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Mid-term Paper

## 2. The Three Rules that Incorporate the Gangster Genre

To discover the core meaning that encompasses the cinematic aesthetics of a gangster film like Ram Gopal Varma's Indian film *Satya* (1998) and Tran Anh Hung's Vietnamese film *Cyclo* (1995), it would be wise to first explore the readings by Robert Warshow, Jack Shadioan and Thomas Letich. There are three key elements that the authors seem to agree upon while closely looking over all three of each author's essays. The first element is the fixed patterns that seem to reoccur all throughout the history of the gangster genre, and it is these particular patterns that help the gangster genre continue to thrive and survive. The second element is the historical, psychological and sociological themes that can be identified, all themes which seem to fascinate and horrify the human psyche. The third element are the rules that the gangster strictly abides by. Many of these rules involve psychological conflicts which apply to the attributes of the archetypal gangster, and these conflicting characterizations have been universal to all types of audiences.

The fixed recurrent patterns that appear in specific genre films all seem to project particular themes that continue to remain timeless and relevant in society. Many of these themes can represent the idealized and oppositional cultural self-images that society seem to continue to relate to, whether it's man vs self, man vs technology, man vs society, man versus woman and man vs nature. "In its initial character, the gangster film is simply one example of the movies constant tendency to create fixed dramatic patterns that can be repeated indefinitely with a reasonable expectation of profit" (Warshow 129). Warshow explains that most genres remain

effective if they maintain a distorted optimistic attitude towards social themes. What's remarkable about the gangster genre is that it actually tends to disguise such social political themes, all without the need to distort or exaggerate. "From its beginnings, the gangster film has been a consistent and astonishingly complete presentation of the modern sense of tragedy" (Warshow 129).

In *Satya* and *Cyclo* for example, if you would walk into the movies not knowing what they were about, it would probably take the audience some time to discover that the films are actually a gangster story. Even though both films use several gangster patterns like tragedy, death, greed, power, destruction of the family and the opposition of the American dream, the use of the Italian neorealism-like filmmaking aesthetic seems to effectively disguise it. When looking closely at the stylistic filming of *Cyclo* and *Satya*, both films use non-actors and many of the sequences seem to be shot on real locations presenting various social problems of the time. I don't believe my aesthetic comparisons to Italian neorealism is a coincidence though, especially since one of *Cyclo*'s main plot points involves a boy's cyclo getting stolen, which is highly parallel to the conflict in De Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948).

Since *Satya* and *Cyclo* stylistically cross into the gangster genre, they are able to subtly disguise many of their social political themes throughout the fabric of its story. Most famously the sequences such as children being posed in front of a poverty-stricken Vietnamese landscape in *Cyclo*, or several of the various surreal musical sequences in *Satya*, which remind viewers of the Bollywood melodrama famously known in the Indian culture. Even though both films are essentially gangster stories, what is missing in *Cyclo* and *Satya* is the iconography of the typical gangster genre. These familiar symbols include such iconic images as gambling, light and shadow, casinos, gambling and most of the images you'd find in American film-noir.

The second key element is the reoccurring themes that continue to be explored in the gangster genre, themes audiences can personally or culturally identify with. Shadioan explains that the reason the gangster genre continues to thrive with audiences is because of the social, political, cultural and psychological conditions that the stories explore. These issues that get addressed within the narratives exposes audience's deepest animalistic dreams, desires and urges. "The genre speaks not merely to our fascination/repulsion with aspects of our socioeconomic milieu that we prefer to shut our eyes to but also to our fascination/repulsion with the most haunting depths of ourselves" (Shadioan 55). The main protagonists in *Cyclo* and *Satya* contain various attributes and characterizations that many of us embody. Whether it's the character of the boy who is doing what he can to survive a post-war society in Vietnam or the gangster Poet (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai) who brutally kills the man who abuses his prostitute, a woman he has ultimately developed feelings for.

Such identifiable human emotions that these tragic characters embody have audiences develop an empathetic fascination and repulsion for them. As unmoral as these unlawful anti-heroes are within the violent gangster world, they are still at the same time emotionally flawed human beings, who like the rest of us, are basically trying to get ahead and survive in a narcissistic and cruel society. Audiences contain similar repressed anti-social dreams, urges and desires, and these gangsters help us to justify such impure thoughts as we ourselves struggle to survive within a Capitalistic American society. Whether we like to admit it, we all contain these primal animalistic urges, but since we were raised in a civilized moral society we look upon these characters as a cathartic escape to vent such violent and unacceptable desires. Basically, 'The Gangster' is what we would like to be, but we are too afraid to do such heinous acts ourselves. "Our involvement with the gangster rests on our identification with him as the

archetypal American dreamer whose actions and behavior involve a living out of the dream common to most anyone who exists in the particular configurations and contradictions of American society, a dream in conflict with the society” (Shadioan 56).

Thomas Leitch explores the third and final element of the gangster film, which is the various different rules that many of the gangster’s abide by. Even though the gangster is known to be opposed to the regulations and rules of the law, government and society, within the dark underbelly of the gangster world, each gang still follows a specific amount of rules that usually concern the social order of their private gangster world. “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). In *Cyclo* and *Satya* for example both gangs presented to us have a ring-leader or an elder others pay respect to. Of course many gangsters break these rules of conduct, which usually ends up badly for them. In *Cyclo* when the boy accidentally went outside his own turf to make a living he immediately was confronted by another gang and was beaten severely for it.

No amount of rules that the gangster will abide by will protect them from his/her fate. The gangster genre still follows a conventional pattern and one of them is the inevitable tragic death for the gangster. “No social model a gang adopts, will protect it from the moral imperative of Hollywood gangster films: Crime does not pay” (Leitch 71). And even though most audiences today know the pattern, rules and cinematic conventions of the genre, their fascination with the gangster and of their world won’t diminish anytime soon. There have been talks recently of *Scar-face* being remade for a third time, as it first was made in the 30’s during the time of prohibition, and again in the 80’s during the rise of the cocaine racket. It will be interesting to see where they will take the iconic gangster a third time when adapting him to the new millennium.