre films and, particularly, to the gangster film.

In addition, Bennett claims that those studies of the novel usually "work with different empirical materials –that is, which accord their attention to different texts within different historical circumstances—as a consequence of the ways in which the generic dominant of the novel and the social dominant of capitalism are respectively defined" (87). Thus, since each critic gives his or her own definition for each type of dominant (the social and the generic), the result is that each theory of the novel will "centrally concern definitional decisions and their effects and, for this reason, often prove insoluble, driven

into a discursive deadlock" (87). In any event, what those critics do is to define the "novel in terms of the role accorded a particular set of formal attributes" (Bennett 91). These attributes, Bennett explicates, are then interpreted "as expressive of particular forms of life, [which] are thus connected to a particular structure of social relationships in which they find their support" (92). As "it consists of a definite set of attributes combined in specific patterns of inter-relations" (92), the novel seems, then, "to be defined in positive terms... as does the society which supports it" (92).

Nonetheless, resorting to a review of genre theory by Anne Freadman, Bennett argues that "this appearance of positivity is misleading" (92). Briefly put, instead of the product of positive statements, the definition of a genre will always depart from "not-statements" which help establish the boundaries between the genre being defined against all other genres. That is, to define a genre implies necessarily to start by deciding what such a genre is not. Bennett then notes that for Freadman, what she "calls the 'recipe theory of genres' in which genres are held to be definable in terms of a set of inherent characteristics, constituting a definite generic positivity, is called into question" (92). Tony Bennett shows the consequent problems:

> If the positivity of the novel is defined in terms of a cluster of attributes which are arrived at via a process of negative differentiation, that positivity is liable to be differently conceived depending on the generic reference points which govern this process of differentiation... Theories of the novel abound and, more often than not, they are irreconcilable so far as their characterization of the genre's positivity is concerned... Yet these incompatibilities... result from the fact

> that entirely the same procedural steps are taken but from within contrasting conceptions of the field of generic differences within which the novel is to be inserted and in terms of which its positivity is theorized. (93)

Bennett's conclusion is that "[w]hen the deployment of the same method results in irreconcilable theories whose competing claims cannot be meaningfully assessed, there are good grounds for thinking the method is inherently flawed" (95).

Accordingly, Bennett notes it was with that kind of difficulty in mind that "Bakhtin suggested the concerns of genre theory, and particularly those of the theory of the novel, should be radically revised" (95). Indeed, Bakhtin will claim that all those attempts "made to distinguish it [the novel] as an already completed genre from other already completed genres, to discover its internal canon –one that would function as a well-defined system of rigid generic factors" (*Dialogic Imagination* 8) have failed. Bennett notes, as it was already noted here in Chapter 1, that in "Bakhtin's view, the novel is an unfinished genre and forever destined to remain so. The novel is, he argues, 'the genre of becoming'" (96). But in contrast with the "teleological structure of... Lukács's Hegelian conception of the novel's tendency to develop toward a restored epic fullness" (Bennett 96), Bakhtin's conception of the novel is that of a "becoming without fixed end or finality" (96). Instead, the "novel *is* not –it has no permanent set of formal characteristics which might define it—but *becomes*, constantly changing and developing" (96). However, Bennett contends, from such a perspective, the novel is understood as an ongoing process which is "not in any specified and pre-ordained direction dictated by the organization of the relations between literary form and social structure which marked the circumstances of its origin" (96).

That being so, it is not possible to define the "novel in terms of the formal attributes governing its structure for it has no structure; it never reaches a point of development at which its attributes congeal into a stable and identifiable pattern" (Bennett 96). Rather, as already discussed in Chapter 1, it is the very process of "novelization [that] becomes systemic and all-pervasive, the dominant principle of the modern literary system" (97). When this happens all genres are affected, "novelizing them just as they, in turn, become sources of novelization" (97). Thus, not only the novel, but all other genres will exhibit such an unending "openness and unfinishedness" (97). And Bennett summarizes:

> ... if, as Derrida contends, the law of genre is that genres should not be mixed, yet they always are, Bakhtin socialises and historicises this process of generic mixing by relating it to the perpetual motion of modern literary culture produced by its openness to the endless mixing and mingling of languages, cultures and literary styles. (98)

Finally, Bennett's conclusion is that the "conditions required by the logic of the sociology of genres cannot be met" (98), that is, there "is no reason to suppose that genres can be constituted as definite literary structures underpinned by similar sets of social conditions" (98). Based on Bakhtin's arguments, he claims that one is justified to suppose that "what we call novels, for example, are just as distinct from one another as they are from other conventionally recognised genres" (98). By the same token, novels and narrative films as well "are related to quite different sets of conditions in different ways in different literary and social and historical circumstances" (98). Accordingly, Bennett claims that the "capacity of the concept of genre to serve as a privileged means of organizing the concerns of the socio-genetic analysis of literary forms is called into question" (98), and suggests

that if "genre is to be accorded a place within the concerns of sociological inquiry, some rethinking is in order regarding the kind of distinction the concept is capable of registering and the purposes for which it can be used" (98).

Indeed, there is no concern in this study about reaching a definite and immutable definition of the gangster film. As it was discussed in the previous Chapter, the attempt is to examine the dialogue between film and society; to discuss the social conditions in the United States during the first decades of the century when the fictional gangster was created does not imply in seeing society as a primary source and the gangster film as a "secondary effect". Rather, as already stated above, the gangster film, together with Hollywood production in general, more than a consequence was part of the very social relations of that time, with a role both as a means to express and to deal with the social, economic and historical conditions of that time, and as an active element in producing those very conditions. To define the gangster-protagonist as the dominant in the gangster film should not consist in an attempt to delimit a genre and its canon. Rather than looking for a "stable and identifiable pattern" (Bennett 96) which assumes a fixed social reality, the deployment of the logic of the dominant here shall serve to help to examine the intergeneric dialogue that so many critics have indicated. It should open the door for questioning, for instance, what is the function of the gangster in comedies, or detective films, or the film *noir*, or even in war films.

Thus, our discussion should also offer one a starting point to examine the interplay among Hollywood film genres as those genres have evolved throughout this century along with the shaping and reshaping of American modern mythology. Finally, by following the evolution in the representation of the gangster throughout this century it should help illuminate the evolution of the social and economic relations in America along these

decades. More than searching for a fixed truth, both generic and sociological, the discussion of the evolution in the organization of the gangster film and in the representation of the gangster will pursue some of the ideological contradictions faced by the Americans with the transformation of the country into an industrialized and urban nation.

Chapter 3

Public Enemy, Little Caesar, Scarface: An American Saga Begins

3.1 Establishing the Conventions for the Myth of a Cultural Contradiction

"Long before the James Cagney/Edward G. Robinson era, American directors and audiences were finding suspense and thrills in the gangster film." Such is the statement one reads on the back of the box of the video tape which includes *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1914) by director Maurice Tourneur and D. W. Griffith's *The Narrow Road* (1912), the latter recovered from a "paper print" which had been deposited at the "Library of Congress in 1912 in collaboration with the UCLA Film and Television Archive," and the former "transferred at 19 frames-per-second from a 35 mm LC print in the American Film Institute/National Film and Sound Archive of Australia Collection".[29]

Even not questioning that the audiences pre-James Cagney/Edward G. Robinson era already experienced "suspense and thrills" from the screen, it is arguable that those sensations were caused by gangster films. Indeed, there are a number of critics who make reference to those films produced before *Public Enemy, Little Caesar,* and *Scarface*. But they usually do not consider them as belonging with the gangster genre. John Raeburn, for example, notes that "[a]lthough the gangster movie appeared in embryonic form before World War I (with D.W. Griffith's *Musketeers of Pig Alley* [1912], for example), not until the late 1920's did it become a distinct genre" (47). He observes that "Prohibition provided a new, lucrative, and well-publicized field of activity for racketeers, one which required a high degree of coordination and organization, transforming the 'crook' into the 'gangster'

[29] Both quotations from the leaflet which comes with the video tape titled *Origins of the Gangster Film*. See the Filmography at the end of this dissertation for complete reference.

(47). In addition, Raeburn points that those illegal organizations that produced and bootlegged alcohol supplied their merchandise to "otherwise law-abiding citizens" (47). Moreover, he claims, those organized criminals "were regarded by many Americans as suppliers of legitimate needs, even as heroic subverters of state tyranny" (47). Raeburn adds, still, that the "city's new significance also paved the way for the gangster film, as did a reevaluation of the American success tradition" (47).

It is interesting to note that in Raeburn's comments one already finds some of the cultural conflicts which called for the appearance of a figure such as that of the gangster: American society beginning "to perceive itself as an urban rather than a rural society" (47); the conflict between the growing taste for consumerism and the religious and moral values still rooted in the rural experience; the end of the Frontier as a possibility for geographical expansion, now replaced by the idea of economic development within a disputed space. The big city brought to prominence a "set of cultural cleavages –between WASPs and ethnics, middle class and working class, rural beliefs and urban practices—that the gangster saga could dramatize with unusual force" (Raeburn 47). All that created the conditions for a transformation in the criminal activity, as well as a new subject for the burgeoning mass media and film industry to explore. But why those films produced during the second decade on the twentieth century resist being considered gangster films? What do they lack? In discussing the differences between those silent crime films and those belonging to the tradition inaugurated by *Public Enemy, Little Caesar,* and *Scarface*, one can begin to better understand what came to be considered the conventions of the gangster genre, their significance and signification.

Stuart Kaminsky says that the "gangster existed in silent film, but the films in which he appeared were essentially romances" (14). One can take such a statement as a starting

point in the discussion on what are the grounds for not considering those silent films as already belonging with the gangster genre, thus helping to illuminate the characteristics of what has been called the classical gangster film. For instance, in Kaminsky's statement there are two assertions which can raise some debate: first, that there already existed the gangster character in those silent films, and second, a hint that even before the appearance of the genre as such one already finds a mixture of generic elements, namely, those of romance and of crime stories.

3.2 The Silent Gangster ?

The discussion in this section will concentrate on two silent-era films, which have deserved the designation of pre-gangster films: Griffith's *The Narrow Road* (1912) and Tourneur's *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1914). Some comments shall be included about Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), specially due to the fact that critics often make reference to it, but its analysis here will be limited since for the present study this researcher was unable to get hold of a copy for direct viewing.

The Narrow Road is a one-reel movie lasting only 17 minutes. It is less elaborated than Tourneur's film both technically and in its plot. Though it raises the issues of urban poverty and crime, it is difficult to classify its mean guys as gangsters. The film opens with a young woman in the living room of her humble apartment getting ready to go out. She is, according to the caption, "the faithful wife outside the prison walls". While she wanders outside the prison, her husband is shown sewing prison uniforms together with other prisoners, all of them observed by the guards. While he works, he sighs as one who knows that patience is required until his prison days run out. Surreptitiously, he risks a look at the "cheering letter" sent by his wife, but quickly hides it back when a guard gets closer, and

continues sewing, now with a dreamy countenance. Outside she dreams along; back home, she pulls a leaf off the wall calendar and smiles confidently. Finally, the caption tells us, "time is up". The next day she is again outside the prison walls, merry with the imminent release of her husband. Another convict is released with the husband, the real bad guy who insists with him that they restart their criminal career right away. Embracing his wife, the husband rejects his prison-companion's offering and leaves to take "the straight road".

In the next scene, the couple arrives at their apartment in high spirits. The wife takes a small parcel from under her blouse and unwraps it, offering the money in it to her husband. He refuses to hold it and takes some bills from his pocket, insisting that she keep all the money. Meanwhile, the bad guy (a counterfeiter, as the audience will soon learn) is shown arriving at a paid room, where he stays alone after giving a coin to the landlord. Back to the couple, we see the husband examining every detail in the modest living room, gesturing happily and marveled by simply being in his own home again. Full of enthusiasm, he hugs his wife again and goes out with a determined attitude, certainly to fulfill his promise that now he'll "do the work". Back home after a hard day's work, the husband goes out again to buy a newspaper, then meeting the counterfeiter who invites him to enter a coffee shop to try convince him to join his illegal deeds. Two detectives, who had recognized them both, observe their conversation. At last, resisting "the crook's inducements," the husband returns to his apartment, where he must explain to his wife that the smell of alcohol is due to just one glass of beer. She accepts his apologies. The counterfeiter goes back to his room; each one is followed by one of the detectives.

From there on the story acquires a faster pace. The police arrive at the counterfeiter's room. He jumps the window with a suitcase where he keeps his counterfeiting material and is pursued by the police. Eventually, he knocks at the couple's

door and the husband "is induced to hide the crook's counterfeiting outfit". They hide it in the sleeping room and the counterfeiter runs again through the window (the apartment was in the ground floor), observed by two beggars. Presently, the police arrive and start searching the apartment. While the couple tries to deny holding anything illegal, the two beggars enter the room through the window and quickly run away with the counterfeiter's suitcase. Convinced that there is nothing in the apartment, the police leave. While the couple, relieved and grateful to fate, embraces one another, the police find the counterfeiter and the two beggars fighting for the suitcase and arrest them all. In the last scene, the husband arrives at the construction where he works and finds the building contractor's (his boss) wallet on the ground. After a little thought, he returns the wallet and begins his working day. Shortly after the incident, a detective arrives and inquires the building contractor about him. The husband's boss denies any foul behavior from our hero, and confirms his opinion by telling the detective how his wallet was returned. The film ends with the faithful wife once more in the living room, sighing with a mixture of relief and hope while the last image fades out.

Looking carefully, there are not many elements in *The Narrow Road* that would later appear in the classical gangster films. Notwithstanding the presence of a criminal, no actual crime is shown on the screen, nothing, in any event, comparable to the crimes the gangster film would exhibit later. On the other hand, one already finds, even if in a still rudimentary form, some of the components listed by Robin Wood in his attempt to arrive at "some definition of what we mean by American capitalist ideology" (*I,G,A* 46) in Hollywood films. For example, the wife (Mary Pickford) in Griffith's film fits easily Wood's definition of the Ideal Female: "wife and mother, perfect companion, endlessly dependable, mainstay of the hearth" (*I,G,A* 47). However, Wood's description of the Ideal

Male –"the virile adventurer, potent, untrammelled man of action"—can not be so easily applied to the husband (Elmer Booth) in *The Narrow Road.* Indeed, Wood himself notes that these two (the Ideal Male and the Ideal Female) "combine into an Ideal Couple of quite staggering incompatibility" (*I,G,A* 47). As a consequence, "each has his/her own shadow, giving us:... [t]he settled husband/father, dependable but dull" (47) (the other "shadow" being the "erotic woman"). Willing to work hard, to avoid excessive drinking, eager to take "the straight road," together with the actor's performance full of deep sighs and dreamy looks and passionate embraces,[30] the husband in Griffith's film fits unproblematically the dependable husband type. In fact, it is hard for the audience even to believe that such a well meaning and hard-working man would commit any crime –we are never informed about the reason for his conviction, making us feel he was unjustly sentenced. The counterfeiter (Alfred Paget), in his turn, is merely a petty criminal (though not a beggar's clothes, what he wears is far from the sophisticated suits of the gangsters by Cagney, Muni, or Robinson, and their successors), the bad guy whose place is in jail, alright. His character never provokes any moral conflict in the audience: there is no empathy towards him, so his fate at the end of the film is taken naturally by us.

In addition to the character-types pointed by Wood, some of the Hollywoodian ideological 'themes' he lists can also be found in *The Narrow Road.* Take the first component in Wood's list: "Capitalism, the right of ownership, private enterprise, personal initiative" (47), and the second one: the "work ethic," defined as the "notion that 'honest toil' is in itself and for itself morally admirable" (*I,G,A* 47), both components together

[30] In "Love, Danger, and the Professional Ideology of Hollywood Cinema" Mark Garrett Cooper analyzes what was produced as "a new commonsense about how love looked and about what was required to overcome the manifold dangers that threatened it" (86). He claims that "[e]veryone knows what love looks like on the screen... images of lovers gazing deeply into each other's eyes before collapsing into an enthusiastic embrace" (87).

"validating and reinforcing each other" (47). And he adds, too, that the "moral excellence of work is also bound up with the necessary subjugation or sublimation of the libido" (47). The first component is hinted in a number of ways in the story: one cannot have what is not his or hers, like the building constructor's wallet. More: the good couple have their own apartment, but the counterfeiter has to pay for his room. And of course, one must work to possess something, a "natural law" which is also reinforced many times in the story. In the prison, for example, the convicts are always shown working, and they seem to be paid for their work, since both the husband and the counterfeiter receive some money when they are freed. The "work ethic" is also supported by the correlation honest work equal to take "the straight road," and vice-versa. And as for the "sublimation of the libido" whenever the protagonist couple is so full of joy for being together again, they hug each other and immediately thereafter he goes out, either to work or even just to buy a newspaper. Amid so many passionate sighs husband and wife are not allowed to stay together in their hearth for too long.

The presence of all those ideological elements in Griffith's film are only possible in a fictional universe where the division between right and wrong is indisputable. The "system" is fine: although poverty exists, one can go straight or not, depending simply on one's own character and attitude, it is a matter of personal decision. Based on such an implied assumption any contradiction within American society's organization and institutions is erased. Thus, the need for prisons is undisputed since there must be a place to put society's bad apples. The same goes for the police. In addition, the contradiction between marriage and the lack of sex is effaced by the underlying message that the importance of marriage is to preserve the right to ownership and to justify labor; in contrast, the counterfeiter is single, refuses to work, insists on being a criminal and, consequently, is

sent back to prison. So even when dealing with a social problem --that of poverty and crime-- the audience is invited to empathize with the good couple, to reject the bad guy's behavior, and to see the order imposed by the police as something natural.

In relation to Tourneur's *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, its 5 reels and 65 minutes allowed for a more elaborated plot, a more sophisticated use of technical resources, and a higher complexity in the composition of the characters. More than that, the film surely deserves, more than *The Narrow Road*, to be classified as a precursor to the gangster genre. As one can read in the leaflet[31] which comes with the video tape, "[b]ank robbery, safecracking, gang solidarity, prison, hidden identity, moral reformation.... *Alias Jimmy Valentine* takes up every familiar element of the crime drama with suspense and wit". Due to the richness of the film for this study and to its rareness it is worthwhile making a summary of the story, even if somewhat long.

The story opens, after the introduction of each character, with a caption where it reads: "His double life. By day he is Lee Randall - respected citizen. By night he is Jimmy Valentine - enemy to society". Next, Lee Randall (Robert Warwick) is shown in his office. Soon he and the other employees conclude it is time for all to close and go home. He returns to his apartment, which is comfortable and clean, although located in a shabby two-storied house in a poor neighborhood. It is 5:00 p.m. and, alone, he naps till midnight, when he changes his hat for a cap, turns his jacket's collar up, and leaves to meet his accomplices Red (John Hines) and Bill Avery (Alec B. Francis). Together, they set out to rob a bank. Jimmy is an expert safecracker who needs no tools, just his sensitive fingers. Red helps him

[31] The two films in that videotape come with a leaflet by The Library of Congress, which brings information about the films, including how old copies were found and recuperated (*The Narrow Road*, for example, was copied from a "paper print" deposited at the Library of Congress in 1912 for copyright protection), and about the making of the films, together with more data on the directors and suggestions of other silent crime videos and suggested readings.

inside the bank, while Bill waits outside as their lookout. Accidentally, they wake the bank's watchman. Jimmy and Red manage to get away –without the money--, but in the confusion Jimmy loses one of his cuff buttons. Bill is caught by the police, but does not squeal. Later, at home with another accomplice, Cotton (who is not mentioned in the credits), Jimmy notices the lack of the cuff button and decides to leave town at once. Before leaving with Cotton, he sends a coded message for Red, telling what had happened and setting a meeting with the lad in a hotel in another city. Jimmy and Cotton run from the apartment just a few minutes before the arrival of detective Doyle (Robert Cummings), who had found the lost cuff button.

During their trip by train, Cotton trifles with a young woman –Rose Fay (Ruth Shepley)—who rejects him. Jimmy interferes, fights with Cotton, and eventually throws him out of the train, while she follows the whole scene. Immediately thereafter, Jimmy runs from the train, while Cotton lays badly hurt on the railway tracks. In her turn, Rose arrives home and tells her father, Lt. Governor Fay (Fred Truesdale), about "her startling adventure with a gentleman and a 'cad'". Meanwhile, in a hospital bed, Cotton "squeals" to Doyle just before dying.

Later, in the main hall of the hotel where the gang was supposed to meet, Jimmy is tricked by Doyle, and is arrested before the arrival of Red. A caption informs us about Jimmy's fate: "... and the iron doors of Sing Sing closed slowly upon him for ten long years". The following couple of minutes are filled with images of life in prison. There, about a year elapses when, unexpectedly, Lt. Governor Fay, accompanied by his daughter Rose and by a certain Mrs. Webster, "leader of the 'Gate of Hope'," arrive at the prison warden's office for a visit to Sing Sing. In order to entertain his guests, the warden sends for one of the prisoners, "Blinky Davis, the cleverest pen and ink artist I [the warden] have

ever seen". Before the amazed eyes of the Lt. Governor, Blinky transforms a five dollars check written by the former into one of five thousand dollars. Presently, he sends for Jimmy Valentine, whom the warden calls "a more romantic type," explaining that "[h]ere's a man who is doing ten years for opening a safe without tools or combination, simply by the sense of touch."

Jimmy, however, refuses to open the safe without a combination, denying that he is capable of safecracking. When the warden begins to lose his patience, the Lt. Governor intervenes, and listens to Jimmy version of the story. Eventually, Jimmy convinces the Lt. Governor that he was unjustly sent to prison. Believing that Cotton had lied to the police just to get even with Jimmy for throwing him out of the train (Rose recognizes Jimmy and says so to her father), leaves Sing Sing "determined to assist Jimmy in securing a pardon." Jimmy is pardoned, but before being freed is warned by Doyle: "I'll get you! It may take a little time, a year, perhaps ten, but as long as we're both alive, I'm after you."

Outside the prison walls Jimmy is met by Red, who awaits him with a new cap to replace his partner's old ragged hat and with an overcoat, since it is winter. "On his way to thank Lieut. Governor Fay for his liberty, Jimmy listens eagerly to Red's plan for a new robbery." Presently, they go different ways, Jimmy goes to Lt. Governor Fay's house to thank him, while Red bides his time in a bar, where he drinks a huge glass of beer and cheats the waiter in order not to pay his bill. Jimmy leaves Fay's house with an invitation to pay a visit to his benefactor in a week's time, at the bank owned by Fay. He meets Red at the bar, where Red, noticing Jimmy absent minded attitude, comments with a malicious face: "That 'dame'... Eh?". Jimmy reacts instantly and grabs his partner by the neck.

A week later, when Jimmy appears at the bank, he is offered a job as a cashier to replace a clerk who had just been "discharged" by Lt. Governor Fay (Actually, after

witnessing the clerk being discharged, Rose convinces her father to offer the job to Jimmy). Jimmy accepts the offer and runs to tell Red of the good news. Red, in his turn, initially resists changing his way of life, but is persuaded when his partner promises to make him a watchman in a National Bank".

Now, "[t]wo happy years have elapsed. Jimmy Valentine has buried his past life and 'alias'. He is now Lee Randall, trusted cashier." Bill Avery is set free from prison and appears in the bank. After some debate, Jimmy and Red persuade him too about the good side of going straight. With a letter of recommendation from Jimmy, Bill gets a job in a factory. Some time later, Jimmy declares his love to Rose, who corresponds. Meanwhile the phone rings. It's from Sing Sing. They have received a message from the Chief of Police asking them if a man named Jimmy Valentine had been incarcerated there during 1902. He is wanted "for a former job which he" had committed before.

When Doyle appears in Jimmy's office with an arrest warrant in his name, Jimmy tells the detective he is not Jimmy Valentine, but Lee Randall, and uses a fake alibi to prove it. Doyle pretends to be convinced, but waits behind a door. Red enters the office with the news that Rose's little brother had locked his little sister in the new vault of the bank; only the Lt. Governor, away on a trip and out of reach, had the combination. Heroically – blindfolded and with his fingers bleeding from being scratched on sandpaper—Jimmy opens the vault and saves the little girl. However, he was being watched by Doyle and Rose, and at once understands that he must go to jail and forget his beloved one. Touched by Jimmy's heroic conduct and by Rose's dismay, Doyle gives up arresting Jimmy and leaves.

The first thing that comes to mind about *Alias Jimmy Valentine* is the ambiguity of the protagonist. Jimmy's double life certainly foreshadows the ambiguity of the gangster as

an outsider, inaugurated by the protagonists in *Public Enemy, Little Caesar,* and *Scarface.* When considered under the perspective of the Ideal Male ("the virile adventurer, potent, untrammelled man of action"), one finds that he fits the model in many instances. He robs because of the "thrills" (to use Bill's phrase) offered by a robber's life. In addition, he is a man always ready to use his fists, as one sees in the sequence of his fight with Cotton. But he is not a petty criminal like the counterfeiter in *The Narrow Road,* nor even like his partner Red, who cheats a poor waiter just for fun and for a coin. He is also heroic when he risks his liberty to save the little giri, and a gentleman as he is willing to defend a woman's honor (in the train and when he reacts against Red's maliciousness). On the other hand, he is romantic and shows an inclination to become the shadow of the Ideal Male, what Wood defines as "[t]he settled husband/father, dependable but dull". Such an inclination can be observed when he appears at the house of the Fays and chats amiably with Rose's kid brother. And in the same sequence, after talking to the Lt. Governor, he looks for the kid again to say goodbye before leaving. Parenthetically, that scene deserves a brief description and commentary. Jimmy, following daughter and father, arrives at a closed door. When they open it what they see is the boy sitting on a chair reading a book. He is shown sideways in a pose that reminds one of a man reading the newspaper. In front of him, with her back to the door, his little sister is sitting on a short stool. To her right, on a stool of the same height, sits a doll in the same upright position, and which she holds by the hand. Still to the right one sees a toy pet on an even shorter stool, whom the doll, in her turn, also holds by the hand. While the boy is presented in an active attitude (reading), the girl, hard to be differentiated at first glance from her toys, just sits there, helping to compose the scenery and just being "feminine". The scene is a little jewel for the illustration of the third

component in Wood's list: "Marriage... [as] an extension of the ownership principle to personal relationships ('*My* house, *my* wife, *my* children') in a male-dominated society.

In any event, it is Jimmy's "double life" that makes him a character closer to those gangsters who would appear on the screen less then two decades later. In contrast with his partners, who claim to prefer a life of "thrills", Jimmy flirts with both adventure and domesticity, with crime and an elevated code of honor. He has the cunning to be the leader of the gang, but violence is his last resort. But even if his double status as criminal and hero might qualify him as some kind of proto-gangster, there are elements in the composition of that character that prevents one from calling him a gangster in his own right. Gangsters like Tony Camonte, Tom Powers and Rico Bandello are certainly ambiguous in their ability to be at once a criminal and a hero, but they are never truly heroic, are never real gentlemen, nor are capable of showing any inclination for a domestic life. In addition, instead of "thrills" what they pursue is power. Personal power. They are monsters because, like Mary Shelley's creature, the more they try to integrate society, the more they bring up the ugliness in that same society. They can not help but confound things: while pursuing what is valued in American society –money, success, individualism, organization, personal initiative, courage— what they achieve is the reverse; as a perverted Midas, everything they touch becomes evil.

However, that is not what happens to Jimmy. Although in the beginning of the film he is presented as simultaneously a "respected citizen" and an "enemy to society", he progresses toward domestication and ends up as a reformed man. His progression in the story resembles that of a young man who loves adventure but is well meaning and matures to become an adult utteriy integrated in the good society. Instead of prison, a job. Instead of being shot to death, a prospective marriage with an Ideal/redemptive Woman. See, for

example, his arguments to persuade his partners Bill and Red to become straight guys. When Bill, out of jail, tells Jimmy he is crazy for choosing to live on the right side of the law, he answers thus: "I'm not crazy. It's only the man who thinks he can beat the law who's crazy." And when, now persuaded, Bill leaves Jimmy's office in the bank, he turns to Red and concludes: "I tell you, Red, there isn't a crook who wouldn't go straight if he could." It is impossible to imagine Rico Bandello saying something of the kind to Joe Massara. In other words, the division between right and wrong, good and evil is never really out of focus for Jimmy. As a consequence, the whole organization of *Alias Jimmy Valentine* will differ from that of the classical gangster films, preventing one to resort to it as an example of a gangster film in the silent era.

