

From *Things Schutzi*
Hollywood Genres

The Genius of the System

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Whenever a motion picture becomes a work of art it is unquestionably due to men. But the moving pictures have been born and bred not of men but of corporations. Corporations have set up the easels, bought the pigments, arranged the views, and hired the potential artists. Until the artists emerge, at least, the corporation is bigger than the sum of its parts. Somehow, although our poets have not yet defined it for us, a corporation lives a life and finds a fate outside the lives and fates of its human constituents.

—Fortune magazine, December 1932¹

Paradoxically, the supporters of the politique des auteurs admire the American cinema, where the restrictions of production are heavier than anywhere else. It is also true that it is the country where the greatest technical possibilities are offered to the director. But the one does not cancel out the other. I do, however, admit that freedom is greater in Hollywood than it is said to be, as long as one knows how to detect its manifestations, and I will go so far as to say that the tradition of genres is a base of operations for creative freedom. The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i.e. not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the system.*

—André Bazin²

* The "auteur policy," which held that certain film directors should be considered the "authors" of their films.



The studio system

François Truffaut, French critic turned filmmaker, recently suggested that "when a film achieves a certain success, it becomes a sociological event, and the question of its quality becomes secondary"³ (Truffaut, 1972). The success of a film may or may not depend upon its artistic quality—and this is a bone of critical contention which forever will separate elitists like John Simon from populists like Pauline Kael. But in the final analysis any film's quality, itself based upon subjective critical consensus, is incidental to the *fact* of its social and economic impact. Truffaut's observation would seem to coincide, interestingly enough, with the U.S. Supreme Court's 1915 decision that "the exhibition of motion pictures is a business pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit." Both Truffaut and the Supreme Court have recognized a fundamental tenet of commercial filmmaking: producers may not know much about art, but they know what sells and how to systematically deliver more of the same. If what the producer delivers happens to be evaluated critically as art, so much the better.

Essentially, the function of the Hollywood production companies always has been to create what Truffaut termed sociological events. In their continual efforts to reach as massive an audience as possible, early filmmakers investigated areas of potential audience appeal and, at the same time, standardized those areas whose appeal already had been verified by audience response. In the gradual development of the business of movie production, experimentation steadily gave way to standardization as a matter of fundamental economics. Between 1915 and 1930 the studios had standardized, hence economized, virtually every aspect of film production⁴ (Balio, 1976). Because of this heavy regimentation, the studios of Hollywood's "classic" era (roughly 1930 to 1960) have been referred to as *factory* production systems. The analogy is not without basis in actual industry practice: the "studio system" functioned to mass produce and mass distribute movies. This is considerably different from the "New Hollywood," where the studios function primarily as distribution companies—that is, they distribute films which, for the most part, are produced independently.

Until the '50s, the major studios (MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Brothers, Paramount, RKO) not only made motion pictures, but they also leased them through their own distribution companies to theaters which they themselves controlled. Although the "majors"—along with significant "minors" like Columbia, Universal-International, Republic, and Monogram—never controlled more than one sixth of all movie theaters in the United States, they did control most of the important "first-run" houses. In the mid-'40s, when Hollywood's audience was at its peak, the five majors owned or controlled the operations of 126 of the 163

first-run theaters in the nation's twenty-five largest cities. Not only did the audiences attending these theaters provide the bulk of revenue for the studios, but they also determined the general trends of studio production and cinematic expression. The U.S. Supreme Court dismantled this monopolistic "vertical structure" in 1948, after ten years of court battles with Paramount. This was one of the key factors, along with the advent of television and other cultural developments, in the eventual "death" of the studio system. By this time, however, Hollywood had read the pulse of its popular audience in developing an engaging and profitable means of narrative cinematic expression—the conventions of feature filmmaking were firmly established.

Thus the artist and the industrialist were cast into a necessary and highly productive relationship—each one struggling with but also depending upon the other for the success of their commercial art. While filmmakers learned to adapt their own and their audience's narrative impulse to the demands of the medium, businessmen learned to exploit the medium's capacity for widespread dissemination and consumption. While filmmakers advanced narrative traditions developed in drama and literature, producers and exhibitors advanced the commercial potential anticipated by previous forms of mass entertainment. So by the time the movie industry had standardized the feature-length narrative film by the late 'teens, the medium's mixed heritage was fairly obvious. The movies had their roots in both classic literature and bestselling pulp romances, in legitimate theater as well as vaudeville and music halls, in traditions of both "serious art" and American "popular entertainment."⁵

The contemporary mass audience, ultimately, is in good part responsible for the development of the studio system—the same audience whose leisure time and spending money became, in social historian Arnold Hauser's words, "a decisive factor in the history of art"⁶ (Hauser, 1951, p. 250). By its attraction to the cinema, this audience encouraged mass distribution of movies, as well as an adherence to filmmaking conventions. Feature filmmaking, like most mass media production, is an expensive enterprise. Those who invest their capital, from the major studio to the struggling independent, are in a curious bind: on the one hand, their product must be sufficiently inventive to attract attention and satisfy the audience's demand for novelty, and on the other hand, they must protect their initial investment by relying to some extent upon established conventions that have been proven through previous exposure and repetition.

We should note here that in film production—and in virtually any popular art form—a successful product is bound up in convention because its success inspires repetition. The built-in "feedback" circuits of the Hollywood system ensured this repetition of successful stories and techniques, because the studios' production-distribution-exhibition system enabled filmmakers to gauge their work against audience response. It is as if with each commercial effort, the studios suggested another variation on cinematic conventions, and the audience indicated whether the inventive variations would themselves be conventionalized through their repeated usage.

We should also note that this is a *reciprocal* relationship between artist and audience. The filmmaker's inventive impulse is tempered by his or her practical recognition of certain conventions and audience expectations; the audience demands creativity or variation but only within the context of a familiar narrative experience. As with any such experience it is difficult for either artist or audience to specify precisely what elements of an artistic event they are responding to. Consequently, filmic conventions have been refined through considerable variation and repetition. In this context, it is important to remember that roughly 400 to 700 movies were released *per year* during Hollywood's classic era, and that the studios depended increasingly upon established story formulas and techniques. Thus any theory of Hollywood filmmaking must take into account this essential process of production, feedback, and conventionalization.

The studio system's role in the evolution of narrative filmmaking was considerable, in terms of its national and international popularity and, more importantly, in its systematic honing of filmic expression into effective narrative conventions. The international film market fluctuated throughout the studio era due to the Depression and the war, but conservative estimates indicate that Hollywood products occupied anywhere from 70 to 90 percent of the available screen time in most European and Latin American countries. In addition, the Motion Picture Association of America's "classification of subject matter" for the year 1950 indicates that over 60 percent of all Hollywood productions that year were either Westerns (27%), crime/detective films (20%), romantic comedies (11%), or musicals (4%), and that roughly 90 percent fell into some preestablished classification—mystery/spy, war, etc.⁷ (Sterling and Haight, 1978).

The implications of these data are twofold. First, Hollywood's domination of not only national but international production and distribution suggests that its influence extended well beyond the United States. Second, and even more significantly, the Hollywood imprint generally involved not only isolated production techniques and narrative devices, but established story types or "genres" like the Western or the musical. And these genres have in turn traveled well—think of what Italy's "spaghetti Westerns," Japan's samurai films, or the French New Wave's hardboiled detective films owe to genres developed by the Hollywood studio system.

The genre film and the genre director

Simply stated, a genre film—whether a Western or a musical, a screwball comedy or a gangster film—involves familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting. During the reign of the studio system, genre films comprised the vast majority of the most popular and

profitable productions, and this trend has continued even after its death. In contrast, non-genre films tended to attract greater critical attention during the studio era—films like John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Charlie Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*, Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend*, and Jean Renoir's *Diary of a Chambermaid*.

These and other non-genre films generally traced the personal and psychological development of a "central character" or protagonist. The central characters are not familiar types whom we've seen before in movies (like the gangster, the music man, the Westerner). Rather, they are unique individuals whom we relate to less in terms of previous filmic experience than in terms of our own "real-world" experiences. The plot in non-genre films does not progress through conventional conflicts toward a predictable resolution (as with the gangster dead in the gutter, the climactic musical show). Instead it develops a *linear* plot in which the various events are linked in a chronological chain and organized by the central character's own perceptual viewpoint. The plot resolution generally occurs when the significance of the protagonist's experiences—of the "plot line"—becomes apparent to that character or to the audience, or to both.

Non-genre films represent a limited portion of Hollywood's productions, and as we might expect, many were directed by foreign-born filmmakers like Wilder and Renoir. But equally significant are those foreign directors who adapted so effectively to Hollywood's genre-based system, as shown, for example, in Fritz Lang's Westerns and crime films, Ernst Lubitsch's musicals and romantic comedies, and Douglas Sirk's and Max Ophüls' social melodramas.

Actually, the dependence of certain premiere American directors upon established film genres is equally significant and just as often overlooked. Whether we discuss Griffith's melodramas, Keaton's slapstick comedy, Ford's Westerns, or Minnelli's musicals, we are treating Hollywood directors whose reputations as artists, as creative filmmakers, are based upon their work within popular genres. As the studio era recedes into American film history, it becomes increasingly evident that most of the recognized American *auteur* directors did their most expressive and significant work within highly conventionalized forms.

The *auteur* policy

Even with this reservation, we certainly cannot dismiss the "*auteur* policy," the single most productive concept in film study over the past quarter century, although we should be aware of its limitations as well as its assets.⁸ The notion of directorial authorship—that the director is the controlling creative force and hence *potentially* the "author" of his films—is a necessary and logical critical approach. Anyone who discussed "the Lubitsch touch" in the '30s or anticipated the next "Hitchcock thriller" in the '40s was, in fact, practicing this critical approach.

Originally, the *auteur* approach was formalized by a group of critics—among them François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, and Jean-Luc Godard—writing for the

French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*. Working throughout the 1950s under editor André Bazin, the *Cahiers* critics fashioned the "auteur policy" (*la politique des auteurs*) as an alternative to content-oriented, plot-theme analyses of movies. Significantly, the *auteur* policy was developed not to treat foreign filmmakers who had a great deal of control over their productions. Rather, the policy was designed to reconsider those Hollywood directors who, despite the constraints of the studio system, were able to instill a *personal style* into their work.

In order to understand the artistry of commercial filmmaking, argued the *auteur* critics, we must complement the dominant critical concern for a film's "subject matter" with more subtle consideration of visual style, camerawork, editing, and the various other factors which make up the director's "narrative voice." Alfred Hitchcock once said that he is "less interested in stories than in the manner of telling them"⁹ (Sadoul, 1972, p. 117). *Auteur* analysis is, in effect, a formalized critical response to this particular conception of filmmaking.

As the *auteur* policy was refined and eventually introduced to English and American critics by Andrew Sarris and others, the Hollywood film industry underwent a steady reevaluation. The reputations of directors like Hitchcock and Minnelli, who had been dismissed by many American critics because they worked in such lowbrow forms, were substantially reconsidered. In addition, a number of directors, who somehow had escaped the attention of American critics (Howard Hawks is a prime example), now were recognized as major filmmakers, along with many other exceptional stylists who had directed low-budget "B" productions (Sam Fuller, Anthony Mann, and others). Even the esteem of a widely heralded director like John Ford, whose popular and critical reputation had long been established, underwent a critical reevaluation that reflected a basic reconsideration of Hollywood filmmaking. *Auteur* critics argued persuasively that Ford's genre films—war movies like *They Were Expendable* and Westerns like *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*—demonstrated a stylistic richness and thematic ambiguity that made them artistically superior to the calculated artistry and social consciousness of "serious" Ford films like *The Informer* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Experience had taught the *auteur* critics that, because of the popular and industrial nature of commercial filmmaking, the serious film artist often comes in through the back door. Too often "serious social drama" in the cinema is less serious, less genuinely social, and certainly less dramatic than the supposed "escapist entertainment" fare of a Ford Western or a Minnelli musical or a Hitchcock thriller. *Auteur* critics, in acknowledging the popular and industrial demands placed upon filmmakers, rejected the artificial distinctions between art and entertainment, and thus they signaled a substantial evolution in the way people—filmmakers, viewers, and critics alike—thought about movies.

