Document A

Tom Waits, Romeo is Bleeding (song lyrics), Fifth Floor Music, Inc., 1978

Romeo is bleeding but not so as you'd notice
He's over on 18th Street as usual
Lookin' so hard against the hood of his car
And puttin' out a cigarette in his hand
And for all the Pachucos at the pumps
At Romero's paint and body
They all seein' how far they can spit
Well it was just another night
But now they're huddled in the brake lights
Of a '58 Bel Air
And listenin' to how Romeo
Killed a sheriff with his knife
And they all jump when they hear the sirens
But Romeo just laughs and says
All the racket in the world
Ain't never gonna save that copper's ass
He ain't never gonna see another summertime
For gunnin' down my brother
And leavin' him like a dog
Beneath a car without his knife
Romeo says: Hey man gimme a cigarette
And they all reach for their pack
And Frankie lights it for him
And pats him on the back
And throws a bottle at a milk truck
And as it breaks he grabs his nuts
And they all know they could be just like Romeo
If they only had the guts
Romeo is bleeding but nobody can tell
And he sings along with the radio
With a bullet in his chest
And he combs back his fenders
And they all agree it's clear
That everything is cool
Now that Romeo's here
Romeo is bleeding
And he winces now and then
He leans against the car door
And feels the blood in his shoes
And someone's cryin' at the 5 Points
in the phone booth by the store
Romeo starts his engines
Wipes the blood off the door
And he brodys through the signal
With the radio full blast
Leavin' the boys there hikin' up their chinos
And then they all try to stand like Romeo
Beneath the moon cut like a sickle
And they're talkin' now in Spanish
All about their hero

But Romeo is bleeding
As he gives the man his ticket
And he climbs to the balcony at the movies
And he'll die without a whimper
Like every hero's dream
Like an angel with a bullet
And Cagney on the screen

And Romeo is bleeding
Romeo is bleeding, hey man
Romeo is bleeding, hey man
Romeo is bleeding

Andele pues!
Hey Pachuco!
Hey Pachuco!
Dame esa pistola, hombre!
Hago la lucha!
Hijo de la chingada madre!
Ay, que pinche pancho!

Hey man!
Hago la lucha!
Vamos a dormir, hombre
Hey man!
Document B


In its initial character, the gangster film is simply one example of the movies’ constant tendency to create fixed dramatic patterns that can be repeated indefinitely with a reasonable expectation of profit. One gangster film follows another as one musical or one Western follows another. But this rigidity is not necessarily opposed to the requirements of art. There have been very successful types of art in the past which developed such specific and detailed conventions as almost to make individual examples of the type interchangeable. This is true, for example, of Elizabethan revenge tragedy and Restoration comedy.

For such a type to be successful means that its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become the accepted vehicles of a particular set of attitudes and a particular aesthetic effect. One goes to any individual example of the type with very definite expectations, and originality is to be welcomed only in the degree that it intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it. Moreover, the relationship between the conventions which go to make up such a type and the real experience of its audience or the real facts of whatever situation it pretends to describe is of only secondary importance and does not determine its aesthetic force. It is only in an ultimate sense that the type appeals to its audience’s experience of reality; much more immediately, it appeals to previous experience of the type itself; it creates its own field of reference.

Thus the importance of the gangster film, and the nature and intensity of its emotional and aesthetic impact, cannot be measured in terms of the place of the gangster himself or the importance of the problem of crime in American life. Those European moviegoers who think there is a gangster on every corner in New York are certainly deceived, but defenders of the “positive” side of American culture are equally deceived if they think it relevant to point out that most Americans have never seen a gangster. What matters is that the experience of the gangster as an experience of art is universal to Americans. There is almost nothing we understand better or react to more readily or with quicker intelligence. The Western film, though it seems never to diminish in popularity, is for most of us no more than the folklore of the past, familiar and understandable only because it has been repeated so often. The gangster film comes much closer. In ways that we do not easily or willingly define, the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects “Americanism” itself.