Thus, Tourneur's film defines each character's place in an unproblematical way. Rose, as already discussed, fits willingly the role reserved for the woman in a patriarchal society: she is passive, docile, a gifted housewife (she is shown a number of times taking care of and playing with her little brother and sister), romantic and frail. She is "feminine", as she powders her cheeks while Jimmy accepts the job offered to him by the Lt. Governor --an offer she persuaded her father to make by being charming. And if that wasn't enough to make it clear how a woman should behave, there is Rose's sister (presumably displaying how her big sister was educated), a girl shown sewing, praying, or just sitting there as a decorative piece of furniture. And, of course she is the one who must be saved in the end so the hero can have his past definitely cleared thus opening the way for his domestication. In that sequence, the little girl reminds one of the woman in the center of the narratives of captivity described by Richard Slotkin, who must be rescued by a white man for the sake of his own redemption.

By the same token, the film's unproblematic approach to right and wrong grants the police a totally positive image. Doyle is depicted as a man of action, intelligent, patient, good-hearted, elegant, efficient and non-violent. Sing Sing is a place where convicts march orderly in its inner courts, work diligently and wake up in the morning with a smile on their faces. As for the Lt. Governor and bank owner Fay, the film bestows him sensitivity (although mistaken about Jimmy's claim of innocence, he was right about Jimmy's moral integrity), entrepreneurship (he was on a business trip during the incident with the bank vault), and a personal power which appears to be indisputable and only natural for him. In other words, bank owners, politicians, the police, chaste women and children are all members of the good society. More then that, the story develops in the realm of that same good society; criminals are only there to reinforce the message that crime does not pay. Jimmy and his partners, for instance, can recall a number of successful robberies; nevertheless, their dwellings and clothes are humble, except for Jimmy himself, who held a regular job in addition to his criminal activities.

In relation to Griffith's other pre-gangster film – *The Musketeers in Pig Alley*—the assertion of the values of civilization against evil and chaos seem to follow the same formula. According to Marilyn Yaquinto, in her book *Pump'Em Full of Lead*, "Griffith got the idea for *Musketeers* from newspaper accounts of real crime, although he omitted murder in his screen version" (12). The absence of murder possibly functions as a promise that even those bad apples in society can be redeemed. After reading Yaquinto's summary of the film one finds that it exhibits similar "patterns" to those in *Alias Jimmy Valentine* and *The Narrow Road.* There is a romantic couple (poor as in *The Narrow Road*), whose chances for becoming respectful is threatened by the action of criminals. The good guy, a musician, "kisses his grieving Little Lady (Lillian Gish) good-bye and goes off 'to improve

his fortune'" (Yaquinto 13). So while he begins his journey in search for the American dream of success and wealth, the Little Lady stays at home, defenseless. While he is away she is threatened by "Snapper Kid (Elmer Booth)—chief of the Musketeers (slang for hoodlums)" (13). At the same time, the musician "intrudes in gangster's turf" (13) twice: the first time it happens by chance and he is robbed; the second time he goes by his own decision, and recovers his wallet. In a third situation, it is Snapper Kid who invades the couple's apartment, but is rejected by the Little Lady, who chooses to stay with the musician. To be left alone, "the couple lies to [the police] to protect Snapper" (14).

So once more the captivity narrative is enacted and its associated myths –the superiority of Christian values, patriarchal monogamous marriage, free enterprise-- are reaffirmed. The man must (the musician, and the "husband" in *The Narrow Road*) find his way through the dark forces of a land without law (Pig Alley and the streets where the husband is tempted by the counterfeiter), rescue the woman (the Little Lady and the wife) in order to find redemption and fulfill the American dream. What seems to make of *The Musketeers in Pig Alley* more of a precursor to the classical gangster films can be implied by this quotation from Yaquinto's book: "Film historian Carlos Clarens describes the lead characters as 'threatened innocents cut from Victorian cardboard.' But the gangster –all attitude and delectable sneer—does more than steal their money: he steals their thunder" (14). In other words, in contrast with *The Narrow Road*, in which the criminal ends up in jail, and with *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, whose proto-gangster ends up a reformed man, in the case of *The Musketeers in Pig Alley* the "gangster" ends up free and, on top of that, results in a more charming character than the lead characters. And that is arguably the most significant characteristic of the gangster character since his first appearances on the screen: the bad guy in relation to whom the audience cannot help but empathize with.

It is still worth noting that all three films being discussed already present a mixing of generic conventions and patterns. In all of them one finds at least two sets of generic conventions or patterns: that of a crime film and that of romance. In addition to those two, in Tourneur's film there is even an investigatory narrative. Another pattern that would come to be explored in future genre films is the relation between Jimmy and Red. While Cotton is killed by Jimmy himself to protect Rose, and Bill stays in jail and thus removed from most of the action, Jimmy and Red display a camaraderie of two men which could allow one to anticipate the male friendship between Rico Bandello and Joe Massara in *Little Caesar*, Tom Powers and Matt Doyle in *Public Enemy* and Tony Camonte and Guino Rinaldo (*Scarface*). Friendship between two buddies, by the way, would become a pattern to appear in a number of Hollywood films so contrasting in generic terms, as the comedies with Laurel and Hardy (late 1920s through 1940s), the road movie *Easy Rider* (1969), the Western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), the detective film *Lethal Weapon* (1987), the comedies-cum-musical starring Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin (1950s), the sci-fi *Star Wars* (1977) and its following series with the buddies played by Mark Hamill and Harrison Ford, or even *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which can also be approached as a buddy film, in spite of the buddies being two women. In the following section the conventions and patterns established by the classical gangster trilogy will be discussed.

3.3 *Little Caesar, Scarface,* and *Public Enemy*

The film critic Thomas Schatz begins the fourth chapter in his *Hollywood Genres* with the observation that the "gangster film has had a peculiar history. The narrative formula seemed to spring from nowhere in the early 1930s, when its conventions were isolated and refined in a series of immensely popular films" (81). He is making reference,

sure enough, to the three most successful of those first gangster films: Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* (1930), William Wellman's *Public Enemy* (1931), and Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1932). Along with Schatz, the majority of the critics agree that those are the three films which established the conventions of the gangster genre. In this section, a number of elements in those films will be analyzed not with any intention to offer some precise definition to the gangster genre, a task never pursued in this study, but, on the contrary, to demonstrate that there is a pattern in those three films in which the gangster is always the protagonist and hero, a dominant condition which determines the structure of the plot and the relations among the remaining characters; in Chapter 4 it will be discussed the plot consequences and ideological implications in variations around that original pattern, which is defined here as a gangster film. In the pattern followed by the gangster film the gangster hero displays his monstrosity, i.e., his inherent ability to suspend the line dividing good and evil, in a most powerful way. On the other hand, as it will become clear in the next chapter, there are gangster film variations in which elements from other genres are included with a higher dramatic density when compared to what one sees in the gangster film, enough to compete with the gangster protagonist for the dominance in the story, resulting in gangster genre films that obey different patterns from that of the gangster film. Now, it will be demonstrated how the metaphor of the gangster as monster —and its consequences on Hollywood's mythological universe— functions in the first three gangster films.

As it was already stated in the previous chapter, the main pattern originated in those three films is not just the fictional figure of the gangster, but the gangster as protagonist, the gangster-hero. Around such a semantic element, the whole syntax of the film is organized, its patterns are established. Because the bad guy is also the hero, the whole division between right and wrong, good and evil becomes blurred and disappears. The composition

of the characters is complicated and the myths for which they would stand are held in check. Indeed, an inversion occurs: instead of the traditional structure in which the hero/heroine strive to save the civilized world from the threats of evil and chaos (Indians or gunmen in the Western, the monster in horror films, space creatures in sci-fi films, the criminal in the detective stories, or even the initial emotional incompatibility between the lead couple in romantic genres like the musical and the screwball comedy, or the protagonist's reluctance to "fit" in family melodrama), the very possibility for a civilized society becomes meaningless.

It was stated in Chapter 1 that any attempt to understand the gangster under the perspective of binary oppositions would lead to a limited view of the character. For example, when the gangster is defined as the bad pole of the opposition between good and bad, he becomes the bad capitalist, the opposite to the good capitalist. The first limitation generated by such an approach lies in its implicit demand for a definition for a good capitalist. The second restriction, and more important here, results from the inability of the approach to deal with the ambiguity of the character. When the gangster is depicted as bad it becomes difficult to explain why the audience empathizes with him. On the other hand, any attempt to convert the poles of the opposition, thus defining him as good, renders his own behavior on the screen unacceptable and impossible to explain either. So our next step is to apply the metaphor of the monster (that who mixes good and bad in a way that the dominant ideological definitions are challenged) to the protagonists in *Scarface*, *Public Enemy*, and *Little Caesar*. Such a procedure should not only cast some new light over the status of the character in the gangster genre itself, but also illuminate his meaning when appearing in other genres as well.

3.4 The Gangster Hero: a Modern Monster Appears on the Screen

When one looks at the gangsters played by Robinson, Cagney, and Muni, it is easy to note that they all come from the margins of society and they all aim at integrating the social mainstream, which for them means getting to the "top of the world." In that sense, their goal does not differ much from that of the hero in the Horatio Alger's books. According to Edward Mitchell, in Alger stories the protagonist "has been separated from his family and deprived of his rightful inheritance... [and his] task is... to win back the family homestead... or... to rise from his status as urban waif to a position of monetary security and respectability" (204). In addition, still like the hero in Alger's novels, the gangster hero "survives as long as he does against heavy odds because of his energy, cunning, and bravura" (207). However, Mitchell notes that while in Alger's stories those traits are presented as positive attributes, they take a somber taint when they appear in the gangster. Why the difference? Because Alger's hero is meant to represent the feasibility of the American dream, while the gangster can not help but expose the social cost of that same dream. Because in Alger's stories the protagonist is born good and his adversaries –the bad guys— stand for those problems with which the system itself is capable of dealing without the need for any real transformation. Similarly to what happens in *The Narrow Road*, the bad guys are punished while those who "go straight" are allowed to keep their dream of success. The eventual success of Alger's hero, together with the punishment for his adversaries, serves only to confirm the feasibility of the American dream. Alger's books repeat the same fictional universe one finds in all Hollywood films which close with a happy ending: a world that is unproblematically divided between good and bad; the bad, of course, are so due to their own choice. But the gangster is born a monster, a hero who

shouldn't be. His success does not reaffirm the dream, and his death (his punishment) does not dissolve its cost and contradictions.

Thus, the problem with the gangster protagonist is not that he is simply evil. It is not that he rejects the American dream. On the contrary, the problem lies in that the more he succeeds in his pursuit of the American dream, the more the road to redemption is closed for him. While to the westerner there is always a sunset to go, a kind of limbo from where he can come again to save civilization, the gangster protagonist cannot help but strive in an environment where heaven and hell have short-circuited. Like the first Puritans, he believes that America is there just waiting for him to be transformed into his own version of Eden. Without Nature and Indians to bar his way, the gangster must kill his fellow citizens to achieve his goals. The gangster's dreams of making America is made clear in the first dialogue in *Little Caesar*, between Rico Bandello and his partner Joe Massara, after robbing a gas station and shooting the attendant. In the coffee shop where they go after the robbery, a headline on a Chicago newspaper ("Underworld Pays Respects to Diamond Pete Montana") makes them dream of the big city. Each one offers his version of the American dream:

> JOE. Yeah, there's money in the Big Town, all right. And the women! Good times... somethin' doin' all the time... excitin' things. Gee, the clothes I could wear. Then I'd quit, Rico. "I'd go back to dancin' like I used to before I met you.
>
> RICO. Women... Dancin'... Where do they get you? I don't want no dancin'; I figure on makin' other people dance.
>
> JOE. Oh... I ain't forgettin' all about the money.

> RICO. Yeah, money's alright, but it ain't everything. Yeah, be somebody. Look hard at a bunch of guys and know that they'll do anything that you tell'em. Have your own way or nothing. Be somebody.

It is interesting to note how Joe's version of the American dream still conforms to the Myth of the Frontier. According to Slotkin, one must remember, the "Myth [of the Frontier] represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" (*GN* 12). So in Joe's case at the end of a period of necessary violence lies the possibility of redemption, i.e., of living in accordance with the positive values of bourgeois society: marriage, an honest job, acquisition of property, to become a consumer. Rico, on the other hand, cannot see the significance of redemption, though redemption was at the root of the Puritans' course of action. Concisely, the Puritans "held that people were conceived and born in sin... except for those few whom... God elected to save" (203). Those elected, however, "were saved to, not by, virtue," (Mitchell 203).[32] So for them, all the violence against the non-white and all the destruction of Nature was justified by the claim that they were building a virtuous society. But for the gangster, an entrepreneur in the competitive capitalist world, virtue is what keeps one alive and successful. In short, the unavoidable killing of the gangster as a form of re-establishing the order is an attempt to suppress the claim that under capitalism, wealth is never God's or Nature's gift, but the result of a social and economic organization that is based on cutthroat competition and brutal exploitation.

Thus, when the gangster appeared as the protagonist for the first time what he did on screen was to contaminate the whole fictional universe of the film industry with such a character's inherent ability to suspend the option between right and wrong. The effect of a protagonist who is simultaneously criminal and hero is to resist the dominant ideology which Hollywood would reinforce throughout its history. For instance, in the gangster film the realm of business and the realm of the home, the former pertaining the male and the latter belonging to the female, become impossible to separate (since the gangster is always doing business and his home is also his hideout/office) resulting in that both realms escape the limits assigned to them by the dominant ideology. As a consequence, a number of the suppressed contradictions latent in the patriarchal structuring of American society explode on the screen without hope for any solution.

In "The Synoptic Chandler" Fredric Jameson suggests that in Chandler's novels a "transformation in reverse of dwellings into office" (43) occurs, which might be helpful in analyzing how the gangster hero, as the modern American monster, has dissolved the line separating home and office. Jameson claims that Chandler transforms "the 'dwellings' of the rich... [like] the hothouse of General Sternwood [in *The Big Sleep*]... into spaces of retreat and withdrawal that are somehow more analogous to offices than to houses or even quarters or apartments" (41). In addition, Jameson observes that the house of Geiger, one of the gangsters in *The Big Sleep*, "is something like a professional office in the way in which it houses Geiger's other line of 'work', namely nude photography with a view towards blackmail" (42). By the same token, he argues that such a conversion of dwellings into offices includes

[32] Although Rico is Italian, and not a Puritan, he is entitled to mimic the Puritan's course of action because, as a monster, he always attempts to imitate and usurp the place reserved for the "white" hero in the dominant

> virtually any of the institutional spaces that provide for the satisfaction of the (other) 'vices' of the rich: not merely Geiger's 'other' office, the pornographic bookstore, but also and above all the casinos and gambling joints in which Chandler's various heiresses run up IOUs and are subsequently blackmailed... [like] the Cypress Club [in *The Big Sleep*]. (42)

Accordingly, to the gangster the very possibility of having a home with a dependable wife and loving children is out of question, though such is a goal he will pursue throughout the development of the genre before the appearance of postmodern films as *Pulp Fiction.* While in other Hollywood genres the businessman is automatically transformed into a husband and father when he arrives home, the gangster will always be a gangster wherever he is. If in normal bourgeois society the separation between home and office is supposed to be a very sharp one, the gangster's dwelling cannot be separated from his office, since a gangster is by definition always a businessman. While the very nature of illegal business takes corruption to the gangster's dwelling, the successful legitimate businessman should never bring work home, hypocritically preserving his family from the violent competition underlying business in the capitalist system.

But the very nature of capitalism makes it difficult for such a separation between the realm of business and that of the hearth to take place: the precondition for an unproblematic separation between home and office depends on the suppression of a number of emotions and on keeping a certain level of ignorance about what each member of the family does and

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ideology.

feels. Wood, based on a book by Horowitz,[33] points "the burden of repression" ("American Horror Film" 197) in "our own civilization" (197). He observes that "the most immediately obvious characteristics of life in our culture are frustration, dissatisfaction, anxiety, greed, possessiveness, jealousy, neuroticism: no more than what psychoanalytic theory shows to be the logical product of patriarchal capitalism" (197). Accordingly, in *The Big Sleep,* both the novel and the film, blackmailing, pornography and murder are found not only in the 'offices' of gangsters Eddie Mars and Geiger, but in the dwellings of high society as well. So it is that General Sternwood's mansion no longer houses a normal bourgeois family, but a disrupted one, with its household utterly involved in a corruption which seems ever harder to repress. The difference is that even if the hardboiled detective stories and the film noir present a dark view of society, they both leave a door open to the possibility of redemption by means of the detective (the Ideal Male).

In *Little Caesar*, in contrast with what one sees in *The Narrow Road*, in *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, and in *The Musketeers in Pig Alley*, the hearth is virtually absent. Because it is the story of a gangster, the audience must follow him from one office (workplace) to another almost throughout the whole story. The film opens with Rico and Joe robbing a gas station. Next, they appear at the lunch wagon, where Rico decides to "beat east", after reading about Pete Montana in the newspaper. In the following scene, he is in Sam Vettori's office, at the Club Palermo, asking to be accepted by Vettori's gang. As the story progresses, Rico will appear in Little Arnie's (a gangster under Pete Montana) gambling house, robbing The Bronze Peacock (the nightclub where Olga and his buddy Joe Massara dance professionally), in his room in Little Italy, in his new and more sophisticated

[33] Gad Horowitz. Repression – Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory: Freud, Reich, Marcuse. University of Toronto Press.

apartment, in Big Boy's (the top gangster) luxurious apartment, and then, after loosing everything, hiding in Ma Magdalena's fruit store and, finally, in a shabby lodging house.

One should note that the gas station, the lunch wagon, the Palermo Club, Little Arnie's gambling house and The Bronze Peacock are all business places. Rico does his business in all of them. When he visits Big Boy's apartment, it is for a business meeting: he is invited to annex Montana's "territory" to that which he took from Vettori after the Bronze Peacock robbery, when against Vettori's own orders, Rico shot and killed Alvin McClure, the head of the crime commission. Rico's dingy room in Little Italy will function, too, as an office. He is shown there twice. In the first time, he is reclined on his bed, resting. Otero, one from his gang, is seated on a piece of furniture facing the bed, smoking and reading a note about Little Arnie, who fled town. After sending some guys to shoot Rico –hitting him in the arm—he is forced to leave Detroit and let Rico take over his gambling house. The note in the newspaper makes Otero remark: "Rico, now you're famous!" To what Rico answers: "You see, Otero, 'tain't no use being scared of any of these big guys. The bigger they come, the harder they fall." They are talking business, of course.

The second time, Rico's room appears in the following scene. Now he is standing on top of a table. What the audience actually sees is his reflection on a big wall mirror. He is trying a tuxedo, and by his mien one can see how he feels uncomfortable. He is shot from a low angle, which reinforces the idea that he is moving upward in the business world. Otero, who is helping him dress, remarks: "Oh, you're getting up in the world, Rico." Next, the scene dissolves to Big Boy's apartment, where Rico is about to be offered Montana's territory. Except for the butler, only the two are in the scene, reinforcing the impression that Big Boy's luxurious and huge apartment was never meant to accommodate any family. It is

a business situation in a male world. Parenthetically, it resembles very closely the all-male environment in *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*, the story of an urban monster, too. The same is valid in relation to Little Arnie's office at his gambling house, also a home/office with no place for a family.

There are a few places in the film, though, which would seem to come close to a family home. Tony Passa, a member of Vettori's gang, lives with his mother, Mrs. Passa, in a tenement house in Little Italy. Tony's flat, a combination of living room and bedroom, is shown in only one scene. He just awoke after a bad night's sleep. He is nervous because of the Bronze Peacock robbery the night before. It was supposed to be carried out without any shooting, but Rico had shot dead the head of the crime commission, and now things might get hot for the gang. His mother enters his flat, and a number of cues of a family life are given in the rest of the scene. She talks to her son like a good mother: initially with a motherly concern ("What's the matter, Antonio? Why you not sleep"). He looks at her without answering, and she insists: "You sick, maybe?" When Tony replies in a harsh tone, she asks accusingly: "You stay out late, Tony? You drink a lotta wine?" But he refuses to tell her what is worrying him, and like a good Italian mother, she lets him know that there is some "spaghetti on stove". She turns to leave and go to work, but he asks her to stay. Her countenance acquires a softer look and she speaks, her tone full of reminiscent tenderness: "You used to be a good boy, Antonio... Remember when you sing in the church, in choir with Father McNeil... You, in white, remember?

Mrs. Passa continues to speak in the same tone, describing how "the church was beautiful", the "big candles... flowers," Tony, a "little boy with long hair," then. Before she finally leaves the room they embrace each other affectionately. After the door closes, Tony looks up dreamily and whispers with a voice heavy with emotion: "Father McNeil..." The

whole scene develops with some suave music in the background (the only scene with extra diegetic music), contrasting with the harshness of most of the sound track, full of screams, gunshots, the noise of car engines and the police siren. Tony's hopeful look as he whispers the name of Father McNeil repeats that of the husband in *The Narrow Road*: they both look for redemption. His mother stands for the redemptive woman. For a moment, redemption seems to be a real possibility. But a little while later, Tony will meet Otero on the streets. Otero warns him to go get his "split" in the robbery, but Tony refuses, telling his partner he is going to the church, rejecting his partner's insistence that he "be a man". Told by Otero about Tony's behavior, Rico has time enough to shoot him on the steps of the church, displaying a lack of respect for Christian symbols which shows the impossibility of redemption for the gangster --a scene which will reappear in other gangster films, as *The Godfather*. What is left is a mother without anyone to redeem: her son is dead and there is no mention to a presumed husband. Here, at least, the door to redemption seems to be closed.

Perhaps the most obvious character to function as the redemptive woman is Olga, who dances for a living in The Bronze Peacock and who becomes Joe's sweetheart when he moves to Detroit. As a working girl in a nightclub she may not be the model family girl, but that would not be an impediment.[34] Olga's sole function in the story appears to be that of redeeming Joe Massara through the offering of "the love of a good woman –a rare commodity in the gangster genre" (Schatz, *HG* 87), as can be illustrated by their first dialogue. They are in The Bronze Peacock's dressing room. Joe has just been hired as a dancer by DeVoss, the nightclub's owner. They are clearly infatuated with each other. She

[34] One should remember that in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) the protagonist, played by John Wayne, finds redemption through a prostitute (Claire Trevor).

confesses her love for him and asks: "Or have you got another girl? A steady I mean?" He jokes, saying yes, "[h]undreds of them," but concludes, romantically: "what's the difference? This is gonna be real, huh? We'll make it... mean something..." But trouble appears when in the middle of a passionate embrace Olga feels the gun under Joe's jacket. Joe tries to temporize by offering the hypocritical separation of business and hearth: "Can not you forget you seen it? It won't make no difference... not between us, Olga. Don't you worry, Babyface. It's just a little good-luck charm I carry with me..."

Joe's reaction is in accordance with the role Hollywood usually assigns to the male protagonist. His answer is an attempt to keep the division between the realm of business (male), and that of romance, where the woman reigns. In spite of Olga being an independent woman, specially for the dominant social principles of that time, she still must be kept away from a man's business, supposedly the only kind that really counts. But she insists: "That your racket?" When he does not answer, she continues as speaking to herself: "I suppose I got no right to ask you. But now that we got an understanding... Joe, couldn't you... leave it? No, I suppose I haven't got the right...". Joe replies: What would be the good of you asking, Kiddy? Once in the gang... you know the rest...". With passion in her voice, Olga interrupts him: "I don't want to know. Maybe it can be different this time. If we try...". Sitting on a couch, she looks up at him, while Joe ponders in doubt: "I've never seen the guy that could get away with it..."

Indeed, in the capitalist system if a man has his own business he is not expected to give it up. On the contrary, a businessman is supposed to follow the first rule of the capitalist game, as Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) bluntly teaches in *Scarface*: "Do it first, do it yourself, and keep on doing it". The alternative, at least in Hollywood's mythic world, is to become a man's own shadow, as defined by Wood previously in this chapter: "[t]he

settled husband/father, dependable but dull" (*I,G,A* 47). In any event, even if reluctantly, that is Joe's choice by the end of the film. After being hired as a dancer, he keeps his distance from Rico and the gang as much as possible. Eventually, he has an argument with Rico in the latter's new apartment over Joe being a "sissy". Rico claims he can not be sure Joe and Olga won't "squeal", so he orders his former partner to "hang around with him". At Joe's refusal, he threatens to get Olga "out of the way". When a phone ring interrupts their argument, Joe leaves the apartment, knowing that Rico is going after him.

Joe arrives at his sweetheart's apartment. He is very nervous and explains to her that they must flee before Rico gets them. Olga, resists, arguing that there is no place for them to go where they would be safe (unlike in the Western, there is no Mexican nor Canadian border to cross, no sunset to be lost in). She concludes: "There is only one thing for us to do: [sergeant] Flaherty!" Joe reasons with her, saying that to call the police would be "suicide". But locking herself in her room, she calls Flaherty. Moments later, Rico and Otero, who has become Rico's new buddy, enter the apartment. Face to face, Rico has not the courage to shoot his old friend and decides to leave, but Otero tells him he is getting "soft" and shoots. Rico pushes his partner and Joe is hit in the arm. At the same time, they hear the police siren approaching and the two gangsters run away through the window and the fire escape.

In the meantime, back in Olga's apartment sergeant Flaherty tries to make Joe admit that it was Rico who had shot McClure during The Bronze Peacock robbery. Olga tells how everything had happened and says Joe can confirm what she is saying. Pressed by Flaherty to corroborate her story, Joe keeps his mouth shut, but his silence is taken by the sergeant as a an accusation against Rico. What follows is Rico's fall from the top of the world. Otero is shot when running from Olga's apartment. Later on Sam Vettori and the rest of the gang

are caught by Flaherty and his men. Rico looks for refuge in Ma Magdalena's fruit shop, who takes advantage of his situation and robs his money. Finally, in a lodging house he reads an interview in the papers in which Flaherty calls him a coward. Enraged, Rico calls the police station and challenges the sergeant. In the final shoot-out, Rico dies under a big illuminated billboard where it is written: "Olga Stassof and Joe Massara," under the drawing of their faces. At the bottom one reads: "Laughing, Singing, Dancing Success in Tipsy Topsy Turvy at the Great Theater."

The death of Rico under Olga's and Joe's billboard could be read as the victory of civilization. But it stands unconvincing, even not taking into account that laughing, singing and dancing constitute a poor motto for a civilized society. When refusing to keep involved with Rico's gang, Joe can only think of running away. In contrast with his cowardly attitude, Olga proves to be much braver, refusing to flee and running the risk of telling the police what she knew about Rico. When questioned directly by Flaherty, Joe again shows his cowardice by keeping quiet, even if his silence is enough for Flaherty to send the police after his old friend and partner. Although Joe gives up his life of crime, one cannot claim that he found redemption. The audience is not invited to empathize with a coward and a traitor to his best friend. The empathy Flaherty deserves from the audience is not great either. Although he shows up from time to time in the story with threatening words against the gangsters, his final success against the criminals is really due to Olga's squealing. He is a flat character with no inner conflicts and no life of his own. As for Olga, she also failed in her role of a redemptive woman since her man was reduced to a soulless dancer, a man without pride nor honor. Arguably, Olga and Joe, who are never really shown dancing, would only find redemption if transported to another genre: the musical.

As one can see *Little Caesar* presents its story in a rather straightforward way. It depicts the trajectory of two petty criminals who go to the big city, one to become a dancer and the other to escalate all the necessary steps to become a great gangster, till he is shot dead in the end. Because its story develops almost entirely inside "offices" there is very little room left for any depiction of what would be the good society around the crude realm of crime. The effect is that of making the audience feel that there is nothing outside the gangster world. In contrast with *Little Caesar*, William Wellman's *The Public Enemy* evinces a concern for being more "educational," in the sense that it attempts to teach the audience how a gangster is made. The aim underlying such a concern about the education of the public is to reaffirm the dominant values of the civilized American society while attributing to the gangster all social wrongs. Of course the motivation for such an ideological concern was related to the first goal of any commercial enterprise in the capitalist system: a good box office, which in its turn will not happen if the film is shocking enough for the audience to reject it.

Thus, right after the opening credits and before the story begins a written alert is given to the audience: "It is the ambition of the authors of 'The Public Enemy' to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal." The text is signed by Warner Bros. Pictures Inc. But that introductory warning denying any intention of LeRoy's film to glorify the criminal seems not enough. Its main instrument to weaken the confounding capacity of the gangster hero is the contextualization of crime and the criminal in historical and sociological terms, rendering the film more "realistic." In cinematic terms, that will appear in the form of a greater level of intergeneric hybridity and a higher level of technical sophistication (with a

greater variation of camera angles, a richer soundtrack, etc.), as it will be presently discussed.