In retrospect, it seems quite logical that *auteur* and genre criticism would dominate Hollywood film study. These two critical methods do complement and counterbalance one another in that genre criticism treats established cinematic forms, whereas *auteur* criticism celebrates certain filmmakers who worked effectively within those forms. Both approaches reflect an increased critical sensitivity to the

penchant for conventionalization in commercial filmmaking. In fact the *auteur* approach, in asserting a director's consistency of form and expression, effectively translates an *auteur* into a virtual genre unto himself, into a system of conventions which identify his work. And further, the director's consistency, like the genre's, is basic to the economic and material demands of the medium and to his popularity with a mass audience. As John Ford, who himself considered film directing "always a job of work," once suggested: "For a director there are commercial rules that it is necessary to obey. In our profession, an artistic failure is nothing; a commercial failure is a sentence. The secret is to make films that please the public and also allow the director to reveal his personality"¹⁰ (Sadoul, 1972, p. 89).

One of the essential attributes of *auteur* analysis is its structural approach: Its method is to uncover the "deep structure" (the directorial personality) in order to interpret and evaluate the "surface structure" (his or her movies). The socioeconomic imperatives of Hollywood filmmaking, however, indicate that there are a number of deep structures—industrial, political, technical, stylistic, narrative, and so on—which inform the production process. Further, when we consider a director working within an established genre we are faced with another, even "deeper," structure than that of the director's personality. The genre's preestablished cultural significance in effect determines the range and substance of any one director's expressive treatment of that genre.

That one director's treatment is more effective than another's motivates the film critic, who examines the filmmaker's manipulation and variation of formal, narrative, and thematic conventions. Generally, and especially regarding a director working within a well-developed genre, the knowledgeable critic must distinguish between the director's and the genre's contribution to a film's expressive quality. In examining Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, for example, one must be familiar with the history of the Western and with Peckinpah's career in order to determine how he has reinvented the genre's conventions.

Analyzing a genre director's work, which has grown along with a genre, represents an even more difficult critical challenge. Consider John Ford, who began directing silent, two-reel Westerns in 1917 and continued to produce the most popular and significant films within the genre until the early 1960s. And what of a director like Alfred Hitchcock, who in a sense "invented" the psychological thriller and who completely dominated that genre from the late 1920s through the 1960s? We will discuss these issues in later chapters, but for now they can stand as open questions that indicate the complexity involved in criticizing Hollywood genre films.

The studio production system itself, designed for the variations-on-a-theme approach characteristic of genre filmmaking, is at the very heart of this critical dilemma. Because of the practical budgetary problems of set design, scriptwriting, and so forth, the studios encouraged the development of film genres. Obviously, costs could be minimized by repeating successful formulas. Box-office returns alone provided sufficient criteria for continued genre production; the studios clearly need not understand *why* certain narratives appealed to viewers. They only

required assurance that the appeal indeed existed and could be exploited financially. Thus, many aspects of studio production were refined to accommodate genre filmmaking: the "stables" of writers and technical crews whose work was limited to certain types of films; the studio sets and sound stages designed for specific genres; even the "star system," which capitalized upon the familiar, easily categorized qualities of individual performers. (Try to imagine, for instance, a passionate kiss between John Wayne and Ginger Rogers. It just doesn't work, essentially because of the close connections between a star's screen persona and his or her status as a generic convention.)

Genre and narrative conventions

As this example indicates, any genre's *narrative context* imbues its conventions with meaning. This meaning in turn determines their use in individual films. In general, the commercial cinema is identifiable by formal and narrative elements common to virtually all its products: the Hollywood movie is a story of a certain length focusing upon a protagonist (a hero, a central character); and it involves certain standards of production, a style of ("invisible") editing, the use of musical score, and so on. The genre film, however, is identified not only by its use of these general filmic devices to create an imaginary world; it is also significant that this world is predetermined and essentially intact. The narrative components of a non-genre film—the characters, setting, plot, techniques, etc.—assume their significance as they are integrated into the individual film itself. In a genre film, however, these components have prior significance as elements of some generic formula, and the viewer's negotiation of a genre film thus involves weighing the film's variations against the genre's preordained, value-laden narrative system.

An example of this process may be seen in a conventional gunfight in a Western film. Everything—from the characters' dress, demeanor, and weapons to their standing in the dirt street of an American frontier community—assumes a significance beyond the film's immediate narrative concerns. This significance is based on the viewer's familiarity with the "world" of the genre itself rather than on his or her own world. As Robert Warshaw observed in his analysis of the gangster genre, "it is only in the ultimate sense that the type appeals to the audience's experience of reality; much more immediately, it appeals to the previous experience of the type itself; it creates its own field of reference"¹¹ (Warshaw, 1962, p. 130). It is not their mere repetition which endows generic elements with a prior significance, but their repetition within a conventionalized formal, narrative, and thematic context. If it is initially a popular success, a film story is reworked in later movies and repeated until it reaches its equilibrium profile—until it becomes a spatial, sequential, and thematic pattern of familiar actions and relationships. Such a repetition is generated by the interaction of the studios and the mass audience, and it will be

sustained so long as it satisfies the needs and expectations of the audience and remains financially viable for the studios.

Genre as a social force

Any viewer's familiarity with a genre is the result of a *cumulative process*, of course. The first viewing of a Western or musical actually might be more difficult and demanding than the viewing of a non-genre film, due to the peculiar logic and narrative conventions of the genre. With repeated viewings, however, the genre's narrative pattern comes into focus and the viewer's *expectations* take shape. And when we consider that the generic pattern involves not only narrative elements (character, plot, setting) but thematic issues as well, the genre's *socializing* influence becomes apparent.

Moreover, in examining film genres, these popular narratives whose plots, characters, and themes are refined through usage in a mass medium, we are considering a form of artistic expression which involves the audience more directly than any traditional art form had ever done before. There are earlier forms that anticipated this development, especially performative arts such as Greek or Renaissance drama. However, not until the invention of the printing press and then the popularization of dime novels, pulp literature, and Beadle books (named for their publisher, Erastus Beadle) did the social and economic implications of popular narrative formulas begin to take shape. Henry Nash Smith considered these implications in his evocative study of America's "Western myth," entitled *The Virgin Land*. Smith is especially interested in the creative posture assumed by individual pulp writers who produced and reproduced popular Western tales for an eager, impressionable audience. Smith's fundamental thesis is that these authors participated, with their publishers and audience, in the creative celebration of the values and ideals associated with westward expansion, thereby engendering and sustaining the Western myth. He contends that the pulp writer is not pandering to his market by lowering himself to the level of the mass audience, but rather that he or she is cooperating with it in formulating and reinforcing collective values and ideals. "Fiction produced under these circumstances virtually takes on the character of automatic writing," Smith suggests. "Such work tends to become an objectified mass dream, like the moving pictures, soap operas, or comic books that are the present-day equivalents of the Beadle stories. The individual writer abandons his own personality and identifies himself with his readers"¹² (Smith, 1950, p. 91).

There have, of course, been pulp novelists like James Fenimore Cooper and Zane Grey, just as there have been genre directors like John Ford and Sam Peckinpah, who used exceptional formal and expressive artistry in Western storytelling and whose writing seems anything but automatic. In underscoring the relationship of pulp Western novels to a mass audience and hence to American folklore, how-

ever, Smith's study adds an important dimension to our discussion. He suggests that these novels were written not only for the mass audience, but by them as well. Produced by depersonalized representatives of the collective, anonymous public and functioning to celebrate basic beliefs and values, their formulas might be regarded not only as popular or even elite art but also as *cultural ritual*—as a form of collective expression seemingly obsolete in an age of mass technology and a genuinely "silent majority."

This view of the nature and function of popular narrative artistry has been extended, predictably enough, into the realm of commercial filmmaking, where many of the same principles apply. In fact, André Bazin's "La politique des auteurs" essay was conceived as a warning to *auteur* critics that they look at the many other aspects of filmmaking besides directing that contribute to the authorship of any individual movie. Bazin suggests:

What makes Hollywood so much better than anything else in the world is not only the quality of certain directors, but also the vitality and, in a certain sense, the excellence of a tradition. Hollywood's superiority is only incidentally technical; it lies much more in what one might call the American cinematic genius, something which should be analyzed, then defined, by a sociological approach to its production. The American cinema has been able, in an extraordinarily competent way, to show American society just as it wanted to see itself.¹³ (1968, pp. 142-143)

The basis for this viewpoint is the level of *active but indirect audience participation* in the formulation of any popular commercial form. And that participation is itself a function of the studio system's repeating and handing down, with slight variation, those stories that the audience has isolated through its collective response.

It should be mentioned that because of the narrow range of distribution and the limited audience feedback involved in the nineteenth century, the pulp author's degree of cooperation with his or her audience was quite different from that of the Hollywood filmmaker.* Furthermore, the dime pulp or bestselling novel is the product of an individual consciousness and is communicated through a personal medium of expression. The Hollywood genre film, conversely, is both produced and consumed collectively. We are dealing here with the studio system over a period of sustained and widespread popular success, from the early years of the sound film through the gradual relinquishing, after some four decades, of the studios and their production system to the commercial television industry. These are the years before American filmmakers began to appeal, as they have tended to more recently, to a specialized market or age group. The Hollywood studios and the genre film had their heyday simultaneously—and this is no coincidence—when films were seen as mass entertainment by a general public who regularly (one might even say religiously) went "to the movies" in numbers peaking in the mid- to late-40's at 90 million viewers per week.

* Smith mentions this fact.

Before examining genre filmmaking as a form of collective cultural expression, however, we should acknowledge that certain commercial and technological aspects of the cinema qualify this approach. Dwight MacDonald in his "Theory of Mass Culture" posits "the essential quality of Mass, as against High or Folk, Culture: it is manufactured for mass consumption by technicians employed by the ruling class and is not an expression of the individual artist or the common people themselves"¹⁴ (MacDonald, in Rosenberg and White, 1964). From this viewpoint, even Shakespeare is more a technician than an individual artist. Nevertheless, MacDonald's observations do encourage us to avoid any simplistic association of commercial filmmaking with either elite or folk expression.

Just as we must temper our view of the cinematic *auteur* by acknowledging the depersonalizing production system in which he or she works, so too must we temper our view of the genre film as a kind of secular, contemporary cultural ritual. The cinema's commercial feedback system rarely affords the audience any direct or immediate creative input. Rather it allows it to affect future variations by voicing collective approval or disapproval of a current film. Such a response has a cumulative effect, first isolating and then progressively refining a film story into a familiar narrative pattern. As Robert Warshaw observes in his study of the gangster genre: "For such a type to be successful means that its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become 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 accepted only in the degree that it intensified the expected experience without fundamentally altering it"¹⁵ (Warshaw, 1962, p. 130).

In a limited sense, any genre film is the original creation of an individual writer or director, but the nature and range of that originality are determined by the conventions and expectations involved in the genre filmmaking process. Thus, any critical analysis of that originality must be based firmly on an understanding of both the genre and the production system in which any individual genre film is generated. Ultimately, we need to complement elitist critical attitudes with a broader, more culturally and industrially responsive approach. In a certain sense, this approach could be dismissed as simply a formulation of a populist "low art" bias to offset elitist "high art" biases in film study. I hope, however, that the value of the ideas developed in this book will be realized in their application, and not in the context of critical debate. Whatever one's objections to *auteurism*, the fact remains that close analysis of certain directors' movies, along with detailed study of their directing methods, does validate the *auteur* policy as something more than merely a critical bias—it does reveal some fundamental truth about filmmaking and film art. So too should a genre approach, when applied sensibly and with care, reveal some essential truths about commercial filmmaking that will enrich our understanding and appreciation of cinematic art.

