Mean Streets:
Death and Disfiguration in Hawks's *Scarface*

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Consider this paradox: in Howard Hawks' *Scarface, The Shame of the Nation,* violence is virtually all-encompassing, yet it is a film from an era before American movies really got violent. There are no graphic close-ups of bullet wounds or slow-motion dissection of agonized faces and bodies, only a series of abrupt, almost perfunctory liquidations seemingly devoid of the heat and passion that characterize the deaths of the spastic Lyle Gorch in *The Wild Bunch* or the anguished Mr. Orange, slowly bleeding to death, in *Reservoir Dogs*. Nonetheless, as Bernie Cook correctly points out, *Scarface* is the most violent of all the gangster films of the early 1930s cycle (1999: 545).[1] Hawks's camera desists from examining the anatomy of the punctured flesh and the extended convulsions of corporeality in transition. The film's approach, conforming to the period style of pre-*Bonnie and Clyde* depictions of violence, is understated, euphemistic, in its attention to the particulars of what Mark Ledbetter sees as "narrative scarring" (1996: x). It would not be illegitimate to describe the form of violence in *Scarface* as discreet, were it not for the fact that appraisals of the aesthetics of violence are primarily a question of kinds, and not degrees. In Hawks's film, as we shall see, violence orchestrates the deep structure of the narrative logic, yielding an hysterical form of plotting that hovers between the impulse toward self-effacement and the desire to advance an ethics of emasculation.

Scarface is a film in which violence completely takes over the narrative, becoming both its vehicle and its determination. As the story's backbone, Tony Camonte's rise to power and his subsequent and inevitable fall rely on violence as the basic common denominator. In the opening of the film, Tony assassinates Castillo, the leader of the mafia in charge of the city's South side district. The killing of Castillo propels Tony's superior Lavo to the position of chief of the South side mob. From the beginning, however, it is clear that Camonte has higher ambitions, and gradually he takes control of the business as Lavo retreats to the background. Tony also initiates a romance with his boss's wife Poppy, which complicates his relationship to Lavo. Subsequent to Castillo's murder, Camonte sets out on a rampage to assume control over the city's bootlegging business. An escalating chain of violent events ensue as Camonte terrorizes and eliminates rivals, dissenters, and associates who attempt to take more than their share of the profit. Eventually he takes on the north side gangsters, soon becoming the most powerful criminal in the city. From this point on his aggression and hubris gradually defeat him, as he kills Lavo and then his loyal right hand Rinaldo, who has just married Cesca without Camonte's knowledge. In the end, the film attains narrative symmetry as Camonte's execution of Castillo in the beginning is reversed when Camonte himself is killed while trying to escape from the police.

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[1] See also Thomas Leitch's *Crime Films*, 25.

The narrative of Camonte's trajectory is immersed in images of violence. Sheer force is what places him in power, and also what ultimately removes him from power. He sustains control of the city through the use of violence, his most important asset as well as his fatal flaw. Likewise, the narrative is organized around the multiple violent events that occur at frequent intervals. Camonte's accelerating violence is presented as a cavalcade of assassinations, in which enemies are executed on the streets, inside bars, in back alleys, in automobiles, in bowling alleys and even in hospitals. In one evocative image the passage of time is represented by leaves falling off the calendar to the sound of gunshots, a meta-textual device whose non-mimetic quality resembles the infamous disclaimer at the beginning of the film. All these violent segments are what drive the narrative forward. Although they are not temporally protracted like the violence in for instance *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch*, their recurrence and frequency lend a certain omnipresence to the violence.

Scarface has a complicated and sinuous production history.[2] Loosely based on a 1930 novel by Armitage Trail (a pseudonym for Maurice Coons) and a screenplay by Ben Hecht, Hawks' film was shot in 1930 but was not released until 26 March 1932. Preceded by Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar*

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[2] According to Richard A. Blake, producer Howard Hughes was so reluctant to make any compromises based on the suggestions of the Hays Office that the film's release was postponed for two whole years. Blake speculates further that "[h]ad he held out another two years, when Hollywood got serious about its production code, *Scarface* might never have been released at all" (1991: 131).

(1930) and William A. Wellman's *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Scarface* was the last of the three major gangster movies of the early 1930s. As they provoked the establishment of the Production Code Administration in 1934 (Prince 2000: 4), these films resonate with an historical significance beyond themselves. Although the first known case of film censorship was reported as early as 1908, when *The James Boys of Missouri*--produced by The Essanay Film manufacturing Company--was charged with 'criminalizing' history (Hoberman 1998: 118), legal censorship of the movies was not sanctioned until 1915. In the case of *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio,* the Supreme Court denied the film medium First Amendment privileges on the grounds that it was purely a business venture. The cinema was thus acknowledged neither as a part of the mass media nor as an organ of public opinion (Lyons 1997: 7). This decision augmented both state and city censorship. It was in response to these threats that the motion picture industry proposed a system of self-regulation. Essentially, these systems were contracts which provided filmmakers with basic, informal rules that would determine the limits of film content. The first incarnation of the self-regulatory system was the "Thirteen Points" and twenty-six other subjects established by the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI) in 1916. In 1922 this system was modified into the "Don'ts and Be Careful," which was instituted by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), a trade organization led by Will H. Hays (formerly Postmaster General under Warren Harding' presidency). Finally, partly as a response to silent gangster films like Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927) and *The Docks of New York* (1928), the Hays Office formulated a revised MPAA Production Code in 1930 (Hoberman 1998: 118).[3] However, the industry was initially quite lenient in enforcing the regulations of the code, and from March 1930 to July 1934, as Thomas Doherty points out, "censorship was lax, and Hollywood made the most of it... More unbridled, salacious, subversive, and just plain bizarre than what came afterwards, they look like Hollywood cinema but the moral terrain is so off-kilter they seem imported from a parallel universe "(1999: 2). Due to increasing pressure from the Catholic Legion of Decency, in 1934 the industry eventually established the Production Code Administration Office, which was run by Joseph Breen and whose Seal of Approval governed film production in Hollywood until its disintegration in 1961. All of the film studios supported the Production Code, which made it nearly impossible for filmmakers within the industry to try and release a film without the Seal of Approval.