Following the introductory note, *The Public Enemy* opens with a series of shots of the modern big city. The audience is informed that it is the year of 1909. For over three minutes a sequence of city images is presented: a still camera, mostly from high angles, shows the city streets full of "Fords" and streetcars, expressways under construction, apartment complexes, industrial plants. As the camera closes to medium long shots and medium shots the viewer's attention is brought to the dwellers of that urban environment. Businessmen, laborers, the Salvation Army, women in fancy dresses, policemen in their uniforms, all mixing together in front of shops, restaurants and buildings. Amid such a varied urban composition these last shots emphasize the consumption of alcohol. Around just one city corner one sees a brewery, a bar, a saloon, and men coming and going with buckets of beer. They foreshadow the coming of Prohibition as well as the fate of the protagonists, who are shown as two boys already drinking beer while the gangster-to-be Tom Powers warns his friend Matt Doyle not to go "fooling around with women".

As children, Tom and Matt are shown making trouble in a modern department store (a scene with the boys savagely running up and down an escalator standing for technological progress) and running from the police. As observed by Schatz, "[o]nce we are introduced to the main characters –as children, significantly—and to their interpersonal and ideological conflicts, this documentary style is abandoned for a more impressionistic [with less regard for showing details and more concerned with evoking strong impressions, as in the scene described as it follows], visually expressive technique" (*HG* 87). Indeed, the next scene inaugurates the impressionistic style that is used in the rest of the film: at home, after admitting to Matt's sister that the skates he gave her were stolen and then were snitched by

his brother Mike, Tom enters his home to be beaten by his father, a policeman, while his mother submissively hears from the kitchen the sound of the strap going down on her son's buttocks. Although the actual beating takes place off-camera, the closing of the camera on Tom's face as he struggles not to cry invites the viewer to imagine a spanking worse than if it were actually filmed. As Schatz notes, "Wellman establishes the fundamental brutality of Tom Powers and his community with this scene and at the same time generates sympathy for the main character. He also suggests that Tommy's criminality may be traced back into his childhood" (*HG* 88). But Schatz observes, too, that because Tom's brother, Mike, "matures into a dull but well-meaning war hero and streetcar conductor [we are] prevent[ed]... from interpreting [Tom's evil career] as a function of his environment" (*HG* 88), though the film never explains the "reasons for the brother's contradictory values and attitudes" (*HG* 88).

Indeed, the film oscillates between attempts to circumscribe criminality and the criminal to a specific environment and "social strata" –thus implying the existence of a sound society-- and the ability of the gangster hero to dissolve the very borders which would separate good from evil. As pointed by Schatz, the juxtaposition of "Powers' commitment to Matt and his criminal lifestyle... with his devotion to his mother" (*HG* 88) constitute a duality which "frame the film's climax and resolution" (*HG* 88). More than that, such a duality frames the whole story and reflects the final impossibility to sustain on the screen, to repeat Wood's definition, that America is the "land where everyone actually is/can be happy" (*I,G,A* 47). Such a contradictory stand –which is provoked by the presence of the gangster hero—can be exemplified by the division of *The Public Enemy* into an initial documentary-style sequence and the impressionistic style that follows throughout the rest of the film.

In the initial sequence of *The Public Enemy* what is shown is the image of progress: the urban space is industrious, organized, disciplined and orderly, even when including the "Depression poor who inhabit" (Schatz *HG* 87) such a space. Supported by the "authenticity" conferred by the documentary-style narrative, that initial sequence restates modern America as a place with its problems, but essentially still the land where anyone can find success. Interestingly enough, it is only when the camera focuses on one corner of the city that the signs of problems in paradise (the intense commerce of beer) appear. Parenthetically, scenes of crime and disorder could have been shown in the first shots presenting the city as a whole. That presentation of the camera over the city, beginning with extreme long shots and gradually closing until the medium shot of the corner, functions like a guide helping the viewer to locate the spot of corruption in the urban environment. That final shot in that sequence, with the salvation army marching amid the intense commerce of liquor and passing by Tommy and Matt (who drink beer after the army passes by) reinforces the idea that the good society (whose existence the passing salvation army attests) does not belong there.

But although some elements of the documentary still pervade the rest of the film (the viewer is informed that Tom and Matt get their first gun in 1915; the date 1917 appears on the screen to inform us of the beginning of WW I, and the number 1920 announces the beginning of the Prohibition), what dominates the film after the initial sequence is the impressionistic style already mentioned, much less educational and more adequate for a more emotional and less analytical expression of the story. The inclusion in the film of other elements which carry a positive character in other Hollywood genres add, too, to resist the contamination of the monstrosity of the gangster to the film as a whole. Put differently, there is an attempt in *The Public Enemy* to surround the gangster with symbols

of the dominant values in the civilized society: a conventional family life, the work ethic, the sanctity of motherhood, patriotism and war heroism. But the monstrosity of the gangster hero cannot be contained; on the contrary, it inevitably contaminates the whole environment in the story, rendering the positive characters incomplete, their actions lacking any sound or clear motivation, and interpersonal relations corrupted. That such a contamination occurs is what will be demonstrated bellow. One can start by analyzing the families in *The Public Enemy*.

3.5 The Gangster's Monstrosity and the Contamination of Hollywood Mainstream Values

As discussed in the previous chapter, the substitution in the American mythology of the city for the West as the privileged place for personal progress asked for an adaptation of the character of citizenry. Although it was possible for a time to present the white male as an active character (in contrast with the passiveness attributed to women, children and non-white laborers), such an image became hard to be maintained after the coming of "waves of foreign immigrants" (Slotkin *FE* 140) attracted by the industrialization in the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. The consequent renewal of the "values embodied in the Frontier Myth" (*FE* 140) was then structured around the "political arrangement of 'paternalism', or... 'domestication'" (*FE* 140). In that process of "domestication", Slotkin claims, the "values and power relationships characteristic of a 'traditional' (read 'idealized') bourgeois family" (*FE* 140) were projected "onto the social and political realms" (140). Accordingly, in the center of a traditional (idealized) bourgeois family one finds a "benign but powerful father, whose moral authority and political legitimacy is authenticated by the 'natural' sentiments of spousal and filial affection and respect" (140).

The father, on the other hand, "mitigates the rigor of his authority by the essentially affectionate and protective attitude he takes toward his dependents; and the dependents, for their part, accept their place in his universe" (140).

For such an idealized family structure to hold, however, the repression of the expectations and desires of each family member must occur. Thus, the first family in the film, constituted by Tommy, Mike, their mother and father, is structured according to the paternalistic model and already shows the distance separating the idealized from the actual familial interrelations. In a family thus structured the father pays a price for his position of power. To carry a "white man's burden" (a phrase uttered in anguish and frustration by a later Hollywoodian failing patriarch, played by Jack Nicholson in Kubrick's *The Shining*) Tommy's father must exercise his power alone. In his struggle to make ends meet in a competitive world where everything is business and nothing is personal, he cannot find nor seek for the sympathy from his wife and children. As the patriarch, he can only impose his power over his family, a man who expects unconditional submission from the household instead of the ideal affectionate and protective father and husband.

Accordingly, his loneliness at home is made evident by his inability to communicate with the members of the family: the character does not utter a word during his whole appearance in *The Public Enemy*. Those cracks in the image of the ideal bourgeois father, appearing so early in Hollywood production, will grow more evident throughout the ensuing decades till reaching an insuperable crisis. Indeed, when discussing the ideological crisis of the American films produced during the 1970s and 1980s, Robin Wood claims that, arguably, the "[r]estoration of the Father" (*Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 172) constitutes the "dominant project, ad infinitum and post nauseam, of the contemporary Hollywood cinema" (172). He explains that within Hollywood's ideological proposition,

> The Father must here be understood in all senses, symbolic, literal, potential: patriarchal authority (the Law), which assigns all other elements to their correct, subordinate, allotted roles; the actual heads of families, fathers of recalcitrant children, husbands of recalcitrant wives, who must either learn the virtue and justice of submission or pack their bags; the young heterosexual male, father of the future, whose eventual union with the 'good woman' has always formed the archetypal happy ending of the American film, guarantee of the perpetuation of the nuclear family and social stability. (*HVR* 172)

At the level of family relations proper, because he is the only one to challenge the authority of the Father (he asks defiantly his father if he is going to be beaten with his trousers up or down) Tommy becomes the logical candidate to inherit the place of the keeper of the patriarchal authority, while the cowardly attitude of Mike eliminates him from possibly coming to play that role. As the best candidate to become the Father, Tommy becomes eligible to be the one to assure the perpetuation of the "Law" at the social and political levels (the fact that Tom's father is also a law enforcer makes more evident the projection of the role of the family Patriarch onto the social and political spheres). Within the ideological framework of Hollywood, that means Tommy is fit to become the Ideal Male and use his cunning and bravura and individualist drive to restate order and the civilized values and defeat the forces of chaos. Though the film might, as observed by Schatz, attempt to create a connection between Tommy's violent upbringing and his future as a criminal, Tommy's behavior as a boy proves him fit to take the role of the Ideal Male in the

story. In other words, he displays those qualities which within Hollywood conventions belong to the hero, or the good badman. Like his father, Tommy will exert his patriarchal authority and power alone. While his father treated his wife as personal property, Tommy will not take women into any serious consideration (all his girlfriends are treated as objects to be consumed and exhibited), thus complicating, too, the inclusion of an Ideal Female in the film.

Thus, Tommy's brutality cannot be explained by the environment alone: in spite of his violent upbringing, he was raised in a family structured according to the bourgeois model of patriarchy and monogamy, and as Schatz reminds us, his brother Mike complicates that kind of explanation, since he did not grow as an outlaw. An interpretive alternative, then, could be to consider his attitude as a personal choice, which, by the way, would denote personal initiative, another positive attribute of the Ideal Male. But the film's own difficulties to separate clearly good from bad complicate any attempt to attribute Tommy's bad deeds just to personal choice, which would allow one to see the character simply as a rotten apple in the barrel. The scene of Larry's funeral helps to illustrate that point, as it shows the absence of good role models in the good society. It happens after Tommy and Matt take part in their first robbery with a gun, which goes wrong and results in the death of Larry, one of the other delinquents, who is shot in the back by a policeman while trying to escape. Around the funerary box Larry's mother mourns her dead son, soothed by Ma Powers. They cry and claim that "he was a good boy." In the adjoining room, a group of policemen talk idly and drink beer; they all agree that Larry was "no good boy." Back to the room with the casket, Ma Powers tries to comfort Larry's mother by claiming that it was the fault of "bad company." As soon as she mentions bad company Tommy and Matt enter the room. Ma Powers calls Tommy with a motherly gesture and the

two young criminals look curiously and indifferently at the body of their dead accomplice. Notwithstanding Tommy's motivation, his monstrous presence challenges the righteousness of the law enforcers (who is "bad company"?), lays open the flaws of the guardians of redemption (mothers blind to the truth about their own children), and exposes the failure of patriarchy in generating men capable of defending the positive values of the dominant ideology.

As illustrated above, the monstrosity of Tommy contaminates the ideologically positive values expressed by the Father, the Mother and the law institutions (remember the good police in Griffith's *The Narrow Road*). Another Hollywoodian convention to express and support the dominant ideology, militarism, is also invited to contain Tommy's ability to threaten the ideologically positive values in America. Thus, the year of 1917 comes as one more attempt to rescue civilization from chaos. Tom's and Mike's father is dead. As young adult males they make their choice: Mike explains to his brother his decision to fight in the war: because "when your country needs you, she needs you." Tom, of course, is more interested in the advancement of his criminal career. But the intrusion of the war in the gangster story opens the possibility for the inclusion of elements and patterns common to another type of Hollywood production --the war genre-- thus opening the possibility for the appearance of one of Hollywood's ideologically affirmative heroes: the war hero.[35] The imperialist World War I is thus ideologically justified in the same way it was the destruction of Nature and the Indians; like the brave colonist in the narratives of captivity, the war hero enters a primitive state and resorts to violence methods to save civilization, after which he can return redeemed. In the end of such a process the superiority of the

American spirit is thus confirmed and the imposition of its values over the enemy is justified. Commenting on American imperialism, Slotkin indicates Roosevelt's ideas on the issue. He notes that for the president...

> Peace is possible only between nations that 'feel the same spirit.' But so long as we had an Indian frontier, 'the chief feature of frontier life was the endless warfare between the settlers and the red men.' In the larger, worldwide perspective, the growth of peace and progress has been 'due to the power of the mighty civilized races which have not lost the fighting instinct, and which by their expansion are gradually bringing peace to the red wastes where the barbarian peoples of the world hold sway.' (*GN* 52)

Thus, by making his choice, Mike becomes eligible to play the role of the war hero with all the ideological elements associated with such a mythic figure in the American films, but will also risk having the contradictions of his enterprise exposed by the monstrosity of Tommy. The viewer learns about Mike's decision to enlist when Tom enters his mother's house and sees that she is crying while being silently comforted by Molly -- Matt's sister and Mike's sweetheart. So far the sequence follows Hollywood conventions. Ma Powers is the weeping mother who cannot do much but witness her young son leave to conquer the enemies of civilization. Her duty to society is done: she has raised a man to perpetuate the American spirit. Molly has a conventional function, too. She is the potential bearer of the children of civilization; she must not complain about her man's decision and

[35] While the westerner stands for the hero of the Myth of the Frontier in a time when America was still a rural country, the Hollywoodian war hero appears to play the same ideologically affirmative role when the Myth of

wait until he is back from the fight and ready to be recuperated to the civilized ways through her unconditional love and companionship. The presence of the father is not necessary as he has done his job, and must make room for an heir to follow his steps.

But, as it was foreshadowed by his cowardly attitude before his father's authority, Mike won't return from Europe as a war hero, in spite of the medals on his chest. Instead, he returns apparently suffering from a nervous breakdown, unable to carry the white man's burden. A luncheon is being offered in his honor by his mother, brother, Matt and Molly when an argument with Tom makes clear the contradictions and weakness of his position. At the center of the table lies a keg of the beer Tom and Matt sell illegally. Except for Mike, everyone thinks it is alright to drink, since "it is only beer." Matt proposes a toast to celebrate Mike's return, but he refuses to drink. When Tom insists and jokes that "beer ain't good enough" for him, he jumps trembling from his chair: "You think I care for the beer that is in that keg? I know what's in it. I know what you've been doing all this time (...) You've been telling Ma that you're going into politics, but you're in the city payroll (...) You murderers! There's not only beer in that keg. There's beer and blood. Blood from men!" Enraged and out of control, Mike grabs the keg and throws it on the floor. While everybody looks at him in astonishment Tom stands up and replies coldly: "You ain't changed a bit. Besides, your hands ain't so clean. You killed and liked it! You didn't get them medals for holding hands with them Germans!"

Tom's reaction lays it all bare: both gangster and soldier fight and kill, the latter to protect and expand the frontiers of civilization while the former does his part to assure free enterprise and free competition within national borders. More than that, Tom is willing to admit what Mike cannot: that both took the "blood of men" in their hands... and liked it.

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the Frontier acquires the imperialistic trait it has today.

Thus Tom gives the coup de grace to the chances for his brother to take the role of the Ideal Male. With his unconfessed motivations exposed, Mike becomes unfit to stand for America's dominant values. In spite of the medals on his chest, he has returned emotionally too weak (he exhibits no signs of physical wounds) and thus impotent to fulfill the expectations of the American audience about a decorated war hero nor to become a strong father and husband. Those were the mythic expectations of the American public: that by "recovering the martial discipline and mission of the frontiersmen, the upper classes w[ould] also regain their model of family government, their energy as 'fighters and breeders,' and the productive advantages that go with these qualities" (Slotkin *GN* 52). As a consequence of Mike's failure to occupy the place of the hero in the story Molly cannot fulfill the role of the Ideal Female, even if she did her part by not challenging her lover's decision to fight and waiting patiently for him, chaste and faithful. Without a coherent function she virtually disappears from the story. Both, Mike and Molly go through the rest of the film as little more than decorative figures. On the other hand, Tom will continue to prove himself a "fighter" throughout the film, as a hero should do under Hollywood conventions. But then again, was America willing to have him as "breeder"?

Victor Frankenstein's terror in face of the possibility of his creature having children with a female monster bride yet to be created was probably similar to what American institutions felt before the idea of the monstrous American gangster having his own family and children. If the gangster was capable of constituting a conventional family, then it would become even harder to isolate him as the source of evil and chaos among a civilized society. Although the gangster would pursue and eventually succeed in having his own family in the decades to follow the classic period of the genre, such a drive would initially only appear in an embryonic form as the cracks in the patriarchal family model were not yet

so evident as they would eventually come to be. So if it may be true when other critics say that the gangster can only deal with women as an object to be consumed (sex without marriage; showing women off as consumer's goods),[36] such an inept relation to women also functioned as a means to prevent the gangster from becoming an even greater ideological menace, i.e., that he, like the bourgeois Father, could own a wife too. Such impossibility for the protagonist in the classical gangster films added to the safety valve offered by the film for the viewer's relief at the end: the gangster is dead, and his bloodline will not go on.

Indeed, many are the critics who have emphasized the gangster's inability to treat women properly, which makes it difficult for him to build a family and have an offspring. Kaminsky, for instance, observes that in *Little Caesar* "[w]omen are rewards, proofs of success, like the pin and ring Rico admires on Pete Montana and the $1500 painting he looks at in awe in the Big Boy's house" (22). As discussed above, there is no room for conventional families in *Little Caesar*. In contrast, there is a concern in Wellman's film to encircle the gangster with families as part of the effort to include elements of the other ideologically sounder (or safer) genres, as is the case of the war genre just discussed. But the usual problems arise: inherently a businessman, the gangster cannot leave business out when arriving home like the head of a bourgeois family should. Schatz observes that "Cagney's character, Tommy, is brutal, reckless, and unwavering in his perverse devotion to anarchy, to his gang, and to his family –especially his mother... and his sidekick, Matt Doyle" (*HG* 88). And concludes that the whole story has "one binding thread: the cohesion of the gangster-family" (88). If the cohesion of a conventional family were to be the film's

[36] Although neither Tommy nor Tony Camonte (in *Scarface*) treat their mothers as objects to be consumed, their indifference to their motherly wishes and guidance already indicates how mothers take part in creating monsters, an indication which will become ever more evident and will be more thoroughly analyzed in films as *The Godfather*.

biding thread the gangster would either have to accept his own domestication in the civilized ways, or an Ideal Male would come and take his place, and the plot would possibly develop as a family melodrama. In a gangster film neither dramatic alternative is open to choice. Still, although lacking in *Little Caesar*, one should note that in both *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* the germs for the conventional gangster-family are already there; the tendency for the gangster to have a conventional family will deserve a more thorough analysis in the next chapters.

The kind of involvement the gangster protagonist has with women --which is lacking in *Little Caesar*-- will not lead to his redemption. In *The Public Enemy*, for instance, Tom's first romantic affair resembles a conventional family life at first. They share a comfortable and roomy apartment, although they are not married. However, such a pretense does not hold for too long, as one of the most famous scenes in gangster films makes clear: one morning at the breakfast table Tom asks Kitty (Mae Clarke) if there is any liquor in the house. When in a sweet and submissive tone she replies "Not before breakfast, dear," he grabs a grapefruit half and grinds it into her face. What is usually not noted by those who comment on that scene is the fact that just before the violence at the table Tom was talking business to his boss Nails Nathan (Leslie Fenton). Business had entered the hearth, transforming it into an office and invalidating all the conventional-family rules.

By then Tom was already having a parallel love affair with Gwen (Jean Harlow), "who intimidates him and has him acting as a schoolboy. (She's supposed to be an upper-crust party girl from Texas, but Harlow's sexual cool hints at much more)" (Yaquinto 35). Yaquinto argues that Gwen's "control of the relationship frustrates Tom, although she finally admits her weakness for him" (35) in her apartment:

> Oh, my bashful boy... You are different, Tommy... it's a difference in basic character. Men that I know... and I've known dozens of them... they're so nice, so polished, so considerate. Most women like that type. I guess they're afraid of the other kind. I thought I was too... but you're so strong! You don't give, you take! Oh, Tommy! I could love you to death".

She closes her admission with a forceful kiss, interrupted by Matt, who arrives with the news of Nails Nathan accidental death while riding his horse.

Tom's other affair happens when the gang is hiding out in an apartment selected by Paddy, the leader after Nails' death. Jane, Paddy's mistress, manages to get Tom drunk and takes advantage of his condition to make love to him. In the next morning, shaking off some of his hang-over and finally understanding what had happened the previous night, Tom smacks her and, against Paddy's orders, leaves their hideout. He is followed by Matt, who complains: "Whadya want to run out on me for? We're together, ain't we?" Tom grins and they both decide to take a walk. But before they reach the corner, members of the rival gang, hidden with a machine gun in a building across the street, fire on them, killing Matt.

Gwen and Jane are like Lilith, "a female demon of Jewish folklore; her name meaning 'Night Monster.' In rabbinic literature Lilith is variously depicted as the mother of Adam's demonic offspring following his separation from Eve or as his first wife, who left him because of their incompatibility" (Britannica v. VI 222). More generally, Lilith has come to represent the dominating woman who by force or seduction makes sex with men and steal their strength. Accordingly, after each of Tom's sensual involvement with them comes a lessening in his power: Both Nails and Matt die. Lilith-like characters had already

appeared in American literature. In the previous chapter it was analyzed how the threat experienced by the Puritans before the sensuality of the Indians helped the former to adopt a demonizing stand facing eroticism. Fenimore Cooper's Cora Munro, one must remember, is depicted in *Last of the Mohicans* as a combination of the "sensuous and erotic appeal of the 'dark woman' with the spiritual gifts of the White or 'redemptive' woman" (Slotkin *GN* 206). She is physically dark (hair, skin, eyes) and wears a costume which is supposed to be evidence of her moral chastity, but which is not enough to "conceal her sensuous and womanly character" (*GN* 206).

It was pointed above, too, that such a female character finds her equivalent in the "erotic woman", described by Wood as "adventuress, gambling lady, saloon 'entertainer'... fascinating but dangerous, liable to betray the hero or turn into a black panther" (*I,G,A* 47). By the same token, Yaquinto describes Gwen as a very seductive and dominating woman in her relation with Tom: "Dressed in a seductive, slinky dress (sans underwear, a Harlow habit), she leads him over to a chair and drapes herself across his lap. She draws his head to her breast and says..." (35). On the other hand, Yaquinto defines Jane as "an experienced woman [who] takes advantage of drunken Tom and sleeps with him" (36). Both women call him a boy and, mixing the motherly tone of an older caring woman with the tricks of an experienced seducer. They mix a promise of redemption and sexual corruption. To be seduced by a woman would mean to convert the cultural rules which organize a patriarchic society, as well as Hollywood conventions: men must take the initiative whether to make the decisions pertaining the material security of the family, or to conquer the love of a chaste and good-natured woman. On the screen marriage is a pattern whose function is to reaffirm the "ownership principle to personal relationships ('*My* house, *my* wife, *my* children') in a male-dominated society" (Wood *I,G,A* 47). On the other hand, a reversal of

the situation would present its difficulties, that is, even if Tom converted the relationship by becoming the seducer himself, he would still be left with a woman unfit to help him find redemption, since in this case one is dealing with women who always already present themselves as objects to be consumed. Once again the door is closed for the gangster film to endorse the dominant ideology as a myth artifact.

Finally, Matt's marriage (in a nightclub) with Mamie (Joan Blondell) –apparently they share the apartment with Tom and Kitty— appear as a timid attempt to divert the film from its shadowy path by creating a parallel romantic plot. Like Massara in *Little Caesar*, Tom's buddy dreams of romance, too. Like Massara, Matt too declares his love for a woman ("oh, but you knew all that time that I was going to marry you, didn't you?"). Like Olga, Mamie seems fit to play the role of the redemptive woman ("You guys don't know what it means to a girl... getting married."). Even more so, since she appears to be more content just to follow her man, not even displaying the same aggressiveness showed by Olga in her attempts to make Massara abandon his gang in *Little Caesar*. But Matt is really a gangster, and in the very night they are celebrating their wedding he leaves Mamie in the nightclub to accompany Tom. They had spotted Putty Nose (Murray Kinnell), who had betrayed them in their first steps in their criminal career, and followed him out of the nightclub and up to his apartment. There, Tom shoots him mercilessly while his former crime mentor plays on the piano a song he used to play to amuse them when Tom and Matt were still kids. The actual shooting takes place off camera. Instead, it stays on Matt's face, who watches the murder in stunned silence from across the room. Nonetheless, Matt has shown the inadmissible flaw of having once dreamt of redemption, and for that he will die bleeding on the sidewalk.

Thus, after all doors for the redemption of the gangster or for the appearance of an alternative Ideal Male are closed, *The Public Enemy* plunges headlong into the dark realm of the gangster film. With the killing of Matt, Tom vows revenge: he enters alone the rival gang's lair. While the camera shows the outside of the building the sound of gunfire is heard. Following a moment of silence, Tom is shown coming out of the building, stumbling back on the camera, and muttering "I ain't so tough" as he falls into the gutter under the heavy rain in the night. Later, in a hospital bed, he shows some timid signs that he is willing to become a good son and brother, but the touching scene with Ma Powers, Mike and Molly will acquire a morbid tone with the next and final sequence. About the scene in the hospital Schatz notes that in spite of Tom's "signs of remorse and reform... clearly it's too late for him" (HG 88). It should be added that it was also too late for the Powers family to become the site for redemption. Nonetheless, the closing sequence takes place in the home of the Powers.' They are all counting on Tom's return from the hospital very soon, but outside their house Mike is warned by Paddy that the rival gang had kidnapped his brother. Paddy explains that he had offered to the Burns gang to "quit the racket" and leave town if they let Tom go, but though it was "a sweet offer," he was not sure it would be accepted. He adds that all his men are after Tom, and that they would call Mike if anything happened. As instructed by Paddy Mike goes back inside and waits for the phone to ring. When the phone rings he answers and then tells Ma and Molly that Tom was about to be brought back home. Ma Powers goes upstairs to make Tom's bed, chanting happily while helped by Molly. Next, there is a cut to a low shot with Mike standing between the camera and the inside of the front door. He is facing the camera and turns when he hears a knock on the door. He opens it, but with his body blocking the audience's view. Slowly, he retreats to one side, letting us see Tom, all wrapped up in bloodstained sheets and a fixed

expression on his face. There is but enough time to see him with the body of a mummy and the face of a bloody monster before he falls directly towards the camera. Speechless, Mike stumbles toward the viewer, his uncertain steps and uncoordinated movements displaying the suffering and confusion even the killing of the gangster cannot hide.

3.6 *Scarface*

To approach *Scarface* the same way it was done with *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* would reveal, in general, that what was discussed and demonstrated about the latter two can also be applied to Howard Hawks' film. Following the pattern of *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, the gangster protagonist in *Scarface* exhibits the same inability to separate office and the hearth. In the same way it happens in the two films just discussed, *Scarface* suffers from the same consequences of having a gangster protagonist, a gangster hero: the impossibility of presenting any convincing Ideal Male. Similarly, by presenting a hero who is out of reach for any possible redemption the otherwise conventional role of the redemptive woman/Ideal Female has no effective presence in the film. As the redemptive woman looses dramatic force, the "erotic women" predominate in the story. The preponderance of the nightmarish milieu of the gangster's world over that environment in which happy America is usually depicted in Hollywood films is also there. And, of course, the lack of a happy ending, the inevitable consequence of all those characteristics in the gangster film, is a trait common to all three films. So instead of pointing the similarities between Hawks' film and the other two classic gangster films, it should prove more illuminating to focus on what differs the former two from the latter.

In a sense, *Scarface* seems more concerned about the technological advancements coming with industrial capitalism then the films by Wellman and by LeRoy, adding to the

gangster one more trait he will share with the Ideal Male, i.e., fascination with new technologies and their use to acquire power. Tony Camonte (Paul Muni), for instance, manifests an enthusiasm with the possibilities offered by the great technological progress of that time that finds no parallel with Rico Bandello and Tom Powers. He exhibits his technological devices with the excitement of a boy with his new toy. For example, when he acquires his new car he insists in telling the others about its bulletproof glass. He is also proud of the additional steel window shutters he gets installed in his new apartment. And when his buddy Guino Rinaldo (Douglas Fairbanks) shoots a rival gangster to get his portable machine-gun, the exultation Tony shows with that new device makes him almost ignore that he is still under the fire of a rival gang. More than an enthusiast for new technologies, Tony is quick to learn how to take advantage of that technology, as his successful use of it makes clear: his life is spared by the use of both the bulletproof glass in the car and the steel window shutters in his apartment. In addition, he destroys the gang of the North Side by turning against them the only machine-gun he took from them.