Film Genres 2

and the Genre Film

I really want to go back to film school. . . . Or maybe I'll get my masters in anthropology. That's what movies are about anyway. Cultural imprints.

—Writer-director George Lucas, discussing *Star Wars*¹

Thus far, we have been considering those qualities of Hollywood filmmaking which determine its status as a commercial art form. Our consideration of those qualities led us to the hypothesis that popular cinematic story formulas—or film genres—express the social and aesthetic sensibilities not only of Hollywood filmmakers but of the mass audience as well.

In many ways, this view of contemporary commercial art resists the elitist critical assumption that the artwork carries an asocial, terminal value—that the artwork is an end in itself, somehow disengaged from the mundane trappings of its initial sociocultural environment. The academic or scholarly context in which we generally are exposed to the high arts tends to support this bias, simply because we do study traditional artworks with little concern for the social imperatives involved in their creation. We presume that aesthetic objects do in fact “transcend” the culture in which they were produced, primarily because of their significance for us as members of a modern technocratic society. Our appreciation of Homer’s epic poetry, Shakespeare’s drama, or Dickens’ novels is only marginally related, if at all, to the traditions of oral history, of the Elizabethan popular theater, or of the serialized pulp romances in which those works participated. The historical “gatekeeping”

function of aesthetic tradition has singled out great works of art for posterity, and thus we have been less sensitive to their sociological qualities than to their formal and aesthetic qualities. We should avoid, however, assuming that we can study and evaluate the products of our own culture from a similar critical and historical distance.

Film critic Robin Wood, in an essay entitled “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” expresses misgivings about these critical oversights in genre study:

The work that has been done so far on genres has tended to take the various genres as “given” and discrete, and seeks to explicate them, define them in terms of motifs, etc.; what we need to ask, if genre theory is ever to be productive, is less *What?* than *Why?* We are so used to the genres that the peculiarity of the phenomenon itself has been too little noted.² (Wood, 1977, p. 47)

As Wood suggests, genre study has tended to disengage the genre from the conditions of its production and to treat it as an isolated, autonomous system of conventions. As a result, genre study tends to give only marginal attention to the role of the audience and the production system in formulating conventions and participating in their evolutionary development.

Genre study may be more “productive” if we complement the narrow critical focus of traditional genre analysis with a broader sociocultural perspective. Thus, we may consider a genre film not only as some filmmaker’s artistic expression, but further as the cooperation between artists and audience in celebrating their collective values and ideals. In fact, many qualities traditionally viewed as artistic shortcomings—the psychologically static hero, for instance, or the predictability of the plot—assume a significantly different value when examined as components of a genre’s ritualistic narrative system. If indeed we are to explain the *why* of Hollywood genres, we must look to their shared social function and to their formal conventions. Once we examine these shared features, we then can address a particular genre and its films.

Genre as system

Perhaps we should begin by noting a basic distinction between film genre study and its predecessor, literary genre study. In the study of literature, generic categories have been virtually imposed on works of fiction (or poetry or drama), representing the efforts of critics or historians to organize the subject matter according to their own subjective criteria. Literary analysts thus have tended to treat their subject in terms that may be irrelevant to those who produce and consume them. Not so with the commercial cinema, however. Because of the nature of film pro-

duction and consumption, identifying film genres scarcely involves the subjective, interpretive effort that it does in literature. Film genres are not organized or discovered by analysts but are the result of the material conditions of commercial filmmaking itself, whereby popular stories are varied and repeated as long as they satisfy audience demand and turn a profit for the studios.

The significance of this distinction is twofold. First, it indicates that a film genre is a "privileged" cinematic story form—that is, only a limited number of film stories have been refined into formulas because of their unique social and/or aesthetic qualities. Second, as the product of audience and studio interaction, a film genre gradually impresses itself upon the culture until it becomes a familiar, meaningful system that can be named as such. Viewers, filmmakers, and critics know what it means to call this film a Western or that one a musical, and this knowledge is based on interaction with the medium itself—it is not the result of some arbitrary critical or historical organization.

To identify a popular cinematic story formula, then, is to recognize its status as a coherent, value-laden narrative system. Its significance is immediately evident to those who produce and consume it. Through repeated exposure to individual genre films we come to recognize certain *types* of characters, locales, and events. In effect, we come to understand the system and its significance. We steadily accumulate a kind of narrative-cinematic *gestalt* or "mind set" that is a structured mental image of the genre's typical activities and attitudes. Thus all of our experiences with Western films give us an immediate notion, a complete impression, of a certain type of behavioral and attitudinal system.

Because it is essentially a narrative system, a film genre can be examined in terms of its fundamental structural components: plot, character, setting, thematics, style, and so on. We should be careful, though, to maintain a distinction between the *film genre* and the *genre film*. Whereas the genre exists as a sort of tacit "contract" between filmmakers and audience, the genre film is an actual event that honors such a contract. To discuss the Western genre is to address neither a single Western film nor even all Westerns, but rather that system of conventions which identifies Western films as such.

There is a sense, then, in which a film genre is both a *static* and a *dynamic* system. On the one hand, it is a familiar formula of interrelated narrative and cinematic components that serves to continually reexamine some basic cultural conflict: one could argue, for example, that all Westerns confront the same fundamental issues (the taming of the frontier, the celebration of the hero's rugged individualism, the hero's conflicts with the frontier community, etc.) in elaborating America's foundation ritual and that slight formal variations do not alter those static thematic characteristics. On the other hand, changes in cultural attitudes, new influential genre films, the economics of the industry, and so forth, continually refine any film genre. As such, its nature is continually evolving. For example, the evolution of Western heroes from agents of law and order to renegade outlaws or professional killers reflects a genuine change in the genre. One could even argue that the term "Western" means something different today from what it did two or three decades ago.



We are most aware of a generic "contract" when it is violated. The violation may involve casting an established performer "against type," as when musical star Dick Powell portrayed private eye Philip Marlowe in *Murder My Sweet* (even the title was changed from *Farewell My Lovely* so that audiences wouldn't mistake the film for a musical). Or the violation may simply be a matter of a vehicle (as a car on a Western set) from one genre turning up on the set of another. (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research); (Private Collection)

Thus genre experience, like all human experience, is organized according to certain fundamental perceptual processes. As we repeatedly undergo the same type of experience we develop expectations which, as they are continually reinforced, tend to harden into "rules." The clearest example of this process in any culture is in its games. A game is a system of immutable rules (three strikes in baseball) and components determining the nature of play. Yet no two games in a sport are alike, and a theoretically infinite number of variations can be played within the "arena" that the rules provide. Similarly, certain styles of traditional or popular music involve a variations-on-a-theme approach both within and among individual pieces. In folk and blues traditions, for example, most compositions are generated from a very few chord progressions.

The analogies between film genres and other cultural systems are virtually endless. What such examples seem to highlight is the dual nature of any "species" (or "genus," the root for the word *genre*), that is, it can be identified either by its rules, components, and function (by its static deep structure) or conversely by the individual members which comprise the species (by its dynamic surface structure).

Think of a Western movie, or a musical, or a gangster film. Probably you won't think of any individual Western or musical or gangster film, but rather of a vaguely defined amalgam of actions and attitudes, of characters and locales. For as one sees more genre films, one tends to negotiate the genre less by its individual films than by its deep structure, those rules and conventions which render this film a Western and that film a musical. This distinction between deep and surface structures—between a genre and its films—provides the conceptual basis for any genre study. Of all the analogies we might use to better understand this distinction, the most illuminating involves the "deepest" of human structures: language.



The language analogy

What is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas.

—Ferdinand de Saussure³

Among other things, the commercial cinema is a communication system—it structures and delivers meaning. Throughout its history, evocative phrases like "the grammar of film" and "the cinematic language system" have suggested that filmic communication is comparable to verbal communication, although the extent and usefulness of that comparison are limited. Most recently, the film-language analogy has undergone renewed interest within the growing field of *semiology* (or *semiotics*), a science that proposes to study human interaction as a vast network of social and interpersonal communication systems. Semiology is itself the brain

child of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who suggested that language provides the "master pattern" for the study of cultural signification. According to de Saussure, verbal language is the one sign system shared by all cultures; its basic structure informs every system of social communication.

That language study and its jargon are a metaphor for genre study should be obvious. Through the "circuit of exchange" involving box-office "feedback," the studios and the mass audience hold a virtual "conversation" whereby they gradually refine the "grammar" of cinematic "discourse." Thus a genre can be studied, like a language, as a formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated, consciously or otherwise, through cultural consensus. Our shared knowledge of the rules of any film genre enables us to understand and evaluate individual genre films, just as our shared knowledge of English grammar enables me to write this sentence and you to interpret it. The distinction between *grammar* and *usage*, closely akin to that between deep structure and surface structure, originates in de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* in verbal language. For de Saussure, the speaker's and listener's shared knowledge of the grammatical rules that make up the language system (*la langue*) enables them to develop and understand a virtually unlimited range of individual utterances (*la parole*). American linguist Noam Chomsky has described this distinction in terms of *competency* and *performance*; he suggests that we should differentiate between our inherent capacity to speak and interpret on the one hand and our actually doing so on the other⁴ (Chomsky, 1964).

If we extend these ideas into genre study, we might think of the *film genre* as a specific grammar or system of rules of expression and construction and the individual genre film as a manifestation of these rules. Of course, film differs from language in that our verbal competence is relatively consistent from speaker to speaker, whereas our generic competence varies widely. If each of us had the same exposure to Hollywood's thousands of genre films, a critical theory would probably be easier to construct. But obviously not everyone has a minimal understanding of even the most popular and widespread genres, let alone the obscure structural delights of such "subgenres" as the beach-blanket movies of the '60s or the car-chase movies of the '70s.

Moreover, although verbal language systems are essentially neutral and meaningless, film genres are not. As a system, English grammar is not meaningful either historically or in socially specific terms. It is manipulated by a speaker to *make* meaning. A film genre, conversely, has come into being precisely because of its cultural significance as a meaningful narrative system. Whereas a verbal statement represents a speaker's organization of neutral components into a meaningful pattern, a genre film represents an effort to reorganize a familiar, meaningful system in an original way.

Another interesting aspect of the language analogy concerns the tension between grammar and usage. Grammar in language is absolute and static, essentially unchanged by the range and abuses of everyday usage. In the cinema, however, individual genre films seem to have the capacity to affect the genre—an utterance has the potential to change the grammar that governs it. Even in film technology

(the impact of widescreen on the Western, for example, or of technicolor on the musical), we can see that individual usage influences both viewers and other filmmakers, and hence encourages them in effect to renegotiate the generic contract. Whether or not some static nuclear deep structure exists, which defines the genre and somehow eludes the effects of time and variation, we cannot overlook the gradual changes (as revealed in individual genre films) in form and substance on the genre's surface. Genres evolve, and they tend to evolve quite rapidly due to the demands of the commercial popular media. But whether this evolution represents mere cosmetic changes in the surface structure (equivalent to fashionable clichés or idioms in verbal language) or whether it reflects substantial changes in the deep structure (the generic system itself) will remain, at least for now, an open question.

Perhaps the ultimate value of the film-language analogy is as a sort of method or methodological model. That is, the similarities between a language and a genre as communication systems should encourage the analyst to approach individual genre films in much the same way that the linguist approaches individual utterances. Like all signifying systems, languages and genres exist essentially within the minds of their users: No single study of English grammar or of a film genre could possibly describe the system completely. In this sense, studying film genre is not unlike going to school as competent six-year-old speakers of English and then being taught English grammar. In each case, we study the system that is the basis for our existing competence.

In all of this, we should not lose sight of the critical, evaluative factor that motivates the genre critic, while it is virtually irrelevant to the linguist. The linguist's concern is the process whereby we verbally communicate meaning; any concern for the *quality* of that communication falls under the domain of rhetoric. As such, the film genre critic must be both linguist and "rhetor"—that is, he or she is concerned with both the process and the quality of any generic communication. The critic develops competence, a familiarity with the system, by watching and interpreting movies and noting similarities. Ultimately, he or she is concerned with recognizing, appreciating, and articulating *differences* among these movies. As critics, we understand genre films because of their similarity with other films, but we appreciate them because of their difference. Therefore an outline of a basic grammar of genre filmmaking should precede any critical analysis of individual films within a genre.



