The bad boy antihero and contemporary politics: *Scarface* and *Gunday*.

**Trump v Scarface**

At a couple of weeks out from the US presidential elections, as many of us watch in horrified fascination what we hope is the slow motion implosion of the Donald Trump campaign, many of us are struggling to understand our historical juncture, in which a reality TV caricature businessman forced us to rethink political process in our country. One of the aspects of this media frenzy that has interested me is how creature and creation of media has exploited the verities taught by media, grounded in media-based inventions of alternative histories. In late 2015 the online publication *Cafe* posted a quiz, “Who said it: Donald Trump or Tony Montana from *Scarface*?” This is a quiz “of moderate difficulty” that does not include the most famous tagline of De Palma’s 1983 mafia gorefest, “Say hello to my l’l fren,” and the references to Miami rather than New York make guessing the right answer easy. Yet the point of the quiz is not to get a perfect score, but rather to meditate (or be amused by) the uncomfortable parallels. Around the same time, legendary rapper Scarface (who took his name from the film), told DJ Vlad in a filmed interview, “I like Donald Trump because he’s rich and lawless.” This kind of tongue-in-cheek comparison points, of course, to a particular kind of bad boy antihero image amply studied in analysis of popular film, and exploited by political figures in overt (or less overt) ways.
This phenomenon is not, sadly, unique to the United States. Coverage of the Trump campaign focused on his “brilliant” relation with the Russian shirt-challenged macho-man leader, Vladimir Putin, who has likewise exploited popular media imagery. As someone who does not know Russian culture, but travels to India frequently, and knows nothing about India either, except as taught by Bollywood movies, I recall also the intersection of Putin and Trump with Narendra Modi, the “Butcher of Gujarat” now Prime Minister of India. Modi’s rise to power was not coincidental with increased violence against Muslim communities by the extreme right Hindu groups that have traditionally supported Modi, and been supported by him, and by this October 2016’s chest-thumping and near declaration of war with Pakistan. It is also a time that has been notable for violence along the recently created, and ever more fortified, barbed wire fence now crossing much of the border between India and Bangladesh.

In term of his foreign policy, Trump’s campaign has likewise been notable for its narrow xenophobia. As we all know, in June 2015 Trump announced his plans to build a “big, beautiful wall” across the entire border between Mexico and the United States, at Mexico’s expense, since, as he repeatedly suggested, that country was responsible for dumping criminals in the USA (Diamond, “Immigration”). In December 2015 Trump called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on.” (Diamond, “Muslim”). With all the ups and downs of his chaotic presidential campaign, these two pledges, the first impossible, the second, unconstitutional, have remained visible as his signature commitments.
Good Neighbor or Stranger Danger

Referencing a series of violent events in a city near the Indian border with Bangladesh, a blogger writes: “Malda has in it all that it takes to draw parallels with the lawless Wild West of USA of the late 18th century and early 19th century” (Tripathi). We all know immediately what Tripathi means by this allusion, which is strangely accurate precisely where it is most erroneous. That is, Tripathi signals a particular historical period in what is now the Western United States, but does so by way of a fictional media analogy, in which the Muslims are the Indians (ie, native Americans), so to speak. The “Wild West” is a creation of Hollywood cinema featuring a fantasy territory where dangerous bandidos and lawless Indians disrupt peaceful settlers and invade their towns. A news reporter speaking about the same incidents says, for instance: “There are large parts of Malda where officers of the state government are scared of venturing into. Areas that have been overrun by illegal immigrants, where mobs led by criminals rule and where Indian law means little” (Kanwal). Ironically, of course, in the historical USA, the challenge to peace came from a flood of undocumented immigrants who are not perceived as such in the popular media versions of the story — ie, the white Europeans who flooded the western part of the country, occupying native American lands. This is the same geographical space crossed — since the mid 19th century --by the US Mexico border, and, like Florida (also once a Spanish colonial territory) in Trump’s version of America, has been imaginarily overrun by lawless refugees from Latin America.

Films like Scarface in this sense are more than films. Historians and other scholars of contemporary culture in a series of studies since the 1970s have observed the
power of the visual image in creating our sense of the past. Films that are based on historical events are remembered as if they were history, such that even when we learn about the inaccuracies and errors, we tend to still recall the film version instead of the facts (Ghose). Structural myths like the Wild West or the American Dream further muddy the waters.

The 2014 film, *Gunday*, like *Scarface*, is set at the intersection of a historical circumstance that brings together a detonating moment in a refugee camp as the incubator of social ills, developing into a story of lawless refugees creating chaos in near-border cities (Kolkata, Miami). Both films begin with documentary footage (the Bangladesh Independence War, the Mariel boatlift) before turning to highly charged, violence ridden melodrama focused on a pair of vaguely homoerotic, outlaw antihero buddies (Bikram/Bala; Tony/Manolo), who build illegal businesses and eventually tear their respective cities and themselves apart in fits of jealous anger. Both films, then, cite and serve as parodies of what in the USA is called the American dream narrative/ or the self-made man/capitalist success story. Both films have sparked angry responses for their stereotypical portrayals (from Bangladeshis, from Cuban Americans). These films (and many others of a similar sort) speak strongly to the contemporary moment, in which stories of undocumented immigrants and desperate refugees dominate the media, and hysterical right wing activists rail against the danger of immigrant presence in First World cities.