Tony's eagerness and ability to experiment with the technological improvements of the age parallel Hollywood's own. Like Tony (and other gangster heroes) Hollywood have always used new technologies both to make money and to demonstrate the superiority of the American capitalist system while reinforcing the bourgeois myth of the eternal technological advancement. The significance of dominating new technologies for one's survival in the American society can be exemplified by the film's opening sequence. In that sequence, Big Louis, one of the bosses in the South Side, is discussing with the two remaining guests in his party about the distribution of crime in their territory. When one of the guests says that Johnny Lovo is threatening to take over the whole territory, Big Loius' reply foreshadows the reason for his imminent doom: "I say, what are we going to do with

the South Side? Let some of the other boys get some of it, too... I've got all I want: I've gotta plenty, I've gotta house, I've gott'an automobile, I've gotta nice girl...". Besides the unforgivable mistake of letting himself be caught alone, Big Louis is killed by Tony a little while later because of his inability to understand the need to control new technologies in order to succeed in the American capitalist system; a rule which Hollywood soon adopted and which it would give an ever higher priority as one can witness in the more recent Hollywoodian filmic production, ever more dependent on special effects.

On the other hand, *Scarface* resorts to elements from yet another genre –comedy— in order to indicate how the need to deal with the technological progress was generating a great degree of anxiety in part of the American society. Angelo (Vince Barnett) is Tony's secretary, even though he is illiterate and not very bright. He is also Tony's henchman in spite of being the shortest of all characters in the story, which does not prevent him from wearing clothes too tight. As a secretary his function is to answer the phone and get the name of the person on the other side of the line. But he just can not get it right: he holds the phone upside down, never understands clearly what his interlocutor is saying and eventually, frustrated and irritated, tries to shoot that technological device which is the cause of so much anguish for him. The joke is, of course, that in all the innumerable attempts he fails to "get a name" from the other side of the line. At the end of the film, bleeding to death after being shot by the police, he finally gets a name. But by then Tony is in shock for having killed his buddy Guino (who had secretly married his sister Cesca), the police has surrounded Tony's apartment and Angelo himself is too weak to say the name. The presence in so violent a film of such a slapstick character works as a counterpoint to the protagonist's enthusiasm for that burgeoning technological society. It resonates the

underlying anxiety of the Americans generated by the need to adapt to an environment in which social relations were increasingly dependent upon new technologies.

Another very interesting moment in *Scarface* is rendered by one of the strange speeches that punctuate the film. Indeed, Hawks' film is occasionally interrupted by the insertion of speeches for law and order. Similarly to *The Public Enemy*, *Scarface* opens with a written alert to the audience:

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

But while in *Little Caesar* the audience is invited to plunge in the gangster's dark universe right from the beginning, and while *The Public Enemy* is fraught with elements from other genres as a strategy to resist the gangster-hero's blurring of the references for right and wrong, *Scarface* resorts to the inclusion of moralist and legalist speeches as a way to counterbalance the ideological confusion generated by the presence of a gangster protagonist. One of those speeches is delivered by Mr. Garston, the publisher of *The Evening Record*, in a meeting with representatives of organizations from the civil society. They are there to complain against the printing of news about crime on the front page. Mr. Garston reasons that rather than trying to hide the facts from the public (a measure supported by a female representative in the group, who is worried about what the children

are reading), it would be better to press the government to make laws against the gangster; as he argues, if state governments passed laws against bullfight and to regulate oil production, surely the federal government could pass laws to fight crime. He offers examples: to "put the guns in the same class as drugs, and white slavery," as well as "deportation laws" for those criminals, who "don't belong to this country".

It isn't difficult to see the problems in Mr. Garston's position. His defense of the right to publish about urban crime is similar to Hollywood's own justifications for the gangster film, at least at such an early stage in the genre: in both cases it is alleged to be a denunciation of crime, not the glorification of the hoodlum. However, there remains the fact that what motivates both the newspaper and *Scarface* itself to put the gangster in films or on the front page is the opportunity to make money. The concern with the separation of the bad seeds from civilized society becomes evident here, too, even if there is a representative of the good immigrant to agree, with heavy foreign accent, that "...they bring nothing but disgrace to *my* people" (emphasis mine). To make the film's ideological stand even clearer, another speech in another scene, this one by the detective chief (Edwin Maxwell), explains the difference between the good violence deployed in the conquering of the Frontier and that of the gangster, which results from the very transference of the violence practiced in the West to the urban environment. It is interesting to see how the detective resorts to a myth to justify violence while, in the same stroke, argues against the very mythologization of violence. In his attempt he implies that as long as there is fair competition violence is justified. The problem is that by supporting free enterprise he is supporting the very economic system which created the conditions for the appearance of the gangster. The detective chief delivers his speech (significantly in the scene which comes right after that with Mr. Garston) to a newspaper reporter who asked him for

information to publish a story about the gang war in the city. The reporter argues that "the public is interested in" Tony, who is "a colorful character". The chief's answer speaks for itself:

> Colorful? What colors are crawling louse? Say, listen, that's the attitude of too many morons in this country. They think these big hoodlums are some sort of demigods. What do they do about a guy like Camonte? They sentimentalize, romance, make jokes about him. They had some excuse for glorifying our western badmen. They met in the middle of the street, high noon, waited for each other to draw. But these things sneak up and shoot the guy in the back and then run away.

3.7 *Scarface*: Foreshadowing the Redemptive/Erotic Woman of the Sixties

In relation to the female characters in Hawks' film, Cesca, Tony's sister, deserves some comments since her character presents some unique characteristics when compared to the other female characters in the classical gangster films. The critic André Bazin calls one's attention to Cesca by observing that one "psychological theme in particular is developed... in *Scarface*, that of incest" (*Bazin at Work* 112).[37] Bazin, however, is more concerned about the significance of such a theme in American films, and does not pursue the implications of her character in *Scarface*. He claims that the difficulty for Hollywood to deal with a "theme like incest [shows] one of the limits the cinema imposes on itself" (112), and indicates such a difficulty as an index for the "extent of censorship... or even simply the extent of the public's self-censorship in the face of everything that disturbs its social and

moral security" (112). By the same token, he argues that Hawks' film contrasts with *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* by its focus on the psychological level: "it's all consciously rejected in favor of psychology and social realism," (*BW* 111) he claims, stressing that "[t]hroughout the film, the authors systematically refuse to lean on the usual dramatic categories, preferring instead to trim the plot in order to concentrate all their attention on the characters" (*BW* 110). In the final sequence of the film, for instance, "the death of the gangster's sister makes him [Tony] vulnerable and incapable of fighting" (*BW* 110).

Under the perspective of the present study, however, what makes *Scarface* special is not just that it includes a psychological theme which the other classic gangster films in particular, and Hollywood production in general, resist to deal with. Given the film's psychological depth, what calls one's attention here is that Cesca's character oscillates between being Hollywood's ideal family girl and the erotic woman. Like the erotic woman, she displays a sexually aggressive attitude. For example, she invites Guino to dance with her in a nightclub, and when he refuses by arguing that she is just a kid and that Tony is around, she immediately grabs another man and carries him to the dance floor. In another scene, she gets enraged with Tony, who wants to forbid her to go out with "fellas", but calms down when he gives her money, which, sure enough, she will spend by going out with fellas. When warned by her mother of the criminal origins of the money, she replies: "What do I care where he gets it [the money]. There's nothing wrong with his giving to me". Such an answer shows to the viewer how similar she is to Poppy (initially Johnny Lovo's moll, till she is conquered by Tony), who likes the money her man can give her, but whose bloody origin she does not care about. In addition, she dresses in a very provocative way, both like the erotic woman represented by Poppy in *Scarface* itself, and like Gwen in

[37] In 1983, Brian DePalma's version would make the incest much more explicit.

The Public Enemy. On the other hand, she dreams of becoming a housewife. Taking advantage of a one-month trip Tony takes while things cool down in the city, she finally seduces Guino and marries him. In the scene preceding Guino's killing by Tony (unaware of their marriage and overtaken by jealousy), she asks her husband: "You do love me, don't you, Guino? Never stop telling me, will you? I'm not like all the others, am I?". It is the same anxiety demonstrated by Olga (the failing redemptive woman for Rico's sidekick in *Little Caesar*) and experienced by all Hollywoodian Ideal Women about being *the one* who can redeem her man, the only justifiable role for a woman in a patriarchal society.

Cesca's ambiguous position as an erotic woman who dreams of becoming a redemptive woman expresses the gangster hero's own ambiguous relation to the conventional bourgeois family. In the case of Tony, the pains he takes to seduce Poppy (by exhibiting to her his increasing material wealth and power, and eventually killing Johnny Lovo) is not inconsistent with his attitude towards Cesca. With Poppy, he displays the gangster's usual behavior with women (according to Kaminsky, "[t]he 'pure' gangster disdains women as sex objects" (*AFG* 22), trying to acquire her as one other consumer's good, a behavior which reaffirms the subaltern position of women within the American dominant ideology. The difference, however, is that in legal marriage the objectified woman receives her redemptive mission in exchange for her subaltern position, while in the case to the gangster's molls the issue of redemption is set aside. With Cesca, his efforts are to exert his patriarchal authority in the hearth by keeping her chaste and submissive. Tony's attitude towards her resembles that of the authoritative bourgeois father who decides over his daughter's sexual fate, and his sensual attraction for his sister raises the issue of the sexual tension in the bourgeois family which need to be subdued by means of taboos as that which prohibits incest. As acknowledged by Kaminsky, such a "sexual flaw... render[s] the

gangster somewhat impure in conventional social/moral terms, although his is an impurity which may well touch the repressed sexual guilts of the viewer" (21). Thus, in the scene in which Tony kills Guino, assuming that his buddy and Cesca were living together without being married, one cannot be sure if his motivation was that of an enraged father, or the lust he felt for her.

In any event, Cesca's character foretells the appearance of a similar character in the late 1960s, played by Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde*, who displays the same contradiction of being an erotic woman who dreams of the American middle class hearth in a film which would signal a definite change in the relation of the gangster with the conventional bourgeois family.[38] Cesca presents herself as an unacceptable character for the dominant ideology, as she hints at the possibility for the gangster to build his own monstrous family in which the father is a crime hero, and the wife does not conquer her man by attracting him to the civilized rules (redemption by means of the bourgeois marriage), but through the sexual pleasure and lust she offers. For representing such a menace to the moral and religious values of the good society, Cesca must die at the end under police siege. As for Bonnie, much more daring in her dream of an erotic housewife, a simple death is not enough and, as it shall be discussed in the following chapter, the innumerable bullets crossing her body will remind one of the frenzy which typically takes hold of those who eventually see the chance for the destruction of the monster.

At this point some final considerations should help summarize the most significant elements discussed in the present chapter. First, the analysis of the so called pre-gangster films showed how films of the silent era like *The Narrow Road*, *Alias Jimmy Valentine* and *Musketeers of Pig Alley* lack the most disturbing and defining trait of the classical gangster

films, namely, the presence of the gangster as protagonist. In the absence of such a character those films are structured to reaffirm the dominant ideological view of America and introduce those conventions that would become typical of Hollywood. Another relevant aspect related to those silent films is the mixture of elements from different film genres, thus reinforcing Staiger's claim against the belief in some generically pure Hollywood film. It was demonstrated, on the other hand, that the presence of the gangster protagonist inaugurated by *Little Caesar, The Public Enemy* and *Scarface,* interferes with the conventional structuring of Hollywood films. Such an interference is translated as the inconsistency of certain character types as Wood's Ideal Male and Ideal Female, as well as the weakening of some conventions as the patriarchal monogamic family so dear to Hollywood.

On the other hand, the concern displayed by Tony in *Scarface* and by Tom in *The Public Enemy* with their families begin the contradictory relation of the gangster protagonist with the American conventional family. As a monster the gangster-hero's unavoidable fate is to find his way back to his mother society. He does so by mimicking their language, values and behavior. Because he is a monster, though, he is unable to understand those rules which function to assure the delicate balance in social relations. Like Caliban, who would learn the civilized language only to make a monstrous use of it (thus exposing the latent and potential monstrosity in the civilized language), the gangster protagonist will always try to follow what he understands as the real rules governing his mother society, but all his attempts will serve only to unveil their very inconsistency. Thus, if he understands how valued is individualism, rational planning, violence and personal ambition by American society, his embracing of those individual characteristics have the

[38] To be more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 4.

effect of showing his own inability to act as a social individual, but showing, too, the ultimate impossibility for one to live according to those rules without a good amount of repression, oppression and denial, and the very acceptance of failure: economic and social. His need to belong to society will make him pursue the goal of having a normal family and in that way revealing its inherent contradictions. In the next chapter it will be discussed how the gangster protagonist dreams of a family, how he comes closer and closer to having one, and how that coincides with the progressive destruction of the conventional American patriarchal monogamic family.

Thus, in this chapter a genealogy of the gangster film was presented were it was demonstrated how the moral and ideological ambiguity which would come to characterize the gangster is still lacking in the silent era films. The films *Little Caesar, The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* were discussed as those films which established the conventions of the gangster film, in the early 1930s. The most important convention there established is the appearance of the gangster as protagonist and hero, and the implications of such a central convention over the organization of the plot, over the structuring of the other characters and on the Hollywoodian ideological discourse was also shown. In the next chapter it will be analyzed the evolution of the gangster film till its postmodern stage, and a discussion will be carried out about variations around the original formula here described.

Chapter 4

Changes in the Paradigm

In the previous chapter it was demonstrated the significance of the creation of the gangster protagonist and hero for the establishment of the conventions of the gangster film as they appeared in the classic trilogy in the beginning of the 1930s. It was shown, too, how elements from other film genres were included in the plot of those films (for instance, the war hero in *The Public Enemy*, or the ideal families around the gangster in *Little Caesar*) as an attempt to deter the confounding influence of the gangster protagonist over the ideologically well defined world characteristic of Hollywood production. In other words, what was analyzed in the three classic gangster films was what Chritstopher Orr would define as the "struggle among the dominants of different genres for supremacy in a given text" (36). In this case, the dominant of the nascent gangster genre won the battle and imposed itself over the other competing dominants. This chapter begins with a focus on the reverse, i.e., a brief analysis will be made of some films in which the gangster is the "intrusive" dominant competing with other dominants. Such a discussion shall demonstrate, first, that the monstrosity of the gangster is weakened when he is not the protagonist and hero of the story, which opens the possibility for different structuring of those films. Secondly, it will reinforce the difference between what has been classified in this study as a gangster film and other films with gangsters, which might be included in a loosely defined gangster genre, but which do not follow the defining conventions of the gangster film. Thus, in the first part of this chapter the presence of the gangster in the film *noir*, as well as in some postwar films that are often classified as gangster films, but which do not have the gangster as protagonist will be discussed.

In order to analyze how the gangster film evolved after its classic period, a discussion will be developed in the following sections about the works which were responsible for some significant changes in the gangster film: Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather*, which will be analyzed together with its adaptation to the screen by Francis Ford Coppola in 1972. In both works the family of the gangster is brought forward with an openness without precedent in gangster films. Finally, this chapter will focus on a work which is commonly classified as a postmodern text, Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, and Puzo's novel *The Last Don*, a gangster novel of the 1990s which also presents some significant changes in the representation of the gangster and his saga, though it might not be so easily classified as a postmodern text. One relevant issue here is the intensification of genre hybridity in the 1990s Hollywood films – as opposed to the common stand that generic hybridity constitutes a specific and characterizing trait of the postmodern texts.

4.1 The Generic Diaspora of the Gangster

If in the last chapter the gangster protagonist was presented as the dominant in the classic gangster film trilogy, now the focus will be on some of the implications for those films following the classic period of the genre which do have a gangster in one of the leading roles, but who does not clearly occupy the position of protagonist and hero. As it was already stated, the mere presence of a gangster in a film is not enough to assure that he will eventually organize the whole plot according to the ideological subversion one sees in films like *Scarface*, *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, even if his character plays a decisive role in the story. Such an assertion can be demonstrated by analyzing some of the so called gangster film variations. Among these, Schatz mentions, for instance, the "'rural

gangster' or 'bandit' films" (*HG* 103), the "gangster-as-cop variation... and the Cain and Abel variation" (*HG* 99), both from the late 1930s, and with time other variations would come, as the gangster comedies, the black gangster films, and even those with a woman as the protagonist, like *Bonnie and Clyde*, and Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997). However, it is not within the scope of this study to analyze them all, so a few will be elected to illustrate how those variations are incapable of fully producing the disturbing effect of the classic gangster films, while maintaining a dialogue with the gangster genre.

One can start by discussing William Wyler's *Dead End* (1937),[39] a film which, according to Ruth, together with *Angels with Dirty Faces* "epitomized... a different cycle of films [which] inverted genre conventions and explored the environmental roots of criminality" (145). The film opens with an aerial view of the big city spreading its high buildings up to the horizon. As it pans downwards, the camera takes the audience to a detail of the city: a dead end in the middle of a slum which surrounds a building inhabited by the wealthy. Because the main entrance of that building is being repaired, the rich have to use the back door to leave or enter the building, thus unavoidably mixing with their slum neighbors. Although it is generally considered a gangster film variation, Yaquinto notes that "main story [of *Dead End*] tracks the lives of out-of-work" (62) Dave Connell (Joel McCrea), the poor and well-meaning architect whose heart can't choose between Drina Gordon (Sylvia Sidney), the poor working girl "who talks of getting a bump on the head by a cop while walking a picket line" (Yaquinto 62), and Kay, the rich lady in the neighboring building, apparently bored with the frivolous preoccupations of the elite. That would bring the film closer to melodrama, if one takes, for instance, Neale's observation that in the melodrama, as well as the musical, the "narrative process is inaugurated by the eruption of

(hetero)sexual desire into an already firmly established social order" (*Genre* 22). But haunting the love triangle there is a parallel plot, that of the gangster. A young Humphrey Bogart is Baby Face Martin, the famous gangster who is secretly back to the his childhood neighborhood. Protected by a plastic surgery (which calls to mind the deceptive appearance of monsters), Baby Face is only recognized by McCrea, his childhood friend, who cannot make up his mind and give him away to the police. Thus unnoticed, he is able to cross the line and enter "normal" society: in fine clothes, he chats amiably with the policeman who protects the rich and threatens the poor kids in the slum, and is treated with respect by the owner of a second-rate restaurant aspiring to sophistication with its French name.

In terms of plot, Wyler's film reproduces the tension already present in *The Public Enemy*, though in the case of the latter the supremacy of the gangster plot (resulting from the supremacy of the gangster protagonist as dominant) over the competing dominants from other genres (war, family melodrama, journalistic) is always clear. In *Dead End*, though, the organizing dominant is not so clear. Indeed, the whole film develops based on the tension between the romantic plot and the gangster plot. In the romantic plot the male protagonist (Dave Connell) is initially a social outsider as he refuses to obey the logic of the capitalist system and resists to work in sophisticated construction projects while surrounded by people living in miserable habitations. Dave dreams of designing tenements for the poor, which makes of him an unemployed architect. At the same time, his is a character in search for redemption. Such a professional/ideological conflict is reflected in his incertitude on whether he should find domestication with Kay, the somewhat futile but wealthy girl in the building of the rich or with the somewhat rebel Drina, whose kid brother is a member in a gang of streetwise youths.

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[39] Adapted for the big screen by Lillian Hellman.

But while Dave struggles against his professional and love conflicts, Baby Face Martin has his own difficulties to deal with. Although he is a notorious gangster (the press is constantly speculating where he would be hiding), his character lacks the heroic tint that was a trait in Rico Bandello, Tony Camonte and Tom Powers. Their drive to integrate the normal society was translated in terms of a desire for power, for becoming a powerful member in that society which rejects them. Baby Face, however, is weak. Indeed, if Warshow is right in noting that "[n]o convention of the gangster film is more strongly established than this: it is dangerous to be alone" ("The Gangster as Tragic Hero" 132-3), then Baby Face is always in danger, since he is far from his territory and is accompanied only by one sidekick, Hunk (Allen Jenkins). As a result, he is always afraid to be discovered, thus letting his weakness and even his cowardliness show at various points in the film. His weakness springs from his desire to be redeemed, a need not observed in his predecessors. His attempt to regain his mother's (Marjorie Main) love evinces his pathetic search for redemption. At a certain point in the story, he manages to enter the old woman's miserable tenement without being noticed by her neighbors. But when she recognizes him under the plastic surgery, her reaction is to deny him as her son and expel him from her home in rage and frustration. Baffled, Baby Face finds some momentary relief when he meets his old girlfriend, Francey (Claire Trevor), what allows him to dream of having a normal girlfriend, perhaps a wife instead of the molls waiting for him in his territory. But his hopes for finding a link with his past and a possible future as a redeemed husband evaporate as he discovers she has syphilis, a consequence of her life as a prostitute after he left her and their neighborhood to become a great gangster.

Baby Face Martin's weakness, to dream of redemption where his predecessors displayed audacity, is at the root of the peculiar position of the character. Most significant

is that instead of having his irresistible dark force gradually submitting the rest of the characters to the logic of the gangster world, it is he who must strive to find a place amid so many elements of social melodrama. His status of someone alien to the main story is noted by Yaquinto, who points that "Baby Face Martin weaves in and out of the story and brings everyone's else woes out of the darkened corners of the crowded ghetto" (63). Such a status contrasts with that of the first three Hollywood gangsters, and instead of a heroic gangster protagonist who seduces the audience to his dark universe, Baby Face allows the struggle between good and evil to dominate the story. Indeed, it is only after failing to find redemption in motherly love or in romantic love that he decides to act like a real gangster and makes a plan to kidnap a rich boy from the wealthy side of the neighborhood. But by then it is already too late, and if he has failed in trying to find redemption, he will fail again in his poorly planed attempt to recover his dignity as a gangster.

Paradoxically, Baby Face Martin's only victory in the film is achieved after his death, as it will be demonstrated presently. On the one hand, his killing by Dave finally allows the architect to make up his mind and admit his infatuation is really for Drina, the courageous poor working girl, thus solving the love triangle. In addition, with the reward for killing Baby Face, Dave saves Tommy, Drina's brother, from being sent to reform school by vowing to use the money to get legal help for the kid (Dave and Drina believe that reform school was responsible for turning Baby Face from a street punk into a gangster). And of course, Dave, Drina and Tommy stand for the conventional family so dear to the dominant ideology as they leave their miserable neighborhood behind: he as the domesticated husband with a good heart; Drina, finally free from her struggle to make ends meet, is now ready to become the understanding and loving wife (and a loving substitute mother for Tommy); and Tommy, now as the kid who will be raised according to the values

of the good society that only an Ideal Family can offer to a child. However, Baby Face's posthumous victory is undeniable, as pointed by Graham Greene, who on commenting about *Dead End* wrote that "what we remember is the gangster.... He and the children (the kids in the slum) drive virtue into a rather dim corner" (in Yaquinto 64). Indeed, it is hard to find virtue in the decision of the Ideal Couple to leave behind that part of America where people cannot be happy. Willing to leave such a dead end to pursue their own American dream Dave, Drina and Tommy resemble too much Baby Face's own attitude years before. Will they ever come back, like the gangster, repentant and in search for redemption? The answer to that question lies in the impossible happy ending for the film, whose last image is that of an America where gangsters to be are bred in every corner of the 'civilized' city and, in contrast to the Western, there is no horizon to follow, just an endless succession of city corners.

In the midst of so many gangster film variations, there was another Hollywood genre which showed the dubious honor of hosting gangsters: the film *noir*. To illustrate some of the implications of the presence of the gangster in yet another genre a brief discussion will be carried out on Raymond Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep* (1939) and its adaptation to the screen by Howard Hawks in 1946 under the same title.[40] However, one must note that the purpose, here, is not to analyze the film *noir* in its own right. In addition, the fact that more than any other Hollywood genre it is the film *noir* which most resists being classified as a genre should not constitute a problem in the following discussion since this study is centered on intergeneric dialogues (with the gangster as a reference) than in offering clear cut definitions of Hollywood genres. In "N for Noir" Manohla Dargis

summarizes the difficulty as she poses the question: "Genre? Style? A mood or a movement? How to classify *noir* has preoccupied every critic or theorist to tackle the subject" (28). Nonetheless, the difficulty so many critics find in defining the film *noir* suggests that the analysis of those films as possibly a privileged site of intergeneric dialogue should prove rewarding, though the focus here is specifically on the dialogue between one film *noir* and the gangster within the perspective of the American mythic world on the screen.

On the other hand, in spite of the intense debate among critics over how to define the film *noir*, some of its traits do not seem to raise much debate, for example, Schatz's observation that "visually, these films were darker and compositionally more abstract than most Hollywood films" (*HG* 112). He is probably right, too, when he observes that "thematically, they were considerably more pessimistic and brutal in their presentation of contemporary American life than even the gangster films of the early 1930s had been" (112). At the same time, the presence of the gangster is not rare in those films, tempting one to ask what would be the function of the gangster in such a dark, brutal and pessimistic fictional environment, so similar to that in his own films. In *The Big Sleep*, the novel, the pessimistic view of American society is more convincing than in the adaptation by Hawks for reasons that will be presently discussed. However, both novel and film 'use' the gangster and some elements of the classic gangster film to reinforce and validate violence as a tool for the regeneration of the white male and to salvage patriarchy and the social values associated to it. In other words, in these works the monstrosity of the gangster is

[40] Given the similarity between Chandler's novelistic plot and Hawks' filmic plot both works will be analyzed as one. Whenever there are relevant enough differences between the novel and the film, the text will specify which is being discussed.

weakened in order to validate the process of regeneration through violence as a tool for the white hero's redemption and for the ideological reaffirmation of the white civilization.

The initial sequence of the story, when detective Phillip Marlowe awaits for his encounter with General Sternwood, who wants to hire him for a private investigation, and their meeting proper, offer good material for the analysis of the function of the main characters in so dark a view of American society. While biding his time in the main hallway of the Sternwood mansion before being led to see the General by Norris, the butler, Marlowe's attention is driven to a "broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armour rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair" (Chandler *TBS* 3). Marlowe notes that the knight, who was "fiddling with the knots of the ropes that tied the lady to the tree... [was] not getting anywhere" (3). The panel foreshadows the underlying structure of the story: that of the captivity narratives, in which the white male confronts wilderness to rescue the white female back to civilization, an adventure which allows the hero to plunge into a primitive state of violence and which ends with his own regeneration while the female can prove herself a redemptive woman since, at least in her heart, she never really gave in to the evil powers. Little doubt is left about what will be the function and mission of the hero in *The Big Sleep* when Marlowe admits that "I [Marlowe] would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him [the knight]" (3).

But if *The Big Sleep* reproduces the basic structure of the captivity narratives, such occurs within a context, in Frank Krutnik's words, of "obsession with... problems within the ordering of masculine identity and male cultural authority" (15). The encounter itself of Marlowe and the General is centered on a discussion about how to deal with the crisis in male authority and of the conventional (patriarchal) bourgeois family, described by Wood

previously in this research as that resulting from a "legalized heterosexual marriage" (I,G,A 47). They meet in the mansion's greenhouse, which the detective describes as a place "really hot... [where the] air was thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom" (6). He observes, still, that the "plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men. They smelled as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket" (6). The General agrees with him about the ambiance of decay and corruption, noting, about the orchids in the greenhouse that they "are nasty things. Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men. And their perfume has the rotten sweetness of a prostitute" (7), ostensibly relating the decadence of men to the seductive power of corrupted women. Asked if he liked orchids, Marlowe answers with a laconic "Not particularly" (7).

In the dialogue that follows between Marlowe and the General there is an insistence in describing society as a whole as full of corruption and dissolution. As mentioned above, such a pessimistic perspective of American society establishes the tone characteristic of the film *noir*, as well as of the hard-boiled stories in general. But such a pessimistic view can also be seen in the gangster film. Schatz, for instance, claims that the "gangster and urban crime films of the Depression era, along with the widely popular horror films, certainly anticipated the darker vision of *noir* films a decade later" (*HG* 112). Notwithstanding the technical reasons for its dark vision and style (like the influence from German Expressionism), at an ideological level the pessimism which links the gangster film and the film *noir* does not appear as simple and direct as it might seem at first.