Toward a grammar of film genre

At this stage, we are somewhere "between" the point of departure (watching movies) and the point of arrival (appreciating and articulating difference—i.e., being critical). We can appreciate difference only when we begin to examine films

systematically, when we consider the systems whereby an individual film "makes meaning." Thus far, we have considered the commercial and formal systems involved in Hollywood filmmaking from a rather superficial perspective. In narrowing our focus to examine the workings of Hollywood genres, we will begin to understand how commercial and formal systems are realized in actual production. Genre production itself should be addressed on three distinct levels of inquiry: those characteristics shared by virtually all genre films (and thus by all genres), those characteristics shared by all the films within any individual genre, and those characteristics that set one genre film off from all other films.

Our ultimate goal is to discern a genre film's quality, its social and aesthetic value. To do this, we will attempt to see its relation to the various systems that inform it. For example, in examining a film like *The Searchers*, it is not enough simply to isolate the formal characteristics that identify it as belonging to a particular genre. Nor is it enough to isolate the elements that make it superior. Initially we have to discern those traits that make the film—and indeed the Western form itself—generic. To repeat Wood's observation: we are so accustomed to dealing with genres, with familiar filmic narrative types, that we tend to isolate these types from one another, thus overlooking many of their shared social and aesthetic features. Before considering the Western, gangster, musical, and other Hollywood genres as individual narrative systems, then, we will discuss the qualities that identify these forms as genres.

A genre film, like virtually any story, can be examined in terms of its fundamental narrative components: plot, setting, and character. These components have a privileged status for the popular audience, due to their existence within a familiar formula that addresses and reaffirms the audience's values and attitudes. Thus the genre film's narrative components assume a preordained thematic significance that is quite different from non-generic narratives. Each genre film incorporates a specific cultural context—what Warshow termed its "field of reference"—in the guise of a familiar *social community*. This generic context is more than the physical setting, which some genre critics have argued defines the genre as such. The American frontier or the urban underworld is more than a physical locale which identifies the Western or the gangster film; it is a cultural milieu where inherent thematic conflicts are animated, intensified, and resolved by familiar characters and patterns of action. Although all drama establishes a community that is disturbed by conflict, in the genre film both the community and the conflict have been conventionalized. Ultimately, our familiarity with any genre seems to depend less on recognizing a specific setting than on recognizing certain dramatic conflicts that we associate with specific patterns of action and character relationships. There are some genres, in fact, like the musical and the screwball comedy, that we identify primarily through conventions of action and attitude, and whose settings vary widely from one film to the next.

From this observation emerges a preliminary working hypothesis: the determining, identifying feature of a film genre is its cultural context, its community of interrelated character types whose attitudes, values, and actions flesh out dramatic

conflicts inherent within that community. The generic community is less a specific place (although it may be, as with the Western and gangster genres) than a network of characters, actions, values, and attitudes. Each genre's status as a distinct cultural community is enhanced by Hollywood's studio production system, in that each generic context is orchestrated by specialized groups of directors, writers, producers, performers, sets, studio lots, and even studios themselves. (Consider Warner Brothers' heavy production of gangster films in the early '30s and MGM's musicals in the late '40s.)

A genre, then, represents a *range of expression* for filmmakers and a *range of experience* for viewers. Both filmmakers and viewers are sensitive to a genre's range of expression because of previous experiences with the genre that have coalesced into a system of value-laden narrative conventions. It is this system of conventions—familiar characters performing familiar actions which celebrate familiar values—that represents the genre's narrative context, its meaningful cultural community.

Iconography: Imagery and meaning

The various generic communities—from the Old West to the urban underworld to outer space—provide both a visual arena in which the drama unfolds and also an intrinsically significant realm in which specific actions and values are celebrated. In addressing the inherent meaning or intrinsic significance of objects and characters within any generic community, we are considering that genre's *iconography*. Iconography involves the process of *narrative and visual coding* that results from the repetition of a popular film story. A white hat in a Western or a top hat in a musical, for instance, is significant because it has come to serve a specific symbolic function within the narrative system.

This coding process occurs in all movies, since the nature of filmic storytelling is to assign meaning to "bare images" as the story develops. In the final sequence of *Citizen Kane*, for example, the symbolic reverberations of the burning sled and the "No Trespassing" sign result from the cumulative effects of the film's narrative process. These effects in *Kane* accumulate within that single film, though, and had no significance prior to our viewing of that film.

A *generic icon*, in contrast, assumes significance not only through its usage within individual genre films but also as that usage relates to the generic system itself. The Westerner's white horse and hat identify a character before he speaks or acts because of our previous experiences with men who wear white hats and ride white horses. The more interesting and engaging genre films, of course, do more than merely deliver the codes intact—as did many of those "B" Westerns of the '30s that almost literally "all look alike"—but instead manipulate the codes to enhance their thematic effect.

Consider the dress code of the principal characters in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962). In this film, Jimmy Stewart portrays Ransom Stoddard,



Most genre films provide us with iconographic cues even before the opening credit sequences have finished, as shown here with *The Band Wagon*. (Private Collection)

an Eastern-bred lawyer bent upon civilizing the Western community of Shinbone. Early in the film, Stoddard takes work as a dishwasher (Shinbone then had little need for lawyers) and continually wears a white apron—even during his climactic gunfight with Liberty Valance. Lee Marvin, portraying the archetypal Western antagonist, Liberty Valance, hired by local cattlemen to prevent statehood and the fencing in of their rangeland, wears black leather and carries a black, silver-knobbed whip. Mediating these two opposing figures is Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), a charismatic local rancher who sympathizes with the cause of statehood. Doniphon eventually murders Valance to save Stoddard, thus enabling Stoddard to gain political prominence and to assume the role of community leader. Throughout the film, Doniphon is dressed in various combinations of black and white. His clothing reflects his ambiguous role as murderous purveyor of eventual social order. Of course, director Ford develops Doniphon's tragic role by manipulating a good deal more than the iconography of Western dress, but this example suggests how filmmakers use a genre's established visual codes to create complex narrative and thematic situations.

A genre's iconography involves not only the visual coding of the narrative, but indicates *thematic value* as well (white civilization good versus black anarchy evil, with black-and-white as thematically ambiguous). We distinguish between char-

acters who wear white and characters who wear black in Westerns, or those who sing and dance and those who do not in musicals, and these distinctions reflect the thematic conflicts inherent within these communities. Because visual coding involves narrative and social values, it also extends to certain nonvisual aspects of genre filmmaking. Such elements as dialogue, music, and even casting may become key components of a genre's iconography.

Think, for example, of the appropriateness of the casting in the film just described (Stewart as naive idealist, Marvin as maniacal anarchist, Wayne as stoic middleman), or think of the way certain movie stars are generally associated with specific genres. Katharine Hepburn, Fred Astaire, Joan Crawford, and Humphrey Bogart have become significant components of a genre's meaning-making system. When we think of Bogart as the typical hardboiled detective or of Astaire as the ultimate, spontaneous, self-assured music man, we are thinking not of the particular human being or of any single screen role but rather of a screen *persona*—i.e., an attitudinal posture that effectively transcends its role in any individual film.

A genre's iconography reflects the value system that defines its particular cultural community and informs the objects, events, and character types composing it. Each genre's implicit system of values and beliefs—its *ideology* or *world view*—determines its cast of characters, its problems (dramatic conflicts), and the solutions to those problems. In fact, we might define film genres, particularly at the earlier stages of their development, as social problem-solving operations: They repeatedly confront the ideological conflicts (opposing value systems) within a certain cultural community, suggesting various solutions through the actions of the main characters. Thus, each genre's problem-solving function affects its distinct formal and conceptual identity.

Character and setting: Communities in conflict

In discussing the grammar (or system of conventions) of any Hollywood film genre, it is important to note that the *material economy*, which motivated the studios to refine story formulas, translates into *narrative economy* for filmmakers and viewers. Each genre incorporates a sort of narrative shorthand whereby significant dramatic conflicts can intensify and then be resolved through established patterns of action and by familiar character types. These dramatic conflicts are themselves the identifying feature of any genre; they represent the transformation of some social, historical, or even geographical (as in the Western) aspect of American culture into one locus of events and characters.

Although the dramatic conflicts are basic to the generic "community," we cannot identify that community solely by its physical setting. If film genres were identified by setting alone, then we would have to deal with an "urban" genre that includes such disparate forms as gangster films, backstage musicals, and detective films. Because the setting provides an *arena* for conflicts, which are themselves de-

termined by the actions and attitudes of the *participants*, we must look to the generic character types and the conflicts they generate in identifying any genre. And we might consider a generic community and its characters in relation to the system of values which both define the problem and eventually are appealed to in solving it.

What emerges as a social problem (or dramatic conflict) in one genre is not necessarily a problem in another. Law and order is a problem in the gangster and detective genres, but not in the musical. Conversely, courtship and marriage are problems in the musical but not in the gangster and detective genres. Individualism is celebrated in the detective genre (through the hero's occupation and world view) and in the gangster film (through the hero's career and eventual death), while the principal characters in the musical compromise their individuality in their eventual romantic embrace and thus demonstrate their willingness to be integrated into the social community. In each of these genres, the characters' identities and narrative roles (or "functions") are determined by their relationship with the community and its value structure. As such, the generic character is psycholog-



Consider the complex of imagery at work in each of these stills. The dress, demeanor, tools, setting, and of course the performers themselves all provide specific generic information to the viewer. (Private Collection); (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research)

ically static—he or she is the physical embodiment of an attitude, a style, a world view, of a predetermined and essentially unchanging cultural posture. Cowboy or Indian, gangster or cop, guy or doll, the generic character is identified by his or her function and status within the community.

The static vision of the generic hero—indeed of the entire constellation of familiar character types—helps to define the community and to animate its cultural conflicts. For example, the Western hero, regardless of his social or legal standing, is necessarily an agent of civilization in the savage frontier. He represents both the social order and the threatening savagery that typify the Western milieu. Thus he animates the inherent dynamic qualities of the community, providing a dramatic vehicle through which the audience can confront generic conflicts.

This approach also enables us to distinguish between such seemingly similar “urban crime” formulas as the gangster and detective genres. Usually, both genres are set in a contemporary urban milieu and address conflicts principally between social order and anarchy and between individual morality and the common good. But because of the characteristic attitudes and values of the genre’s principal characters, these conflicts assume a different status in each genre and are resolved accordingly. The detective, like the Westerner, represents the man-in-the-middle, mediating the forces of order and anarchy, yet somehow remaining separate from each. He has opted to construct his own value system and behavioral code, which happens (often, almost accidentally) to coincide with the forces of social order. But the detective’s predictable return to his office retreat at film’s end and his refusal to assimilate the values and lifestyle of the very society he serves ultimately reaffirm his—and the genre’s—ambiguous social stance. The gangster film, conversely, displays little thematic ambiguity. The gangster has aligned himself with the forces of crime and social disorder, so both his societal role and his conflict with the community welfare demand his eventual destruction.

All film genres treat some form of threat—violent or otherwise—to the social order. However, it is the attitudes of the principal characters and the resolutions precipitated by their actions which finally distinguish the various genres from one another. Nevertheless, there is a vital distinction between kinds of generic settings and conflicts. Certain genres (Western, detective, gangster, war, et al.) have conflicts that, indigenous to the environment, reflect the physical and ideological struggle for its control. These conflicts are animated and resolved either by an individual male hero or by a collective (war, science fiction, cavalry, certain recent Westerns). Other genres have conflicts that are not indigenous to the locale but are the result of the conflict between the values, attitudes, and actions of its principal characters and the “civilized” setting they inhabit. Conflicts in these genres (musical, screwball comedy, family melodrama) generally are animated by a “doubled” hero—usually a romantic couple whose courtship is complicated and eventually ideologically resolved. A musical’s setting may be a South Pacific island or the backstage of a Broadway theater, but we relate to the film immediately by its treatment of certain sexual and occupational conflicts and also by our familiarity with the type of characters played by its “stars.”

