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Essay #1

Public Enemy or Glorified Gangster?

“It is the ambition of the authors of “The Public Enemy” to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal.” –Foreword

William Wellman’s *The Public Enemy* (1931) was well received by the American public as one of the most classic gangster films of all time. However, it is also significant for its relationship with the standards of the Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, established in 1930. Scandalous scenes of seduction, illegal production and distribution of alcohol, the depiction of the police as a threat and the glorification of the gangster lifestyle depart from the strict laws of the Code. Efforts to adhere to the standards of the code are seen in some murder scenes, but not all of them. Many Americans during the 1930s were immigrants, and struggling through the Great Depression, which made the main characters of the film very relatable. The lives of Tom Powers and his side kick Matt are lavish and extravagant, the kinds of lives that the average American longed for at the time. Although some attempts to adhere to the Hays Code are visible, the film deterred from the strict rules of the Code more than ^{it} obeyed them by glorifying the gangster lifestyle, primarily because most of America during the 1930s could identify with the struggles of a typical American gangster.

important
rhetorical
turn

The opening scenes of the film play an important role in setting up one of the most significant motifs of the film: alcohol. We see families heading to bars after work instead of

officer enters from the right background, and we hear a loud gunshot and see smoke from the gun as Larry's body becomes distorted in mid-air. We then hear another gun shot, while Larry's body is still framed between the telephone poles. Now, his position is completely blocking our view of the police officer. He then tumbles down and hits his head on the telephone pole in the foreground. Next, we cut to a shot of Tom and Matt still inside the building which they were attempting to rob, and then cut again to a shot of the police officer over Larry's dead body in the streets under the streetlight. This back and forth cutting is an expression of the panic going on during the scene. Tom and Matt escape unharmed, but we see them running from the police officer as he shoots numerous times at them. The end of the scene is a close-up of Larry's limp hand holding a small pistol. This scene is incredibly significant because throughout its entirety we know that Larry is innocent, and immediately our sympathy is with Larry – not the police

officer who is trying to stop crime. It is very important to note that he was shot in the back twice, an instant degradation of respect. The police are immediately seen as a threat to the audience, and the close up on the pistol signifies the overwhelming influence of guns and violence in the film. It is also important to note that Tom's father was a police officer, and did not hesitate to be strict and spank Tom when he had done wrong as a child. We encounter his father early in the film as a dominating and threatening figure in his young life, which most likely contributes to his rebellious attitude throughout the film.

Sexuality was another major topic of the Hays code. Sexual conduct outside of wedlock was forbidden, along with passionate kissing, and any sort of sexual suggestions. These actions are something that the film hardly makes any effort to hide. Not only do Tom and Matt pick up girls in a restaurant, and off of the streets, we even see them lounging in pajamas with women, suggesting that they have slept together the previous night. Although these scenes are

This may be actually the officer's hand

not completely – he is in on the attempted heist

that would lead to

for the officer

How so exactly?

Another example of degrading or not respecting the police, + thus a flouting of the Hays Code.

a rather different hunting down

Although appealing to women, Tom and Matt were hunted down by men too. Violence plays a huge role in the film, and is established in the first few scenes. The violence depicted throughout the film, although essential to the plot, strays widely from the limitations set forth by the Hays Code. Towards the end of the film, we witness the violent murder of Tom's sidekick Matt. However, it is important to note that at this point in the film, Tom and Matt are wearing the fanciest suits, driving the most luxurious car, parading around with beautiful women, and have more money than they know what to do with. They have built up their gangster careers to the point that other gang members saw them as threats. As Tom and Matt leave Paddy Ryan's place, we see them walking down the street, very skittish and skeptical of their surroundings. Then we cut to a shot of Matt and Tom walking down the street but this time through the window of the hotel across the street. In the foreground we see two machine guns, and we see only the backs of the men operating them. Matt and Tom are framed through the window as if we ourselves are seeing them through the scope of a gun. We then cut to the previous shot of Matt and Tom walking down the street, and immediately hear the loud gunshots of the machine guns. Matt's body distorts and then falls to the ground. Tom hides behind the corner of the building and Matt's body rolls to the bottom right of the screen. We see him roll over for just an instant and look up at Tom. The loud gunshots roar again and we see the stone being pummeled with bullets just inches from Tom's face. The next shot we see is through the hotel window again, framing Matt's body as if through the scope once more. Pedestrians and the shooters rush to his body entering the frame that the window creates. However, the dominant in this shot is not Matt, or the killers—it is the large obtrusive machine guns hovering just above the windowsill. Matt's body surrounded by the men is pushed to the very top right of the window's frame almost insignificant

good

to the guns, demonstrating again the significance of violence and the brutality of murder present in the film.

