

The Gender Ideology of Scarface

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Scarface, directed by Howard Hawks, is a gangster genre film that emerged with the materialization of motion picture synchronized sound. The popularity of the gangster film coincided with an unstable economy. During the time of Scarface's release, Americans were experiencing a form of economic violence: the Depression. For those feeling disenfranchised and displaced in the capitalist society, they found temporary relief in living through an underdog capitalist thug. Yet not all spectators could picture themselves up on screen acting out the dream. Rather than picturing themselves in the gangster fantasy, women spectators see themselves relegated to objectification. Women spectators see that their power lies with their appearance. The ideology of gender in Scarface dictates that women belong in the private space of the home either as sexual objects or as a mother.

In the world of the gangster women are not recognized by their abilities but by society's gender constructs. From the start of the film women are referred to as accessories. In the opening sequence of Scarface, a janitor sweeps the floor of a banquet hall where a party has just taken place. As he cleans he picks up a white bra found in the pile of confetti. Viewers are introduced to women literally within in the context of the sexual garment. The bra itself is a gender creation that provides "support" and makes the breasts presentable the male gaze. Wearing a bra, symbolically, restricts and controls a woman's sexuality. Omitting women from the scene and introducing the bra informs the audience that in the world of the gangster, women are viewed as sexual objects.

Not only is the ideology of women as objects told visually it comes through in the dialogue by Big Louie. Immediately after the bra is shown, Big Louie, a pudgy and amiable gangster, puts women in the same category of owned objects. With an Italian immigrant accent Louie brags, "I got a house, I got an automobile, I got a nice girl." Owning a house and a car is a mainstay of middle-class America. These properties symbolize the American dream. Mentioning his girlfriend in the sequence places her in the same vein as the car and house, as newly acquired property.

Big Louie's words are later repeated when Tony attempts to court Poppy on the staircase. Poppy says, "You got a car?" Tony replies, "And I got a new home to. Come over to see it?" All Tony needs is Poppy to make the paradigm complete. For the gangster, financial capital breeds material wealth, which buys the object that, is woman.

Naturally, once the gangster marries the "nice girl" he makes her into a wife and mother. By doing so it permanently pushes a woman into the background keeping them dependent and domesticated. In *Scarface*, men run the newspapers, men run the police force. Women are constantly pushed into the background for the men drive the action. Rather than doing the acting out, women are being acted upon.

According to the logic of the film, men should be active while women should remain passive. This logic follows Laura Muvley's theory of the active male gaze from her famous article "Visual Pleasure." Mulvey says that women in Hollywood films only serve as a prop for the male gaze. Women are decorated with *to be looked at ness*, meaning that in film women are displayed as sexual objects in order to attract the male gaze.

Such is the case with Poppy, who is presented with *to be looked at ness*. There is a hierarchy in looking, Poppy allows herself to be looked at instead of doing the looking. When Tony and Johnnie stare at Poppy, she does nothing besides examine her fingernails. To the looker, allowing one self to be gazed at translates into a subordinate personality. To Tony, Poppy will allow Tony to drive the relationship. At the ballroom hall it is Tony who asks Poppy to dance. Eventually, the film's ideology for waiting rewards Poppy. Poppy, unlike Cesa, gets to live.

The gender ideology of *Scarface* insists that women be passive while punishment awaits the women who are active. Tony's sister, Cesa, actively pursues men that she finds attractive just as Tony's chases Poppy. Reversing the gaze, Cesa, actively looks at Dino and assertively pursues a relationship with him. Cesa initiates the flirting process with Dino. From her bedroom window Cesa throws a coin at him to get his attention. Dino looks up at her and smiles. Cesa is not going to wait to get what she wants she is going to go out and get it. It is because she actively goes out into the world to get what she wants that Cesa is killed at the end of the film. At the dance hall as she passes Dino, she pulls his arm to get him to look at her. Just as Tony asked Poppy to dance, Cesa asks Dino, "Do you want to dance?" Asserting herself, she dances for Dino. Still Dino rejects her. Cesa's carries herself with confidence and determination as corners Dino at Tony's office. Dino notices and comments, "You are just like Tony when you go after something." Just as Tony is determined to get what he wants so is Cesa. Since she is woman Cesa must be punished. Cesa is punished for her active personality in the same manner that Tony is punished for being a murderous thug. According to the logic of the *Scarface*, a woman who initiates romance is as much of a criminal as someone who murders and steals.

One particular moment provides visual evidence of the active male, passive female ideology in *Scarface*. Woman's as objects to be looked at is exemplified in a scene in which Tony Camonte meets Poppy at Johnnie's, his boss, luxurious apartment. As Tony prepares to update Johnnie, he stops talking as

Poppy walks out from the bathroom. The whole film seems to halt as Poppy makes an appearance. Tony says, "That's pretty hot." Referring to Poppy as a thing, not a person.

In a wide shot, Tony and Johnnie stand in the foreground with their backs facing the audience while Poppy sits at in the background yet at the center of their gaze. As the men stare at Poppy, she looks down at her nails, not looking back. Poppy allows herself to be treated like an object; she is subordinate to the male gaze. Open curtains separate the living room from the bedroom, the public from private space. Tony and Johnnie look at Poppy from the living room, the public space, while she continues to dress in the bedroom, the private space. The shot proves that Poppy is a just an object to be looked at and should remain in the background, behind of the scenes in their lives.

In this shot, directly parallel to Poppy stands a nude feminine statue. Since the statue is aligned with Poppy it suggests that Poppy, like the statue, exists to be looked at. Since the statue is lined up directly with Poppy, it is clear that she is one of many of Johnnie's collectibles.