Thus, it is *not* the musical numbers themselves which identify these films as musicals. Many Westerns and gangster films, for example, contain musical numbers and still aren’t confused with musicals (Westerns like *Dodge City* and *Rio Bravo*, for instance, or gangster films like *The Roaring Twenties* and *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*). The frontier saloon and the gangster’s speakeasy may be conventional locales within their respective communities, but their entertainment function clearly is peripheral to the central issue. However, in “musical Westerns” like *Annie Get Your Gun*, *The Harvey Girls*, and *Oklahoma!*, the nature and resolution of the dramatic conflicts as well as the characterization clearly are expressed via the musical formula. In *The Harvey Girls*, for instance, the narrative centers around the exploits of several dozen women—including Judy Garland and Cyd Charisse, which should provide us with a generic cue—who migrate West to work in a restaurant. Certain Western conventions are nodded to initially: the girls are told aboard the train headed West that “You’re bringing civilization. . . . You girls are bringing order to the West”; later, there is a comic brawl between these “Harvey Girls” and the local saloon girls. But the Western genre’s fundamental traits (the individual male hero responding to the threat of savagery and physical violence within an ideologically unstable milieu) are not basic to the film. Once the characters and conflicts are established, the setting might as well be Paris or New York City or even Oz.

As I hope these examples indicate, the various Hollywood genres manipulate character and social setting quite differently in developing dramatic conflicts. We might consider a broad distinction between genres of *determinate space* and those of *indeterminate space*, between genres of an ideologically contested setting and an ideologically stable setting. In a genre of determinate space (Western, gangster, detective, et al.), we have a symbolic arena of action. It represents a cultural realm in which fundamental values are in a state of sustained conflict. In these genres, then, the contest itself and its necessary arena are “determinate”—a specific social conflict is violently enacted within a familiar locale according to a prescribed system of rules and behavioral codes.

The iconographic arena in determinate genres is entered by an individual or collective hero, at the outset, who acts upon it, and finally leaves. This entrance-exit motif recurs most in genres characterized by an individual hero: for example, the Westerner enters a frontier community, eliminates (or perhaps causes) a threat to its survival, and eventually rides “into the sunset”; the detective takes the case, investigates it, and returns to his office; the gangster, introduced to urban crime, rises to power, and finally is killed or jailed. In these genres, the individual hero incorporates a rigid, essentially static attitude in dealing with his very dynamic, contested world.

In contrast, genres of indeterminate space generally involve a doubled (and thus dynamic) hero in the guise of a romantic couple who inhabit a “civilized” setting, as in the musical, screwball comedy, and social melodrama. The physical and ideological “contest” which determines the arena of action in the Western, gangster, and detective genres is not an issue here. Instead, genres of indeterminate



Similarity and difference: the distinctive narrative contexts of the screwball comedy (*It Happened One Night*, above) and the gangster film (*The Public Enemy*, below) clearly overwhelm the apparent similarities between these two scenes. (Culver Pictures); (Culver Pictures)

space incorporate a civilized, ideologically stable milieu, which depends less upon a heavily coded place than on a highly conventionalized value system. Here conflicts derive not from a struggle over control of the environment, but rather from the struggle of the principal characters to bring their own views in line either with one another's or, more often, in line with that of the larger community.

Unlike genres of determinate space, these genres rely upon a progression from romantic antagonism to eventual embrace. The kiss or embrace signals the integration of the couple into the larger cultural community. In addition, these genres use iconographic conventions to establish a social setting—the proscenium or theater stage with its familiar performers in some musicals, for example, or the repressive small-town community and the family home in the melodrama. But because the generic conflicts arise from attitudinal (generally male-female) oppositions rather than from a physical conflict, the coding in these films tends to be less visual and more ideological and abstract. This may account for the sparse attention they have received from genre analysts, despite their widespread popularity.

Ultimately, genres of indeterminate, civilized space (musical, screwball comedy, social melodrama) and genres of determinate, contested space (Western, gangster, detective) might be distinguished according to their differing ritual functions. The former tend to celebrate the values of *social integration*, whereas the latter uphold the values of *social order*. The former tend to cast an attitudinally unstable couple or family unit into some representative microcosm of American society, so that their emotional and/or romantic “coupling” reflects their integration into a stable environment. The latter tend to cast an individual, violent, attitudinally static male into a familiar, predetermined milieu to examine the opposing forces vying for control. In making this distinction, though, we should not lose sight of these genres' shared social function. In addressing basic cultural conflicts and celebrating the values and attitudes whereby these conflicts might be resolved, all film genres represent the filmmakers' and audience's cooperative efforts to “tame” those beasts, both actual and imaginary, which threaten the stability of our everyday lives.

Plot structure: From conflict to resolution

As a popular film audience, our shared needs and expectations draw us into the movie theater. If we are drawn there by a genre film, we are familiar with the ritual. In its animation and resolution of basic cultural conflicts, the genre film celebrates our collective sensibilities, providing an array of ideological strategies for negotiating social conflicts. The conflicts themselves are significant (and dramatic) enough to ensure our repeated attendance. The films within a genre, representing variations on a cultural theme, will employ different means of reaching narrative resolution, but that closure is generally as familiar as the community and its char-

acters. (Think of the general discomfort felt upon realizing, even quite early in seeing a genre film, that Cagney's heroic gangster would "get his" or that Tracy and Hepburn would cease their delightful hostilities and embrace in time for the closing credits.)

Actually, the most significant feature of any generic narrative may be its resolution—that is, its efforts to solve, even if only temporarily, the conflicts that have disturbed the community welfare. The Western, for example, despite its historical and geographical distance from most viewers, confronts real and immediate social conflicts: individual versus community, town versus wilderness, order versus anarchy, and so on. If there is anything escapist about these narratives, it is their repeated assertion that these conflicts can be solved, that seemingly timeless cultural oppositions can be resolved favorably for the larger community.

In a Hollywood Western, as in virtually any Hollywood genre film, plot development is effectively displaced by setting and character: once we recognize the familiar cultural arena and the players, we can be fairly certain how the game will be played and how it will end. Because the characters, conflicts, and resolution of the non-generic narrative are unfamiliar and unpredictable, we negotiate them less by previous filmic experiences than by previous "real-world" (personal and social) experiences. Clearly, both generic and non-generic narratives must rely to some degree upon real-world and also upon previous narrative-filmic experiences in order to make sense. In the genre film, however, the predictability of conflict and resolution tends to turn our attention away from the linear, cause-and-effect plot, redirecting it to the conflict itself and the opposed value systems it represents. Instead of a linear chain of events, which are organized by the changing perceptions of an individual protagonist, the genre film's plot traces the intensification of some cultural opposition which is eventually resolved in a predictable fashion.

Thus, we might describe the plot structure of a genre film in the following way:

- establishment* (via various narrative and iconographic cues) of the generic community with its inherent dramatic conflicts;
- animation* of those conflicts through the actions and attitudes of the genre's constellation of characters;
- intensification* of the conflict by means of conventional situations and dramatic confrontations until the conflict reaches crisis proportions;
- resolution* of the crisis in a fashion which eliminates the physical and/or ideological threat and thereby celebrates the (temporarily) well-ordered community.

In this plot structure, linear development is subordinate to and qualified by the *oppositional* narrative strategy. Opposing value systems are either mediated by an individual or a collective, which eliminates one of the opposing systems. Or else these oppositions are actually embodied by a doubled hero whose (usually romantic) coupling signals their synthesis. In either instance, resolution occurs, even

if only temporarily, in a way that strokes the collective sensibilities of the mass audience. It is in this context that the genre film's function as cultural ritual is most evident.

In their formulaic narrative process, genre films celebrate the most fundamental ideological precepts—they examine and affirm "Americanism" with all its rampant conflicts, contradictions, and ambiguities. Not only do genre films establish a sense of continuity between our cultural past and present (or between present and future, as with science fiction), but they also attempt to eliminate the distinctions between them. As social ritual, genre films function to stop time, to portray our culture in a stable and invariable ideological position. This attitude is embodied in the generic hero—and in the Hollywood star system itself—and is ritualized in the resolution precipitated by the hero's actions. Whether it is a historical Western or a futuristic fantasy, the genre film celebrates certain inviolate cultural attributes.

Ultimately, the sustained success of any genre depends upon at least two factors: the thematic appeal and significance of the conflicts it repeatedly addresses and its flexibility in adjusting to the audience's and filmmakers' changing attitudes toward those conflicts. These can be seen, for example, in the Western hero's status as both rugged individualist and also as agent of a civilization that continually resists his individualism. The degree to which that opposition has evolved over the past seventy-five years has accommodated changes in our cultural sensibilities. Or consider science fiction, a literary and cinematic genre that realized widespread popularity in the late '40s and early '50s. This genre articulated the conflicts and anxieties that accompanied the development of atomic power and the prospect of interplanetary travel. Because science fiction deals with so specialized a cultural conflict—essentially with the limits and value of human knowledge and scientific experimentation—it is considerably less flexible, but no less topical, than the Western. Nevertheless, each genre has a static nucleus that manifests its thematic oppositions or recurring cultural conflicts. And each genre has, through the years, dynamically evolved as shown by the ways its individual films manipulate those oppositions. If we see genre as a problem-solving strategy, then, the static nucleus could be conceived as the problem and the variety of solutions (narrative resolutions) as its dynamic surface structure.

In this sense, a genre's basic cultural oppositions or inherent dramatic conflicts represent its most basic determining feature. Also the sustained popularity of any genre indicates the essentially unresolvable, irreconcilable nature of those oppositions. Resolution involves a point of dramatic closure in which a compromise or temporary solution to the conflict is projected into a sort of cultural and historical timelessness. The threatening external force in contested space is violently destroyed and eliminated as an ideological threat; in uncontested space the vital lover's spontaneity and lack of social inhibition are bridled by a domesticating counterpart in the name of romantic love. In each, philosophical or ideological conflicts are "translated" into emotional terms—either violent or sexual, or both—and are resolved accordingly. In the former, the emotive resolution is externalized, in the latter it is internalized. Still, the resolution does not function to

solve the basic cultural conflict. The conflict is simply recast into an emotional context where it can be expeditiously, if not always logically, resolved.

As a rule, generic resolution operates by a process of *reduction*: the polar opposition is reduced, either through the elimination of one of the forces (in genres of determinate, contested space) or through the integration of the forces into a single unit (in genres of indeterminate, civilized space). The contest in determinate space generally is physically violent. Frequently, up until the resolution, there is more tension than action. The violent resolution usually helps the community, but only rarely does the hero assimilate its value system. In fact, his insistence that he maintain his individuality emerges as a significant thematic statement. As such, these films often involve a dual celebration: the hero's industrious isolationism offsets the genre's celebration of the ideal social order.

There is a certain logic and symmetry in the gangster's death, the Westerner's fading into the sunset, the detective's return to his office to await another case. Each of these standard epilogues implicitly accepts the contradictory values of its genre, all of which seem to center around the conflict between individualism and the common good. The built-in ambiguity of this dual celebration serves, at least partially, to minimize the *narrative rupture* resulting from the effort to resolve an unresolvable cultural conflict. This violation of narrative logic is itself fundamental to all of Hollywood's story formulas, in that the demand for a "happy ending" retests the complexity and deep-seated nature of the conflict.

Because genres of social order invariably allow the individual hero his formalized flight from social integration and from the compromising of his individuality, the narrative rupture is usually less pronounced than in genres of social integration. The cultural conflicts in genres of integration are revealed through the doubling of the principal characters—that is, through their opposed relationship, usually expressed as romantic antagonism. With the integration of their opposing attitudes into a cohesive unit (the married couple, the family), the conflicts are resolved and basic communal ideals are ritualized. But the cultural contradictions that inhibit integration throughout these films—between spontaneous individual expression and social propriety, for example—cannot be resolved without severely subverting the characters' credibility and motivation.