Indeed, a factor which complicates the relation between the pessimism in the film *noir* and that in the gangster film is the different function of the gangster in each of the two genres. In the latter case, the presence of the gangster protagonist/hero excludes the

possibility for the full development of a positive protagonist/hero, or the Ideal Male, to use Wood's phrase again. By functioning as the dominant the gangster, in his turn, contaminates the rest of the film with the pessimism his figure implies. As a consequence, the gangster film resists closure to the point where Hollywood's happy ending becomes untenable. In the case of *The Big Sleep*, in contrast, the pessimistic depiction of society comes from the cynical standpoint of the Ideal Male himself. The result is that no matter how pessimistic the protagonist/hero may be, the very presence of such a positive male protagonist implies the possibility of separating right from wrong, good from evil, as determined by the dominant ideology. The presence alone of the Ideal Male as protagonist in the story reasserts the belief in the moral superiority of the good society in which, no matter how unwilling, he takes part and protects.

In truth, in his interview with the General (and throughout the story) Marlowe insists on the existence of a line separating good from evil based on the mere existence of men like himself. Marlowe and men like him are, above all, men of action, and as such he and the General share many affinities, worries and frustrations. Indeed, their conversation is like a father-to-son dialogue in which the ailing Father passes his experience as the legacy for the representative of the next generation of men of action, and gives over to the younger one the mission of fighting against the forces which threaten the social structure they support. With Marlowe presented to the reader as a man of action from the start, the next step is their reciprocal recognition as equals: the detective notes that although an "obviously dying man," the General "still had the coal-black directness of the eyes in the portrait that hung above the mantel in the hall" (6), the portrait being of "an officer in full regimentals... and the general look of a man it would pay to get along with" (4). When asked to tell something about himself, Marlowe impresses his interviewer when he admits

that he "test[s] very high on insubordination" (8). His cynical claim that he is "unmarried because I [Marlowe] don't like policemen's wives" (8) makes the old man smile. Marlowe's cynical justification for still being single (at age 33) is just one of the negative references about women during their dialogue, as it was pointed a few paragraphs above.

It is noteworthy that although the older man does enjoy the suffocating atmosphere of the greenhouse, Marlowe, "a man with blood in his veins" (7) feels uncomfortable. The greenhouse repeats some important characteristics of the wilderness that the Puritans had to confront in order to rescue the white (female) captives.[iii] It appears chaotic and alien to white civilization and it also threatens the white male with the dangers and temptations of sex outside the laws of Christianity. It is in such an ambience of dissolution that both men talk. While Marlowe drinks and smokes (and the General, condemned after "a rather gaudy life" (7) to "indulge his vices by proxy" (7) sniffs the smoke) the old man tells him "family secrets" (8), which include his oldest daughter's (Vivian) marriage with a bootlegger. About that, the detective admits to have "always got along with bootleggers" (8), obtaining a "faint economical smile" (8) from the other, together with his own admission: "It seems I do too" (8). One other family secret has to do with Carmen, the old man's younger daughter, whose wild sexual behavior is the reason for her father being blackmailed.

In the previous chapter it was noted that according to Jameson in Chandler's novels the "dwellings of the rich... [are transformed] into spaces of retreat and withdrawal that are somehow more analogous to offices than to houses or even quarters or apartments" ("The Synoptic Chandler" 41). If General Sternwood's greenhouse functions as his home and office, the same applies to all other dwellings in the story, including those of the gangsters. Similarly, all dwellings share the same atmosphere of corruption and dissolution. In other words, all dwellings represent, at some degree, that 'wilderness' in which the white hero

can descend to a primitive state from which to return violently till his own final regeneration is achieved. So what prevents *The Big Sleep* from repeating the gangster's dark universe in which chaos defeats civilization is, again, the presence of the Ideal Male. It is his presence that assures the possibility for the regeneration of other ideologically affirmative characters, who acquire a coherence which lacks in the ideologically affirmative characters in films like *The Public Enemy*.

Thus, it is through Marlowe's action that the characters in the story find their place and social order is symbolically restored. For example, the General's daughters are initially introduced as wild. In their father's own definition, "they both had, and still have, all the usual vices" (10). As a detective, Marlowe's most obvious function is to investigate all puzzles till he finds the truth. But "Marlowe cannot reconstruct the 'truth' of the matter in hand until he has solved the additional enigma posed by Vivian (repeatedly articulated as 'What Eddie Mars got on you?')" (Kuhn 85). He cannot assert the truth before he has released Vivian from captivity back to civilization, he cannot restore the social order before he has rescued the Ideal Female from the hands of evil (the gangster Eddie Mars and his crime associates) back to the moral principles of the good society.

So in his search for the Truth by means of a number of trips to the dwellings/offices of the gangsters, Marlowe "gives vent to everything racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise socially resentful and reactionary in the American collective unconscious, enhancing these unlovely feelings... by a homoerotic and male-bonding sentimentalism that is aroused by honest cops and gangsters with hearts of gold" (Jameson *TSC* 37). As Kuhn notes, the house rented from Eddie Mars by Geiger, the homosexual gangster who deals in pornography and blackmailing, "is a site of obsessive return" (90). It is in the 'primitive' ambiance (exotic and degenerate as the General's greenhouse) of Geiger's house that

Marlowe most dramatically confirms Carmen as a dissolute woman beyond salvation; it is there, in the home/office of a gangster that General Sternwood's younger daughter is definitely characterized as an Erotic Woman as she is found by the detective completely naked and drugged, oblivious to the gangster's dead body on the floor. Parenthetically, in *The Big Sleep* the idea that Geiger's house is off the limits of civilization is reinforced (more in the filmic adaptation than in the novel) by the stress on the distance separating it from the city. In Kuhn's words, the "fact that it is always made so abundantly clear that ground has to be covered in order to arrive at the scene of the crime marks it as beyond the bounds of the everyday, of knowable and familiar time and space" (90).

Indeed, the novel is full of 'primitive' places where ground must be covered in order to arrive at: Eddie Mars's gambling joint (the Cypress Club), the garage in which Mars's wife is kept captive, the Sternwoods's house, and even the old oil wells in the property, where, close to the end of the story, Carmen shoots Marlowe, unaware that her pistol was only loaded with blanks. Accordingly, Marlowe must make his trip to the Cypress Club in order to rescue Vivian from the dark forces of wilderness. But if the detective's trips seem to stress that wilderness is to be found everywhere, Marlowe's own characterization as 'good' functions to prevent the reader/audience to think that society has degenerated to a point beyond return. For example, already on page 41 when Vivian asks him if he is honest, he answers: "'Painfully'". Later, answering to Vivian's doubt about the existence of right and wrong, he insists that there is the right and the "wrong side of the fence" (105). In addition to being honest, he works hard for little money (Marlowe: "'You can't make much money at this trade [private investigation], if you're honest'" (40-1)). That, together with his concern with not exposing the General to the suffering he would endure if he knew all

of his daughters bad deeds, functions to reaffirm the first two items in Wood's list: the "right of ownership" and "the notion that 'honest toil is in itself admirable" (*I,G,A* 47).

But how can Marlowe disprove the General's own admission that "'[n]either of them [Vivian and Carmen] has any more moral sense than a cat. Neither have I. No Sternwood ever had'" (10)? The solution Marlowe found was to defy and defeat the representatives of evil –the gangsters— and by eventually showing that during her captivity (i.e., during her dubious relationship with Eddie Mars) Vivian had never surrendered to the temptations of 'wilderness', remaining pure in her heart. The period during which Vivian kept suspicious relations with Eddie Mars is similar to that of the white captive woman in the seventeenth century, when "[i]n the Indian's devilish clutches, the captive had to meet and reject the temptation of Indian marriage and/or the Indian's 'cannibal' Eucharist" (Slotkin *RTV* 94). As Slotkin explains, to "partake of the Indian's love... was to debase, to un-English the very soul" (*RTV* 94). On the other hand, the captive's resistance meant the possibility of finding her "ultimate redemption by the grace of Christ and the efforts of the Puritan magistrates" (94). Under such a light, to prove Vivian's abidance to the rules of the good society is the real mission set for him, which explains why he proceeds in his investigation even after having solved (and been well paid) the mission he was hired for: to prevent the General from being blackmailed for the nude photos of Carmen taken by Geiger. The following dialogue between Vivian and Marlowe shows how he suspected that she was 'good', and how the Sternwood family was, after all, good too:

> M. Sure. You worry about your little sister, don't you –from time to time.
>
> V: I think she's all I worry about. I worry about Dad in a way, to keep things from him.

M: He hasn't many illusions, I said, but I suppose he still has pride.

V: We're his blood... I don't want him to die despising his own blood. It was always wild blood, but it wasn't always rotten blood.

M: Is it now?

V: I guess you think so.

M: Not yours. *You're just playing the part.* (emphasis mine). (106)

In order to complete his mission Marlowe must prove that what Eddie Mars really had on Vivian was Carmen's degenerate life, while Vivian was just pretending to be an Erotic Woman herself to protect her family. Eventually, Marlowe succeeds. Carmen, in spite of having been described more than once as an "animal, and not a nice animal" (157) is not so bad, since she is prone to suffer "epileptic fits" (158), thus being the victim of a health problem, not a female lacking any moral sense. And Vivian's ex-husband, the bootlegger of whom the General was so fond, is found to be just another of Chandler's gangsters with a heart of gold, and, like Marlowe, the General, the cops and even Norris, the butler, a man of action. In the end, everything falls into place – the Sternwoods (and the good society they stand for) are not evil and deserve the detective's efforts to protect them, as he himself explains:

'I do all this for twenty-five bucks a day –and maybe just a little to protect what little pride a broken and sick old man has left in his blood, in the thought that his blood is not poison, and that although his two little girls are a trifle wild,

> as many nice girls are these days, they are not perverts or killers.' (162)

In the novel, after making Vivian promise that she will send Carmen to "[s]omewhere far off from here where they can handle her type, where they will keep guns and knives and fancy drinks away from her" (162), he suggests that he will take care of the last source of evil, as he tells Vivian: "'Forget Eddie. I'll go see him after I get some rest. I'll handle Eddie'" (163). He is free to wander by the dark corners of the city like the westerner can ride from wilderness to civilization and back again, saving the latter from the former even if he claims he doesn't fit in any. In the film, Marlowe actually kills Eddie, the monster. In the final scene, and obeying Hollywood's demand for a happy end, Vivian and Marlowe fall in love. As Kuhn observes,

> Marlowe, as hero, remains (within the terms of the Production Code) Morally unimpeachable; Bogart and Bacall are about to fall into one another's arms; And Vivian and Marlowe prove themselves to be an exemplary Hawksian team – witty, resourceful, mutually supportive and, above all, 'good' (*Marlowe* to *Vivian*: 'I didn't have a chance to thank you for what you did back there. You looked good, awful good'). (84)

4.2 The Gangster is Dead. Long Live the Gangster

In the chapter Schatz devotes to the gangster film in his *Hollywood Genres*, the last section is entitled "*Key Largo* and *White Heat*: The gangster's epitaph". The title points to the eventual death of the gangster film and its hero in the classic form. Indeed, after John

Huston's *Key Largo* (1948), and Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949), neither the genre nor the character would appear again in their classic form, at least not with any remarkable impact. And though the two films function as a vehicle for the farewell of two of the most popular actors to embody the gangster persona –Robinson, in *Key Largo*, recalling his Rico Bandello, and Cagney, in *White Heat*, recalling Tommy Powers-- they present differences enough between them to justify a separate analysis, although brief, of each.

Under the approach of this study one of the aspects of *Key Largo* which seems most interesting is its rich intergeneric interplay. In truth, Huston's film is exemplary of how the competition of dominants of different Hollywood genres among themselves within a film can make it difficult to define its genre. In contrast with *The Big Sleep*, in which the competition among dominants is concealed by the story's ostensive insistence in defining the whole of American society as evil, in *Key Largo* it is the very competition of dominants that comes forward, with well defined sections in which one or another element dominates, that helps to raise the audience's interest. Still in contrast with *The Big Sleep*, Huston's film allows the gangster to take the lead in a good portion of the plot, even if he is not the one destined to end with the upper-hand. Thus, one can say that *Key Largo* exhibits two main and competing plots, that of the gangster and that of romantic melodrama.

The gangster part of the plot is about Johnny Rocco (Robinson) and his gang, who gather at an isolated Florida hotel where they will consummate a "job" big enough to bring Rocco back to kingpin status, after being deported as an "unfriendly alien". The parallel melodramatic plot is that with the lead of "war hero/lover/detective Frank McLoud (Bogart)" (Schatz *HG* 106), and by Nora (Lauren Bacall), the daughter of James Temple (Lionel Barrymore) the proprietor of the hotel where the action takes place. Frank McLoud

is the war hero who arrives at the island hotel to pay his respects to the father and the widow of his old buddy, killed in the war.

The film begins with the promise of a romantic melodrama by presenting Bogart and Bacall as the couple to be. The relevance of such an opening with the romantic couple appearing first, can be better understood if one resorts to Meir Sternberg's "primacy effect," explained by Bordwell in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Such an effect is generated by a "[c]oncentrated, preliminary exposition that... triggers strong first impressions" (Bordwell *TCHC* 37). Bordwell notes that Sternberg ascertains that "in any narrative, the information provided first about a character or situation creates a fixed baseline against which later information is judged" (*TCHC* 37). Accordingly, to begin the story with the Bogart/Bacall couple, whose "box-office clout had been enhanced by their marriage a year earlier" (Schatz *HG* 106), creates a number of first impressions, among which one can mention the idea that the film will be dominated by the couple, who will probably end the story together. "Once the couple is firmly established Robinson/Rocco emerges from an upstairs suite and immediately assumes the control of the film" (Schatz *HG* 106). But by then the audience's favorable expectations about the romantic couple, and the implied happy ending, are already established as the spectator's guide.

So it is that even before the competition of dominants begins, the ambiguous light that the gangster as monster casts over the boundaries separating good and evil is weakened by a number of scenes before his appearance, as the talk about the heroic death James Temple's son in WW II, which elicits a patriotic sentiment, and by the scene with Bogart and Bacall tightening up the boat before the coming of a squall (which will eventually destroy the gangster's plan), as a touching reminder that *there is* a place for a good white family in America. Thus, when Robinson's character, as noted by Schatz, becomes the

"focal character... [who controls the narrative and]... retains just enough sadistic brutality to prevent the audience from developing a sentimental attachment to him" (*HG* 106), the expectations previously established of the gangster's eventual defeat will, in fact, allow the audience to empathize unproblematically with him.

The final confrontation comes as a confirmation of the spectator's expectations. After the squall strikes the resort, the gang lead by Rocco is forced to flee on a fishing boat (the boat which served in the initial part of the film to imply that a good white man and a good white woman can, together, face and defeat the forces of wilderness, represented by both the squall and Rocco). Forced by the gang to pilot the boat, McLoud kills all of them, except for Rocco, who had remained bellow. Schatz offers a nice description of the final showdown:

> *Key Largo*'s showdown situates Bogart/McLoud topside, looming above a hatchway until Robinson/Rocco emerges from bellow. Huston films the sequence in an exchange of point-of-view shots so that we view the hero from bellow framed by the hatchway and then view the villain-victim from above, entrapped within the bowels of the boast and pleading for his life. The Bogart character is well aware of Hollywood's code of retribution, of course –having been victimized by it himself in countless crime sagas—and he pumps bullets into Robinson with obvious relish. (HG 107-8)

That play with the exchange of point-of-view shots is coherent with the expectations generated by the primacy effect, which indicated from the start who would eventually dominate the film. In addition, Huston's film serves as an example of how it becomes

easier for the audience to empathize with the gangster when there is a clear competition between an ideologically affirmative male and a gangster, both of them dramatically dense. Such an effect is in contrast to what occurs in films like *The Big Sleep*, in which the Ideal Male is presented from the start as the main dominant while the gangster is kept more to the background. In that situation the gangster is unable to stand out as that force which suspends the references for right and wrong since there are a number of misleading cues favoring the idea that both the main protagonist and the other 'normal' characters live in a state of hesitation themselves towards good and evil.

In contrast with *Key Largo*, Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* brings back to the screen a film more faithful to the gangster genre's origins, but which also foreshadows the crisis that would be at the root of the dramatic transformation experienced by the genre in the late 1960s. In terms of the competition of dominants, *White Heat* repeats the pattern inaugurated by the genre's classic trilogy. The ideologically affirmative characters, here represented basically by the law enforcement agents, never come to display the dramatic density exhibited by Cody Jarrett, the gangster hero and protagonist. On commenting the film in his *Hollywood Genres*, Schatz indicates such a difference between the two types of characters: "In fact, *White Heat* recalls the classic gangster films where the police and their crime-fighting procedures were scientific and methodical to the point of comic banality" (109). He illustrates the contrasting treatment Walsh gives to the police and to the gangsters by selecting a sequence in which three undercover agents follow Ma Jarrett in separate cars: "This exchange of dialogue occurs as they [the agents] establish radio identities: 'We'll use the ABC method. I'm B.' 'I'm C.' 'I'm A." (109-10). But while Walsh "plays the scene straight, cutting from one car to another with the same dull precision exhibited by the

agents...[as soon as] Ma spots the autos... the camera assumes her subjective viewpoint... and the narrative recovers its visual and emotional intensity" (110).

But if in terms of the competition of dominants *White Heat* reproduces the basic situation in the classic gangster trilogy, it adds, too, a psychological side very revealing of how the classic gangster film would have to adapt, as a myth artifact, to face some important transformations that the American society was experiencing (for example, the intensification of the crisis of family relations springing from an urban rather than a rural environment). *White Heat*, as notes Schatz, "traces the perverted life and loves of gangster Cody Jarrett (Cagney), who kills cops and his own gang members with equal disregard and whose heart belong only to Mother.... Raoul Walsh's narrative is a morass of Freudian imagery and psycho-sexual undercurrents" (HG 108). His conclusion is that "[n]ot only does Cody's pathological state provide a rationale for his aberrant behavior, [but] it also exonerates society from any responsibility for his criminality" (HG 108).

However, even if true, such a reasoning does not explore deep enough the significance of such a psychological element. Because what Walsh decided to emphasize in his film could already be seen in the genre's origins: the flaw in the bourgeois family – Horowitz's "burden of repression," discussed in Chapter 3-- and its explosive consequences, translated in those films by the violent behavior of the gangster and his uneasiness with women. Throughout the film Cody Jarrett suffers from terrible seizures. He has an attack in a hideout in front of his gang, and is taken by Ma Jarrett to an adjoining room where she soothes his pain while encouraging him to be even more brutal. Cody's father, we learn, was sent to a mental institution where he died of similar seizures. Put differently, the head of Cody's family is the same absent (and probably brutal) father one finds in *The Public Enemy* and in *Scarface*. Like Tom Powers and Tony Camonte, Cody is

the son of an absent father and is raised by a mother who cannot teach him anything but to be a man in a patriarchal society. In that sense, what Ma Jarrett does is to tell her son candidly what all mothers had been telling their sons in the 'normal' American family. Schatz claims that although "Cody's sole redeeming quality, like that of Cagney's Tommy Powers in *The Public Enemy*, is his love for his mother... even this quality is perverted... [since it] is Ma Jarrett herself who schooled her son in criminality and gang leadership" (HG 108); the presence of the monster helps to expose the role of the mother in the maintenance of patriarchy and its consequent distribution of power, a role usually hidden behind the normal mother/son relations in the Hollywoodian Ideal Family.

By the same token, the "psychotic brutality" (*HG* 108) Schatz sees in *White Heat* is proportional to the level of accumulated repression in the American family during the first decades of life in an urban environment organized by industrial capitalism. It indicates how dangerously out of control social relations can get under the demands of the dominant ideology (one should note that the main difference between the positive hero's violence and that of the gangster is that in the former case violence is presented as ideologically justifiable, while in the latter case the way violence is used challenges the very basis for its justification). Such an increase in brutality in the gangster film becomes clear when one compares, for instance, the scene in which Cagney/Tom Powers defies alone the rival gang (in which the spectator only hears the shots), and that in which Cagney/Cody, answering to a hostage's complain that "it's stuffy" inside the car trunk where he is locked, sadistically unloads his gun in his victim, while lightly remarking: "Hold on, I'll give you a little air".

The difference in the brutality displayed by the 1930s gangster and that of the late 1940s is also paralleled by the disposition of the gangster film to show more overtly that violence on the screen. That becomes relevant when one thinks that after *White Heat* the

next gangster film to cause impact would also blend unprecedented graphic violence with the dream of the ideal American bourgeois family: Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), the film to be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

4.3 *Bonnie and Clyde*: the Gangster Dreams of a Family

Bonnie and Clyde, released in August 1967, claims Gary Crowdus, "was not only a landmark film for Arthur Penn, it also became a cultural milestone for an emerging counterculture" ("Penn, Arthur" 305). Indeed, Penn's film appears in the context of a broad cultural crisis in America and as part of a wave of Hollywood films which "transcoded a growing sense of alienation from the dominant myths and ideals of U.S. society" (Michael Ryan *Camera Politica* 17). These films, Ryan ponders, "provided audiences with a new set of representations for constructing the world, new figures of action, thought and feeling for positing alternative phenomenal and social realities, sometimes apart from, sometimes within the interstices of the dominant social reality construction" (17). Amid such a social and cinematic context, *Bonnie and Clyde* can be analyzed as an index for the transformations both in the gangster film and in the characterization of the gangster as an adaptation of Hollywoodian mythology to the changing cultural reality.

The film shows the career of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow (Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty), real-life criminals from the Midwest who during the Depression fall in love, are joined by C. W. Moss (Michael J. Pollard, who becomes their mechanic, driver and something like a member of the household) and Buck Barrow (Gene Hackman, Clyde's brother) and his wife Blanche (Estelle Parsons), go on a spree of robberies and killings, and become national folk heroes in the process. Eventually, and with Buck and Blanche already

killed in a shoot-out with the law, Bonnie and Clyde are betrayed by C. W.'s father, Daddy Moss (Dub Taylor), and they are caught in an ambush, and shot to death by the police.

Although brief, the synopsis above suggests at least two important changes in the gangster film: the statement that the gangster protagonist falls in love, and the presence of so many family relations –brothers, wives, husbands, in-laws—an unusual number for a film of that genre, specially when such relations occur within the gang members. As it was previously discussed, the classic gangster is unable to constitute a normal family. In the Hollywoodian tradition, marriage to a good woman is a hero's way to find redemption and social integration. The gangster, however, because he is simultaneously hero and monster, can have no final redemption, nor become a regular member of society; his victory would mean the disruption of the civilized social rules, and his successful marriage would mean the very undermining of the values associated to the conventional bourgeois family. By the same token, instead of a redemptive woman, the classic gangster can only have some kind of sex relations with the erotic woman.

Accordingly, the death of the gangster at the end of every gangster film expresses an attempt to reaffirm the dominant ideology, including those norms related to sexuality and marriage. But if the pattern (to use Staiger's phrase) of the classic gangster film dictates that the gangster protagonist must never fall in love, by beginning the film with the romantic scene in which Bonnie and Clyde meet, Penn is offering a significant variation in that pattern. Indeed, as noted by Ryan, the "style of the film is itself romantic" (*Camera Politica* 21), and following Staiger's claim that those variations open the possibility for

"commentary about issues raised within the standard pattern" (6),[41] this section will discuss the implications of such a variation in the myth of the gangster as an ideological adaptation to a new cultural situation.[42]

In this case, the borrowing of romantic elements –for example, "[c]lose-ups are used expressively... and the frame functions to create significant still images of the interrelations between the protagonists and nature" (Ryan 21)-- has the function of indicating an ideological crisis related to the conventional bourgeois family and patriarchy and the sexual codes under it. To understand what occurs at the myth level when the gangster is endowed with the desire for romantic love and a conventional family, one must remember that, as monster, the desire to integrate his mother society is behind the gangster's motivation. But since his presence/action suspends the notion of right and wrong, good and evil, whatever or whoever he attempts to mimic will have his or her corruption, flaws and contradictions exposed. For example, his very creation implied in the corruption of the Hollywoodian hero, as he became a monstrous hero, a permanent challenge to the positiveness of the ideal male, loved and rejected at once. Thus, as he is allowed to dream of a family, he threatens to corrupt the dominant family structure with the possibility of generating a monstrous family in which the referents for what is and what is not acceptable disappear in so basic an institution for the structuring of society.

Indeed, as critic Pauline Kael observes, "the 'normality' of the Barrow gang and their individual aspirations toward respectability are the craziest things about them" ("Crime and Poetry" 44). Yes, because even if they appeared to be prototypes of the anti-

[41] One must note that what Staiger calls a deviation from the pattern imphes in the borrowing of elements from other genres. In other words, in this study, the analysis of deviations from the pattern is equivalent to the analysis of what has been called here intergeneric dialogue.

establishment heroes and resonated perfectly with the revolutionary tenor of the late sixties, *Bonnie and Clyde* were still in business, and like any preceding gangster, they chose to make their living by violent means. Indeed, more than with any preceding gangster, the Barrow gang was likable. Kael observes that in contrast with the "'classic' gangster films [which] showed gang members betraying each other and viciously murdering the renegade who left to join another gang... the Barrow gang represents family-style crime" (45). The result, of course, is that the audience is impelled to empathize with a family who is capable, in the same breath, to love and to kill, to dream of respectability and to rob.

In that respect, a fruitful contrast can be made between *Bonnie and Clyde* and another rebellion film of the time: Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967), which also focuses on the crisis of the conventional American family. Such a comparison should cast some light on how the presence of the gangster protagonist differentiates *Bonnie and Clyde* from other rebellion films produced in the late sixties and early seventies. About these two films Ryan claims that "both *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* evidence the limitations of the sixties version of alienated white middle class rebellion" (21). He sustains that in these films the "alternatives posed to bourgeois conformity frequently took the form of a search for more personal, self-fulfilling experiences" (21). Ryan argues that by focusing on the self these films "cohered perfectly with traditional American individualism"(21-2). However, while in Nichols's film the rebellious couple –Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) and Elaine (Katharine Ross)—who challenge the patriarchal and bourgeois structure of the American family are allowed a prospective happy life by the end of the film, in *Bonnie and Clyde* the heroes can only await violent destruction. In fact, the scene in

[42] The new cultural situation here is signaled by the consequences of the creation of the pill over the sexual behavior of the Americans and the structuring of the family, by the rising opposition to the presence of U.S.

which Bonnie and Clyde are shot in slow motion and a from number of different angles while they are being riddled with bullets in an ambush of the police inaugurated a new level of graphic violence on the Hollywoodian screen. Why?[43]

In *The Graduate*, Braddock is the young male who refuses to work after graduating from college. His attitude challenges the work ethic, as defined by Wood, and can thus be understood as the result of a rebellious spirit. But Braddock's disposition can be interpreted in a different way when one considers one other element in Wood's list: "Success/wealth. A value of which Hollywood ideology is also deeply ashamed, so that while hundreds of films play on its allure, very few can allow themselves openly to extol it" (*I,G,A* 47). Accordingly, Braddock's rebelliousness against the work ethic appears less radical when his refusal to work is not followed by a refusal, say, of his family money. He also appears to challenge the family as organized by the patriarchal order as he wanders from a sexual liaison with a married woman –the infamous Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft)—to pursuit of her engaged daughter. But again the rebelliousness of his attitude is undermined by the film's end, in which Braddock (finally a man of action, after the affair with Mrs. Robinson) and Elaine (who follows her man, approvingly) run from the church to a future which can hardly be different from the perpetuation of that same family structure traditionally presented by Hollywood, even if now its crisis is presented more openly.

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soldiers in Vietnam, and by the values championed by the hippies.

[43] One could argue that like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* (1968), another rebellion film, also ends in a tragic and violent way, with the killing of the two protagonists by rural rednecks. But while in the latter the heroes' journey is one which challenges the establishment, Bonnie and Clyde, in spite of their seemingly rebellious attitude, confound the audience as they also pursue a conservative dream of a normal family and a normal life. Such a contrast results in that the death of the heroes in *Easy Rider* allows the viewer to empathize freely with their 'cause,' in spite of all its limitations (there are no other heroes in the film for the audience to empathize with.). In *Bonnie and Clyde*, however, to empathize with the heroes means to face the ideologically confounding message of the gangster films.

