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Gangsta-Capital

Burn Shit

February 18, 2012

Whenever we watch MTV Cribs, we're treated to a flaunting of extravagant wealth and hyper-tacky Hollywood opulence. Proud millionaires take us on strolls through their palatial dwellings, showing us the bed, 'where the magic happens', regaling us with name-drop tales of pool parties, award ceremonies and the obligatory thanks to God, family and fans for their wealth and success. This is often coupled with some horseshit about how their sickening hyper-affluence is all the more appreciated and deserved after, 'a rough start', 'a difficult upbringing' or 'being from where I'm from', followed by delicately-shrouded self-congratulatory praise for their own upward social mobility, seeing themselves – as they do – as the quintessence of the self-made man and the American Dream.

After a walk through the corridor (with some ADHD speed-up/slow-mo/two-second-cut camera effects and Jay-Z's 'Big Pimpin' added in post-production) we're taken to admire the DVD collection and the home cinema. Favourite film? Always Scarface. *Always Scarface*. Sometimes there's even a stage-managed gathering of friends and revelers, joyously sharing in the fruits of the popular entertainment industry. This is aspirational television at its best.

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We invariably get a little speech about why that OG, Tony Montana, is held in such high esteem by any self-styled Beverly Hills gangsta/Cribs host: How they have four copies of the special collectors edition DVD and a framed poster that reads, 'Every Dog Has Its Day'. Now *here's* the kind of man they can relate to; a man who'll do all it takes to, 'provide for his family', 'make that paper', 'get to the top' etc. etc. etc. Isn't it a curious choice of No. 1 film for a multimillionaire rapper? A film about the American Dream turned American Nightmare? About turbo-capitalist accumulation taken to its logical, violent conclusion? Our MTV anchor seems to miss the point entirely, seeing Scarface as an endorsement and glamorisation of a 'money by any means' mentality, a 'Get rich or die trying' aphorism of high-end drug-dealers and the cut-throat, dog-eat-dog individualism of the sociopathic narcissist that is *Scarface*. Accumulation of money, accumulation of status, accumulation of reputation, accumulation for the sake of accumulation. This is capitalism in its purest form. The apex of free-market economics. But somewhere the intended meaning of Scarface has been lost; the narrative of capitalism reaching a barbaric crescendo, and the old A-list pseudo-leftist, Oliver Stone must feel a slight disappointment that his script has gained so much kudos with aspiring Mafiosi and wannabe thugs.

The gangster, as a captain of the black market, makes a living in a parallel economy. Illicit trade, drugs, prostitution, racketeering, extortion, theft; he owes his fortune to an underworld that works outside the confines of 'legitimate business practices', but mimics the rules and structures of licensed corporatism with its own rigid hierarchies, territorial disputes, ruthless competition and the golden rule of supply and demand. Product and service. Buy for one dollar, sell for two. Extract value, appropriate surplus, expand territory. It's the same game with the same rules, but with different merchandise and the possibility of a more aggressive service. The Hollywood gangster character isn't dealing in metaphors or similes. What the

films show is the actual *essence* of capitalism and the actual embodiment of the American Dream distortion, rather than just an anomaly, or a symptom of the failure of the system, that is the system in all its glory.

We counterintuitively admire the Gangster. Their Hollywood portrayals are charismatic and seductive. We gawp at the Corleones, Tony Soprano and Scarface. We like them because they've taken capitalism for its word. They've taken the abstract myth of the American Dream for reality and followed it through to its obvious conclusion... *This is what you've taught us, now this is what we'll do...* Remember Milton Friedman, The Godfather of the neo-liberal project, said that when it came to narcotics, we should let 'the invisible hand' work its magic? Their bosses have all the material wealth of CEOs but without the delusions of legitimacy, or the pious assurances that their existence is both necessary and desirable for 'job creation', 'satisfying a demand', 'finding a niche' or 'stimulating growth'. No pretension with the gangster. No justifications, no explanations – just profit. They embody capitalist aspiration, ambition and the entrepreneurial spirit in its rawest, most brutal form. *They are the American Dream*. And this is what all good Gangster films are about; they all improvise around the same scale, draw from the same theme – this *is* capitalism, this *is* the American Dream fallacy. How heavy-handed and frequent were *The Wire's* brilliant parallels between drug gangs, government bureaucracies and 'legitimate business'?

There's no point engaging in any debates that differentiate between good businesses and bad businesses. Why draw an arbitrary line between the so-called 'black market' and the legitimate (white?!) one because we know it's all the same filthy operation. All markets are 'black', and we reject the dichotomy and the Establishment's sanctimonious nomenclature. The politician, the businessman, the police and the priest fight a war on drugs and a war on crime while they share tables

with corporate executives at charity fundraisers, scratching each others backs and working the crowds. There's no need to persuade that the whole system is rigged against us. Society *is* a racket. Capitalism *is* gangland warfare: Competing mobsters battling for the spoils of a 200-year mob-war.

We all love it when Al's Michael cooly tells Pat Geary that they're, 'both part of the same hypocrisy, Senator.'

To be robbed with the sword by the gangster or to be robbed with the pen by the grinning regional manager? The latter character – the man offering us an honest days' wage-labour, some state-sanctioned thievery and humiliation on a mass scale – pompously tells us it's for our own good and that we should be thankful, grateful and glad. He cakes himself in respectability, bathing and believing in his own shit with the government as his bodyguard.

This isn't a vindication of the Mafia. This is just a futile vilification of organised crime, that is, just another denunciation of capital in *all* its twisted forms, from we who hold Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Al Capone and John Gotti in the same low regard.