Are we to assume that the screwball couple's madcap social behavior and mutual antagonism will magically dissolve once they are wed? Or that the conflicts, which have separated the song-and-dance team throughout rehearsals, will somehow vanish after the climactic show? To avoid these questions and to minimize the sense of rupture, these genre films synthesize their oppositions through some formal celebration or social ritual: a Broadway show, a betrothal, a wedding, and so on. In this way, they don't actually resolve their conflicts; they reconstitute them by concluding the narrative at an emotive climax, at precisely the moment when the doubled principals acquiesce to each other's demands. The suggestion of living "happily ever after" tends to mask or gloss over the inevitable loss associated with each character's compromise. What is celebrated is the collective value of their integration into an idealized social unit.



In all genre films, there is a sense of loss. At the end of *Shane*, the initiate-hero (Brandon De Wilde) must part with the hero (Alan Ladd). (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research)

This sense of loss accompanies the resolution of all genre films because of the contradictory, irreconcilable nature of their conflicts. Through violent reduction or romantic coupling, however, the loss is masked. It is, in effect, effectively repressed in the emotional climax. What is to become, we might very well ask ourselves, once the film ends, of the uninhibited music man after he weds the gold-hearted domesticator—and what's to become of her as well? What's to become of the savage frontier lawman once the social order he instills finally arrives? These are questions which, unless initiated by the films themselves, we know better than to ask. Genre films not only project an idealized cultural self-image, but they project it into a realm of historical timelessness. Typically, films produced later in a genre's development tend to challenge the tidy and seemingly naive resolutions of earlier genre films, and we will discuss this tendency in some detail when we

examine generic evolution. What we should note here, though, and what is being masked by such a resolution is the fundamental appeal of both sides in a dramatic conflict. Whatever oppositions we examine in genre films—individual versus community, man versus woman, work versus play, order versus anarchy—these do not represent “positive” and “negative” cultural values. For one of the reasons for a genre’s popularity is the sustained significance of the “problem” that it repeatedly addresses. Thus, generic conflict and resolution involve opposing systems of values and attitudes, *both of which* are deemed significant by contemporary American culture.

Narrative strategy and social function: Contradictions, happy endings, and the status quo

In surveying the setting, characterization, and plot structure of Hollywood film genres, we have made several general distinctions between genres of order and genres of integration. I have suggested that these two types of genres represent two dominant narrative strategies of genre filmmaking. Perhaps it would be useful to summarize these strategies.

Certain genres (Western, gangster, detective, et al.) center on an individual male protagonist, generally a redeemer figure, who is the focus of dramatic conflicts within a setting of contested space. As such, the hero mediates the cultural contradictions inherent within his milieu. Conflicts within these genres are externalized, translated into violence, and usually resolved through the elimination of some threat to the social order. The resolution in these films often is somewhat ambiguous. The hero, either through his departure or death at film’s end, does not assimilate the values and lifestyle of the community but instead maintains his individuality. Genres that incorporate this narrative strategy I have termed *rites of order*.

Other genres (musical, screwball comedy, family melodrama, et al.) are set in “civilized” space and trace the integration of the central characters into the community. There is generally a doubled (romantic couple) or collective (usually a family) hero in these genres. Their personal and social conflicts are internalized, translated into emotional terms, with their interpersonal antagonism eventually yielding to the need for a well-ordered community. Integration invariably occurs through romantic love. After a period of initial hostility, the couple find themselves in a final embrace. The genres which incorporate this narrative strategy I have termed *rites of integration*.

There is considerable overlap between the rites, of course, in that all order genres address the prospect of social integration, and all integration genres are concerned with maintaining the existing social order. But this general distinction does provide a starting point for analysis. We have a set of assumptions to develop and refine while examining individual genres and their films. For the purposes of clarity and simplicity, the following chart may be useful.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GENRES OF ORDER AND GENRES OF INTEGRATION

| | ORDER (Western, gangster, detective) | INTEGRATION (musical, screwball comedy, family melodrama) |
|-------------------|--|--|
| <i>hero</i> | individual (male dominant) | couple/collective (female dominant) |
| <i>setting</i> | contested space (ideologically unstable) | civilized space (ideologically stable) |
| <i>conflict</i> | externalized—violent | internalized—emotional |
| <i>resolution</i> | elimination (death) | embrace (love) |
| <i>thematics</i> | mediation—redemption | integration—domestication |
| | macho code | maternal-familial code |
| | isolated self-reliance | community cooperation |
| | utopia-as-promise | utopia-as-reality |

In examining both types of genres, one of our concerns must be the relationship between narrative strategy and social function. Although I have suggested that each genre represents a distinct problem-solving strategy that repeatedly addresses basic cultural contradictions, genres are not blindly supportive of the cultural status quo. The genre film’s resolution may reinforce the ideology of the larger society, but the nature and articulation of the dramatic conflicts leading to that climax cannot be ignored. If genres develop and survive because they repeatedly flesh out and reexamine cultural conflicts, then we must consider the possibility that genres function as much to challenge and criticize as to reinforce the values that inform them.

As has often been said, Hollywood movies are considerably more effective in their capacity to raise questions than to answer them. This characteristic seems particularly true of genre films. And as such, the genre’s fundamental impulse is to continually *renegotiate* the tenets of American ideology. And what is so fascinating and confounding about Hollywood genre films is their capacity to “play it both ways,” to both criticize and reinforce the values, beliefs, and ideals of our culture within the same narrative context.

Consider Molly Haskell’s description of the narrative resolution in certain melodramas of the 1930s and ‘40s: “The forced enthusiasm and neat evasions of so many happy endings have only increased the suspicion that darkness and despair follow marriage, a suspicion the ‘woman’s film’ confirmed by carefully pretending otherwise”⁵ (Haskell, 1974, p. 124). Implicit in Haskell’s statement is the assumption that the audience knew better than to believe the pat “happy end.” She assumes that the audience was sensitive, consciously or otherwise, to the narrative rupture involved in a melodrama’s progression from conflict to resolution. One could just as easily argue the opposite, of course, that audiences actually believed and bought wholesale, consciously or otherwise, the “neat evasions of so many happy endings.”

The fact is, however, that as genres develop their conflicts are stated ever more effectively, while their resolutions become ever more ambiguous and ironic. This

would seem to support Haskell's position, and further to undercut the simplistic conception of the audience as utterly naive and of the Hollywood genre film as mere escapist entertainment. Let us consider, even if only briefly, the issue of a genre's increasingly sophisticated capacity for presenting its conflicts, a capacity which seems closely related to the process of generic evolution.

Generic evolution: Patterns of increasing self-consciousness

We have already noted that genre filmmakers are in a rather curious bind: they must continually vary and reinvent the generic formula. At the same time they must exploit those qualities that made the genre popular in the first place. As Robert Warshow puts it: "Variation is absolutely necessary to keep the type from becoming sterile; we do not want to see the same movie over and over again, only the same form"⁶ (Warshow, 1962, p. 147). His point is well taken: the genre's "deeper" concern for certain basic cultural issues may remain intact, but to remain vital its films must keep up with the audience's changing conception of these issues and with its growing familiarity with the genre. But how does a genre evolve, and does its evolution follow any consistent or predictable pattern? If certain formal and thematic traits distinguish a genre throughout its development, what changes as the form evolves?

First, a genre's evolution involves both internal (formal) and external (cultural, thematic) factors. The subject matter of any film story is derived from certain "real-world" characters, conflicts, settings, and so on. But once the story is repeated and refined into a formula, its basis in experience gradually gives way to its own internal narrative logic. Thus, the earliest Westerns (many of which actually depicted then-current events) obviously were based on social and historical reality. But as the genre developed, it gradually took on its own reality. Even the most naive viewer seems to understand this. It comes as no surprise to learn that Western heroes didn't wear white hats and fringed buckskin, that gunfights on Main Street were an exceedingly rare occurrence, or that the towns and dress codes and other trappings of movie Westerns were far different from those of the authentic American West. In this sense, we recognize and accept the distinctive grammar—the system of storytelling conventions—that has evolved through the repeated telling of Western tales.

Simultaneously, however, we also realize that these real-world factors, basic to the genre's dramatic conflicts, are themselves changing. Consider how the changing image of Native Americans ("Injuns") has been influenced by our culture's changing view of Manifest Destiny, the settling of the West, and the treatment of peoples whose cultures were overwhelmed by the encroachment of civilization. Or consider how the atom bomb and space travel affected the development of the science fiction genre after World War II; consider the impact of organized crime on the gangster and detective genres in the 1950s. Perhaps the effects of these external

social factors are best seen case by case. A genre's formal internal evolution, however, especially when considered in terms of our growing familiarity with it over time, does seem to follow a rather consistent pattern of schematic development.

In his chapter "Textuality and Generality" (*Language and Cinema*), Christian Metz considers the internal evolution of the Western. Metz suggests that, as early as 1946 with John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, the "classic" Western had assumed "an accent of parody which was an integral part of the genre, and yet it remained a Western." He goes on to assert that the "superwesterns" of the 1950s "passed from parody to contestation," but that they "remained fully Westerns." He then observes that in many recent Westerns, "contestation gives way to 'deconstruction': the entire film is an explication of the [Western] code and its relation to history. One has passed from parody to critique, but the work is still a Western." Metz contends that with every "stage" of its evolutionary process, the Western sustains its essence, its generic identity. He concludes his discussion with a rather suggestive observation: "Such is the infinite text one calls a genre"⁷ (Metz, 1974, pp. 148-161).

Metz views the Western genre not only as a system of individual films, but further as a composite text in itself. His point is that the Western represents a basic story, which is never completely "told," but is reexamined and reworked in a variety of ways. Within these variations, Metz discovers a pattern of historical development. His classic-parody-contestation-critique progression suggests that both filmmakers and audience grow increasingly self-conscious regarding the genre's formal qualities and its initial social function. Actually, Metz's view of the Western's formal evolution is quite similar to the views of various historians who have studied the historical development of styles and genres in other arts. Perhaps the most concise and influential study of this kind is Henri Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art*, in which he develops a schema for the "life span" of cultural forms:

Forms obey their own rules—rules that are inherent in the forms themselves, or better, in the regions of the mind where they are located and centered—and there is no reason why we should not undertake an investigation of how these great ensembles . . . behave throughout the phases which we call their life. The successive states through which they pass are more or less lengthy, more or less intense, according to the style itself: the experimental age, the classic age, the age of refinement, the baroque age.⁸ (Focillon, 1942, p. 10)

Focillon's view is somewhat broader than Metz's. But he also observes that the continual reworking of a conventionalized form—whether it is an architectural style or a genre of painting—generates a growing awareness of the conventions themselves. Thus a form passes through an *experimental* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their "equilibrium" and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an *age of refinement*, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the

form, and finally a *baroque* (or “mannerist” or “self-reflexive”) stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the “substance” or “content” of the work.

Using this strategy with film genres, we might begin with this observation: at the earliest stages of its life span, a genre tends to exploit the cinematic medium *as a medium*. If a genre is a society collectively speaking to itself, then any stylistic flourishes or formal self-consciousness will only impede the transmission of the message. At this stage, genre films transmit a certain idealized cultural self-image with as little “formal interference” as possible. Once a genre has passed through its experimental stage where its conventions have been established, it enters into its classical stage. We might consider this stage as one of *formal transparency*. Both the narrative formula and the film medium work together to transmit and reinforce that genre’s social message—its ideology or problem-solving strategy—as directly as possible to the audience.

Leo Braudy describes the process of generic evolution: “Genre films essentially ask the audience, ‘Do you still want to believe this?’ Popularity is the audience answering, ‘Yes.’ Change in genre occurs when the audience says, ‘That’s too infantile a form of what we believe. Show us something more complicated’” (Braudy, 1976, p. 179). This rather casual observation involves a number of insights, especially in its allusion to the “conversation” between filmmakers and audience and in its reference to audience “belief.” The genre film reaffirms what the audience believes both on individual and on communal levels. Audience demand for variation does not indicate a change in belief, but rather that the belief should be reexamined, grow more complicated formally and thematically, and display, moreover, stylistic embellishment.