Similar to the bra from the opening sequence, the audience gains sexual access to Poppy. Poppy is the first woman introduced in the film her costume echoes the bra from the opening sequence. Poppy wears a silk robe hanging loosely off her body, with a slip under, her upper thighs exposed. Perfectly manicured hair, Poppy presents herself as if she an expensive item at Tiffany's. Here the message is that women should make themselves passive objects available for male gaze.

To Tony, Poppy is like the automobile and car that he always wanted, she is an expensive object. Upon entering the apartment Tony rubs Johnnie's silk robe and says, "Silk, eh. Expensive." When an uninterested Poppy is introduced, it is clear to the audience that Tony desires her. As Tony leaves, Poppy becomes an object just as the silk robe during the concluding conversation between Tony and Johnnie: Johnnie "She don't like anybody but me," Tony: "She's a very busy girl, expensive?" With her blonde hair, pale white skin, Poppy is just another object of material wealth. Her objectification is furthered by a reference to the silk robe. After Tony has moved up the gangster hierarchy, Poppy pays Tony a visit. Now, Tony wears the silk robe. Impressed Poppy rubs Tony's silk robe and repeats Tony's words to Johnnie, "Expensive, eh?" Poppy can be brought by Tony's wealth, just as the silk robe was.

Although she allows herself to be objectified, Poppy wants to be apart of the action. She uses her looks to be apart of macho world. After Tony hits the O'Hara side of town, he takes a posse to Johnnie office to load up guns. Poppy picks up a small handgun and plays with it. The only girl among gangsters, it seems as if Poppy will join up with them. She flirts with the handgun as if she was Bonnie Parker, living out a small dream. Of course Poppy hands over the gun to Tony, possibly living through him. Poppy uses her looks to be apart of

the action. She knows that the gangsters will not allow her to be in business with them. Therefore, she lives through her thug boyfriends.

Women are to remain in the private space of the bedroom, quiet, pretty and in the background of the gangster's lives. Throughout *Scarface* women are pushed into the private sphere. Men run the newspapers offices as editors and reporters. It is men who hold the position of police officers and detectives. The only people who are in the Barbershop are men. Women are pushed into the background of the men and when woman does not live by this ideology than she gets punished.

When Cesa attempts to break out of domestic bondage she is met with Tony's wrath. Tony grabs Cesa and drags her home when he sees Cesa out having fun in the public sphere. Tony drags Cesa back home to be domesticated and forced to wait in the private sphere. By doing so Tony demands that Cesa be the "virgin", who will be docile enough to cave into Tony's temper tantrums just like his mother.

When the audience first meets Tony's mother she is feeding and waiting on Tony. Tony's mother remains in the home at all times. When she is at home she is usually in the kitchen cooking. Tony sits comfortably at the dinner table while his mother serves him. Behind Tony sits a quiet young woman, whose looks reminiscence Cesa's appearance. Once again, the visual message is Cesa's place is behind Tony, in the background of his public life.

Tony's mother seems helpless when it comes to controlling Cesa. Tony explodes when his mother tells him that Cesa is out of the house at dinner-time. Even though Tony's mother dislikes Tony's lifestyle she remains helpless to stop him or her daughter Cesa from doing what they want to do. His mother disapproves of his behavior yet all she can do is complain as she stands over a pot of sauce.

Just as Poppy is an object that can be brought temporally, so is Tony's sister. After Tony embarrasses Cesa by violently kicking out her boyfriend, Tony soothes her over by lovely handing her a cash roll. Once the money is in Cesa's hand, she happily forgives her brother and never questions the source of the cash. Cesa's mother begs her daughter to get it back, asks, "Why did you take it?" to which Cesa replies, "Because I wanted to that's why." Her mother responds with a warning, "Tony don't love you...to him you are just another girl." This turns out to be true, Cesa is just another object that Tony wants to control and own.

What allows women to be treated as objects is the fact that the men depicted in *Scarface* must be ultra-masculine. The film focuses on the power struggles that men have with one another. Men shoot at each other with guns, phallic symbols. Whoever has the biggest one means they control the power. After Tony shoots out O'Hara and goes back to Johnnie's office, Tony proudly holds up his machine gun. In comparison to the rest of the guns, Tony's ma-

chine gun stands out. The other male gangsters are in awe of the large weapon. The camera shows a close up of the large weapon, as off screen Tony says, "This is what gives the orders." This statement turns out to be true since the power falls in Tony's hands. Whoever has the largest phallus wins.

The gender ideology in *Scarface*, declares that in a capitalist society women are objects that can be acquired with wealth as if they are too material goods. *Scarface* only allows two roles for women--the mother and the sexual object. Women are not involved in business, or work as police officers taking down the gangster. True to the world of the male capitalist criminal, women only mere objects, which can be brought.

The gender ideology of *Scarface* is not contained with in the film. Howard Hawks' *Scarface*, popularized the gangster genre as it pushed boundaries with graphic depiction of violence. It is hard to believe that when *Scarface* was made in 1932 it was meant with scrutiny over its content (Sklar, 186). Since *Scarface* was made in 1932, the gangster genre has merged into American pop culture. From MTV rap videos to the HBO television series *The Sopranos*, the imagery of gangsters is glorified in mainstream culture.

The gangster genre proves to be quite primitive in regarding sexuality. Not much has changed for the roles delegated towards woman within the gangster film. With graphic gangster rap videos women are degraded as sex objects who deserve to be dominated and abused. Depictions of women in the gangster genre have become increasingly more violent and graphic since the 1930's, due in part to the fact that depicting women as sexual objects produces profits. Similar to the gangster, a capitalist nation prefers profits over gender equality.

References

- Sklar, Robert. *Film: An International History of the Medium*. Second Edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1993. 186.