Scarface (1983)

BY ROGER EBERT / September 28, 2003

"Me, I want what's coming to me." "What's coming to you?" "The world, Chico, and everything in it."

-- Tony Montana in "Scarface"

Brian De Palma's "Scarface" rises or falls with Al Pacino's performance, which is aggressive, over the top, teeth-gnashing, arm-waving, cocaine-snorting, scenery chewing -- and brilliant, some say, while others find it unforgivably flamboyant. What were Pacino's detractors hoping for? Something internal and realistic? Low key? The Tony Montana character is above all a performance artist, a man who exists in order to gloriously be himself. From the film's opening shots, in which he is one more disposable Cuban ex-con in a Florida detention center, his whole drive is to impress his personality and will on others. He begins with no resources or weapons, except for his bravado, and fakes out more powerful men simply by seeming dangerous and resourceful. His act is a bluff, so there is no sense in underplaying it.

Montana is one of the seminal characters in modern American movies, a character who has inspired countless others. If the crime expert Jay Robert Nash is correct, and American gangsters learned how to talk and behave by studying early Hollywood crime movies, then "Scarface" may also have shaped personal styles. There is even a documentary on the new "Scarface" DVD about the movie's influence on hip-hop performers. The movie has been borrowed from so often that it's difficult to understand how original it seemed in 1983, when Latino heroes were rare, when cocaine was not a cliche, when sequences at the pitch of the final gun battle were not commonplace. Just as a generation raised on "The Sopranos" may never understand how original "The Godfather" was, so "Scarface" has been absorbed into its imitators.

It takes the name and same of the story structure from Howard Hawks' famous "Scarface" (1932), starring Paul Muni and inspired by the life of Al Capone. Both movies were assailed for their violence, both characters are obsessed with their sisters, and both die because they used their own product -- in Montana's case, cocaine; in the case of the syphilitic Capone, prostitutes. But the De Palma movie is not a remake in any conventional sense; it takes a familiar story arc, which may even contain echoes of "Macbeth," and uses it to look at a new character in a new terrain -- the Miami of the early 1980's, after Fidel...
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