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[3] Although the Code was adopted in 1930, it did not come into effect until 1934.

Before the onslaught of the gangster trilogy, the Hays Office had been concerned mainly with issues of sex and nudity rather than with violence (Hoberman 1998: 118), a remaining priority both with the Production Code and the later rating systems. In a 2001 study of 125 censored Hollywood movies, Dawn B. Sova finds that only six were censored due to their violent content alone, whereas forty-nine were banned or cut because of their sexual subject (2001: 347-348).[4] *Scarface* belongs in the former category, which also includes Roland West's *The Alibi* (1929), James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), Brian de Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997). With regard to *Scarface*, The Hays Office attempted to curtail the production of the film both on account of the violence it portrayed, and because it insisted on a connection between public officials and criminal activities. In their evaluation of Ben Hecht's script, the Hays Office came to the following conclusion:

> Under no circumstances is this film going to be made. The American public and all conscientious State Boards of Censorship find mobsters and hoodlums repugnant. Gangsterism must not be mentioned in the cinema. If you should be foolhardy enough to make *Scarface*, this office will make certain it is never released (Lyons 1997: 13).[5]

Howard Hughes, the film's producer, nonetheless opted to make the film.[6] When upon its release New York State censors cut a large number of violent scenes, Hughes filed a lawsuit against the censors and defeated them in court. However, *Scarface* was banned in Chicago and other cities despite the verdict. Hawks's film finally opened in New York on May 20, 1932, after several revisions had been made to accommodate the Hays Office. The most significant of these were the inserted indictment of gangsterism in the very beginning; a scene directed by Hawks's assistant Richard Rosson, in which politicians and officials convene to discuss how to fight crime in the city; and a change in the film's title in which the subtitle was added, which, according to Gerald Mast, was "merely a public-relations tactic" (1982: 73). The Hays Office had also wanted a different ending, one that depicted the apprehension and execution of Camonte, but the suggestion was abandoned before the film's release. Moreover, in Ben Hecht's script, according to Todd McCarthy, "the story was much harsher, more cynical about human motivations and behavior, more jaundiced about political realities, and more forthright than the finished film would be" (1997: 136). Although it became a box-office success, *Scarface* did not recoup its production costs quickly, which was mainly due to the fact that the film was still prohibited in some states even after its general opening. In Chicago, *Scarface* could not be seen until over a year after its release, and, as Carlos Clarens notes, the film was not widely distributed abroad (1997: 91). Some time after its initial theatrical run, Howard Hughes withdrew all legal prints of the film, making the movie difficult to view even in the United States until it was reissued by Universal Studios in 1979.

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[4] There are four different forms of film censorship: withholding a finished film from distribution and exhibition (the case of Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* in the UK affords an example in this respect); overt censure, which implies the termination of a film project for political reasons; covert censure, abandoning a project due to a lack of funding; and post-censorship, the re-editing of a film prior to its theatrical release (Whitaker 1997: 1).

[5] The convention that divides the firing of a gun and its resulting impact into two separate shot segments illustrates the extent to which depictions of violence in Hollywood films prior to the 1960s were subject to extra-aesthetic concerns. In the event that censorship boards might delete the sequence, the convention protected narrative continuity by dividing the action into several shots. Thus, even though censors would remove part of a scene due to violence, there would still be sufficient material left to ensure that the film did not skip important plot information (Maltby 2001: 121).

[6] Howard Hughes was regarded as a threat to the established Hollywood studios. A self-made businessman and millionaire with movie-making ambitions, Hughes financed his own production company, Caddo, which thus became one of the very few – if not the only – independent American film company at the time.

The altercation over *Scarface* and its condemnation by the Hays Office was an exception in the history of the censorship of violence and crime in the movies. Few films made between 1934 and 1968 (when the new rating system was first introduced) were denied a seal of approval, and legal censorship of violence in the movies declined similarly. It is notable that throughout the classical period the concern with violence appears to have been correlated more specifically with criminality, whereas from the 1970s the preoccupation shifted to violence and violent behavior in general (Lyons 1997: 14). Maltby, on the other hand, assumes that the censorship efforts of the early 1930s were targeted mostly at spectacle rather than narrative, since by convention the criminal was always punished in the end anyway (2001: 124). What makes the case of *Scarface* stand out is the fact that neither at the time nor later has violence been a particularly salient target for censorship struggles, be it from legal censorship boards or from the industry itself.[7] Seldom has a film been singled out as objectionable due to its violence nature. The subject of violence has never incited as much protest in special pressure groups as have issues of censure in relation to the depiction of sexuality, ethnicity and religion on the screen. In this perspective, the treatment of Hawks' film by the Hays Office and by local regulatory councils appears unprecedented.

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[7] After the controversy surrounding the gangster movies of the early 1930s, the issue of screen violence was largely laid to rest until the late 1940s, when, as Hoberman observes,

Despite the critical and cultural reputation that *Scarface* enjoys,[8] the film's most distinctive facet is the set of contradictions and ambivalences which animate the narrative. There is a gap between the statement in the preface and the intentions of the film itself; the images are suffused with a violence that, by being shown, conceals; the concern with contemporary social issues and didacticism indicated by the preface seems precariously at odds with the insular cartography of the gangster cosmos; and, most significantly, the ebullient bravado that is the trademark of the main protagonist betrays an hysterical underside which conceives masculinity as infantilism. All these internal contradictions expose a violence immanent to the process in which the film organizes itself as a textual event.