In its turn, *Bonnie and Clyde* also exhibits some restrictions in its anti-establishment disposition. Take the scene in which Bonnie and Clyde meet an "Okie" family. When the farmer explains that their farm was taken by the bank, Clyde shakes his head sympathetically, while Bonnie comments: "Why, that's a pitiful shame". But even if the two make their living by robbing the same banks who take the property from the people who work and live in it, the film is "never... capable of offering the suffering 'Okies' or displaced farmers of the Depression anything but a transient image of folk heroism" (Ryan 23). Indeed, the film is more interested in reproducing those elements which constituted the core of the hippie counterculture: those "values of a return to nature, of the virtue of preindustrial social forms like the commune, of the need to liberate oneself from 'straight' behavior, specially regarding sexuality, of the ideal of a simple and more authentic life experience" (Ryan 23). But if Bonnie and Clyde robbed banks and shops in order to support their dream of a free and exciting life, so was the hippie movement "itself dependent on a well-fuelled capitalist economy" (Ryan 23). In other words, in both cases the rebellion dream can only take place if the 'system' they supposedly defy is functioning well.

Those aspects just discussed of the two films are only some possible examples to demonstrate how, in spite of the cultural impact they caused when they appeared, the challenge both *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* offered to the establishment was not radical enough; a rebellion which could no more than suggest alternatives always already fated to be absorbed –and thus defeated-- by the dominant ideology. To use a concept discussed in Chapter 1, the challenging values of American counterculture of the sixties constituted what Chambers names "noise" in a totalizing system, this perspectivist element which results from the different perspective each person has of the dominant ideology. For

instance, Ryan's observation that "[l]aw school followed a quick shave and a haircut for many former hippies" (23) translates what kind of future can be foreseen for Braddock and Elaine after they run from the church altar: she will become the loving housewife for a husband well adapted to the "plastics" business, the career he was advised to follow by a representative of the 'square' generation.

Bonnie and Clyde, in their turn, are allowed no future. But, as we have seen, the counterculture values the two films advanced (like the rest of the rebellion films of the time) were not radical enough to break Hollywood strategy of offering limited reforms in place of revolutionary alternatives in its mythic world. The ideological limits inherent to Hollywood's output could only make room for elements of subaltern ideologies with which it could negotiate and incorporate as a domesticated element unable to threaten the status quo. So, again, what in *Bonnie and Clyde* is so subversive to the point that the protagonists must be executed at the film's end? That question takes one back to the elements initially pointed in this section: the gangster's love relation and his dream of a family.

Indeed, the recurrence of the theme in the film cannot be ignored. It is an insistence that suggests a desire of the gangster to be 'normal' at an unprecedented level. For instance, after killing a man for the first time, Clyde ponders that while he is already known by the law, Bonnie, for still being unknown, has the opportunity to get out of the criminal career. In the bedroom of a cheap motel, he reasons with her: "'I want you to say the word to me and I'm gonna put you on that bus back to your mama. 'Cause you mean a lot to me, honey, and I just ain't gonna make you run with me'." Naturally, Bonnie refuses the offer, but never before had a gangster protagonist displayed such a chivalrous concern for a lady, not to mention that Clyde's suggestion to send Bonnie back to her "mama" seems more appropriate coming from the mouth of a preoccupied husband than from a mean gangster.

Later on, with the Barrow gang already complete and with some stickups done, Bonnie runs from the rest in a cornfield by the road. Clyde leaves the car and goes after her till he finds her scared and crying: "'Oh, I want, I wanna see my mama. I wanna see my mama'." In the following sequence, the whole gang is shown meeting not only Mrs. Parker (Bonnie's mother), but also Bonnie's sister, a man who stands for some male relative of hers, and two small boys (kid brothers? nephews?). The scene begins with a very long shot of three cars parked by the side of a road. A number of people are gathered around and one can hear they talk and laugh indistinctly. The quick montage that follows, with cuts which isolate specific moments in the family reunion –Bonnie's mother hugs her and cries; two small boys play together; Buck plays with a little boy, bouncing him on his knee; Bonnie with her sister—creates a pervasive sense of family reunion. But perhaps the most unexpected attitude for the gangster tradition till then comes at the end of the family meeting, when Clyde tries to comfort Mrs. Parker, who fears for her daughter. Clyde: "'And they ain't goin' catch us. 'Cause I'm even better at runnin' than I am at robbin' banks'," he admits. And he continues: "'Look, I ain't gonna risk my little girl here, just to make money, uncertain times as we are'." Finally, after some more talk insisting in how much he is willing to give up risk and money to protect Bonnie, Mrs. Parker gives him the approval of the good mother: "'Maybe you know the way with her then. I'm only an old woman and I don't know nothin'...".

Although the sequence above is clearly the one that most evinces such an unprecedented relevance of family matters in a gangster film, it is far from being the only one to indicate the gang's willingness to integrate normal society. More than once Bonnie and Clyde talk dreamily of the day when they will be able to settle down and "get us a home". And when it comes the moment for the Barrow gang to split the money they had

just robbed it is, again, family matters that get into the way. In that scene Blanche, who never comes to enjoy being part of a criminal gang, demands her share. She whispers to her husband, Buck, telling him to demand that Clyde include her in the splitting, too. Buck feels embarrassed, but does what she is asking. As a consequence, Bonnie and W.C. look indignant, but Clyde decides in Blanche's favor. He begins to split the money all over again, calling Blanche "Mrs. Buck Barrow" when he separates her share for her. When Bonnie turns and stalks away from the others, Clyde goes after her: "'Listen, now, honey, I guess I have to keep saying this: Blanche is married to Buck, and Buck is family'." Coherently, Bonnie retorts that her "'family could use some of that money'."

In sum, while *Bonnie and Clyde* shares, in general terms, the same ideological limits exhibited by the other rebellion films of the late sixties and early seventies, it does present an important difference: the gangster protagonist and hero. Thus, the real subversive move in Penn's film lies not in the counterculture values it shares with films like *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider*, but on the contrary, it's most threatening ideological challenge is the very desire of the gangster to have a normal family and integrate the good society. What Bonnie and Clyde make evident is what was kept hidden in the other films of the kind: under a discourse exalting Nature, an attempt to renew the Myth of the Frontier; behind the call for free love, the support by the bourgeois and patriarchal family; concealed by the pursuit of freedom from the 'system', an attempt to keep individualism alive and justifiable.[44]

Indeed, by inserting a gangster protagonist in a counterculture film, *Bonnie and Clyde* goes beyond the challenges posed by counterculture discourse and points at the site

[44] If the counterculture of the sixties and seventies lead to the yuppies in the eighties, who reaffirmed the dominant ideology with gusto, the same cannot be said about the fate of the conventional bourgeois family, whose crisis is still an ongoing process as demonstrated by Geoffrey Holtz with so many numbers in his *Welcome to the Jungle – The Why Behind "Generation X"*.

of a real cultural crisis. If the ideals proposed by the hippies were unable to free American society from the restraints imposed under the capitalist system, leading to a reaffirmation of male individualism and patriarchy, the weakening of the structure of the conventional family came as one consequence of such a failure. As noted by Holtz in his book, the "final consequence of the exploding divorce rate of the Free's parents [the Baby Boomers, "born between 1943 and 1960"] was the ensuing growth in the number of stepfamilies" (36). The Barrow family, however, does not allow the viewer to put the problem in simple terms of either rejecting or accepting such a family model, considering that like the figure of the gangster himself, as a monstrous family they suspend the references for right and wrong in family relations, structure and social function. A discussion on some of the paradoxes originating from a gangster family should clarify the issue.

A characteristic which the classic gangsters had always shared was their ability to be at once repulsive and seductive as they combined extreme violence, crime and disregard for the human life on the one hand, and leadership, cunning and bravura on the other. In other words, their confounding capacity came from an attitude which mixed ideologically positive and negative values to succeed. But the seductive side of the classic gangsters was restricted by their un-American physical mien, much too distant from the ideal of the WASPs. It is significant, then, that Clyde is a gangster protagonist played for the first time by an actor who exhibited the physique du role of an all American hero. Tall, handsome and white, Warren Beatty in nothing remembered those actors who played the most popular gangsters in the classic era of the genre: Robinson and Cagney. In contrast with these two, Beatty could easily occupy the minds of the young women as a desirable husband and father. He was also an apt role model for the young men of that time. In addition to his physical appearance, Clyde's seductiveness was increased by his pursuit of the dreams

shared by the American counterculture youth, the already mentioned free love (he dreams of a marriage, but being a bachelor does not prevent him from having sex with Bonnie), exaltation of Nature and the opposition to the 'system'. His gallantry towards Bonnie also added to his seductiveness.

Accordingly, the emergence of the first romantic gangster would not go without some transformations in the characterization of his female partner. If the molls who followed the classic gangsters were Erotic women (adventuress, fascinating but treacherous, sensual), Bonnie does not fit such a definition so easily. Differently from her predecessors, then, Bonnie does exhibit those traits usually attributed to the Ideal Female (wife and mother, perfect companion, endlessly dependable, mainstay of hearth and home). On the other hand, she is adventuress and certainly sensual, specially when one considers that it is she who cures Clyde's impotence.[45] By the same token, the members of the Barrow family/gang themselves cannot decide whether they should behave like gangsters or as compassionate citizens, as it can be illustrated by the scene in which they capture Captain Frank Hammer of the Texas Rangers. After capturing Hammer, the gang discusses what they should do about him. With the captain tied up, Buck asks Clyde: "'What do you want to do with him, huh'?" Blanche looks clearly uncomfortable with the situation, while C.W., trying to be helpful, suggests uncertainly: "'Shoot him'?" When Clyde replies with a "'come on, now, huh'," he tries again: "'Hang him'?", only to have his idea rejected by Clyde once more. The famous solution comes from Bonnie, who suggests that they take a picture of Hammer surrounded by the gang in a friendly manner to be published by the

[45] Although Clyde's impotence might render a number of very interesting interpretations, that issue will deserve, here, only the observation that, like Caliban and Frankenstein's creature and even Mr. Hyde, the gangster have always barred the possibility of their reproduction, a situation which will change with the publishing of Puzo's *The Godfather*.

newspapers. Such a solution, although undeniably creative, seems very unmanly when one thinks of how Rico Bandello and Tom Powers treated their enemies.

In conclusion, *Bonnie and Clyde* stands for a unique gangster film for its ability to express so radically the ideological confusion Americans were feeling in a period of cultural transition. The Barrow gang's unprecedented attempt to function like a family is an attempt to adapt the myth of the gangster to the crisis of the conventional American family and its values. For his inherent ability to suspend the usual notions for right and wrong, no other mythic figure would fit more appropriately the role of pointing to that confusion; the crisis of the conventional family was already much too evident to allow Hollywood to continue to support unproblematically such a model by means of the Ideal family structured according to the rules of patriarchy. The gangster family in Penn's film opened a much to radical possibility for restructuring the failing old model; by posing that there is no right and wrong, the Barrow gang functions as the ground zero from which one can build any new model for the American family. For making the repugnant seem attractive, the seductive quality of the Barrow gang could not escape the inevitable fate reserved for the gangster: final and violent destruction. However, as the dominant ideology could not find a solution for the crisis of the bourgeois family, the legacy of the Barrows would not be erased. On the contrary, as a shadow of the Ideal Family, Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather* would institutionalize the gangster family in the Hollywoodian mythological realm by means of its adaptation to the screen by Francis Ford Coppola with his *The Godfather* trilogy. Accordingly, the significance of the transformation of the gangster film brought by the work of Puzo and Coppola will be discussed in the following section in this chapter.

4.4 *The Godfather*: a New Family in Town

The appearance of the Corleone family after the unmerciful destruction of the Barrows illustrates how the killing of the monster is always temporary, and how his fate is always to try and return to the heart of his mother society by occupying the site of those conflicts and contradictions central to its culture. Another way to put is to say, more specifically, that since the dominant ideology's solution, in *Bonnie and Clyde*, for the crisis of the conventional family –namely, the extermination of the unconventional family— cannot be applied to the real world, the coming of a more solid gangster family was inevitable in mythological terms, since the continuing family crisis in American society still lacked a more appropriate mythic solution to express it. Like other unconventional families that would appear on the screen after the sixties,[46] the creation of the Corleones was one of Hollywood's attempts to negotiate and absorb the subversive family models that could arise from the crisis in the American family structured under patriarchy and the bourgeois values. But as we have seen, the gangster resists, by definition, to function as a supporting element for the dominant ideology. On the contrary, the institutionalizing of the gangster family served only to cast the light of monstrosity to the whole of the nuclear family and all social values associated to it.

The strangeness caused by a gangster family can be illustrated by the way the critic David Howard chose to define *The Godfather*: "A family saga of epic proportions created with *the most improbable of themes* -- the universe of the organized crime in the United

[46] Films in which one finds families who, at least at first sight, try to deviate from the conventional model: mother and son, but no father (*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*), father and son and a rejected mother (*Kramer vs. Kramer*), loving couple who kill serially before having a bunch of kids (*Natural Born Killers*), a monstrous but adorable family (*The Addams Family*), or not so adorable and comprised only by men (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), just to mention a few. Though such films point, in some way or another, to problems in the conventional family model, their happy ending generally functions to eventually support that

States" (emphasis mine) (*The Tools of Screenwriting* 274) ("Saga familiar de proporções épicas, criada com o mais improvável dos assuntos -- o universo do crime organizado nos Estados Unidos"). The relevance of the family in Puzo's novel and Coppola's film cannot be ignored when one thinks that in addition to creating a 'normal' family for the gangster, those works also presented for the first time the word *family* as an adjective for a criminal/business organization. The implications of those two new elements for the gangster figure, for the gangster film and for the mythic manifestation of American dominant ideology are significant and will be discussed in the following section.

4.5 The Gangster is the F/father[47]

Although the gangster had always incorporated elements of patriarchy, by taking upon himself the role of the Patriarch, Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) was causing an important transformation not only to the figure of the gangster protagonist and hero, but was also altering dramatically the characterization of other characters usually present in the classic gangster film and subordinated to his dominance, like the erotic woman and the redemptive woman. And of course, as a 'conventional' patriarch he was also introducing a completely new kind of character in the convention: the gangster's children. Until then, the Hollywoodian ideal family was protected by its very absence from the realm of the gangster and the consequent contamination by his monstrosity. Rejected by his parents (Tommy Powers by his father in *The Public Enemy*, Baby Face Martin by his mother in *Dead End*)

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same model or the ideological values on which it finds support. As Wood would put it, the dominant ideology in those films allow some variations as long as no radical transformation is carried out successfully.

[47] Puzo and Coppola presented not only the first gangster father for the American public; their work tell the story of two of such characters: Vito Corleone, the founder of the dynasty, and Michael, his son and heir. Since they are both the leading characters in Puzo's novel and in Coppola's first two adaptations to the screen, *The Godfather* and *The Godfather II*, these first two films of *The Godfather* trilogy will many times be discussed here as one only story, and will be differentiated whenever necessary.

or loved by a monstrous mother as in *White Heat*, all those films implied that the gangster could only come from either as a specific failure (a black sheep) in the bourgeois family or from an already corrupted family whose very characterization as corrupt implied the existence of the good conventional family. In other words, it was always implied the existence of the good family, which the gangster could only threaten from the outside, a place of redemption out of reach for a character who never had sought nor deserved redemption.

Thus, in contrast with the classic gangster films in which all roads to redemption were closed, *The Godfather* adds the pursuit of redemption to the gangster's relentless pursuit of success. Such a combination of goals has been pointed by critics as the confrontation between the impersonal demands of capitalism and the emotional ties offered by the family and which function as the last resort for one's humanization. Hess, for one, claims that in *Godfather II*[48] the "all-pervasive theme is the warmth, strength, and beauty of family ties which, in bourgeois society, alone appear to meet de desperate need we all feel for human community" ("Godfather II" 82). But Hess observes, too, that the "counter theme and real strength of the film is its demonstration that the benefits of the family structure and the hope for community have been destroyed by capitalism" (82) itself. In other words, according to Hess *The Godfather* opposes the realm of business to that of the family, the values associated to the former being destructive to those values the dominant ideology relates to the latter in the Hollywoodian mythology. Approached in such a way, *The Godfather* could be compared to a number of other non-gangster films dealing with that business/home opposition to denounce how the negative values associated to the

former threaten the positive values associated to the latter. One can take Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) as an example of such a kind of film and compare it to Coppola's to see if such a parallel can be made.

In *Wall Street* one follows the professional trajectory of Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), a neophyte stockbroker, who is seduced into insider trading by sleek entrepreneur Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas). The son of the blue-collar and union man Carl Fox (Martin Sheen), Bud struggles with his conscious to decide between his loyalty to Gekko and to big money and to his father. While Gekko stands for those values associated to success in capitalism (greed, cynicism, cold heartedness, ambition), Carl Fox stands for those good old values associated to the bourgeois family (honest toil, loyalty, family ties, friendship). So when Bud Fox eventually solves his personal conflict and decides to tape and hand on to the law Gekko's admission of his dishonest methods to make money, the "message" of the film is that only the abidance to family values may redeem a man and save him from becoming a greedy bad capitalist; *Wall Street* has a happy end as greed and crime are punished and the bourgeois positive values associated with the family end with the upper hand. By the end of the film, the viewer has accepted the invitation to empathize with the good patriarch played by Martin Sheen and Charlie Sheen's redeemed protagonist and hero.[49] In *The Godfather*, however, things seem to be somewhat more complex, since following the classic tradition, and as it has been argued in this study, the presence of the gangster protagonist and hero in Coppola's trilogy does not allow for Hollywood's

[48] The same can be stated about the first *Godfather*, film and novel. In *The Godfather III* the theme is still present, but mostly to show the failure of the conventional family to function as a site for redemption.
[49] The father/son relation of their characters is further reinforced by the fact that both actors are father and son in real life, a fact well known by the audience.

conventional happy ending, as there is no ideal male nor ideal female to empathize with and to reaffirm the dominant ideology.

In order to unveil the implications from Vito Corleone's decision to be both a family man and a gangster, a brief comparison to William Wyler's *Desperate Hours* (1955) will be here developed. Wyler's film narrates the story of three convicts who run from prison and find refuge in the home of the Hilliards, a very conventional American middle-class suburban family: the working father (Fredric March), the loving and submissive housewife (Martha Scott), the romantic teenage daughter (Mary Murphy), and her kid brother (Richard Eyer). In fact, the gangster picks the house of the Hilliards when he sees the boy's bicycle laid on the front lawn because, as the gang leader Glenn Griffin (Humphrey Bogart) explains later, "a man with a family thinks twice before taking any risks". The plot develops during the three days while the gangsters hold the Hilliards secretly as their hostages in their own house and Glenn waits for his girlfriend to send him a certain sum of money, thus establishing a 'business' situation. One should note that as the plot develops, even though Mr. Hilliard does go to his office every day in order not to raise suspicion, the tense negotiation one finds in a difficult business is brought home, menacing the bourgeois principle of separating business from domestic life. The film ends, again, with the death of the gangster hero, who is disarmed by Mr. Hilliard and eventually shot by the police. But the film's happy ending, reestablishing the family's conventional structure and the chasm separating it from the realm of business, still fails to come to an unproblematical closure. In the final shot, after the gangster protagonist has been destroyed, and the Hilliards enter their home, the camera closes on the bicycle on the lawn, as a reminder of the frailty of the bourgeois family structure, a frailty that would become the open crisis of the sixties and thereafter.

In that film, as mentioned above, the gangster can only threaten the ideologically positive status of the bourgeois family from the outside. Even weakened by the presence of the gangster, *Desperate Hours* does end happily, considering that the father did perform his role of protector and provider while the rest of the household took on gladly each one's predetermined role. Nonetheless, both *Wall Street* and *Desperate Hours*, even if in different ways, emphasize the polarity between home and office. While Stone's film openly opposes these two poles, clearly indicating the realm of business as dehumanizing and the family as the site for redemption, Wyler shows more subtly the threat posed by the male's business world to the conventional family structure when it cannot be kept at a distance from the hearth. In contrast, *The Godfather* short-circuits such a polarity since, as we have seen, a gangster's home is always his office, too. The novelty, when compared to the classic gangster's lair in which only his molls would enter, is the family who now has to share the gangster's home/office with him and definitely includes the pursuit of redemption among his goals. But unlike the heroes in *Wall Street* and in *Desperate Hours*, neither Vito nor Michael Corleone can find redemption in their home, which is always already encompassed by the shadow of the cut-throat competition in the business world.[50]

Indeed, already in the opening scene in *The Godfather* one can see that the opposition between evil/business and good/family will be completely shattered. Howard's comments on that scene indicates the unprecedented proximity of the poles of an, until then, insuperable polarity:

> By showing us the sumptuous wedding in parallel with Don Corleone's activities in his office, the filmmakers offer a

[50] In Puzo's novel, as well as in Coppola's trilogy, all lead characters justify, at some point, their corruption and violent means in the name of family ties. Such an attitude makes null any attempt to claim the separation

> more thorough perspective of the context in which the story develops. The wedding allows the filmmakers the opportunity for showing the whole 'family' –that is, both the members of the specific criminal organization and Corleone's relatives and friends, including Carlo, the new son-in-law, and Tom, the adopted son. (278-9)[51] ("Ao nos mostrar a festa suntuosa de casamento paralelamente às atividades de Dom Corleone, em seu gabinete, os cineastas nos dão uma perspectiva mais completa do contexto em que a história se desenrola. O casamento dá aos cineastas a oportunidade de exibir a 'família' inteira -- ou seja, tanto os integrantes daquela organização criminosa específica quanto os parentes e agregados de Corleone, inclusive o novo cunhado, Carlo, e Tom, o irmão adotivo").

Howard's conclusion offers a glimpse of the discomfort caused by the appearance of the gangster family:

> it is not so much that we don't want to believe that someone can do such things, rather, we don't want to believe that such things could have been done by the kind of people with whom we would like to empathize. We are seduced to accept the possibility by the main champion for a completely opposite life: Michael Corleone. (286)

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of the evil business world from the holy and innocent hearth and home.

Indeed. What makes Howard feel uncomfortable is the ideologically destabilizing effect of the gangster figure. It is interesting to note that while pointing Michael (All Pacino) as that particular character who evolves from the champion for a straight life to someone who "can do such [evil] things" (286), Howard still resists giving up the polarization between good and evil, an approach which prevents him from accepting that rather than a transition from good to evil, Michael's figure is actually complicating the very referents to differentiate one from another. Hence, if Michael does gradually progress from the good guy of the initial sequences of the first *Godfather* to the cold and insensitive new Don, such a transformation does not occur due to his abandonment of the civilized values of the bourgeois family, but much to the contrary, his progress towards evil and corruption is the result of being himself the best pupil to the teachings of his father, the founder of the Corleones and a man so dedicated to his family. In other words, if in each of the *Godfather* films one witnesses the gradual dissolution of the Corleones as a normal family, it is not because Michael distances himself more and more from the positive values associated to the bourgeois family, but because he struggles to be faithful to a family model whose contradictions cannot be suppressed anymore. Both Vito and Michael struggle to maintain a family model which rather than being capable of redeeming the Patriarch is in fact the nurturer of he who will threaten it. They don't exchange the ideal family for the success in the capitalist world, they understand that one cannot be without the other.

By the same token, in his parallel between the *Godfather I* and *II* Hess argues that Vito Corleone "operates his organization like a business; there is a civilizing influence upon it and him. He avoids open bloodshed whenever possible and conducts his affairs on a

[51] All quotations from David Howard were taken from a Brazilian edition and translated back into English by myself.

business level, *keeping all personal reasons out of them*" (emphasis mine) (41). In contrast, he claims, "[j]ust the opposite happens to Michael Corleone. Starting off at a civilized level, he gradually degenerates... until *II*, when his [Michael's] policies become totally immoral, divorced from any kind of code of ethics" (41). Although it is difficult to disagree with Hess and Howard about the progressive degeneration of Michael's character, one must not forget that he is actually taking to the letter the very code of ethics he received as a legacy from his father. Contrary to what Vito repeats to everyone about separating business and emotions, to his son he teaches otherwise. Consider Michael's words to his adoptive brother and Family *Consigliere*: "Tom, don't let anybody kid you. It's all personal, every bit of business. Every piece of shit every man has to eat every day of his life is personal. They call it business. OK. But it's personal as hell. You know where I learned that from? The Don. My old man. The Godfather" (Puzo *The Godfather* 145).

In contrast with Hess's and Howard's view that Michael's progressive degeneration corresponds to a distancing from the redeeming qualities of the bourgeois family founded by his father and to a parallel plunge into the dehumanizing capitalist world, Ryan relates the process lived by Michael to the clash between the "idealized, father run, small business" (67) and the "increasing corporate dominance of American economic life" (66). Instead of attributing to the first Don some civilized and humane code of conduct, Ryan observes that "[e]conomic harmony in the first film [*The Godfather*] seems indissociable from the positioning of women in a subsidiary position of care in relation to men, who are the primary economic agents" (66). He calls attention to the formal resources employed in the film to "carefully demarcate" (66) the world of business and that of the family: "Business takes place in dark interior rooms from which women are excluded. The camera work in these scenes is organic; it suggests unity and harmony, and the lighting is *generally*

shadowy yet warm" (emphasis mine) (66). As one can see, the film combines the shadows of business and the warmth one supposedly would find in a good family. Accordingly, Ryan concludes that the...

> conservative elegizing of the small-business world is inseparable from a nostalgia for the patriarchal family because the brutal, aggressive, and calculating emotional configurations of that world require a compensatory locus of care, one provided in traditional conservative socialization by women in the family. (67)

Thus, what the saga of the Corleones unveils is the untenability of the proclaimed separation between family and business; when such a separation breaks down, the realm of violent competition and the realm of redemption collide into one only realm. When analyzing what he calls "crisis films", Ryan argues that "[o]ne lesson of the crisis of order and patriarchy is that political authority and male sexual and social power are interconnected and interdependent in a patriarchal society" (65), that is, in a society like the American society home and business can never be separated from each other since they are interdependent, even if the Hollywoodian mythological world so often insists that the ideal family holds values which oppose those of capitalist business. However, since the gangster is not simply a villain, but rather a monster, the twist here is that such a lesson is not taught by characters who can be unproblematically rejected or accepted by the audience; in contrast to *Wall Street*'s Gordon Gekko, who is easily antagonized by the audience, or Mr. Hilliard in *Desperate Hours*, who asks for the viewer's empathy for the positive hero he is, the Corleones are likeable and we wish they will succeed, as if they were 'one of us', even when Vito or Michael are planning the assassination of their business competitors. For

being both so seductive and degenerate, the Corleones dissolve not only the polarization of the realm of business and that of the family, they also prevent the audience from choosing between a corrupted family and the ideal family offered by Hollywood as the conventional place for redemption.

4.6 The Collapse of the Ideal Family

Hollywood conventionally presents the ideal family as the site for redemption. It is possible to trace the source of such an ideological proposition back to the captivity narratives written in the late seventeenth century and the "first coherent myth-literature developed in American for an American audience" (*RTV* 95) as posed by Slotkin and already discussed in Chapter 2. In those narratives, the male was called to defy the dark forces of wilderness by violent means in order to rescue the captive female back to white civilization. In those narratives white society represented the positive values of civilization, while the Indians and Nature were not only civilization's evil reverse, but also the place for the white male to return to a more primitive state before being able to be redeemed. His redemption would come from his bravery in rescuing the "sufferer [who] represents the whole, chastened body of Puritan society" (*RTV* 94). The ideological structure in those narratives establishes the realm of the male as an unholy place, but a place where he must go and strive in order to protect and maintain all that is civilized, holy and good; only through a good woman can a man reintegrate such a society and eventually find redemption.

Accordingly, in Hollywood narrative films the ideal male must plunge every day in the realm of business –competitive, violent and unholy—in order to protect and support his family, the realm of the ideal female and the bourgeois stronghold for the positive values of

civilization. When the Corleone family appears to short-circuit the polarity between the feminine/civilized/redemptive realm of the family and the male/violent/unholy realm of the outside world, suspicion is cast over the purity of the female and her ability to conduct her male through the path for redemption. But without a "good woman" to function as a vehicle for his redemption, suspicion is raised, too, about the justifications for ideal male's violent and competitive behavior, as well as the possibility for him to be redeemed. A look at some of the main female characters in *The Godfather* novel and films should help illustrate how the complicity between the patriarch and the redemptive woman is exposed.

Mama Corleone (Morgana King), the first ideal female in the Corleone saga, follows Hollywood's recipe for the redemptive woman. At first sight, she fits perfectly Wood's definition for the Ideal Female, which is worth repeating here: "wife and mother, perfect companion, endlessly dependable, mainstay of hearth and home" (*I,G,A* 47). However, the moral purity of the redemptive woman demands from such a mythic character that she remains untouched by the business world, even if, paradoxically, her subsistence depends on it; isolated in the home, she must not take part in nor be aware of the evil deeds of the family patriarch. Thus, her redemptive capacity depends on the sacred bourgeois separation of home and office. But in contrast with Mrs. Hilliard in *Desperate Hours*, Mama Corleone does not protect herself from being contaminated by her husband's criminal activities as she is a willing supporter of the means employed by her husband to make ends meet.