Thus, the end of a genre’s classic stage can be viewed as that point at which the genre’s straightforward message has “saturated” the audience. With its growing awareness of the formal and thematic structures, the genre evolves into what Focillon termed the age of refinement. As a genre’s classic conventions are refined and eventually parodied and subverted, its transparency gradually gives way to *opacity*: we no longer look *through* the form (or perhaps “into the mirror”) to glimpse an idealized self-image, rather we look *at the form itself* to examine and appreciate its structure and its cultural appeal.

A genre’s progression from transparency to opacity—from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism—involves its concerted effort to explain itself, to address and evaluate its very status as a popular form. A brief consideration of any Hollywood genre would support this view, particularly those with extended life spans like the musical or the Western. By the early 1950s, for example, both of these genres had begun to exhibit clear signs of formal self-consciousness. In such self-reflexive musicals as *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), *The Band Wagon* (1953), and *It’s Always Fair Weather* (1955), the narrative conflict confronts the nature and value of musical comedy as a form of popular entertainment. In accord with the genre’s conventions, these conflicts are couched in a male-female opposition, but the boy-gets-



Parodies of established genres are a good indication of how we become familiar with a genre's conventions and appreciate seeing these conventions subverted. In a modern dance sequence from The Band Wagon, Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire parody the hardboiled detective genre. (Hoblitzelle Theater Arts Collection)

girl resolution is now complicated by a tension between serious art and mere entertainment. These movies interweave motifs involving successful courtship and the success of *The Show*, and that success is threatened and resolved in a fashion which provides an “apology” for the musical as popular art.

In *The Barkleys of Broadway*, for instance, Ginger Rogers abandons musical comedy for “legitimate theater” but eventually returns both to the stage musical and to her former partner-spouse (Fred Astaire). Gene Kelly in *An American in Paris* must decide between a career as a painter, supported by spinster-dowager Nina Foch, and a “natural” life of dance and music with young Leslie Caron. In these and the

other films, the generic conventions, which earlier were components of the genre's unspoken ideology, have now become the central thematic elements of the narrative. No longer does the genre simply celebrate the values of music, dance, and popular entertainment, it actually "critiques" and "deconstructs" them in the process¹⁰ (Feuer, 1978).

The Western genre, which was entering its classic age in the late 1930s (*Stagecoach*, *Union Pacific*, *Dodge City*, *Destry Rides Again*, *Frontier Marshal*, all 1939), exhibits by the 1950s a similar formal and thematic self-scrutiny. Such films as *Red River* (1948), *I Shot Jesse James* (1949), *The Gunfighter* (1950), *Winchester 73* (1950), *High Noon* (1952), and *The Naked Spur* (1953) indicate that the genre had begun to question its own conventions, especially regarding the social role and psychological make-up of the hero. Consider, for example, the substantial changes in the screen persona of John Wayne or of Jimmy Stewart during this period. In such baroque Westerns as *Red River* and *The Searchers* (starring Wayne) and *Winchester 73*, *The Naked Spur*, *The Man from Laramie*, and *Two Rode Together* (Stewart), Wayne's stoic machismo and Stewart's "aw-shucks" naiveté are effectively inverted to reveal genuinely psychotic, antisocial figures.

Naturally, we do not expect a classic Westerner like Wayne's Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* to exhibit the psychological complexity or the "antiheroic" traits of later Western figures. Our regard for a film like *Stagecoach* has to do with its clear, straightforward articulation of the Western myth. A later film like *Red River*, which incorporates a younger figure (Montgomery Clift) to offset and qualify the classic Westerner's heroic posture, serves to refine and to call into question the genre's basic values. These values are subverted, or perhaps even rejected altogether, in later films like *The Searchers*, *The Wild Bunch*, and even in a comic parody like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. In these films, the "code of the West" with its implicit conflicts and ideology provides the dramatic focus, but our regard for that code changes as do the actions and attitudes of the principal characters.

The Western and the musical seem to represent genres in which the evolutionary "cycle" seems more or less complete. However, not all genres complete that cycle or necessarily follow such a progression. For example, in the gangster genre, various external pressures (primarily the threat of government censorship and religious boycott) disrupted the genre's internal evolution. And in the war genre, the prosocial aspects of supporting a war effort directly ruled out any subversion or even the serious questioning of the hero's attitudes. War films that did question values were made after the war and generally are considered as a subgenre. There are also genres currently in midcycle, like the "disaster" or the "occult" genres popularized during the 1970s. The disaster genre, whose classic stage was launched with *The Poseidon Adventure* and *Airport*, has evolved so rapidly that a parody of the genre, *The Big Bus* (1976), appeared within only a few years of the form's standardization. Interestingly, the audience didn't seem to know what to make of *The Big Bus*, and the film died at the box office. Apparently the genre hadn't sufficiently saturated the audience to the point where a parody could be appreciated.

Thus, it would seem that, throughout a genre's evolution from transparent social

reaffirmation to opaque self-reflexivity, there is a gradual shift in narrative emphasis from social value to formal aesthetic value. Because continued variation tends to sensitize us to a genre's social message, our interests, and those of the filmmakers, gradually expand from the message itself to its articulation, from the tale to the visual and narrative artistry of its telling. It is no coincidence, then, that so many directors, who worked with a genre later in its development, are considered *auteurs*. We tend to regard early genre filmmakers as storytellers or craftsmen and later ones as artists. Naturally there are exceptions—Ford's early Westerns, Busby Berkeley's '30s musicals, all of Hitchcock's thrillers—but these involve directors whose narrative artistry and understanding of the genre's thematic complexity were apparent throughout their careers.

Generally speaking, it seems that those features most often associated with narrative artistry—ambiguity, thematic complexity, irony, formal self-consciousness—rarely are evident in films produced earlier in a genre's development. They tend to work themselves into the formula itself as it evolves. We are dealing here with the inherent artistry of the formula itself as it grows and develops. A newborn genre's status as social ritual generally resists any ironic, ambiguous, or overly complex treatment of its narrative message. But as filmmakers and audiences grow more familiar with the message as it is varied and refined, the variations themselves begin to exhibit qualities associated with narrative art.

This does not mean that early genre films have no aesthetic value or later ones no social value. There is, rather, a shift in emphasis from one cultural function (social, ritualistic) to another (formal, aesthetic). And both are evident in all genre films. A genre's initial and sustained popularity may be due primarily to its social function, but a degree of aesthetic appeal is also apparent in even the earliest, or the most transparently, prosocial genre films. Each genre seems to manifest a distinct visual and compositional identity: the prospect of infinite space and limitless horizons in the Western, documentary urban realism in the gangster film, the "American Expressionism" of *film noir* and the hardboiled detective film, the musical's celebration of life through motion and song, and so on.

This aesthetic potential may have been tapped by filmmakers—writers, producers, performers, cameramen, editors, as well as directors—who quite simply made good movies. They manipulated any number of narrative and cinematic qualities that imbued their films with an artistry that may or may not have been common for the genre at that stage of its development. Whether considering artistically exceptional films early in a genre's evolution or the more self-reflexive films produced during its later stages, it is difficult not to appreciate the formal and ideological flexibility of Hollywood's genres. These story formulas have articulated and continually reexamined basic social issues, weaving a cultural tapestry whose initial design became ever more detailed and ornate, ever more beautiful.

Doc Boone had termed "the blessings of civilization." No such option was available to Tom Doniphon, however. His killing of Valance, which he himself describes as "cold-blooded murder," is finally an act of self-destruction. As surely as he eliminates Valance and saves Stoddard, he is committing himself to a life of isolated uselessness.

The ideal union of Westerner and Woman in the family, the one social institution revered by all of Ford's essentially antisocial heroes, has regressed from a reality (Ringo and Dallas) to a promise (Wyatt and Clementine) to an untenable situation (Ethan and Martha) to an outright impossibility (Tom and Hallie). With the steady enclosure of the genre's visual and thematic horizons, the hero's options are reduced to one single, inexorable reality: Doniphon does not ride off into the sunset or across Monument Valley, but into the Valley of Death.

With Tom Doniphon's death, Ford bids farewell to the Westerner and his heroic code. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is a fitting epitaph. It traces the death of that code and the basis for its mythic legacy. Some critics have noted the similarities in story and character between this film and *My Darling Clementine*, but the evolution of Ford's perspective and the genre's changing thematic emphases render the differences of those films more significant than their similarities. Time has turned Ford's—and the genre's—initial optimism into a mixture of cynicism and regret. Stoddard's glad-handing politician and Hallie's overwhelming nostalgia are the only elements remaining of the genre's faded utopian vision.

No filmmaker understood or articulated that vision with the style, sensitivity, and consistent quality of John Ford, and although the Western genre survives him it will be forever in his debt. Not only was Ford the best of Hollywood's Western storytellers, but he brought to that story a depth and complexity that place his Westerns among the most significant films of the American cinema.

The Gangster Film

4

"The purpose of this film is to depict an environment, rather than glorify the criminal."

—Preface to *The Public Enemy*

"There's only one law: Do it first, do it yourself, and keep on doing it."

—Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) in *Scarface*

"Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?"

—Dying words of Rico Bandello (Edward G. Robinson) in *Little Caesar*

The classic gangster films

The gangster genre has had a peculiar history. The narrative formula seemed to spring from nowhere in the early 1930s, when its conventions were isolated and refined in a series of immensely popular films. The three most successful were *Little Caesar* (produced by Warner Brothers and directed by Mervyn LeRoy in 1930), *The Public Enemy* (produced by Warner Brothers and

directed by William Wellman in 1931), and *Scarface* (produced by Howard Hughes and directed by Howard Hawks in 1932). Because of their overt celebration of the gangster-hero and their less-than-flattering portrayal of contemporary urban life, these films were as controversial as they were popular, and threats of censorship, boycott, and federal regulation forced the studios to restructure the gangster formula by the mid-'30s. Consequently, the gangster film enjoyed possibly the briefest classic period of any Hollywood genre. Its evolution was severely disrupted by external social forces, and its narrative formula was splintered into various derivative strains.

Although many of these strains have survived into the 1970s—the syndicate film, the caper film, the cop film, and so on—we are going to concentrate on those classic gangster films of the 1930s and their more immediate descendants. Urban criminals undoubtedly will remain a significant and marketable subject for feature filmmaking as long as our cities and the commercial cinema survive, but the prototype, that isolated, self-styled gangster best characterized by Cagney and Robinson, had all but disappeared from the screen by the early 1950s. Hollywood's postwar urban crime films will be discussed later; this chapter will concentrate on the gangster genre during its formative stages and as it evolved throughout the 1940s. We will focus upon Hollywood's development of the heroic, heavily stylized criminal sagas from the early 1930s through postwar throwbacks like John Huston's *Key Largo* (1948) and Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949).

The gangster-hero and the urban milieu

Unlike the Westerner and the hardboiled detective, who were adapted to the screen from popular literary genres, the screen gangster was lifted directly from the current newspaper headlines. The accuracy of screen portrayals of figures like Al Capone, Bugsy Siegel, and Hymie Weiss rarely went deeper than the headlines. Hollywood exploited the notoriety and social significance of their real-world counterparts while it adjusted their character and environment to the peculiar demands of Hollywood narrativity. The romanticization of the gangster-hero and the stylization of his "underworld" milieu render the genre's connections with reality rather tenuous and complex. In fact, the '30s-based screen gangster and his dark, impressionistic world were all but dead by the late '40s. By then Hollywood's concern for organized crime and its preference for location shooting and urban realism had displaced the gangster biographies that dominated Depression-era crime films. As Hollywood's characterization of the criminal was taken out of the controlled studio environment and away from performers like Cagney, Robinson, and Bogart, the genre underwent a radical revision of its own mythology.