The unabashed disclaimer with which *Scarface* begins relates awkwardly to the subsequent narrative. Condemning both the activities of the gangsters and the passivity of the government, the interpolation anchors the film in an instructional promulgation that at least potentially trades in textual pleasure for didacticism. But the insert's ambiguity is evident in that, on the one hand, it functions as a self-conscious meta-frame which directly addresses the situation which is later enacted. On the other hand, because the segment itself is positioned within the parameters of the text, it is also a part of the film's total enunciatory design. Spectators

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Maxwell Shane's *City Across the River* (1949) was cut according to Production Code advice (1998: 120). This film was part of a small cycle of *juvenile-delinquency* films that flourished briefly around 1950, and which included titles such as Nicholas Ray's *They Live By Night* and *Knock on Any Door* (both 1949), Kurt Neumann's *Bad Boy* (1949) and Joseph H. Lewis' *Gun Crazy* (1950). Despite a few occasional hisses - spurned by the release *of The Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks 1955), *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich 1955), *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray 1955), *Baby Face Nelson* (Don Siegel 1957), *Machine Gun Kelly* (Roger Corman 1958) *and The Bonnie Parker Story* (William Witney 1958) – film violence as a public and media topic would not reappear until the late 1960s with *Bonnie and Clyde.*

[8] Andrew Sarris characterizes the film as "the bloodiest and most brutal of the gangster films" (1972: 37). Thomas Doherty's verdict is that Hawks' film was "the most controversial and violent" of the 1930s cycle (1999: 148), and Cuban novelist and film critic Guillermo Cabrera Infante maintains that Hawks' opening sequence set the tone for the entire genre of gangster and crime films that came out of Hollywood in the 1930s (1996: 48).

perceive it intuitively as a documentary passage, or as a non-fictional fragment that precedes the fictional story itself. In principle, however, the disclaimer is inescapably caught within the same textual whole from which it attempts to distance itself, and this contradiction produces a complex interaction between different layers of narrative as well as between text, image and story. The segment reads:

> 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 society 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?

The statement is one of the most direct addresses to the audience on the topic of violence in the history of American cinema, and the explicit link between fictional and historical incidents anticipates the modern re-enactment genre. Beginning with a definition of the film's content, the message ends with a provocative appeal to the viewer. Taken as a narrative framing of the diegetic action of the film, the opening titles serve to restrict the heterogeneity of its discourse.[9] What is striking about this short prolegomenon is the way in which it rhetorically integrates a moral dimension into the aesthetic system of the film. It appears as if the narration with one single brushstroke has clarified its ethical position; principle appropriates textuality rather than the other way around.

However, there is a sense in which the mission statement is duplicitous. By denouncing the violence in advance, the responsibility pertinent to showing it becomes less taxing. The disclaimer, as it were, acts as a form of inadvertent validation. Thomas Schatz, for instance, has argued that "the rhetorical power of Hollywood's narrative codes" in fact works against the didactic purpose of the opening statement (1981: 93). Schatz's assertion is not necessarily incorrect, but it requires some measure of modification. The narration of *Scarface* courts ambiguity not only in the juxtaposition of the disclaimer and the violence, but also---in a mereological sense--in the incongruent distribution of rhetorical value among each narrative instance and the text as a whole. It is certainly

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[9] For an extended discussion of the preface's rhetorical relation to the narrative, see my "Straitjacketing the Image: Illocutionary Writing and the Obstruction of Cine-Semiosis in Hawks' *Scarface*."

possible to imply, as Schatz does, that *Scarface* tends to romanticize the figure of the gangster (1981: 93), but only in isolated segments of plot. As soon as we reach the story's conclusion, narrative mortification materializes as a relentless exposition and deglamorization of gangsterism. No less than the initial disclaimer is the scene where Camonte is killed an illustration of what Anne Nesbet sees as an authorial "framing" of textual violence. "Depictions of violence which are strangely or inadequately 'framed'," she writes, "tend to produce anxiety in an observing audience... [t]he urgency of critics' search for an authorial 'reaction shot' reflects uncertainty about how they are (or should be) reacting to the violence" (1992: vii). Although Nesbet refers to the work of Isaak Babel, the crux of her thesis - that the nature of the aesthetic point of view which underpins fictional violence is vital for our comprehension of the moral import of the depiction - easily appertains to film fiction as well (notice also her metaphorical reliance upon a film term to describe the process of authorial framing).

The policing of filmic perspectives as regards questions of morality and law has of course always been a paramount concern in Hollywood, to which the stipulations recorded in the 1930 Production Code testify. Articles 1 and 3 under "Principles of Plot" declare respectively that "No plot or theme should definitely side *with evil and against good*," and "No plot should be constructed as to leave the question of right or *wrong in doubt or fogged*" (in Mintz and Roberts 1993: 146, emphases in original). Thus, in the case of *Scarface*, it could be maintained that the MPAA distrusted the intrinsic morality of the film's story, since the producers were compelled to equip the narrative with the already much discussed preamble. Confrontational subjects like violence are acceptable in proportion to how convincingly the mechanism of authorial framing articulates a morally based censure of these subjects. However, extra-fictional disapproval is frequently insufficient as a means of audience persuasion. A case in point is Oliver Stone's largely unsuccessful attempt publicly to define his *Natural Born Killers* as an anti-violence text in the face of what many took to be the film's own evidence to the contrary.

The notion that particular moralities are embedded in the deep structure of crucial components of aesthetic form, like narrative, represents an intricate challenge to theories of film fiction, but it is one that has been confronted – perhaps obliquely – by certain critics. On a general scale, Jean-Pierre Oudart has diagnosed Classical Hollywood Cinema's preference for firm narrative resolution as a symptom of a cultural desideratum to reconfirm the hegemony of the dominant ideology (1971:

5). By re-establishing order, Hollywood films do not only achieve a kind of compositional symmetry in the Aristotelian sense but also an eradication of those subversive elements upon which the narrative movement depends in the first place. If this is a legitimate premise, one may allege that the canonic story format propounded and refined by Classical Hollywood films provides a structure which is inherently conservative and, moreover, oppressively homogenous. In a discussion of the economy of violence in the exploitation genre, D.N. Rodowick echoes to some extent Oudart's proposition in his identification of three global conventions which circumscribe the logic of violence in mainstream cinema. First, the violence of authority, never excessive but always modulated according to the degree of transgression, is invariably justified. Second, the cause of the transgression is assigned to an external agent, an anarchic other who fails to comprehend or conform to the moral rationality which defines the culture authorized to deploy "legal" violence (for Rodowick this is synonymous with bourgeois society). Third, the projection of unsolicited violence onto the other fractures the text so that "criminal violence is consumed by legal violence in a closed circuit established by the undermining and restoration of stable ideological positions" (1984: 322). For the audience, this narrative structure ensures an ostensibly legitimate and pleasurable experience of a film's violence, one that reinforces dominant beliefs and safeguards the viewers from becoming implicated in the onscreen action. Rodowick posits a design which necessitates some system of appropriate authorial framing, and it seems to be the occasional lapse of such a system that makes narratives such as Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991), and Rémy Belvaux, Amdré Bonzel and Benoît Poelvoorde's *Man Bites Dog* (1992) so disconcerting. When the Production Code presided over the dissemination of moving images, film violence mostly consolidated existing values.

