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### Final Examination Questions

1. The Mythical Structure and Ritual Sacrifice in *A World Without Thieves* (2004)

Chinese director Xiaogang Feng's *A World Without Thieves* (2004) has a very mythic structure in that the text follows the most conventional narrative form which will successfully accomplish the cathartic emotions of the audience. John C. Lyden's explains in his article "Film as Religion" that film and theater is a traditional ritual that people constantly do all the time. He states "Theater satisfies the need people feel to express certain emotions, such as pity or fear, but in a socially acceptable manner." (Lyden 88). However, he believes that to successfully accomplish such a cinematic manipulative ritual, the narrative must follow a conventional mythical structure, which usually involves tragedy or the highest form of drama, so the end result will lead to effectively arousing spectator's emotions, thoughts and fears.

Lyden explains the effective mythical structure, "First, the plot should not involve a good person passing from happiness to misery, as this is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious. Second, it should not involve a bad person passing from misery to happiness, as the injustice of this arouses no pity or fear. Third, it should not involve an extremely bad person falling from happiness to misery, as this will arouse neither pity nor fear for pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one ourselves" (Lyden 88). He continues by saying

that what eventually remains should be a character that is neither perfectly good nor perfectly evil, but a seriously flawed human being whom audiences can identify and also empathize with. This is why Feng's *A World Without Thieves* constitutes having a very mythical structure. Like most characters in gangster crime dramas, the two main lovers Wang Bo (Andy Lau) and Wang Li (Rene Liu) are both extremely flawed and tragic characters who try to spiritually and morally do what is right, but like all the great characters in literature and art, the two ultimately end up being tragically punished in the end.

The ritual of sacrifice that occurs in *A World Without Thieves* comes when Wang Bo is killed at the end of the film. When Wang Li gets pregnant she uses this as an opportunity for her and Wang Bo to move through ritual time and space which spiritually will offer them the rare chance to start over and redeem themselves. She wants to give their baby a clean slate and in a way the birth of the child will lead to the two thieves spiritual rebirth so they can finally lead moral and law-biding lives. Unfortunately it doesn't exactly turn out that way because of Wang Bo's threat of risking and destroying the pure naivety of young Dumbo. Because of that Wang Bo is willing to risk his life and happiness to preserve Dumbo's innocence, which ultimately leads to his spiritual sacrifice and of the ritual of his death.

## 2. The Gangster Film Aspects and Conventions in *The American Soldier* (1970)

[Rainer Werner Fassbinder's](#) *The American Soldier* (1970) contains various aspects, codes and languages that are contained in the American gangster film. The most formal indexical code is the mise-en scene, which when translated from French means "the placing on the stage." Mise-en Scene refers to everything that occurs within the foreground, mid-ground and the background

of the camera lens. Since Fassbinder was known to be a huge admirer of classic American cinema, most of the photography conveys an overt exaggeration, distortion and manipulation of the isolated world found in usual American gangster movies. The film is shot in stark black and white which emphasizes the stylized cinematography and image composition. These iconic visual signs include high contrast in lighting and shadows, which all help to create a moody tension and alienated despair for the viewer. The gangsters in these films are usually found wearing iconic coded wardrobe which is also indexical to gangster imagery. This includes a Fedora hat, suit and a tie, while their behavior involves either smoking, gambling or drinking heavily with stoic and serious expressions on their faces.

The landscape iconography found in *The American Soldier* also contains coded aspects of the gangster film which disrupts the generic conventions of the genre, most obviously in its various gritty locations and environments. The visual settings in *American Soldier* seem to be composed of seedy bars, foggy streets, dim diners, smoky gambling houses, dance club and dark alleyways, while many of the visual planes help effectively create such fatalistic, tragic themes and a claustrophobic, brooding atmosphere. To express the characters highly alienated world Fassbinder brilliantly uses several geometric figures, including the tight restriction of the camera frame. The use of tight hallways, sharp corners and cramped entrance ways leading into various back rooms feel claustrophobically enclosed, condensed and trapped for the viewer.

The characters in *the American Soldier* also reflect the tragic bleakness and cynicism attributes which are coded in various anti-heroes within the gangster genre. What Thomas Leitch writes in his article “The Godfather and the Gangster Film” is that most gangsters in the cinema are obsessed with rules and structure. “Although it could well be argued that every crime film is a critique of the society crime disrupts, the gangster film is especially concerned with the social

order its gang mimics or parodies” (Leitch 69). He states that the social models that character’s in gangster films adopt usually are explanations for why such characters resort to crime, and these moral models usually revolve around four different codes: Moral deviance, Developmental deprivation, Sociological Determinism and finally Circumstantial accident. The character of Ricky from *the American Soldier* seems to fall either under the Moral Deviance or Circumstantial Accident category, as he for the most part acts extremely ambivalent to crime, sex and violence. It’s difficult to diagnose Ricky because Fassbinder purposely leaves his gangster character slightly ambiguous and mysterious, while keeping the dialogue minimal, and leaving the conflicts in the story unresolved and left hanging in the end.