The few scenes in which Mama Corleone takes part suffice to show how she is unfit to represent the moral purity conventionally attributed to the redemptive woman. An illuminating scene, both in the novel and in the *Godfather II*, is that which narrates the first encounter of Vito Corleone and Peter Clemenza (Bruno Kirby), one of the future

caporegime (captain, right under the Don's authority) of the Corieone Family. In that scene, Vito (the young Vito is played by Robert De Niro) is having dinner with his family (only Santino was born then) when he hears a knock on the window which opens to the open air shaft that separates the two buildings. At the window in the neighboring building he sees Clemenza, who throws him a bundle. Although somewhat surprised, Vito hides it in his own apartment, even after discovering, together with his wife, that some guns constitute the bundle's content. Even when one takes into consideration the subservient role of the female under patriarchy, it is not possible to deny Mama Corleone's plain knowledge and acceptance of her husband's criminal decision.

In order to further clarify what is at issue here in relation to Mama Corleone's ability to function as an inspiration for her husband to pursue redemption, a parallel will be made with a similar scene in *The Narrow Road*, discussed in Chapter II. In *The Narrow Road*, the counterfeiter asks the male protagonist to hide the suitcase with his counterfeiting outfit. Though the lead couple also hide the material in their bedroom, the outcome of the two scenes is contrasting. In *The Narrow Road* the suitcase is taken by two beggars before the police can find it hidden in the couple's bedroom, thus allowing the husband, with the support of his ideal wife, to be redeemed and to follow "the straight road". In *The Godfather*, on the other hand, not only Mrs. Corleone does not inspire her husband to give up crime and pursue redemption, but from then on she will actually work as an accessory to the crime organization Vito founds with his future "Caporegimes" Clemenza and Tessio. Later on, she will appear cooking for the three men while they plan future crimes and the organization of the Corleone Family. One should remember that in *Scarface* even the erotic female Poppy, played by Karen Morley, asks Johnny Lovo and Tony Camonte not to discuss business in her presence.

Finally, already a widow, Mama Corleone has the opportunity to put forward her view as a witness and spiritual support for a family raised over decades of corruption. In the *Godfather II* Michael, the new Don of the Corleone Family, is at a loss. His father's best pupil, he is willing to make all the necessary decisions to protect and keep his family united. But in spite of his successful efforts to maintain the Family's power, the Corleone family is disintegrating. He has been betrayed by Fredo (John Cazale), the second son to their father, and who proclaims his anger for being treated like an incapable by his younger brother. In addition, his marriage experiences a crisis (which will eventually end in a divorce) for his refusal to abandon crime and become a legitimate businessman, and he perceives that he is also loosing the emotional ties with his children. At that point, Michael asks for his mother's advice and ponders with her that if by making the Family stronger he wouldn't be running the risk of loosing it.

On commenting that scene, Ambrogio argues that in contrast to Michael's father, who had given "him vital advice, telling him" (40) how to recognize the traitor in the Family who would set the trap for Michael's assassination, "his mother's advice about how to be strong like his father and keep the family together in his time of crisis is useless" (40). Useless indeed, since she advises him to keep the course of action taken by Vito Corleone himself decades before, a course of action relying on "a basic contradiction in capitalism between the luminous bourgeois ideals of peace, freedom, opportunity, love, and community and the harsh, brutal realities of the irrational economic system which encourages these ideals and feeds off their unobtainability" (Hess 85). Having had her moral purity stained by a life of complicity with all for which she should have been the redeeming alternative, Mama Corleone can not save her son as she could not redeem her husband.

In Puzo's novel, as the second-generation female in the Corleone family, Kay (Diane Keaton) follows the steps of her mother-in-law. At the end of the book she faces a moral conflict caused by her suspicion that Michael has killed Carlo (his own brother-in-law) even after becoming the godfather for Carlos's and Connie's son, at Kay's own request. In essence, it is the same conflict faced by Mama Corleone in the beginning of Vito's criminal career: to keep or not her marriage to a man she knows that owes his success in business to a brutal murder –the assassination of Black Hand Fanucci by Vito and, in the case of Michael, the murder of Sollozzo and the police captain. Unlike her mother-in-law, Kay cannot take so naturally the fact that her husband is a murderer. Thus, she resorts to Hagen, the Family *consiglieri* and who, she believes, because he is "not Sicilian... can tell a woman the truth... treat her like an equal, a fellow human being" (*The Godfather* 442). Hagen begins by telling her that she was the one who had forced Michael to lie to her; after all, Michael had "warned her never to ask him about business" (*TG* 442). Then, very candidly, he admits the killings ordered by Michael (Carlo and Tessio), and explains that if Michael had not ordered their assassination not only the Family, but the Corleone family itself would also be threatened. In other words, according to Hagen's didactic explanation, even Michael's decision to kill the husband of his own sister was a necessary measure to preserve their family from danger. In addition, Hagen tells her that the murders of Carlo and Tessio were too tough a move for Vito to make, and that he had "made Michael his successor, knowing that Michael would take that load off his shoulders" (442). The last paragraph in the novel tells the reader of Kay's decision to become a Catholic and take the place of the new Don's wife, with all that such a decision implied in moral terms and acts accordingly: "...with a profound and deeply willed desire to believe, to

be heard, as she had done every day since the murder of Carlo Rizzi, she said the necessary prayers for the soul of Michael Corleone" (*TG* 443).

Coppola's final scene for *The Godfather* does not differ much from the novel's in its moral implications. Ryan's description of that scene helps to call attention to those implications:

> ... at the end Michael's wife, Kay, stands in the foreground, a rather large figure filling half of the frame. In the background, in the center of the frame, is a door leading to Michael's room, where he stands, after having been honored as Godfather by his men. Framed by the door, Michael is idealized in a metaphoric portrait. The door is then closed, and the woman/wife/mother is shut out. The gesture of separation establishes the prevailing opposition of the film between the inside of the men's world and the outside of the women's world. (68)

Thus, at the end of both the novel and the film, Kay accepts to keep her marriage and her family united over an original crime and a founding lie. It is a cynical attitude which prevents her from fitting the role of the redemptive woman.

In *The Godfather II*, on the other hand, the situation changes as Kay finally understands that her husband will never keep his promise to become a legitimate businessman. Utterly disgusted with Michael, she confesses that her third pregnancy was not interrupted by a miscarriage, but by an abortion. She calls their marriage "unholy" and admits she did the abortion not to allow Michael's kind to continue. Astonished, Michael slaps her, an unacceptable act against his own wife (an *infamita* only Carlo commited in

The Godfather), which definitely destroys any hope for patriarchy and the ideal bourgeois family. From then on, and including *The Godfather III*,[52] never again will the gangster protagonist and hero be allowed to have a "normal" family. By pursuing one, he has put under suspicion the last bourgeois bastion for the ideal male to find redemption. As for the ideal female, the only alternative for redeeming her own self is to stay out of the family; she can redeem no one.

4.7 The Gangster Rests in Peace

A striking novelty brought to the gangster film by *The Godfather*, in addition to the gangster family, is Vito Corleone's death. For the first time in the genre the gangster protagonist and hero dies a natural death. Vito Corleone, now retired, dies in his tomato garden, playing with his grandson like an affable old grandfather. He dies as a man redeemed, and the viewer must face once more the moral and cultural contradiction posed by all gangsters since the first gangster to appear on the screen as the protagonist and hero: to admire or to condemn a character who at once stands both for the most valued qualities in American culture and for those seen as the most evil. The first Don Corleone tells the audience that if violence is a valid tool for the pursuit of redemption, it is also an unacceptable foundation for a civilized society to rest upon. To have so noble a character and so brutal a murderer to die in peace among his loved ones mocks the very notion of redemption offered by Hollywood and historically pursued by Americans.

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[52] In *The Godfather III*, Michael's heir as the future Don is Vincent Mancini (Andy Garcia), the illegitimate son of Sonny Corleone. In order to become the future head of the Corleone Family, he must give up his romance with Michael's daughter Sofia (Sofia Coppola), and thus remain a bachelor. Sofia, in her turn, is killed by Michael's enemies. Whatever the future of the Corleone Family, it will never have a family again. As for Connie Corleone (Talia Shire), after a row of failed marriages in the first two *Godfather* films, she becomes a stepmother for her brother's children after his divorce in *II*. In *The Godfather III*, however, she

Thus, after corrupting the very idea of a possible final redemption in a world full of evil, its pursuit is made senseless. Accordingly, Michael, Vito's successor, will discover (and reveal to us) that redemption is a fading dream. In *The Godfather III* he is at a loss once again. In order to become legitimate (and thus a legitimate aspirant for redemption) he gave up dealing drugs, he became a major partner in the Imobiliare, the international real estate corporation of the Vatican, he allowed his only son to become a opera singer instead of carrying on with the Family business, and even prevented his daughter from marrying a gangster like himself... all in vain. Finding himself surrounded once more by murder, crime and treason, Michael acknowledges that corruption is everywhere, including the Church. In addition, divorced from his wife Kay since the *Godfather II* and with his daughter Sofia shot to death, he failed to keep his family together. Coherently, the third godfather, Vincent Mancini (Andy Garcia) is a bastard and still a bachelor at the end of *The Godfather III.* As a disillusioned return to the original gangster model, Vincent disregards any hope for redemption and his pursuit will be the one inaugurated by Tony Camonte, Little Caesar and Tom Powers: to be on top of the world at whatever cost.

For Stephen Hunter, in *The Godfather III*...

> Al Pacino's Michael Corleone is Coppola's sick and tragic king. The year is 1979; Michael, the weight of his immoral choices graven into the fallen flesh of his face like the imprints of paws in the snow, is seeking escape from the guilt of his past (notably the murder of his brother Fredo) in the bosom of the church. (104)

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appears "grown into true a mafioso's persona" (Hunter "The Godfather, Part III" 106), and has degenerated to a point of no return for a once postulant to the role of redemptive woman.

By the end of the film, with neither a family nor the church to offer him some hope for redemption, the last part of Coppola's trilogy shows an aging Michael Corleone alone on a chair in his patio. Interestingly enough, he reminds one of the ailing General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*. Like the old General, Michael faces death as a Patriarch, a legitimate businessman and a man of action, with whom he shares the same family degeneration, the same involvement with an all pervasive corruption and somber business relations.

4.8 A Gangster Redeemed?

Mario Puzo's *The Last Don* (1996) shares a number of resemblances with *The Godfather*. It tells the story of a powerful Mafia Family ruled by an aging Don Clerlcuzio, who, like Don Corleone, is concerned about getting legitimate. Both Dons have to find a place for their sons in the business world, and each is responsible for the death of their sons-in-law. It can also be read as its sequel: while at the end of *The Godfather* the Corleones leave the east coast to live in Las Vegas, closing the New York operation and adopting the hotel and casino gambling as the Family's new business enterprise, in *The Last Don* the story already begins (after a Prologue in Quogue, off New York, in 1965) in the 1990's Vegas and Hollywood. Because they share so many resemblances, and because the latter novel carries out the future plans that are only hinted at by the end of the former, to examine their differences can prove revealing.

The prologue in *The Last Don* narrates an episode in 1965 in Quogue, the estate of the Clerlcuzios off New York, and which resembles the estate of the Corleones in *The Godfather* –one mansion for the Family Don and some other houses for his children and some smaller ones for "trusted Family retainers" (3), all surrounded by a high "redbrick wall armed by barbed wire and electronic sensors" (3). Don Clericuzio has four children –

Giorgio, Silvio, Vincent, Petie and Rose Marie. Don Clericuzio is a widower and no more is told about the late Mrs. Clericuzio. They have all gathered in Quogue to celebrate the christening of Dante, Rose Marie's baby, and of Croccifixio (nicknamed Cross), the son of Nalene and Pipi De Lena, the Don's nephew and the Family "Hammer" (the chief hitman). Like in *The Godfather*, the novel opens with a family celebration (Connie's wedding, in the preceding novel) which functions to introduce both the family and the Family members. It is too an opportunity for Family business. At that particular celebration, Don Clericuzio, now the head of "the most powerful Mafia Family in America... planned to relinquish that power, on the surface. It was time to play a different hand; obvious power was too dangerous" (3). The Clericuzio's powerful status had been conquered a year before, when they had completely destroyed the also powerful Santadio Family in that war, which had cost the life of Silvio, Don Clericuzio's eldest son.

From that prologue in the East Coast in 1965, the story jumps to Las Vegas in 1990. From then on Pipi and the Don's children are removed to the background and the reader begins to follow the trajectory of the cousins Dante and Cross; here a significant difference between the two novels arises. Whereas in *The Godfather* the gangster protagonist and hero is clearly indicated (Vito, first, and then Michael as his heir and successor), in *The Last Don* the author divides the main gangster character into two distinct ones. The confounding combination one finds in both Vito's and Michael's moral and ethic code (as well as in all classic gangsters) is very much weakened, if not lost, by the splitting of the main gangster character into a "good" gangster and a "bad" one. Thus, while Dante grows to become a violent and bloodthirsty man, trained to become the future Hammer of the Family and dreaming of the day when he will succeed his grandfather as the new Don, Cross will lead a less violent life as the owner of half (the other half owned by the

Clericuzio Family) the Xanadu Hotel and Casino in Vegas. While Dante Clericuzio is short, dark and disproportionally muscular, Cross De Lena is tall, blond, athletic and handsome. Where Dante displays a taste for rape, Cross falls in love for the novel's female protagonist, Athena Aquitane, a Hollywood star and "the most beautiful woman in the world" (20).

Puzo's attempt to create a gangster with a good heart subverts the logic of the gangster stories in significant ways, even if with disappointing and unconvincing results. Because of his ability to make uncertain what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, what is holy and what is unholy, the gangster protagonist, until *The Godfather*, could neither find a redemptive woman, nor, as a consequence, find redemption. In contrast with the mythological American hero, who is justified in employing violent means in a regenerative process because he fights for the positive and superior values of white civilization, the gangster has no justifications, for though his means and abilities are the same, his own regeneration is also the reaffirmation of what is evil. Nonetheless, the splitting of the gangster protagonist in *The Last Don* allows Cross, the good-hearted gangster, to fight Dante, the evil gangster, and thus become eligible to conquer the redemptive woman, Athena.

But insurmountable problems appear, as each supposed victory of good over evil rests on an original sin. First, is spite of Cross's characterization as an Ideal Male, he had to "make his bones" in order to deserve the money and power he gets from being associated with the Clericuzio Family, that is, to be accepted into the Family he had to prove himself brave and loyal by making his first killing becoming a murderer. In addition, his romantic relationship with Athena is also based on a founding sin, as he ordered the assassination of her ex-husband as a favor to her, who shows her thankfulness by falling in love with him. But, and more important, the legitimate future of the Clericuzio, as well as his own

legitimate and romantic life with Athena by the end of the novel rests on a most terrible crime: the assassination of his cousin Dante with his own hands. The thoughts of Don Clericuzio in the following passage should clarify the monstrous foundation of Cross's supposed redemption:

> During the last five years he had seen Dante as the great danger to his master plan. Dante would resist the folding of the Clericuzio Family into society. And yet, what could he himself, the Don, do? Order the killing of his daughter's son, his own grandson? Would Giorgio, Vincent, and Petie obey such an order? And if they did, would they think him some kind of monster? Would they fear him more than they loved him? And Rose Marie, what would remain of her sanity then, for surely she would sense the truth. (498)[53]

After so many terrible crimes, Cross's marriage proposal to Athena, and her acceptance, sounds more as the claim of a cynic than the words of a repentant man ready to be redeemed: "'Let's get married,' he said. 'Let's have other children and live our lives like normal people. With our children let's try to make right what seems wrong with our world. All families have some misfortune. I know we can overcome it. Will you believe me?'" (497).

But in addition to the novel's failed attempt to redeem the gangster, there is another interesting aspect in its plot, which is indicated in Don Clericuzio's assertion that "obvious

[53] Rose Marie had witnessed the assassination of her own husband in their nuptial bedroom by her cousin Pipi and her three brothers, a crime ordered by Don Clericuzio, but never acknowledged by him. Her husband was a member of the Santadio family. After that, she becomes gradually more hysterical, being eventually locked in a sanatorium, from where she will probably never leave, when she learns of the death of her only son Dante.

power was too dangerous" (3). From the Don's perspective, to become legitimate means not to become a "good" businessman, since he despises legitimate businessmen as men without honor, unjust and equally corrupt, but rather to exert power unnoticed. His strategy is based on a twofold move: to go westwards and to own legal commercial enterprises. Indeed, Mafia's decision to move to the American west has more than just geographical implications. It parallels an ideological change from Wall Street --symbol of a more "traditional" capitalism-- to the postmodern kind of capitalism that Vegas and Hollywood seem more fit to represent in the 1990s. Put differently, their move westwards dislocates the gangster from industrial capitalism in which, according to Fredric Jameson, the "ideas of a ruling class were once the dominant (or hegemonic) ideology of bourgeois society... [to what has become] a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" ("Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" 69). It means that the power of the Mafia springs gradually less from the corruption of the "system" (by controlling politicians, judges and law enforcers, for example) and more from the postmodern tactic of substituting an open ideological discourse for fake images (Vugman *passim*), which characterizes capitalism in its postindustrial stage (so well represented by the Hollywood fantasy industry and Vegas's architecture). Like the ruling elite in postindustrial capitalism, the gangsters aim at becoming "[f]aceless masters [who] continue to inflect the economic strategies which constrain our existences, but no longer need to impose their speech (or are henceforth unable to)" (Jameson "CL" 69).

So in *The Last Don*, the gangster has finally become a part of the American social mainstream. But that occurs when the American social identity dissolves amidst an environment of simulacra; simulacra in Jean Baudrillard's conception for postmodernism, when "the sign 'has no relation with any reality'... [and in which] as a response to the

perception of the disappearance of the real, there is a compensatory attempt to manufacture it, in an 'exaggeration of the true, of the lived experience" (*in* Connor 52) o signo 'não tem relação com nenhuma realidade'... [e que] como em resposta à percepçãodo desaparecimento do real, há uma tentativa compensatória de manufaturá-lo, num 'exagero do verdadeiro, da experiência vivida'").[54] And Hollywood is at the root of that exaggeration of reality, that hyperreality. Indeed, paraphrasing Baudrillard, one can say that Hollywood "is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of California and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.[55] In *Pulp Fiction*, the following and the last film to be analyzed in this study, it will be discussed the fate of the gangster in the American postmodern era.

4.9 *Pulp Fiction* and the Postmodern Gangster

Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) has been generally praised as a postmodern film meaning, among other things, that it displays the intense generic hybridization which has called the attention of so many critics as a postmodern trait, as it was discussed previously (specially in Chapter 1). However, this study has demonstrated that the presence of elements from other film genres in the gangster film can be observed since the founding trilogy of the gangster genre; indeed, an intergeneric borrowing characteristic of all Hollywood genre films from the beginning. Thus, before initiating a discussion on the generic hybridization in *Pulp Fiction* it would help to briefly recapitulate the function of the borrowing of alien generic elements by the gangster films analyzed up to this point.

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[54] My translation.

[55] Baudrillard's original statement is: "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (*Simulations* 25).

In the classic gangster film elements from other genres are included in opposition to the gangster in order to make him stand solely for evil, as a strategy to annul his capacity to suspend the ideological limits which determine good and evil, right and wrong, moral and immoral. Hence, the ideologically positive characters in the classic gangster films are rendered incomplete or incoherent, (as in the case of Tom Powers's brother and his fiancé in *The Public Enemy*), and eventually fail in their ideological task of reaffirming a world in which the dominant ideological values are right and those belonging with the subaltern ideologies are wrong. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, the "use of traditional generic structures [are employed] as a means of demythologization" (Cawelti "*Chinatown and Generic Transformation*" 238); that is, the "basic characteristics of a traditional genre [are invoked] in order to bring its audience to see that genre as the embodiment of an inadequate and destructive myth" (238). In the case of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Cawelti observes that the leading couple "are themselves very much a part of the society they are attacking. They share its basic aspirations and confusions, and they yearn above all to be integrated with it" (241); here, an example of ideologically positive elements borrowed from another genre is the inclusion in the plot of elements from the family melodrama. Thus, in Penn's film the Hollywoodian ideological proposition that evil (the gangsters) can/should be unproblematically separated from the normal society is undermined. In *The Godfather*, the 'normal' family is also employed in a process of demythologization in which the model family is denounced as incapable of functioning as the redemptive site for the white male. In sum, in all those gangster films elements and characters are borrowed from other genres with the function of offering an ideologically positive alternative to the gangster's confounding capacity. The result is always the ideological defeat of those positive

characters, who end up being either too weak and inconsistent or with them having their own evil traits exposed.

It was suggested previously that when Hollywood is seen as a factory of the American mythic world, it is possible to look at the different Hollywoodian genres as parts of one interconnected universe. From this resulted an inevitable overlapping of their borders, considering that all genres must resort to those myths belonging with the same mythological universe. In that sense, the intergeneric borrowings can be understood as the borrowing among distinct types of myth narratives (genres) which are possible due to the fact that all those elements are part of one whole mythological universe. As such, each mythic/generic element or character must always bear a direct relation to some cultural issue in the real world (the myth having always a historical source). The result is that notwithstanding how ideologically affirmative a Hollywood genre film is, because it addresses issues of the real world, it inevitably includes elements which can be related to some subaltern ideology that points to the possibility of resistance against the dominant ideology the film supports. In *Pulp Fiction*, however, the interminable procession of generic elements from different genres create a different fictional and ideological context. In that film, elements from so many Hollywood genres seem to exist, at least apparently, in a very balanced and well integrated way; a situation which is in contrast with the usual ideological oppositions one finds in the gangster films.

Indeed, the level of hybridization in Tarantino's film is such that it projects almost the whole American filmic/mythological universe onto the screen at once. Accordingly, in

"Two Shots at Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*"[56] Pat Dowell claims that "only in this most superficial way does *Pulp Fiction* traffic with everyday reality. In general the tone of Tarantino's work is a rejection of anything resembling the 'real' world" (4). Dowell argues that though "there are scenes in coffee shops 'like Denny's,' as the script denotes, and in old cars and suburban tract homes... the movie exists only in terms of other movies, and is not, as collagists like Godard might construct, an undermining of those terms" (4-5). That is more than simply acknowledging a higher level of hybridization in a postmodern film when compared to Hollywood's modern output. The presence of so many different genres in *Pulp Fiction* (the gangster film, the musical, the boxing film, war film, horror film, family melodrama, kung-fu films, just to mention the most obvious ones) functions to complicate the relation between the film and the real world. To make this clearer one can restate Dowell's claim in the following way: the myths and ideological propositions in *Pulp Fiction* do not address reality in a direct mode, rather, the film refers to the mythological/filmic universe Hollywood has developed throughout the decades of its existence.

But one should examine the ideological implications of such an effect. It was already argued that the "role of the [dominant] ideology is to suppress... [its own] contradictions [created by its need to include subaltern ones] in the interests of the preservation of the existing social formation, but their presence ensures that it is always possible, with whatever difficulty, to identify them" (Belsey *Critical Practice* 45-6). In other words, it is those inherent contradictions which prevent any film from imposing the dominant ideology, monolithically and unproblematically, over its audience, since those

[56] There are, in fact, two distinct articles under that title, the first signed by Pat Dowell and the second signed by John Fried. That explains why in the following pages that same text is sometimes credited to Dowell, and

contradictions arise from the need of the film to address reality and its inevitable conflicts and contradictions. For example, Hollywood's Ideal Male stands for the individualism, aggressiveness, competitiveness and social dominance which American culture values for a (white) male. But independently of how positive those masculine traits are depicted in a film, the downsides those same traits have in the real world (oppression of the females, for instance) must inevitably appear as some contradiction or inconsistency in the film. That is where *Pulp Fiction*'s intense hybridism functions as an obstacle in the relation between the film and reality, since it addresses not the real world and its inherent contradictions and conflicts, but the Hollywoodian mythological universe.

As a consequence, Tarantino's film can deal with a fictional world as its original inspiring source, a world in which, as Wood observes in his list of the recurrent ideological elements in Hollywood cinema, "America [is presented] as the land where everyone actually is/can be happy; hence the land where all problems are solvable within the existing system (which may need a bit of reform here and there but no *radical* change)" ("I,G,A" 47). It is as if *Pulp Fiction* functioned as a meta-myth narrative which rather than dealing with the dominant ideology and the cultural contradictions in the real world, addresses the ideological and cultural problems of the mythic figures who inhabit the mythological/filmic realm itself. It is within such a meta-fictional context that the ethical, moral and even philosophical propositions in the film must be analyzed.

4.10 The Gangster Faces Ethical Conflicts

The characters in *Pulp Fiction* seem never to miss an opportunity to pose some ethical question or to tackle some moral issue. At a certain point in his "Know-Nothing

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sometimes credited to Fried.

Entertainment: What To Say To Your Friends on the Right, and Why It Won't Do Any Good," Thomas Leitch lists some of these moments and argues that...

> Although the characters of *Pulp Fiction* are obsessed with moral problems, the problems which they most actively debate –is giving Mia Wallace a foot massage equivalent to giving her oral pleasure? does Marcellus Wallace look like a bitch? is Vincent or Lance responsible for administering adrenaline to the dying Mia? should Winston Wolf say 'please' to Vincent when he asks him to clean Marvin's blood and brains from the car? how much personality would a pig have to have to avoid being a filthy animal?-- are so inconsequential, and the characters' avowed moral standards so disproportionate to their criminal lifestyles... that the tendency is to trivialize all moral discourse, reducing the very possibility of moral action to Vincent's formula – 'This shit happens'. (9)

Going the opposite direction, however, Todd Davis asserts in "Shepherding the Weak: The Ethics of Redemption in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*" that by...

> using the interpretive strategies established by the ongoing project of ethical criticism... we will reveal the manner in which Tarantino utilizes the otherwise mundane moments of conversation and reflection in the lives of the gangsters... as a means of exploring ethical and philosophical questions

> regarding faith, morality, commitment, and the human community. (60-1)

But if the analytical method chosen by Davis, "ethical criticism,[57] establishes an important bond between the life of the narrative and the life of the reader" (61), then his approach to the film fails exactly by not acknowledging the effect caused by Tarantino's deployment of generic hybridism in a way which prevents the *direct* bond between the events in the narrative and those in the viewer's real life. It is only by ignoring such a function of generic hybridism in *Pulp Fiction* that he can claim that "we discover ourselves laughing with them [Vincent and Jules] while viewing Tarantino's film because –aside from the weapons and drugs that mark *their* world—many of their thoughts and concerns seem not so different from our own" (61) (emphasis mine).

In other words, Davis ignores the cynicism the film asks from the audience in order to empathize with its characters. As Leitch notes, "*Pulp Fiction* devotes all its furious energy to disavowing the possibility of moral good it raises at each crisis in the film" (10). An example of such disavowal (and its implied cynic attitude) in the film: when the prizefighter Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) is on the run after winning a fight he was supposed to throw he learns that he had accidentally killed his opponent; when the taxi driver who is taking him out of town asks how it feels to kill another man, the answer is no more than a shrug and a comment that it was the other boxer's fault (after all, he shouldn't have gotten in the profession if he was such a weak fighter, he reasons). Because he betrayed his arrangement to throw the fight, he will have enough money to flee with Fabienne (Maria de Medeiros) --his "Betty Boopish girlfriend... [who is] sweet, innocent,

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[57] A method, Davis claims, "promulgated by figures as Wayne Booth, Martha C. Nussbaum, and J. Hillis Miller" (60).

and the tender spot for the otherwise rough, worn-out boxer" (Yaquinto 226). Like the conventional Ideal Male, Butch was regenerated through violent means, and is now ready to be redeemed by a good woman.