In terms of characterization, a notable aspect of *Scarface* is the absence of the traditional hero. Although the establishment conventionally defeats the transgressor in the end, the film fails to develop its nominal heroes psychologically or even narratively. The viewers are never encouraged to engage with any of the representatives of the law because their role in the story is too insignificant. Their position in the story is not sustained sufficiently to invite any emotional investment. Hence, the viewers are left with Rodowick's anarchic other at the center of the narrative, a characterizational effect not unlike those in films such as *The Killing, The Wild Bunch,* and *Reservoir Dogs.* In a larger historical perspective *Scarface* prevails as an early instance of the later tendency to foreground, and give narrative prominence to the figure of the criminal. However, Hawks's film never indulges in the fetishization of the criminal that we find in these later films. In *Reservoir Dogs* particularly, the viewers no longer merely sympathize with morally deviant protagonists, they become celebrants of their actions and behavior, amused by their dialogue and jokes, and are entertained rather than sickened by the violence.

The romanticization of violent perpetrators is a phenomenon that appears to emerge with the rise of the 1930s gangster films, at whose core, Thomas R. Atkins holds, "the roots of modern screen violence" may be located (1976: 7). It is perhaps inescapable that several critics have interpreted the fascination with crime and violence in the movies of this period as a response to the immoderation of the 1920s and to the crisis of the Depression years. Richard Maltby contributes one such symptomatic reading of the gangster flicks:

> [T]he brief cycle of gangster movies made during the 1930-31 production season was part of a broader representational strategy within Hollywood during the early Depression, by which overtly retrospective accounts of the excesses of the previous decade were staged as melodramatic reenactments of the rise and fall of moral chaos. Through such a strategy, Hollywood participated in a more general cultural attempt to account for the crisis as an alleged permissiveness of the Jazz Age (2001: 119).

According to William Faure, the 1930s became the decade for cinematic examinations of the nature and causes of social violence, examinations that cemented the impression that mass hysteria was a significant force behind the preoccupation with violence and criminals (23).[10] The movies of the early 1930s construe an ambiguous image of the gangster. Semiotically suspended, this image vacillates between romantic hero and cultural scapegoat. As Maltby contends, the gangster became "a significant part of the sin that was being expiated after the Crash" (2001: 127). But this expiation insinuates an unauthorized undertow which covertly venerated the criminal. Gerald Mast has suggested that the world of *Scarface*, its didacticism notwithstanding, fails to interrogate the sociological structure that may be found to promote gangsterism. *Scarface* differs in this respect from LeRoy's *Little Caesar* and Wellman's *The Public Enemy*, which explore the social influences of unemployment and poverty in order to explain the rise of organized urban crime. In Mast's opinion, the point of Hawks' film is the realization that "gangsters and their brutal world exist because they are in fact thoroughly accepted by the very moral, political, and cultural life of modern America, which deplores them only in theory" (1982: 75). If Mast is correct, the more undisguised celebration of the gangster in *Bonnie and Clyde* may not be so much a direct product of the countercultural rhetoric of the late 1960s as yet another manifestation of a more fundamental and historically far-reaching adoration of a particular criminal archetype.

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[10] According to Maltby, in the classical era the issue of violence was subsumed under the more general category of crime, a fact the Payne Fund Studies also confirm. It was only in the 1960s that depictions of violence came to be viewed as a distinct case (2001: 120). However, as most of the criminal activity seen in the gangster films involves violence, there is no reason to subjugate the prominence of violence to a matter of crime alone; nor is it inconceivable that the priority given to crime over violence is actually interrelated with the seeming "invisibility" of violence from an aesthetic point of view. The hypothesis, then, would be that it is not until violence becomes stylistically "excessive," as in Penn and Peckinpah, that it is considered a category of its own.

More than a reflection of the authentic gangster who inhabited the streets of urban America in the 1930s, movie characters like Paul Muni's Camonte may be seen as the celluloid pedigree of the figure of the modern criminal, who, as Joel Black reminds us, is principally an invention of the popular media (1991: 31). The main channel of distribution for the particular genre that Michel Foucault has dubbed "the song of murder" was the broadsheet (1975: 207-208). Genealogically, the murder song can be traced further through the confessions made by criminals at Newgate (subsequently collected in *The Newgate Calendar* and *The Tynburn Chronicle*),[11] the chronicles of the famous trials like François Gayot de Pitaval's *Causes célèbres et intéressantes*, and novels like John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) and Henry Fielding's *Jonathan Wild, The Great* (1743) (Black 1991: 32). Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the criminal act of murder became an increasingly common and refined topic of domestic conversation. An aesthetic valuation of murder, and the conception of the murderer as a kind of artist, occurs in Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* (written around 1761, but unpublished, though translated by Goethe as *Rameaus Neffe* in 1805), in Friedrich Schiller's essay "Reflections on the Use of the Vulgar and the Lowly in Works of Art" (1827), and finally, in De Quincey's "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (1827).[12] As Black is anxious to point out, the criminals are never seen as artists per se; it is the fictional narrators who aesthetically reconstitute them as artists of murder (1991: 38).