The gangster is the man of the city, with the city’s language and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring, carrying his life in his hands like a placard, like a club. For everyone else, there is at least the theoretical possibility of another world—in that happier American culture which the gangster denies, the city does not really exist; it is only a more crowded and more brightly lit country—but for the gangster there is only the city; he must inhabit it in order to personify it: not the real city, but that dangerous and sad city of the imagination which is so much more important, which is the modern world. And the gangster—though there are real gangsters—is also, and primarily, a creature of the imagination. The real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become.
Thrown into the crowd without background or advantages, with only those ambiguous skills which the rest of us—the real people of the real city—can only pretend to have, the gangster is required to make his way, to make his life and impose it on others. Usually, when we come upon him, he has already made his choice or the choice has already been made for him, it doesn’t matter which: we are not permitted to ask whether at some point he could have chosen to be something else than what he is.

The gangster’s activity is actually a form of rational enterprise, involving fairly definite goals and various techniques for achieving them. But this rationality is usually no more than a vague background; we know, perhaps, that the gangster sells liquor or that he operates a numbers racket; often we are not given even that much information. So his activity becomes a kind of pure criminality: he hurts people. Certainly our response to the gangster film is most consistently and most universally a response to sadism; we gain the double satisfaction of participating vicariously in the gangster’s sadism and then seeing it turned against the gangster himself.

But on another level the quality of irrational brutality and the quality of rational enterprise become one. Since we do not see the rational and routine aspects of the gangster’s behavior, the practice of brutality—the quality of unmixed criminality—becomes the totality of his career. At the same time, we are always conscious that the whole meaning of this career is a drive for success: the typical gangster film presents a steady upward progress followed by a very precipitate fall. Thus brutality itself becomes at once the means to success and the content of success—a success that is defined in its most general terms, not as accomplishment or specific gain, but simply as the unlimited possibility of aggression. (In the same way, film presentations of businessmen tend to make it appear that they achieve their success by talking on the telephone and holding conferences and that success is talking on the telephone and holding conferences.)

From this point of view, the initial contact between the film and its audience is an agreed conception of human life: that man is a being with the possibilities of success or failure. This principle, too, belongs to the city; one must emerge from the crowd or else one is nothing. On that basis the necessity of the action is established, and it progresses by inalterable paths to the point where the gangster lies dead and the principle has been modified: there is really only one possibility—failure. The final meaning of the city is anonymity and death.

In the opening scene of *Scarface*, we are shown a successful man; we know he is successful because he has just given a party of opulent proportions and because he is called Big Louie. Through some monstrous lack of caution, he permits himself to be alone for a few moments. We understand from this immediately that he is about to be killed. No convention of the gangster film is more strongly established than this: it is dangerous to be alone. And yet the very conditions of success make it impossible not to be alone, for success is always the establishment of an individual pre-eminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically arouses hatred; the successful man is an outlaw. The gangster’s whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, and he always dies because he is an individual; the final bullet thrusts him back, makes him, after all, a failure. “Mother of God,” says the dying Little Caesar, “is this the end of Rico?”—speaking of himself thus in the third person because what has been brought low is not the undifferentiated man,
but the individual with a name, the gangster, the success; even to himself he is a creature of the imagination. (T. S. Eliot has pointed out that a number of Shakespeare's tragic heroes have this trick of looking at themselves dramatically; their true identity, the thing that is destroyed when they die, is something outside themselves—not a man, but a style of life, a kind of meaning.)

At bottom, the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous, is—ultimately—impossible. The effect of the gangster film is to embody this dilemma in the person of the gangster and resolve it by his death. The dilemma is resolved because it is his death, not ours. We are safe; for the moment, we can acquiesce in our failure, we can choose to fail.
Document C

Banksy, *Flag (a.k.a. L.A. Flag)*, screenprint, 70 x 49.5 cm, 2006.