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The Reverend Abernathy spoke of a plate of salad shared with Dr King at the Lorraine Motel, creating a grief-laden scenery of the Last Supper. How odd it was after all, this exalted Black Liberation, played out at the holy table and at Gethsemane, 'in the Garden,' as the hymns have it. A moment in history, each instance filled with symbolism and the aura of Christian memory. Perhaps what was celebrated in Atlanta was an end, not a beginning—the waning of the slow, sweet dream of Salvation, through Christ, for the Negro masses.

1968

ROBERT WARSH

The Gangster as Tragic

AMERICA, as a social and political organization, is not based on a cheerful view of life. It could not be otherwise. In a society where tragedy is a luxury of aristocratic societies, the individual is not conceived of as having immediate political importance, being determined by supra-political—that is, non-controversial—matters. Modern equalitarian societies, however, whether authoritarian in their political forms, always base their claim that they are making life happier; the function of the modern state, at least in its ultimate terms, is not only to regulate social relations, but also to determine the possibilities of human life in general. Happiness is the chief political issue—in a sense, the only political issue—for that reason it can never be treated as an individual matter. If an American or a Russian is unhappy, it implies a failure of his society, and therefore, by a logic that all recognize the necessity, it becomes an obligation of the authorities to be cheerful; if the authorities find it necessary, they may even be compelled to make a public display of their cheerfulness on important occasions, just as he may be compelled to lead the army in time of war.

Naturally, this civic responsibility rests most heavily on the organs of mass culture. The individual citizen is permitted his private unhappiness so long as it does not have political significance, the extent of this tolerance being determined by how large an area of private life the society can tolerate. But every production of mass culture is subject to public scrutiny and must conform with accepted notions of the public good. Nobody seriously questions the principle that it is the duty of mass culture to maintain public morale, and certainly the mass audience objects to having his morale

a time when the normal condition of the citizen is a state of anxiety, euphoria spreads over our culture like the broad smile of an idiot. In terms of attitudes towards life, there is very little difference between a 'happy' movie like *Good News*, which ignores death and suffering, and a 'sad' movie like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, which uses death and suffering as incidents in the service of a higher optimism.

But, whatever its effectiveness 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 to those who would be most disoriented without its support. Even 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. Most often, this opposition is confined to rudimentary or semi-literate forms: in mob politics and journalism, for example, or in certain kinds of religious enthusiasm. When it does enter the field of art, it is likely to be disguised or attenuated: in an unspecific form of expression like jazz, in the basically harmless nihilism of the Marx Brothers, in the continually reasserted strain of hopelessness that often seems to be the real meaning of the soap opera. The gangster film is remarkable in that it fills the need for disguise (though not sufficiently to avoid arousing uneasiness) without requiring any serious distortion. From its beginnings, it has been a consistent and astonishingly complete presentation of the modern sense of tragedy.

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. One gangster film follows another as one musical or one Western follows another. But this rigidity is not necessarily opposed to the requirements of art. There have been very successful types of art in the past which developed such specific and detailed conventions as almost to make individual examples of the type interchangeable. This is true, for example, of Elizabethan revenge tragedy and Restoration comedy.

For such a type to be successful means that its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become the accepted vehicles of a particular set of attitudes and a

particular aesthetic effect. One goes to any of the type with very definite expectations, and can be welcomed only in the degree that it interposes an experience without fundamentally altering the relationship between the conventions which govern the type and the real experience of its audience. In whatever situation it pretends to describe is of no importance and does not determine its aesthetic value. In an ultimate sense that the type appeals to its audience of reality; much more immediately, it appeals to the experience of the type itself: it creates its own form of reality.

Thus the importance of the gangster film, measured in terms of the place of the gangster in the American imagination, is not the importance of the problem of crime in American European movie-goers who think there is a gangster's corner in New York are certainly deceived, but the 'positive' side of American culture are equally deceived. I think it relevant to point out that most Americans have never seen a gangster. What matters is that the experience of the gangster as an experience of art is universal to Americans. We understand almost nothing better or react to it with quicker intelligence. The Western film, which has never to diminish in popularity, is for most of us the folklore of the past, familiar and understood. The gangster film has been repeated so often. The gangster film is closer. In ways that we do not easily or willfully understand, the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of our psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of the American life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself.

The gangster is the man of the city, with the city's power and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest streets and its terrible daring, carrying his life in his hands like a gambler's club. For everyone else, there is at least the theoretical possibility of another world—in that happier American country where the gangster denies, the city does not really exist; it is a crowded and more brightly lit country—but for the gangster there is only the city; he must inhabit it in order to live. It is not the real city, but that dangerous and sad city which is so much more important, which

world. And the gangster—though there are real gangsters—is also, and primarily, a creature of the imagination. The real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become.