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[11] See Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel, 1830-1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, and Thackeray.*

Scarface features a classically deluded hero who is consumed and destroyed by his own hubris and lack of insight and self-control. Hecht's original draft delineates even more insistently these aspects of Camonte's character, who lives to see some of the concluding gunfire, but the Hays office objected to this suggestion as they saw it as a glorification of the criminal (McCarthy 1997: 139). Muni's performance is instrumental in exteriorizing and calibrating the excessiveness of the artistic murderer-as-gangster. Robin Wood finds that Camonte is defined by an "essential innocence," in that the primitivism of his behavior and mentality is that of a child (1981: 59). Grouping the film with Hawks' comedies (*Bringing up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *Monkey Business* (1952)), Wood claims that the combination of farce and horror is indicative of the principal theme which structures *Scarface*: the psychology of total irresponsibility (1981: 67). Other critics have also emphasized the co-existence of such traits in Camonte's persona. Leland A. Poague, for instance, writes that the character's "exercise of power is simultaneously playful and brutal" (1982: 97), though Schatz proposes that "[his] primitive brutality, simple-minded naiveté, and sexual confusion made him a figure with little charisma and with virtually no redeeming qualities" (1981: 91). In the context of Hawks' oeuvre this portrayal of giddy irresponsibility becomes especially revealing. While the filmmaker in his comedies cultivates a certain laxity--the exhilaration accompanying the free play of solipsistic impulses--the heroes of his adventure films share a strong sense of communal accountability. The prototypical Hawksian protagonist represents values such as loyalty, courage and endurance. In *Scarface*, however, it is a strangely careless sensibility that informs the characterization of the main protagonist. Even the nihilism of Pike Bishop and his partners in *The Wild Bunch* falls short of the absolute lack of social commitment of a Tony Camonte. Nonetheless, one of the peculiar effects of Hawks' film, Wood writes, is that the viewers are still able to commiserate with Camonte despite the unspeakable cruelty of his actions. Comparing the film to Jean-Luc Godard's *Les Carabiniers*, Wood proposes the following hypothesis: "[t]hough utterly different in style and method, both [films] have leading characters who consistently perform monstrous violent actions which the films never condone, yet who retain the audience's sympathy to the end, and for similar reasons" (1981: 58). The reasons alluded to involve the way in which the film presents its protagonist as if he were a young and naive child, as "an innocent immune from moral judgment" (1981: 58). But this narrative strategy does not mitigate the violence of Camonte: "[f]ar from weakening the statement of horror and despair, this intensifies it" (Wood 1981: 58).

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[12] The previously mentioned writer Mishima Yukio and filmmaker Donald Cammell are examples of artists who both in their art and in their life have carried the romanticization of murder to its extreme conclusion. That there is still a continued interest in the tradition of the song of murder in contemporary popular culture is evident in the work of recording artists like Nick Cave, The Auteurs and Kristin Hersh. See Nick Cave's *Murder Ballads*, The Auteurs' *After Murder Park*, and Kristin Hersh's *Murder, Misery and Then Goodnight.*

Irrespective of the many putative references to historical events in *Scarface*,[13] the film's violence is essentially amimetic; the references neither imitate nor represent any extra-fictional reality, but address instead the transtextual tradition from which they emerge. "Despite this claim to social commitment," Eva Bueno, José Oviedo and Michael Varona write in an essay on the film, "*Scarface* posits its own 'reality', one which limits itself to gangsters and those who would censure, control or profit by their activities" (1989: 113). In turn, the generic and narrative codes in *Scarface* provide a quotational repository for many later films. Nicholas Ray's *Party Girl* (1958), Billy Wilder's *Some Like it Hot* (1959), Denys de La Patellière's *Du Rififi à Paname* (1966), Brian De Palma's remake *Scarface* (1983), as well as his *The Untouchables* (1987), and Joel Coen's *Miller's Crossing* (1990) are only some among a slew of texts that in various ways reference Hawks' film. The perhaps most mesmeric intercinematic quotation of *Scarface* takes place in anthropologist Eliane de Latour's *Bronx-Barbès* (2000), in which the criminal trajectory and self-image of a young West African hoodlum constantly are focalized through the characterizational tropes established by Hawks's and DePalma's texts. Although the transtextualism of *Scarface* is a long way from the thoroughgoing pastiche of a Tarantino, Hawks's film is still imbued with a host of generic and individual intertexts. Bueno, Oviedo and Varona apprehend the relationship between these and the film thus:

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[13] As much a lurid promise as a warning, the disclaimer's statement that "Every incident in this picture is the reproduction of an actual occurrence" refers among other things to incidents like the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929, when Al Capone and his cohorts murdered seven men from Bugs Moran's gang in Chicago, and the Siege of West 90th Street in New York in 1931, in which young criminal Francis "Two-Gun" Crowley was apprehended by the NYPD after a two-hour shootout (Hagemann 1984: 40-41).

> The opening sequence of the film establishes a set of semiotic texts which will continue to generate meaning throughout the movie in various innovative articulations. These semiotic texts, replete with their own internal grammars and contradictions are woven into the deep structure of the film through the use of specific cinematographic techniques (1989: 114).

Previous gangster and crime films from D.W. Griffith's short silent *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) to Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927, written by Ben Hecht) and *The Dragnet* (1928) had already provided a narrative template for the genre. Hawks's film appropriates these generic stock features rather profusely, which is perhaps what stirs a critic like Stephen Louis Karpf to speak of the "derivative" quality of the narrative (1973: 87). More particular to *Scarface* is a set of infective motifs culled from a variety of cultural and textual sources. One of the most immediately resonant is the sustained connection to *The Great Gatsby* (1925), whose thematic ideas underlie the development of both the story and the character of Camonte. There is a scene in *Scarface* in which Camonte tries to impress Poppy with his collection of silk shirts, a moment which, as Doherty has pointed out, directly acknowledges its subtext (1999: 148).[14] What appears to be Camonte's credo-- "Do it first, do it yourself, and keep on doin' it"--is an evident though distorted reformulation of the ethos of the self-made man so abundantly associated with Fitzgerald's novel, and the suave licentiousness of the gangster's world is highly reminiscent of the decadence of the former text. In *Scarface*, Doherty writes, there is a sense in which "the fresh green breast of the New World has rotted on the vine, the cultural metaphor of 1925 having become the economic report of 1932" (1999:148). Hawks's deeply ironic gesture, eloquently rendered in the billboard sign slogan "The World is Yours," seems to be as much a repudiation of the politics of the self-made man as a de-romanticization of the gangster figure specifically.