But perhaps a focus on the issue of redemption and the different views displayed by the two gangster protagonists, Vincent (John Travolta) and Jules (Samuel Jackson), on the matter should help clarify the function of generic hybridism in *Pulp Fiction* and some of its implications. The conflict begins when they both miraculously survive after a man they were supposed to kill unloads his gun in their direction. While Vincent interprets the experience as a freak occurrence, Jules sees the event as the result of divine intervention. Vincent's attitude follows the classic gangster's attitude towards life: unconcerned about finding redemption, his violent lifestyle aims at his own personal success, which is translated in terms of consumerism. Thus, very often Vincent's ethical concerns and decisions have a price tag on. He takes some time discussing the price and quality of each of the samples of heroin Lance (Eric Stolz), his drug dealer, offers him. Before they part, Vincent still finds time to discuss with Lance how unethical it is to scratch the painting of another man's car, and the punishment one deserved for being so unethical. At Jackrabbit Slim's, the "1950s-style theme park of a diner with a bubbly Wurlitzer jukebox and a wait staff dressed like dead 1950s icons such as Marilyn Monroe and James Dean" (Yaquinto 225), where he takes his boss's wife Mia (Uma Thurman) one evening, he wonders why the milkshake she asked is priced five dollars. Finally, in his last argument with Jules about the latter's decision to begin his pursuit of redemption, he reasons that without a job Jules would become a " homeless bum", that is, a non-consumer.

Apropos of that philosophical discussion between the two gangsters on divine intervention, Davis claims that "Jules realizes that he must instead quest for some other life

beyond the underworld in order to test and make use of his new, transformed value system" (64). There is no doubt that Jules's discourse on the meaning of their surviving a round of point blank shots is as grandiloquent as an inspired priest's: "It could be God stopped the bullets, he changed Coke into Pepsi, he found my fuckin' car keys. You don't judge shit like this based on merit. Whether or not what we experienced was an according-to-Holly-miracle is insignificant. What is significant is I felt God's touch. God got involved." One can imagine, just for a moment, Don Corleone breaking the conventions in the gangster film and uttering a like discourse. Following such an improbable situation, it would only make sense if, say, the Don decided to give up all his material riches and become a pious man from then on, or something similar. What one could never imagine a Corleone doing was to "walk the earth... like Cain in *Kung Fu*," which is exactly what Jules announces he is going to do. In other words, in a conventional Hollywoodian myth narrative like *The Godfather*, if a gangster decided to pursue redemption, due to the unmediated relation of myth and reality (myth "explaining" the viewer's reality), any decision he would make would have to bear some plausibility in the real world. In *Pulp Fiction*, however, the characters are never really connected with the real world, only to the so many genres which populated the American modern mythological universe, and all Jules can do is to think of some other genre/myth narrative more appropriate to run from the underworld and where he can live the life of a holy man.

Finally, it must be considered that as a mythological universe, Hollywood's output can be treated as a master narrative. That is, like the great religions, political ideologies, or scientific narratives, it is one whole set of ideological propositions functioning as a broad point of reference to one's understanding of the historical past, present and of its future possibilities. When one considers that one trait of postmodernity is the crisis experienced by

all master narratives, then it makes sense to inquire about the status of the Hollywoodian mythology in these postmodern days. If by applying the word 'crisis' to the master narratives one means that they have had their power to function as that broad ideological reference, then the same can be said about the Hollywoodian narrative: unable or unwilling to offer a reference as convincing as it had been until the end of its classic era, it flees from reality and falls into a game of never ending and enjoyable self references.

Conclusion

The discussion carried out in this study and its consequent assertions found support on a certain number of basic claims: 1) that modern societies as the American do need and develop some mythology to help explain and give order to a reality which is generally chaotic and violent, and that Hollywood has been the privileged medium for the development and transmission of the modern mythological universe of twentieth-century America. 2) That in result, Hollywoodian characters stand for specific myths, but with the function of reaffirming the dominant ideology, which Hollywood narrative films, as myth narratives, tend to express and reinforce. 3) Within such a fictional/mythological context, one character alone stands out for his ability to challenge Hollywood's ideological constraints and to threaten the conformist structure of the narrative films produced by Hollywood industry: the gangster. For his unique mythic and ideological status, as well as for his undeniable popularity, he was elected as the thread conducting the analysis which was here developed. From each of those three pillars a number of implications arose along the preceding four chapters on which this conclusion will make some final comments and considerations.

C.1 Hollywood as the Factory of Mythologies

The claim, sustained by Levi-Strauss and literary critics like Northrop Frye and Leslie Fiedler, that "modern societies do not have myths in the sense of popular stories that serve to locate and interpret social experience" because they "have history and science to explain origins and nature and literature to express the archetypes of the collective unconscious" (Wright 185), was opposed by the argument that the past, the subject matter

of history, is itself by definition "categorically different from the present" (187), while science is in great proportion out of reach of the non-experts, thus neither of them being able to function as a guide for the present. Thus, the need for myths displayed by modern societies was assigned to literature and film, which as narratives are fit to function as myth artifacts.

Myths, both modern and primitive, are stories with a narrative structure (initial equilibrium—crisis—new equilibrium), a structure which is important for their conservative character as it suggests the possibility of an ordained world among chaos at the end of each narrative. The conservative character of myths is further reinforced by the fact that even though they spring from history they undergo, in the process of their making, a process of condensation in which the original historical conflicts are erased, remaining an "increasingly conventionalized and abstracted [story] until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, "icons," "keywords," or historical clichés (Slotkin *GN* 5). When some important historical event occurs (a war, a natural catastrophe, a change in the mode of production), the ongoing mythology must adapt itself in order include that event. In this sense, Hollywood appeared as the privileged medium for the modern American mythology, since it was part itself of the same historical transformation experienced by Americans and which it sought to represent in the form of entertainment: the transformation of the U.S. from a rural into an urban and industrialized society. As a factory of American myth narratives, Hollywood has been, in the twentieth century, a significant medium for the "mythologization of American history [in a process that] contains within its structure both a representation of historical reality and an ideological apology or polemic that distorts reality in the service of particular interests" (Slotkin *FE* 34).

The elements in Hollywood films would soon include representations of the dominant ideological notion of American social organization. Among these, an emphasis was given on some character types as the Ideal Male, the Ideal Female, the erotic woman, as well as the patriarchy, the bourgeois family as the model family, the right to property and the work ethic, which says that "'honest toil' is in itself and for itself morally admirable" (Wood "I,G,A" 47). Being all narratives, Hollywood films could easily present social problems and contradictions resulting from the dominant ideology as problems which can be solved by the end of the story, with their conventional happy ending standing for a new equilibrium, or social stability. In this sense, there are the ideologically affirmative characters (the Ideal Male, the Ideal Female), who must always end with the upper hand, since they stand directly for what is considered positive in the dominant ideology. Negative characters like the erotic woman and the bad guy fulfill their function of supporting the dominant ideology as they end either defeated by the positive characters, or eventually reformed and accepted into the mainstream (A good example is the prostitute (Claire Trevor) in Ford's *Stagecoach*, who proves to have a heart of gold and runs to Mexico to become a housewife and the redemptive woman for the Ideal Male played by John Wayne).

To approach Hollywood output as a modern mythological universe allowed this study to explain the hybridity in Hollywood genres, which was demonstrated to occur since the silent era (a point made along the analysis of the so called pre-gangster films, as Maurice Tourneur's *Alias Jimmy Valentine* and D. W. Griffith's *The Narrow Road*). After demonstrating the difficulties, so far insuperable, for critics to find clear cut definitions for each genre, this study chose to focus on generic interplay and to explore genre variations. Approached as narratives structured around specific myths from a whole mythological realm, it was argued that Hollywood genre films were free to borrow mythic elements

which are dominants in other types of myth narratives (genres) to play subordinate roles, thus explaining the inherent generic mixing characteristic of all genre films. The sharing of basically the same technological resources and the same final goal (the making of profit), as well as the fact that all studios were limited by the same ideological constraints, have also contributed to the sharing of elements among the different genres.

C.2 A Modern American Monster Appears

If the function of Hollywoodian characters in general is to express and reaffirm the dominant ideology, be it by presenting the ideologically positive characters as heroes/heroines, be it for presenting the negative ones as characters to be rejected or only to be accepted after their embracing of the mainstream values, the gangster is a character who resists being ideologically contained. There are two basic situations for the appearance of the gangster in a film: as a subordinate or competing dominant, and as the main protagonist, in which case the film is considered a gangster film by this study. When he appears as the dominant of the film, he holds the status of protagonist *and* hero. The insistence that in addition to being the protagonist in the gangster film the gangster is also its hero is to stress that he is not simply a bad guy, but a bad guy who is capable of stimulating the audience to empathize with him as they usually do with the positive hero in other genres.

The analysis of *Little Caesar, The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*, the three films which inaugurated the gangster genre and established its conventions, demonstrated that not only the gangster protagonist and hero appeared together with the genre, but more than that, it showed that it is his presence as such that defines the plot and the composition of the remaining characters. The novelty brought by the gangster to the screen and, as a corollary, to the modern American mythology, was a character who resisted being presented to the

audience neither as a positive hero, nor as a negative character liable to be reformed (redeemed) and conquered back to the mainstream values. The reason lies in that he is a character who combines some of the ideologically most positive attributes for a male in American society –individualism and the search for personal success, competitiveness and violent methods, cunning and bravura—but who, in contrast with the positive American hero, employs his attributes in a behavior which threatens the social stability. Because of his ambiguous composition, the gangster was defined here as a monster.

The concept of monster employed in this study refers to that creature every human society invents to stand for everything that is considered evil, abnormal or simply monstrous. The function of such a creature is to be a negative reference for what is the socially authorized behavior. In the stories in which the monster appears, he is always expelled from that society who created him, or is killed. However, as a child from that society, the monster's fate is always to return and try to integrate it, thus contaminating it with all the evil he represents. Although destroyed by the end of every narrative, a monster's final destruction can only occur when the social contradictions he stands for are resolved, which would also ask for the appearance of a new monster to express the conflicts arising from that new social organization.

The gangster appeared when the U.S. was changing from a rural to an urban and industrial country. Until then, the possibility for geographical expansion functioned as a escape valve for violence, individualism and sexual repression –cultural values turned acceptable since the experience of the Puritans in the seventeenth century. The wars against the Indians for the conquering of more land and for freeing white captives, as well as the fight against the British in order to develop a national identity, resulted in the association of violent methods with material wealth and spiritual redemption. The mythology created to

express those ideological values were the narratives of captivity, which, according to Slotkin, became the first mythological literature in America.

The advent of intense industrialization and urbanization in the turn of the twentieth century was an historical event which created a new environment. There, without the possibility to move to an ever farther frontier, Americans had to display their individualism, competitiveness and violence against their city neighbors. While the dominant ideology still deemed those values as positive, their potential to threaten social stability was intensified, making more evident their ideological ambiguity. It was in such a context that the gangster appeared. He embodied the contradictory feelings Americans displayed for those positive values now turned more ambiguous.

C.3 The Monstrous Function of the Gangster Hero in its Classic Era

In the first three gangster films the gangster protagonist and hero is clearly the dominant. Elements and conventions from other genres were included in the story with the clear function of opposing the confounding his effect. *The Public Enemy*, for instance, presents the gangster's brother, Mike, as a potential Ideal Male. Mike is the straight guy who works hard, has a girlfriend with the traits of an Ideal Female and is even given the opportunity to become a Hollywoodian war hero. It all fails, as it was demonstrated, due to the irresistible force of the gangster. The defeat of the ideologically positive characters can be observed in their inconsistency, superficiality and incoherent discourse and behavior (back from war, Mike cannot reply to his brother's observation that they both killed men and liked it), as well as in their failure to fulfill their role (Mike's girlfriend, in spite of her characterization as Ideal Female, is prevented from becoming a redemptive woman, since her man became a coward and a failure himself). *Scarface*, in addition to the ideological

strategies just mentioned, resorts to the inclusion of moralist and legalist speeches as a way to counterbalance the ideological confusion generated by the presence of a gangster protagonist.

In any event, the gangster wins the competition of dominants, with the effect of erasing any successful representation of the good society in the film. Thus, there are no normal families in any of the three first classical gangster movies and from the beginning (in *Little Caesar*) or gradually (in *Scarface* and *The Public Enemy*) the whole plot is immersed in the gangster's dark and morally ambiguous world. Thus, the classic gangster film offered to the audience something that other genres would not: the opportunity to plunge *willingly* into the ideological contradictions in the American society and to face the their resulting anxieties without the reassuring happy end. With the bad guy being the only hero in the film, the conventional happy end cannot happen: the eventual victory of the hero would mean a criminal's victory, leaving his defeat as the only alternative. But his defeat is the defeat of both a hero and a monster. As a defeated hero, he will have the empathy of the audience and will arouse the desire to see him in action again. As a monster, his eventual death is not enough to erase the cultural contradictions he stands for and, again, he must return.

In contrast with the Ideal Male, the gangster protagonist and hero in the classic stage does not pursue redemption, as he can never end with the upper hand and his fate is to die in the gutter. In fact, if the gangster ever dreamt of finding redemption that would contaminate the very idea of redemption, signaling a distrust in American society of the possibility for one being redeemed within the current cultural context, or even a distrust on why would one wish to be redeemed. The fact that eventually the gangster film did come to include redemption as one of the protagonist gangster's goals signaled that an increasing

distrust of the positive meaning of redemption was occurring. The inclusion of the pursuit of redemption as a gangster's goal, however, wasn't noted before the late sixties and early seventies, with the making of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather*, both novel and film. The conclusions on that issue will be set forward bellow, after a final discussion on the role of the gangster in non-gangster films and in gangster film variations.

C.4 The Gangster Visits Other Genres

As it was discussed in Chapter 2, the gangster, who is the dominant in what was here defined as a gangster film, can also appear in other genres, were he must compete with other dominants. To illustrate such a situation, the participation of the gangster in *The Big Sleep*, a detective novel and a film *noir*, was analyzed. One interesting aspect in that film/novel is the pessimistic view of society it displays, a view seemingly as dark as that which one finds in the gangster film. The question that was raised, then, was what would the function of the gangster be in such a pessimistic environment. What happens, in simple terms, is that his confounding effect over the dominant moral code is weakened and rather than a monster, the gangster tends to be portrayed as just the conventional Hollywoodian bad guy, whose defeat at the end reaffirms the ideological mainstream values.

It was noted that the pessimism of the private eye (the Ideal Male) in that kind of story is more akin to that of the westerner than to the pessimism provoked by the depiction of American society as the gangster's world, as it occurs in the gangster film. Like the westerner, the private detective resists integrating the good, or civilized, society. Like the westerner, he knows how to find his way both in the good society and in the urban "wilderness," that is, the underworld. In the same way, they both, the westerner and the detective, fight for the protection of white civilization and the reaffirmation of the dominant

ideology. Accordingly, if the westerner needs the Indians or Wilderness to defeat in order to fulfill his civilizing role, the detective will fight the gangsters with the same objective. The result is that the gangster is then turned into a negative character, whose destruction (in this case reform is impossible, since, as Joe Massara puts it to his girlfriend Olga in *Little Caesar*, "...once in the gang... [it is impossible to quit]") is the necessary condition for the Ideal Male to "discover" in his investigations that although corruption pervades the whole of society, there still are instances in which violence, individualism and sexual repression are justified.

A similar effect was observed in the gangster film variations previously discussed. In *Dead End*, the gangster is the intruder in a romantic plot-cum-social drama. Not being the dominant element in the film, Baby Face Martin is a weak and cowardly gangster. Out of his territory as he is out of a conventional gangster film, Baby Face is rejected by his own mother and proves to be not so cunning when his plan to kidnap a wealthy kid for a ransom fails and ends with his own death. But the main protagonist, the architect played by McCrea (the Ideal Male) in *Dead End*, is morally insecure (should he marry the rich girl or the poor but honest and hardworking one? Should he give in Baby Face's real identity to the police, or not? Should he design habitations for the poor, or should he leave the slums altogether, as he does at the end?) and weak, in contrast with the ideologically powerful hero in *The Big Sleep*. In result, the gangster can challenge with greater force the ideologically affirmative symbolism of the Ideal Male and finds room for a stronger and more evident contamination of the story with his moral and ideological ambiguity, which is made evident by the shadow he casts on the romantic (ideologically affirmative) plot in the story and which culminates in the film's tentative happy end. Hence, while detective Marlowe (Bogart) will always be remembered by the audience as the hero in *The Big Sleep*,

in *Dead End* it is the gangster (Bogart again) who impresses our minds by the end of the projection.

In yet another gangster film variation, *Desperate Hours*, what called attention was the way the gangster exposes the frailty of the patriarchal family structure. With the invention of the gangster family yet to come, in this film the gangster and his gang denounces the assumed sacredness of the bourgeois family by taking one as hostage in their own home. Such a situation erases the important rule of patriarchy that home and office must be kept apart, with the latter as the realm of the male and the former as the realm of the redemptive female. The exposure of the frailty of the bourgeois family structure caused by the gangster in *Desperate Hours* is successful enough for him to compete with the Ideal Male in equal conditions. Like in *Dead End*, the film's happy end is stained by the mark of the gangster, even if Mr. Hilliard (the Ideal Male) is not so weak a character as the architect in *Dead End*.

Finally, the discussion on *Key Largo* showed that in this last gangster film variation in the classical era there is a duel between the plot of the gangster film and a romantic plot throughout the story, a duel in which both plots compete with fairly equal force. In fact, in that film it is the very competition of dominants that comes forward, with well defined sections in which one or another dominates. However, by opening with Bogart and Bacall as the romantic couple to be, the film establishes a "primacy effect," an effect generated by a "[c]oncentrated, preliminary exposition that... triggers strong first impressions" (Bordwell *TCHC* 37). In this case, the relevance of such an opening lies in that the audience's expectations for the eventual victory of the romantic couple is established from the start. With the defeat of the gangster already foreshadowed, he is allowed a certain freedom to come forward during the film, more as a kind of an homage to his failing dark power and a

sign that the intensification of social anxieties was asking for some significant changes in the representation of the gangster.

C. 5 Family Relations, family Relations, and Redemption

Indeed, the intensification in the crisis of the bourgeois family model based on patriarchy would be expressed more and more clearly in each new gangster film and in its variations. Called the "gangster's epitaph" by Schatz, *Key Largo* and *White Heat* showed differences enough for this study to classify the former a gangster film variation, while the latter is really the last popular gangster film with a gangster protagonist and hero. In spite of all the attempts to "exonerate society from any responsibility for his [Cody, the gangster played by Cagney] criminality" (Schatz HG 108), *White Heat*, the last classic gangster film, is the first to suggest, still timidly, that a violent, competitive and individualist man can be raised in a normal family. If in the beginning of the genre the family of the gangster (when it does appear, as in *The Public Enemy* and in *Scarface*) is presented as a potential though ineffectual site for his redemption, in *White Heat* such a potential for redemption is questioned as never before. As it was demonstrated in Chapter 4, the creation of a monstrous family to preserve the bourgeois family from its responsibility in the reaffirmation of a social and economic system which encourages individualism and violence is an attempt that backfires. The absent father and a criminal mother who soothes her son's seizures with the advice that he must behave like a man (to be individualistic and violent) resembles too closely the role of the bourgeois family not to produce at least a certain uneasiness. Significantly, while bringing the gangster closer to the conventional Hollywoodian family, *White Heat* also displays an unprecedented increase in the level of onscreen violence, foreshadowing a correspondent intensification of the crisis of the

American dominant family model and in the violence generated by the increasing resistance of the dominant ideology to let the problems in that family structure to surface.

The amount of violence in the gangster film would definitely reach a higher level with the advent of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Immensely popular, Penn's film was compared in this study with some other so called "rebellion" films of the late sixties, particularly *The Graduate*. It was shown that while denouncing the crisis of the conventional bourgeois family and the economic system it supports, a non-gangster film like *The Graduate* is incapable or unwilling to pose any real alternative for a social organization based on patriarchy, sexual repression, individualism and its resulting violence. On the other hand, *Bonnie and Clyde*, paradoxically, goes much deeper in its denunciation of the crisis involving the family structure and the capitalist system simply by depicting a gang who insists on becoming a conventional family and a gangster who dreams of redemption. The unprecedented graphic violence which marks the end of *Bonnie and Clyde* is an index of a social crisis that was about to explode the ideological restraints imposed onto it. *The Godfather*, the next gangster novel and film would signal that the dominant ideology had finally been forced to acknowledge the crisis in the conventional family: the gangster was finally entitled to have a "normal" family.

The appearance of the Corleones was followed by other unconventional families onscreen, which illustrates how the dominant ideology negotiates and includes subaltern ones as a strategy to survive.[58] But while most of the unconventional screen families served the dominant ideology by reaffirming it in each new happy end, the same did not happen in *The Godfather* since the gangster resists, by definition, to function as a supporting element

for the dominant ideology. Much to the contrary, the institutionalizing of the gangster family served only to cast the light of monstrosity onto the whole of the patriarchal family and all social values associated to it. It was demonstrated that by short-circuiting the separation between the office and the hearth, so relevant a foundation for patriarchy, *The Godfather* brought up a number of implications for the gangster figure and, by extension, for the expression of the dominant ideology by Hollywood output.

The first of these implications discussed in this study was the transformation of the gangster protagonist and hero into a father and into the Father, i.e., the symbol of Patriarchy. It was argued that although the gangster had always incorporated elements of patriarchy, by being prevented from having his own family he had never been a fitting model neither for the head of the conventional family, nor as the Patriarch. Consequently, with such a new role, the bourgeois family and its soft spots could be scrutinized as never before on American theatres.

Finally presented with a family, the gangster could now pursue redemption as any bourgeois father or, in Hollywoodian terms, as any Ideal Male. The consequence was that of putting under suspicion the assumed sacredness of the bourgeois wife (the Ideal Female/redemptive woman) based on her ignorance of her husband's behavior in the business world (she was supposed not to know anything about what happened in her husband's "office"). The film suggests that within the dominant family structure the wife is necessarily an accomplice to her husband's evil deeds. A second consequence was the denunciation that one does not need to be the black sheep of the family to grow into an individualist and a violent and sexually repressed man; much to the contrary, it is Michael

[58] One possible exception being *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. One can find an illuminating discussion on this film and other American horror films in Robin Wood's "An Introduction to the American Horror Film".

Corleone, the Don's favorite son and a war hero, as well as the protagonist and hero in the story, who, by following his father's teachings, becomes more and more corrupted till eventually destroying his family and, together with it, his hopes for finding redemption.

In analyzing Kay, Michael's wife, this study showed that in a first moment (by the end of the novel and of the first *Godfather* film) she accepts the role of her husband's accomplice; in a second moment, in *The Godfather II*, she finally rejects all that Michael represents. But without any successful alternative for the conventional family, her only choice is to divorce him and, although free from guilt, her role of redemptive woman is still kept at bay, as she has no man to redeem any more (and as a divorced woman, she is clearly a deviation from the conventional Hollywoodian redemptive woman). One other aspect that was pointed in the *Godfather* novel and trilogy was the insistence by the characters in justifying their corruption in the name of family ties. The demand Michael makes to Victor Mancini in *The Godfather III* that he must give up his plans for getting married (with Michael's own daughter) as a condition for the latter to become his successor and new Don denounces the utter failure of the patriarchic bourgeois family as the site for redemption. Together with the fact that Victor will become Don in a world taken by corruption (even the Church), Michael's death alone on a chair suggests that redemption is out of reach in the business world of capitalism as it is in the patriarchic family which gives it support.

C.6 The Last Don Dreams of Becoming Legitimate

After writing so destructive a novel for the assumption of the bourgeois family's redemptive qualities and for patriarchy and the American capitalist system, Mario Puzo's *The Last Don* comes as an unconvincing attempt to redeem the gangster by situating him

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(for complete reference, see Bibliography).

within the legitimate business world and in an ideal family with obvious Hollywoodian traits (the leading couple are depicted almost as WASP demigods). The tortured life of Don Clericuzio's only daughter (both her husband, and later, her son are killed under the Don's orders) and her fate (she is eventually locked up in an institution for the insane) signals the amount of violence necessary to sustain the social structure of the dominant ideology in the postmodern era.

In any event, attention was given to two other postmodern elements in *The Last Don.* First, the splitting of the gangster protagonist in two characters, which is characteristic of the postmodern hero. According to David Harvey "[t]he characters [in postmodern fiction] do not contemplate how to unveil or to disclose a central mystery, being forced instead to ask 'What world is this? What one must do in it? Which one of my selves should do it?" (*Condição Pós-Moderna* 52) ("As personagens já não contemplam mais como desvelar ou desmascarar um mistério central, sendo em vez disso forçadas a perguntar "Que mundo é este? Que se deve fazer nele? Qual dos meus eus deve fazê-lo?").[59] In contrast, the modern hero is always in pursuit of a central cause, a central mystery. Indeed, Joseph Campbell claims that the modern hero's "problem is nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant --or rather... nothing if not that of making it possible for men and women to come to full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life" (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 388). Such a contrast springs from the fact that while the modern hero lives in a world where master narratives still function as an ideological reference, in the postmodern

[59] My translation from the Brazilian edition.

stage all master narratives have experienced a weakening in their function as a reference, leaving the postmodern hero without any unifying cause.[60]

Accordingly, because he is also a hero, the modern gangster can be compared to the modern hero, while the postmodern gangster can be analyzed as the postmodern one. Hence, the splitting of the gangster protagonist and hero in *The Last Don* is an expression of the hesitation which is characteristic of the heroes in a postmodern text. While the "bad" gangster, Dante, strives to become a Mafia Don in the traditional style, the "good" gangster, Cross, pursues integration in a society in which rather than master narratives it is the scattering of visual images, emptied out of their original meaning, that functions as the new ideological reference. Such an hesitation in a mythic figure as the gangster indicates that as a mythology, Hollywoodian output experiences a crisis as a guide and an ideological reference. That crisis of the Hollywoodian mythological universe becomes clearer in *Pulp Fiction*, the last film discussed in this study.

The second postmodern element analyzed in Puzo's novel –the dominance of the image over discourse—can be observed in the relevance displayed by Hollywood and Las Vegas in the plot and in the endless descriptions of so many luxurious apartments, houses, offices, hotels and casinos. Another example can be seen in the importance of the physical appearance of the characters in the establishment of their personalities; thus, the Ideal Male and the Ideal Female are WASPs, the bad guy is ugly and dark, etc. But it is in *Pulp Fiction* that the dominance of the image over the word is translated in terms of simulacra, as it will be discussed in the next section.

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[60] For a more thorough analysis of the relation between the word (master narratives) and the visual image in modern works and in postmodern ones, see Vugman, Fernando S. "From Master Narratives to Simulacra:

C.7 The Gangster in a World of Simulacra

This study has argued that the intense generic interplay in *Pulp Fiction* has the function of presenting the Hollywoodian fictional universe as the first reference for the film, instead of what occurs in Hollywood films produced before postmodernity, whose original reference was always reality. One consequence was that in contrast with the competition of dominants one finds in previous genre films, in Taratino's film elements from innumerable Hollywood genres seem to coexist in perfect integration. Another consequence is that the myths and ideological propositions in *Pulp Fiction* do not address reality in a *direct mode*, rather, the film refers to a world of simulacra, that is, a world which is a copy of an original that never existed. In other words, it refers to the mythological realm created by Hollywood itself, a "reality" which only exists on the screens and in the minds of the audience.

A significant consequence is that *Pulp Fiction* presents itself not as a myth narrative, but as its simulacrum, in the sense of a copy from an original which never existed; that is, the "reality" in *Pulp Fiction* reproduces the Hollywoodian mythological universe previously established, a universe which never existed. Within such a fictional context, while the gangster wonders about his own identity (Am I black, or white? Am I good or evil? Am I a killer or a saintly man?) a spectacle of visual images overwhelms the audience. However, the effect is to bury the ideological discourse even more deeply, since the reference is not reality with its problems and anxieties, but a simulacrum of reality in which happiness is always already assured and where everyone can/should be concerned only with consuming from the endless stock of goods offered in the postmodern America.

Analysis of Orwell's 1984 and Terry Gilliam's Brazil." M.A. Uniersidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 1995.

Behind an entertaining narrative about nothing real the dominant values of the American postmodern capitalism --specially the insistence on consumerism-- are reaffirmed.

The gangster appeared as a necessary mythic figure to express social contradictions and anxieties generated during an important historical change in the U.S., i.e., the transition from a rural culture to an urban and industrialized environment. With postmodernity, another major historical change is going on and the place for the gangster in the American mythology, if any, is still to be discovered. Arguably, Americans are being challenged once more to define good and evil in a changing world; one will still have to wait to see if the gangster will find a way to adapt and express the ideological contradictions in a postmodern society, or if Americans will leave him on the couch of a psychoanalyst and replace him by some new monster yet to come.

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Nino Rota. Perf. Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, Robert Duvall, James Caan, Diane Keaton, John Cazale, Talia Shire, Richard Conte, Richard Catellano, Abe Vigoda, Alex Rocco, Sterling Hayden, John Marley, Al Lettieri, Sofia Coppola, and Morgana King. Paramount, 1972.

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