Oliver Stone states that he was inspired in writing the script by his anger about the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) act of 1970, aimed at enhanced penalties for crimes committed as part of a criminal organization. He says,
“The RICO act was just one of the precursors to the Patriot Act “ (Tucker 86), signed by George Bush as an anti-terrorism measure in 2001. Stone was particularly interested in unveiling how different US entities—the DEA, the CIA—operated with conflicting briefs, with one organization often protecting major criminal figures that the other was trying to eliminate, an activity that he finds troublingly similar to anti-terrorist responses today.

**Fear of the refugee: learning to hate what we create**

Refugee camps are the inevitable breeding grounds for crime. They are crowded and dirty; there is nothing to do, so opportunistic crime flourishes—child rape in *Gunday*, contract murder in *Scarface*—but this contamination by criminal activity also is tied to a genetic flaw that dogs the refugee and makes the receiving country’s wariness seem reasonable. The names of the camps—“Freedom Town” in Miami, “Geneva” in Dhaka, Bangladesh ironically point to first world good intentions; in filmic practice, however, all the refugees are treated roughly, with suspicion: all are processed as pre-criminals. The rape in Geneva camp is at the root of the boys’ personality problems, including their frequent inconsistent generosity and their violent outbursts—most notably, in the early part of the film, cheerfully stuffing a screaming coal dealer into a train’s roaring furnace, or promising to blow up Calcutta when a misunderstanding between the young men leaves them frustrated in love. Likewise, in the earlier film, while Tony Montana’s mother confirms that he was always criminally inclined, the repressions of Castro’s Cuba, Tony’s experience in the Cuban army, rough treatment and denial of human rights upon
landing in the USA, and the mafia’s gruesome chainsaw murder of a colleague all contribute to his volatility.

This is true of all camps, really, even real world detention camps like Guantánamo, where US officials have dragged their feet for years in releasing innocent detainees who were swept up in the war on terror due to a variety of unlucky circumstances. The argument is that while they may have arrived innocent, the time they spent in the camp, the torture that we inflicted on them, now make them security risks (Fisher, Smith). In proof of this stand, Pentagon officials allege that former detainees were involved in subsequent ISIS attacks in Europe (Mora).

“The image is fading of an organic society,” argue Comaroff and Comaroff, “on the rise is a rather different archetype: that of the state as citadel; of its territory as embattled homeland . . . against the endless threat of others who challenge its moral and corporeal integrity, enemies who take the form of aliens, migrants, terrorists, home-grown saboteurs, felons, the indigent poor” (107). In this context, politics is about containment, securing the border, rooting out evil alien in favor of the autochthonous good, fighting infection (or decontaminating). A store owner in Gunday says it explicitly; these child refugees from Bangladesh “are infecting our Calcutta.” Tony explodes in a Scarface restaurant scene: “You need people like me so you can point the finger and say that’s the bad guy.”

Before Scarface gave Brian De Palma a different profile and a new set of enemies, he was the subject of frequent, hostile attacks for his provocative anti-capitalist statements and affiliation with radical movement politics. Reading aloud from The Urban Guerrilla in his 1970 Hi, Mom! is one instance of this position. Likewise, in 1980
he comments that when he tried to talk about the revolution on talk shows, his comments were twisted into just another commercial product: “I was talking about the downfall of America. Who cares? In my experience, what happened to the revolution is that it got turned into a product, and that is the process of everything in America” (Dumas).

**The other’s woman**

Both films also cater to the aspect of xenophobia that posits the other as powerfully drawn to “our” women, with the potential for undue and disruptive ethnic mixing. In *Scarface*, it is the elegant blonde Elvira who Tony must have despite her status as mistress to his mafia boss. In *Gunday*, all the major conflicts of the film are detonated by Bikram and Bala’s rivalry over the cabaret dancer who catches both their fancies. Both these women by their choice of profession and association would seem to be outside the protection of mainstream morality, yet both figure the danger of contamination of the dominant culture more generally since they are light-skinned, conventionally attractive women. In neither film is the woman given any option other than ceding to the obsession of one of two criminal figures, and while Elvira is dragged down by a serious drug addiction that keeps her from producing Cuban American babies, the cabaret dancer is revealed as an undercover police agent, whose life, nonetheless, will clearly be bookmarked by the two refugee men’s love.

And film does infect reality in other ways. After all, Saddam Hussein named one of his shell companies for money laundering “Montana Realty” in homage to *Scarface*, reportedly his favorite film (Tucker 265).


“I like Donald Trump…” VladTV [http://www.vladtv.com](http://www.vladtv.com), posted on youtube 9 October 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhJLFLXFZsQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhJLFLXFZsQ)


Smith, Clive Stafford. “At Guantánamo Bay, the guilty go free, the innocent remain.” *Aljazeera America*. 3 June 2014.