The scene in which the allusion to *The Great Gatsby* occurs is also revelatory of a major subtext that threads through Hawks's film. Caressing his silk shirts, Camonte performs a gesture which divulges the tension at the core of the film's codification of masculinity. As it turns out, Scarface is not only a childlike gangster, but an effeminate one as well. His vanity only matched by his brutality, Camonte is time and again portrayed as being obsessed with clothing and with his appearance (we first see him inside a barbershop). What is more, Camonte is highly unpredictable and he is given to exaggerated, uncontrollable bursts of emotion, traits which are conventionally associated with the feminine. Camonte's melodramatic tinge is somewhat aberrant within the context of a genre which, like the western, values masculine restraint. When juxtaposed with more paradigmatically phlegmatic gangsters like Vito Corleone in *The Godfather* or Tom Reagan in *Miller's Crossing*, Scarface's hysterical features emerge even more transparently. Camonte's persona, ambiguously situated between a vitalistic violence and an emasculated hysteria,[15] appears to illustrate the decentering of masculine subjectivity that David E. Ruth in his book on the invention of the gangster claims occurred with modernity. Implying a correlation between violence and particular forms of social change, Ruth writes: "[m]en celebrated aggression at the same time that the ongoing organization of society rendered aggression increasingly counterproductive" (1996: 92). The cycle of gangster movies that appeared in the early 1930s may be seen as a response to the transformations of the notion of masculinity which took place at the time. Muni's complexly engineered gangster could feasibly be read as a symptom of this transformation.

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[14] In an article which predates Doherty's text, Hagemann makes the same observation (1984: 33).

Some of the violence in *Scarface* is signaled not only by the cross symbolism but also by an accompanying aural cue, which is first heard in the film's initial sequence. In an unbroken, uncharacteristically elaborate tracking shot that climaxes with the murder of Castillo, we first hear Camonte's signature whistling, a recurring sound trope that surfaces shortly before he is about to kill someone. Hecht's script indicates that the melody Scarface whistles is a version of the popular 1930s song "Come Back to Sorrento," written by Ernesto de Curtis in 1904 (Hagemann 1984: 40), but as Carlos Clarens has suggested, the theme used in the film is that of the sextet from Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1997: 93).[16] The musical excerpt was by no means chosen at random. Donizetti's opera, which is based on Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), revolves around the illicit love affair between Lucia and her power-mad brother Enrico's adversary Edgardo. There is much to indicate that Cesca's relationship with her brother is substantially modeled on that of Lucia (Lucy Ashton) and Enrico (Lord Henry Ashton) in Scott's narrative. The text of Camonte's leitmotif, furthermore, translates as "What restrains me in such a moment?," a pithy rhetorical question whose self-reflexivity extends beyond the character of Camonte to implicate the film--and its perspective on violence--as a whole. In a conspicuous sense the text of the melody seems to mock the address to the audience in the beginning of the film, as if to defy the disclaimer's concerned tone with a rejoinder that is equally cynical and sinister. The phrase's temporal designation, "in such a moment," may be taken to denote not only the narrative time of violence but also the historical time of the film's production, thus restating the question in terms of who restrains the filmmaker in showing the audience images of violence. Finally, the aural trope circuitously supports yet another chain of transtextual signification. As Hawks himself discloses in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, the conception of the relationship between Camonte and Cesca in plainly incestuous terms was a conscious decision on part of the scriptwriters,[17] as was the use of the Borgia family in late 15th century Italy as a model for that relationship (1996: 52). Hecht even refers to Cesca as a "Borgian wench" in his script (Hagemann 1984: 40).[18] Incidentally, prior to *Lammermoor* Donizetti had composed the opera *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833), and in Camonte's effortless whistling the connotations to the Borgia family thus meld with those to Scott's novel.

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[15] In the present context I have in mind the quotidian rather than the academic sense of the term.

[16] Donizetti composed this work in 1835, and it was first performed in Naples in September the same year.

In a manner not entirely different from Tarantino's cannibalizing of 1970s soul music in *Reservoir Dogs*, *Scarface* achieves, alongside its narratively prominent quotation of high art, a seamless integration of a melange of references to popular music. These include Louis Armstrong and Kid Ory's "St. Louis Blues," which is heard on the soundtrack in the "Paradise" sequence, Sophie Tucker's "Some of These Days," (written by Shelton Brooks, 1910) to which Cesca dances in front of Rinaldo in the same sequence, and Cesca's performance of "Casey Jones" in the scene leading up to Rinaldo's murder. The last two anthems in particular portend the later destruction of Cesca and Rinaldo's relationship by

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[17] Other scholars have also commented upon the incest motif. See for instance Clark Branson 71.

[18] Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519) is reputed to have had an incestuous relation with her elder brother Cesare and her father Pope Alexander VI. The story of her life was the inspiration for Victor Hugo's prose play *Lucrece Borgia*, written in 1833, the same year as Donizetti completed his *Lammermoor* opera.

Camonte's consuming jealousy. Brooks's lyrics intone the imminent grief which befalls the speaker when s/he is left behind by a lover, and "Casey Jones" chronicles the tale of the eponymous train engineer who is killed in a wreck between Memphis and Canton in 1900.[19] More than mere ornamentation, these musical references both foreshadow plot events and help expand the intertexual range of the film.