Thrown into the crowd without background or advantages, with only those ambiguous skills which the rest of us—the real people of the real city—can only pretend to have, the gangster is required to make his way, to make his life and impose it on others. Usually, when we come upon him, he has already made his choice or the choice has already been made for him, it doesn't matter which: we are not permitted to ask whether at some point he could have chosen to be something else than what he is.

The gangster's activity is actually a form of rational enterprise, involving fairly definite goals and various techniques for achieving them. But this rationality is usually no more than a vague background; we know, perhaps, that the gangster sells liquor or that he operates a numbers racket; often we are not given even that much information. So his activity becomes a kind of pure criminality: he hurts people. Certainly our response to the gangster film is most consistently and most universally a response to sadism; we gain the double satisfaction of participating vicariously in the gangster's sadism and then seeing it turned against the gangster himself.

But on another level the quality of irrational brutality and the quality of rational enterprise become one. Since we do not see the rational and routine aspects of the gangster's behavior, the practice of brutality—the quality of unmixed criminality—becomes the totality of his career. At the same time, we are always conscious that the whole meaning of this career is a drive for success: the typical gangster film presents a steady upward progress followed by a very precipitate fall. Thus brutality itself becomes at once the means to success and the content of success—a success that is defined in its most general terms, not as accomplishment or specific gain, but simply as the unlimited possibility of aggression. (In the same way, film presentations of businessmen tend to make it appear that they achieve their success by talking on the telephone and holding conferences and that success is talking on the telephone and holding conferences.)

From this point of view, the initial contact and its audience is an agreed conception of life. Life is a being with the possibilities of success or failure; the principle, too, belongs to the city; one must emerge or else one is nothing. On that basis the necessity is established, and it progresses by inalterable steps where the gangster lies dead and the principle lives; there is really only one possibility—failure. The city is anonymity and death.

In the opening scene of *Scarface*, we are introduced to a man; we know he is successful because he has the appearance of opulent proportions and because he is surrounded by a crowd. Through some monstrous lack of caution, he is left alone for a few moments. We understand immediately that he is about to be killed. No conventional film is more strongly established than this: it is a man alone. And yet the very conditions of success require that he not be alone, for success is always the establishment of an individual pre-eminence that must be imposed on the crowd; it automatically arouses hatred; the successful individual's whole life is an effort to assert himself, to draw himself out of the crowd, and to be recognized *because* he is an individual; the final bullet makes him, after all, a failure. 'Mother of God, Little Caesar, 'is this the end of Rico?'—spoken thus in the third person because what has been lost is not the undifferentiated *man*, but the individual; the gangster, the success; even to himself he is a failure of the imagination. (T. S. Eliot has pointed out that Shakespeare's tragic heroes have this trick of identifying themselves dramatically; their true identity, the thing that they are when they die, is something outside themselves; it is a style of life, a kind of meaning.)

At bottom, the gangster is doomed because of his obligation to succeed, not because the means to success are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern city, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless against enemies: one is *punished* for success. This is the dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and su-

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.

1948

RICHARD COB

The Homburg Ha

EVEN to an unpractised eye, it was apparent at Paddington. For here were all the *signes av* was awaiting one, all the untold horrors of the further up the line. On the departure platform groups of twos and threes, keeping their distance from another, perhaps in a last desperate bid to cling to a unit, even reduced to bare essentials, in the absence of elder or younger brothers, and to hold on to the comforts of home, holiday and privacy. Boys, of vastly different ages, all affecting a brave unconcern, almost as if they had just over and settle down in the compartment; mothers, some with a few tears, a few actually *over* the verge, fathers, some with sons, whether tall or quite tiny, a brave indifference to the stiff upper-lipdom. Some of the boys were standing on one leg, others were shifting from leg to leg, some to go to the lavatory, or indeed needing just a moment, unwilling to admit to its urgency. From inside the train, I watched the scene, with some trepidation, but I have got it all over, as far as I was concerned, with my eyes on the up platform of Tunbridge Wells Central. When the train, a welcoming tunnel had at once blotted out the parents, as they disappeared in a swirl of yellow light, the station fortunately not suited to prolonged adieu.

I thought that I could distinguish between the newcomers—later, as I was to learn, the designation was New Scum—and the hardened year-olds, three-year-olds—other expressions of a vocabulary awaiting to trip me up, like so many of the other end—by the apparently unaffected casualness of the latter, some of them standing in waiting postures, as if they were meeting their pa



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