### 3. How Hip-Hop Films like Set It Off (1996) are Different from Blaxploitation

Breta E. Smith-Shomade states in the article “Rocky-a Bye, Baby! Black Women Disrupting Gangs and Constructing Hip-Hop Gangsta Films”, that genre blending has forced many critics and audiences to reconsider the elements that essentially make up a gangster film. She calls the new gangster genre which was popularized in the 90’s ‘Hip-Hop Gangsta Film’ as a gangster story which differs from most conventional gangster movies; specifically the representation of the African American female. She states how the African American gangsters in these films still continue to follow the ‘cinema of loneliness’ tradition but they operate much different from their white counterparts, simply because of the important positioning of the African American women in the stories.

She later compares the various ideological aesthetics of the Hip-Hop Gangsta Films to the earlier and much more radical representation of African Americans that are found within the

Blaxploitation films of the 1970's. "Most of these blaxploitation films characterized all African descendants as monolithic balls of anger, trapped within urban jungles and forever banished to the margins of society. Ironically (or typically), most of these films were directed and produced by white men" (Smith-Shomade 154). For the Hip-Hop Gangsta Films, they instead presented a much richer representation of African American women, all the while using the popularity of rap music and various ghetto aesthetics as a fresh new way to represent their identities. Unlike the women characters that inhabit the world of blaxploitation, the woman in *Set It Off* (1996) are not at all sexualized or exploited for their physicality, and their every-day lives are highly relatable and familiar to audiences.

In director F. Gary Gray's urban Hip-Hop gangster film *Set It Off*, what I found fascinating about the story was not only the female African American representations, but that the story was less about race and more about gender. In fact I found *Set It Off* to have more in common with a feminist crime film like *Thelma and Louise* (1991) than a Hip-Hop gangster film like John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (1991). Simply because it told a story about three oppressed women who found themselves in a sticky situation where they had no other choice but to resort to crime in order to survive. The film represents an authentic blackness that has more to do with gender issues rather than race issues, ironically because the police officer sidekick and the child protective service worker who are trying to stop the gang are black and not white. How the gender and the race in *Set It Off* become creatively reinvented within the masculinized and racialized stereotypes is incredibly fascinating. Ultimately these untraditional changes cause the film ideology in the end to present a much different agenda that is usually not standard for that type of genre.

#### 4. Tycoon (2002) and its Russian Historical Transition into the American Gangster Film

Pavil Lungin's Russian gangster film *Tycoon* (2002) didn't get received very well by critics either Russian or American. The reason for this was mostly because of its incoherent narrative techniques which seemed to be heavily drawn upon by Orson Welles *Citizen Kane* (1941). Peter Pozefsky explains in his article "Russian gangster films as popular history" the reason why *Tycoon* is critiqued next to the Americanism of traditional gangster films. Much of this is because *Tycoon* borrows both semantic and syntactic cinematic elements which began during the American Golden Age of gangster films like *Public Enemy* (1931) *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932). However he states that they're three moments where *Tycoon* does diverge away from the classic American gangster formula. The reasons are that the heroic character Platon does survive in the end, the plot is weakened by the presence of the investigative judge, and lastly the narrative technique of interviews through Platon's various friends and enemies. Even though the story of *Tycoon* does take various formulaic elements from the Hollywood Golden Age, the visuals and basic themes still present a postmodern plot that has the tone and spirit of 70's and 80's American gangster movies.

The historical sensibilities throughout *Tycoon* can be found in many of its political and sociological elements, as Pozefsky suggests that its added syntactic layer explores the political message that the common people should be much more wary of the state and less wary on the wealthy. Because of such themes this culturally adapts *Tycoon* to its appropriate Russian context. *Tycoon* seems to address the historical time period between Perestroika through the end of Yeltsin's presidency while Pozefsky states "While film-makers often treat the historical themes, there is no single genre to which a film-maker such as Lungin could have turned to make a 'history film' about Russia under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Most films that might be classified as

history films have been melodramas in which the lives of individuals, lovers and families are depicted as they are buffeted by the larger forces of history” (Pozefsky 301).

I believe transitioning the modern political Russian context into a classical Hollywood standard gangster story like *Tycoon* was probably one of the reasons why it tended to bother many Russian people. It seemed most Russian audiences and critics could not separate the difference between fictional genres to factual historical representation. Many publications stated the factual errors within Lungin’s representation of Russian history and that the film didn’t accurately depict any of the social conflicts in Russian society. And yet while some critics were enraged and offended by the film, other critics were much more sympathetic and learned to avoid judging it simply by the accuracy of its history, politics or ideology.

#### Work Cited

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