All of these allusive patterns in *Scarface* participate in a process of textual self-consciousness, one that the extra-artistic amendments such as the opening disclaimer unwittingly enhance. By underscoring the film's relation to "reality," the insert's irrevocable self-consciousness paradoxically annuls it. As Iampolski has shown, acts of quotation--which in my view become signs of self-consciousness whether they are intended or not--work to promote semiosis at the expense of mimesis (1998: 30). Quotationality bolsters a text's amimetic aspects. In Hawks's movie there is an additional sequence in which transtextual citation and narrative self-consciousness converge in the same semiotic space. Some time after the Valentine's Day massacre, Camonte and his companions attend a theatre performance of Somerset Maugham's *Rain*, a morality tale first published in the collection *The Trembling of a Leaf* (1921).[20] Camonte has to leave in the intermission because his men have located the whereabouts of Gaffney, the leader of the gang that were murdered on Valentine's Day. However, Camonte orders one of his men to stay behind and watch the rest of the play so that he will learn which of her two suitors Sadie eventually chooses. The scene in which Gaffney is shot in a bowling alley precedes the scene at the "Paradise" restaurant. Asking for a light, Poppy chooses Camonte's match over Lovo's lighter, a move which, prefigured by the Maugham quotation, indicates that she has now left her former lover for Camonte.

In terms of narrative organization, violent action in *Scarface* is protracted globally but compressed locally. Brutal events take place at short and even intervals, but their duration is brief. Peter Brunette's description of the violent grammar of the Three Stooges films may apply equally to that in *Scarface*: "this narrative of violence... acts as a kind of punctuation, a system of commas, periods, and paragraph breaks, for the syntax of the ostensibly plotted, 'larger' narrative" (1991: 176). For Donald C. Willis, this punctuation system asserts itself so vigorously that it in fact dissolves the film's proper narrative (1975: 132). In contrast, violence in another seminal film like *The Wild Bunch* is expansive within the sequence, but occurs less frequently and systematically between different scenes and parts of the film. The anatomy of the violent movement is dissected into detailed fragments, shown from different positions in space and prolonged in time beyond the actual story duration. Similarly, the images of violence establish their own temporality in the concluding shots of *Bonnie and Clyde*, which is non-concomitant with that of the represented event. The narration of *Scarface*, conversely, does not linger on its violent images. If Penn and Peckinpah conceive of violence as scenes, Hawks presents it as summary. Furthermore, the graphic imagery in *Scarface* is so cautiously conceptual that it hardly qualifies as carnage at all. Even a film like Kubrick's *The Killing*, which is fairly sanitary in this respect, suggests a certain level of explicitness in the depiction of violence which is absent from Hawks' film. On the other hand, violence in *Scarface* is highly prolific. In the course of the narration there are twenty-eight sequences which feature violent action, and these produce a structuring taxonomy which corresponds to the progression of narratively salient plot phases. Although *Scarface*'s violence is rarely developed into the kinds of spectacle found in *The Wild Bunch*, it nonetheless performs a primary aesthetic function in that it shapes and configures the narrative of the film. Violence in Hawks' film is not a consequence of unresolvable conflicts, a product of the action, but rather, the narrative action becomes a result of the violence.

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[19] There are several versions of this song, apparently conceived by Wallace Saunders and first published in 1902, and the one used in *Scarface* may be found in H.M. Belden & A.P. Hudson's *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore.*

[20] Coincidentally, Maugham's text was adapted for the screen and released only a few months after *Scarface*'s premiere under the direction of Lewis Milestone. Another version of the story had been made into the film *Sadie Thompson* (1928), by Raoul Walsh--a key director of gangster films, whose *White Heat* (1949) is much indebted to *Scarface.*

The classical and hence extrinsic norms for visualizing violence that inform Hawks' narrative rely to a significant extent on abstraction, on a certain de-materialization of the body--in short, on contour rather than texture. As Nick Browne states, before the 1960s American movie violence was generally codified in "certain dramaturgical conventions... functioning most notably by suggestion (narrative indirection or simple symbolism), diminishment, or usually the elimination of the details of the actual wounding" (1999: 548). In the war films of the 1941-1945 period, James William Gibson describes what he terms "a highly abstract approach" to violence: "wounds are relatively painless and bloodless. No one screams in agonizing pain. Even death is discreet, signified by a small red dot on the chest" (1994: 22). Because the violence in *Scarface*--and by extension that of the classical cinema as a whole--works by implication, it becomes in a sense even more threatening than the later, graphic depictions. Since an abstract approach omits the impact of violent force upon the body, both the nature and consequences of violence become an enigma, something that entices due to its inarticulate elusiveness. The effort toward ever more explicit portrayals of disfiguration can be conceptualized as an increasing desire to rid classical violence of its unbearable invisibility. When filmmakers like Peckinpah, Scorsese and Tarantino show us images of graphic bodily laceration, their spectacles function as an epistemological delimitation. The violence shown inscribes its own limits in the act itself, as if the images were saying: violence may be this, but at least it is nothing more. Classical cinema's approach to violence--because it involves abstraction and indirection--cannot guarantee such a delimitation, and this renders the impact of violence potentially infinite for the viewer.

The murder scene with which the narrative begins makes palpable the aesthetics of abstraction that defines the narration of violence in *Scarface*. Shot so that the camera stays behind in the adjacent room through which Camonte first enters, the murder is only shown to us in silhouette, as a configuration of shadows on a white canvas illuminated by the light. The violence thus achieves the texture of a pantomime, to borrow Infante's phrase (1996: 48). Here is how Gerald Mast elucidates the scene:

> we see the murder clearly and are capable of recognizing its brutality; but we do not experience that brutality fully, distanced by the murder's shadowy indirectness, so that we do not come to loath or detest the man who performs it. It is a shadow, a two-dimensional shape, not a man, who is the brutal murderer. Nor do we feel deeply for the shadow's victim, since the victim's moral and emotional life is as vague and blurry as the shadowy killer. (1982: 81)

We identify Camonte as the killer on account of his trademark whistling, but the sequence does not reveal his face. The killing initiates the narrative, and becomes an emblem of the ways in which violence is presented throughout the film; it takes place in off-screen space, or in spaces where all substance and detail are removed from the image. The lack of bodily definition in the moment of murder formalizes the violence and heightens its conceptual rather than its material suggestiveness. As I have already suggested, this stylistic technique is paradoxical, as it presents a visualization of a violent act that is not shown.