Suggest reasons for this departure, its potential effects

The past four scenes described all exemplify ways in which the film deters from the Hays Code. However, in some scenes the director does choose to adhere to the Code's standards. For example, one of the first major gang-related crimes we see Tom and Matt commit is when they murder their old childhood acquaintance, "Putty Nose." Tom and Matt enter his parlor and threaten him to the point that he is begging for life, trying to recall the good times they had together when Tom and Matt were young boys. There is a shot when Putty Nose is sitting at the piano playing an old song from their childhood, in which he and Tom are framed between the piano and its top, which forms a triangle. Tom's head is exactly at the top of the triangle, and Putty Nose is cornered at the bottom. This shows Tom's dominance over Putty Nose's life at this moment in time. As Putty Nose turns around and begins singing, we see Tom pull a gun out of his coat pocket; we now know something that Putty doesn't. The camera then pans to the right and we see Matt looking over his shoulder at the off camera action. Putty is still singing. When he gets to a familiar funny point in the song we hear gunshots, and then the clamorous sound of piano keys as Putty's body falls on them. Tom then enters from the left while Matt is still looking towards the piano with a shocked expression. We have been spared the sight of his actual death, but nevertheless know that it has occurred. Tom leaves unaffected, demonstrating his tough gangster attitude towards life.

Has influence? Specify briefly.

A similar scenario occurs towards the end of the film, when Tom is seeking revenge on Matt's killers. It is dark and rainy as Tom's rival gang collaborates at their usual meeting place. We see Tom lurking in the shadows, and once the men have entered the building, Tom comes towards the camera until his whole face envelops the shot. We then cut to him entering the

building. Next, we hear several loud terrifying gunshots back and forth and a long painful scream. Through the glass walls outside, we can then see Tom at long shot distance exiting the room where the action occurred, limping severely. He then crouches against the doorframe with a gun in both hands, as smoke wafts out of the room. Next, we see a medium shot of Tom against the door and hear wailing from inside the building. Through the next series of shots, we see Tom coughing and struggling severely through the street in the pouring rain. The angle of the camera is slightly tilted upward, reflecting him as an almost larger-than-life figure. We know that he has been shot in the head due to blood flowing down his face. Finally he utters a famous line from the film, "I ain't so tough," and collapses. The last thing we hear is the screaming whistles of the police.

Has
adhered
reporting

During the 1930s, moviegoers were seeking an escape that allowed them to forget their problems for at least a few hours. Due to the Great Depression, money was scarce, and people did what they could to make their lives happy. Many people could identify with the immigrant attitude of wanting to fit in and make a life for themselves. In the public eye, the gangster/bootlegger lifestyle brought not only money, but women, cars, nice clothes—and even fame. The gangsters led celebrity lifestyles. In the movie, for example, after one of the leaders of their gang dies in a horseback riding accident, we see a shot of a newspaper headline that reads, "Nails Nathan's Funeral Stops Traffic; Floral Pieces Amount to \$75,000; Crowds Line Streets to Witness Passing of Noted Gangster." Their "above the law" way of life gave rise to the modern concept that the criminal life was cool. As Tom Powers lays in a hospital bed towards the very end of the movie, our sympathy is with him, not the law. Although he is a noted killer and criminal, we genuinely want to see him survive. The brutal way in which he is murdered puts us on his side and we feel tremendous sorrow for him and his family, rather than feeling grateful

Who's
the
immigrant
in the film
Specific

good
observation

that justice has been served. People could identify with the gangster's desire for money, wealth, and fame because so many people were wholeheartedly deprived of these luxuries. The Hays Code does have influence over the film in some places, but the majority of the film disobeys its standards. The scenes of seduction, murder, violence and police brutality, which stray from the standards of the code, result in the acquisition of wealth, money, and fame that was so intriguing during the 1930s. The film *The Public Enemy* does the exact opposite of what its foreword proposes. It glorifies the hoodlum and the criminal, because the kinds of lives they lived were desirable by so many Americans at the time.

Very good paper Sarah. You describe several sequences from the film in excellent detail, and overall you make a strong case for how TPE departs from the Hays Code — as well as the reasons for this resistance. You could relate a few local points back to your thesis at key rhetorical junctures, such as the ends of Its (see notes). See p 2, for example. Your point about the Prohibition scene could easily include mention of the important, even "necessary" role the bootlegging gangster came to play.

Br/A-

I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on this work.

Sarah M. Duse