Conceptually, the violence in *Scarface* involves acts of intended erasure on multiple levels. There is the prudent erasure of gunshot wounds; the incessant wiping out of narrative characters; the expository titles in the beginning which, rhetorically speaking, in effect ban the ensuing imagery; and the political initiatives to prevent the film from being made in the first place. These acts of deletion find a stylistic correlative in the film's pervasive use of the X motif, a literalization of the multi-layered erasures the means of which is the mutilation of the textual body. Even the film's title gestures toward an awareness of an aesthetics of disfiguration in its adumbration of a Hawthornian badge of disgrace. The cross-shaped scar on the face of the main protagonist is an inscription of a violence, a de-facing, at the same time as it is also the symbolic locus to which all of the narrative's other X's refer back. Each individual manifestation of the emblem on the various spaces of the film, each instance of violation, enters into a metonymic relation with its conceptual source, the master scar on Camonte's face. A remarkable contradiction, the scar as a sign simultaneously performs the acts of imprinting and crossing out.

The form of *Scarface* is not prototypically Hawksian. As McCarthy concedes, such "stylistic flourishes" would not often be seen later in the director's long career (1997: 155). Whether he has been celebrated as one of the greatest American film artists (as he was by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics in the mid-1950s), or dismissed as a mere "entertainer" (which seems to have been the opinion of Raymond Durgnat's re-evaluation of the director (1977: 18)), two aspects of Hawks' practice are continuously repeated: his enormous versatility with respect to genre and subject matter, and the absence of an idiosyncratic film signature. Jean-Pierre Coursodon, however, points out that Hawks really worked within "a fairly narrow range of expression," always returning to the same plot and the same characters (1983: 160). He explains the director's unevenness as a consequence of the impossibly high standard he set for himself in his few true masterpieces, such as *Scarface*, *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), *His Girl Friday* (1940), *To Have and Have Not* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946) *Red River* (1948) and *Rio Bravo* (1959). The originality of Coursodon's thesis derives from his readiness to maintain that Hawks's forte was his "stylistic richness" rather than his thematic fluctuations. Hawks' style, Coursodon argues, manifests itself as "an extraordinary density, a permanent tension generated by verbal and visual economy and the functional necessity of every shot and every cut" (1983: 164). Even Durgnat, who in the aforementioned article does his best to de-canonize

Hawks, admits that the director's style possesses a "pantherine grace" (1977: 16). In a more recent estimation, Larry Gross reinforces this view when he postulates that Hawks's style "is not a discernible, material phenomenon" but a "distinctive unity of a world that synthesises disparate rhetorical, verbal, visual and dramaturgical capacities" (1997: 13).

The film is also Hawks' most expressionistic--Jonathan Mumby labels the visual style of the film "documentary expressionism" (1999: 56)--evidence of which can be found in the movie's "violent chiaroscuro, tight grouping within the frame, and fluid, staling camera movement" (Clarens 1997: 93). It is a testament to the filmmaker's dexterity that the cross-shaped token so richly employed functions both as a symbol and as a stylistic trait within the diegetic world of the film. While on occasion Hawks uses the iconological figure quite self-assertively--as in the St. Valentine' Day massacre scene--at other times its incorporation is subtle and barely noticeable. There is the X on the wall in the police office early in the film, on Cesca's face in the balcony segment, on the curtains in the hospital sequence, and on Cesca's back as she dances in the Paradise restaurant. Poague writes that the cross metaphor--furnishing the story with "a point of moral reference on what might otherwise be seen as a remarkably immoral movie" (1982: 96)--also reflects the intertwining plot structure in which two paths of action, Camonte's rise to power and his incestuous relation to Cesca, together form an X.[21] The sign also elicits a sense of the impermissible, of the censured--connotations cross-fertilized with its capacity for signifying a lack of substance, identity, or information. A semiotic blank, the sign ultimately evokes the unfathomable void of death, but, even more significantly, it is also a disfiguration of the photographic image itself. This is also a kind of violence.

In the introduction to this article I suggest that the plotting in *Scarface* is hysterical, and in the closing section I intend for a moment to return to this idea. The murderous yet almost childlike psychopathology of the main protagonist, the narrative's ambivalence toward its own depiction of violence, and the film's fixation with contradictory acts of erasure and disfiguration--these elements all point to, and are suggestive of, a meaning which can only be particularized on a larger interpretive level. Coursodon has proposed that what fuels Hawks' cinema is a "neurotic denial of death" (1983: 168), and it is this obsession that seems to provide the thematic corollary for *Scarface*'s formal mode. Death, Coursodon writes, "is the unacceptable, that which must not be shown" (1983: 168). Serge Daney, that seminal *Cahiers du cinema* editor and critic, detected this aspect of Hawks' poetics early. In a review of *Rio Bravo* (1959), he states that "[L]e rapport à la mort – passage par excellence – est toujours pensé ainsi: *un* mort, ce n'est jamais *la* mort et la mort, ce n'est jamais qu'être absent, plus précisément: être *hors-champ*" (1971 : 23, emphases in original). Hawks' relegation of death to zones off-screen space, to the out-of-frame, is an act of evasion that may account for the hysterical impulse that informs both the film's plot and characterization. Relying on a Lacanian reading of film violence, Guy C. Rittger finds that the totality of classical Hollywood cinema in fact is founded on a similar act of repression: "the libidinal economy of cinematic action film, prior to 1967, can be characterized as 'neurotic,' organized around potentially traumatic glimpses of a Real which remains precariously veiled" (1995: 357). The "Real" that Rittger has in mind here is the fact of mortality. If *Scarface* is a "death-dance," as Raymond Durgnat has stated (1977: 18), its choreography is tentative, its rhythm timorous. It is as if the filmmaker over-compensates for the repression of death on a conceptual level by reducing it to a spectacle on a literal level. In this regard, violence becomes the only possible method of dying because the event of violence itself is so horrible that it tends to re-direct our attention away from death. By repressing death, violence thus becomes a lugubrious means of coping with it.

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[21] The range of associations that the sign of the X carries could doubtlessly be extended. I have chosen to neglect the obvious religious resonance of the symbol, which is something that Robin Wood discusses in his book on Hawks. Hagemann, moreover, has suggested that the appearance of the symbol in the first shot resembles a Tau-cross, which in art is the insignia of St. Anthony the Great (1984: 31).

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