The mythology of the classic gangster film, like that of the Western, concerns the transformation of nature into culture under the auspices of modern civilization. The nature/culture opposition which plays so obvious and important a role in the Western is equally vital but considerably less obvious in the gangster



The world of the gangster: what Warshaw called "the dangerous and sad city of the imagination" is shown in this shot from the gang-war montage in Howard Hawks' Scarface (1932). (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research)

genre. Nature in the gangster film is conspicuous primarily in its absence—or rather in the ways it is repressed in the "social animal" who is the genre's focal character. The oncoming civilization which the Westerner had fled has now arrived with a vengeance, and the gangster has little choice but to accommodate his primitive and civilized impulses to that environment. There is no limitless horizon, no sunset in the distance for the urban renegade.

The gangster's milieu is the modern city, generally seen at night, with its enclosing walls of concrete and shadow, its rain-soaked streets, and its careening black automobiles. The gangster's setting, like that of the Westerner, is one of contested space where forces of social order and anarchy are locked in an epic and unending struggle. But whereas the Western depicts the initial and tremendous struggle to establish social order, the gangster film deals with an organized so-

ciety's efforts to maintain that order. The urban environment is not merely an ideological frame of reference to be accepted or rejected by the hero as it is for the stoic, detached Westerner; instead, the city represents a complex, alienating, and overwhelming community that initially creates the gangster and eventually destroys him.

Robert Warshow, in his illuminating essay, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," views the genre's milieu as a surreal extension of the gangster's own psyche. "The gangster is the man of the city," writes Warshow. "He must inhabit it in order to personify it: not the real city, but the dangerous and sad city of the imagination which is so much more important, which is the modern world." Not only is this city an extension of the gangster's imagination, but of the viewer's as well. In Warshow's terms, "The real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and are afraid we might become" (Warshow, 1962, p. 131). Or in the words of Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson) in *Key Largo*: "There are thousands of guys with guns—but there's only one Rocco." As both Warshow and Robinson/Rocco suggest, Hollywood places the urban criminal in the realm of American mythology. He is depicted with imaginative, stylized intensity and in heroic proportions that far remove him from the real-world criminal on which his character is based.

So although Rico ("Little Caesar") Bandello, Tommy ("Public Enemy") Powers, and Tony ("Scarface") Camonte were modeled after notorious men of that era—Rico and Tony supposedly after Al Capone, and Tommy Powers after Hymie Weiss—their screen portrayals bore little resemblance to the actual criminals. (In fact, many critics have argued that just the reverse is true, that "real" criminals tended to adjust their dress and demeanor so that they might resemble their depiction in the movies.)

In retrospect, it seems logical that Hollywood's characterization of the urban hero, whether as gangster or as cop, would undergo a substantial change during the 1930s. America's gradual shift from a primarily rural-agricultural to an urban-industrial nation, compounded by the Depression, Prohibition, and the other vagaries of city life, generated considerable cultural confusion and caused an extensive reexamination of our traditional value system. The urban lone wolf's brutality and antisocial attitudes in Hollywood films are simply components of an essentially positive cultural model—that of the personable and aggressive but somewhat misguided self-made American man. It's important to note in this regard that the depiction of Cagney as gangster in *The Public Enemy* is basically indistinguishable from that of Cagney as government agent in *G-Men* and other mid-'30s crime films. He may be advocating a different value system in each role, but his self-assured swagger, caustic disposition, and violent demeanor are basic to each.

There are notable precursors to the '30s gangster films. As early as D. W. Griffith's *Musketeers of Pig Alley* in 1912, urban-based crime provided an engaging dramatic subject. By the late 1920s, silent melodramas had begun to isolate certain narrative and stylistic devices which would work their way into the gangster films a few years later. Two of the more significant films of this period were *The Racket* (1927) and *Underworld* (1928). The latter film, directed by Josef von Sternberg for

Paramount, is a truly remarkable precursor of the gangster film which examines and dramatizes organized crime within a sordid, shadowy urban milieu. Like the silent Western epics of the 1920s, *Underworld* appears rather rudimentary because of its lack of sound effects and dialogue, as well as its dependence upon the conventions of silent melodrama.

Warner Brothers' conversion to sound movies in the late 1920s, coincidental with America's desperate social and economic climate, proved to be the catalyst in the evolution of the gangster film. Warners had generated the sound prototype for the musical (*The Jazz Singer*, 1927) and the next year provided the first sound gangster film (*The Lights of New York*, 1928). The studio dominated production in both genres for years. *The Lights of New York* is an eminently forgettable film except for one aspect: it demonstrated that sound effects and dialogue greatly heightened the impact of urban crime dramas. As later films would confirm, synchronous sound affected both the visual and editing strategies of gangster movies. The new audio effects (gunshots, screams, screeching tires, etc.) encouraged filmmakers to focus upon action and urban violence, and also to develop a fast-paced narrative and editing style. This style is most effective in those classic gangster films of the early 1930s, before the Production Code forced the genre into premature refinement.

The classic screen gangster represents the perverse alter ego of the ambitious, profit-minded American male. His urban environment, with its institutionalized alienation and class distinction, has denied him a legitimate route to power and success, so he uses the depersonalizing milieu and its technology—guns, cars, phones, etc.—to plunder its wealth. But somehow the massive, unthinking city, that concrete embodiment of civilization and urban order, is more powerful than either the self-reliant criminal or the generally inept police who pursue him. The ultimate conflict of the gangster film is not between the gangster and his environment nor is it between the gangster and the police; rather, it involves the contradictory impulses within the gangster himself. This internal conflict—between individual accomplishment and the common good, between man's self-serving and communal instincts, between his savagery and his rational morality—is mirrored in society, but the opposing impulses have reached a delicate and viable balance within the modern city. The gangster's efforts to realign that balance to suit his own particular needs are therefore destined to failure.

So the civilization which the Westerner held at bay now overwhelms the gangster-hero; the cowboy's distant fears have become the gangster's daily *angst*. The very buildings in which the gangster hides, the cars that he uses for murder and escape, the clothes, guns, phones, and other tools of his trade—all are emblems of a social order which eventually must destroy him. And these emblems create a system of iconographic components which assume a special significance in the narrative. Thus the gangster's urban milieu serves a dual function. On the one hand, it is a dark and often surreal arena of physical action and violence and serves as an expressive extension of the gangster's own sensibilities. But on the other, it represents the forces of progress and social destiny which the gangster cannot hope to conquer. The intangible forces of social order and civilization which have created the modern city certainly will crush a single anarchic malcontent.

The gangster prototypes: *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*

The gangster's propensity for asserting his individual will through violent action and self-styled profiteering renders him an ideal screen persona. The fact that his assertiveness flaunts social order even heightens his individuality. He is surrounded by dull-witted underlings and pursued by inept police in a confused moral climate that allows him ample opportunity, in Warshaw's words, "to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd"² (Warshaw, 1962, p. 133).

One of the remarkable aspects of these early gangster films is their tendency to establish the hero's aggression and willful violence as a given, with little thought to the social conditions which nurture those impulses. For Rico Bandello in *Little Caesar*, for example, it seems only natural to graduate from robbing rural gas stations to big-time city crime. *Little Caesar* opens with Rico and his initiate-partner

Edward G. Robinson's portrayal of Rico "Little Caesar" Bandello established the type: ruthless, resourceful, ambitious, and ultimately self-destructive. (Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)



(Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., as Joe Massara) just having held up a gas station outside of Chicago. They hear about "Diamond Pete" Montana's criminal exploits in the city and decide to grab their own piece of the action. Rico and Massara arrive in the city, and Rico ruthlessly murders his way to mobster status, eventually displacing Montana as the city's gangster chieftain. Director LeRoy traces his precipitous rise to wealth and power in a fast-paced, episodic narrative style with occasional peaks of violent action. There is little time for reflection—on the part of the characters or the audience.

The only character capable of self-examination is Joe Massara, who eventually decides to desert Rico and go straight. Massara's change of heart is motivated, predictably enough, by the love of a good woman—a rare commodity in the gangster genre where women invariably are depicted as sexual ornaments, mere emblems of the gangster's socioeconomic status. Massara and his lover-domesticator become a professional song-and-dance team (jumping from one Warner Brothers formula to another), and agree to turn state's evidence against Joe's former mentor. Rico learns of their betrayal, and his inability to execute Massara adds an interesting twist to the gangster's otherwise murderous mentality. Ironically, his plan for vengeance leads to his own death. Rico's dying epithet—"Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?"—reflects our own disbelief that this heroic, willful, urban demigod ever could be destroyed.

The number of gangster films generated by *Little Caesar's* popular success indicates that Rico Bandello's end was just the beginning of the screen persona he helped to establish. Rico's irrational brutality, his disdain for law and order, and his enterprising business mentality are presented as inherent elements of his criminal nature. Later gangster films would attempt, even if only half-heartedly, to provide some motivational basis for that criminality.

At one point in *The Public Enemy*, for example, in an exchange between Tommy Powers and his girlfriend (Jimmy Cagney and Jean Harlow), the girl tells him: "You are different, Tommy, and it's a matter of basic character. . . . You don't give, you take. Oh, Tommy, I could love you to death." While this reaffirms the hero's criminality (and indicates it is sufficiently appealing to win the affection of Jean Harlow), the film does attempt to account for Powers' violent and antisocial behavior. *The Public Enemy* opens with documentary-style footage of inner-city tenements and the Depression poor who inhabit them. Once we are introduced to the principal characters—as children, significantly—and to their interpersonal and ideological conflicts, this documentary style is abandoned for a more impressionistic, visually expressive technique. Tommy is first depicted as a young boy stealing a girl's skates and is beaten by his insensitive father when his older brother decides to snitch on him.

In the first of many powerful visual sequences in the film, we see Tommy in a low-angle shot being led away from the camera down a shadowed hallway by his father, who takes him into a room and beats him with a strap. The actual beating takes place off-camera but is set up in such a way that the viewer's imagination makes the scene worse than it would be if actually filmed. The horror is accen-

tuated, of course, by the use of off-screen sound—Tommy's cries and the sounds of the strap striking him. Wellman establishes the fundamental brutality of Tommy Powers and his community with this scene and at the same time generates sympathy for the main character. He also suggests that Tommy's criminality may be traced back into his childhood. The fact that his brother matures into a dull but well-meaning war hero and streetcar conductor prevents us from interpreting Tommy's antisocial behavior as a function of his environment, but we are never told the reasons for the brothers' contradictory values and attitudes.

The Public Enemy employs a fast-moving, elliptical, episodic story line that pinpoints the gangster-hero at various high points in his ill-fated career. One of the interesting distinctions between Tommy Powers and his counterparts in *Little Caesar* and *Scarface*, however, is that here the gangster's criminality is not a path to power and wealth. It is essentially an end in itself. Cagney's character, Tommy, is brutal, reckless, and unwavering in his perverse devotion to anarchy, to his gang, and to his family—especially his mother (Beryl Mercer) and his sidekick, Matt Doyle (Edward Woods). Wellman traces Tommy and Matt's progression from petty street hoods to saloon toughs to well-skilled criminals with one binding thread: the cohesion of the gangster-family.

Powers' commitment to Matt and his criminal lifestyle is juxtaposed with his devotion to his widowed mother, and these dualities frame the film's climax and resolution. Matt eventually falls in love, reaffirming the values we associate with Tommy's mother, but he is killed in an ambush meant for Tommy who vows revenge. He challenges the rival gang responsible for Matt's death, and we know this is virtually an act of suicide. With the camera viewpoint outside the rival gang's lair, Powers enters alone, exchanges gunfire off-screen, and then stumbles back into the street (and back on camera), muttering, "I ain't so tough," and falling into the gutter.

Later from his hospital bed, Tommy shows signs of remorse and reform, but clearly it's too late for him. The film's closing sequence takes place in the Powers' home, where Tommy's mother and brother anxiously await his return after learning he's been kidnapped from the hospital by the rival gang. The film closes with one of the most striking images in any gangster film: We hear a knock at the door and see Mom looking up from the bed she is preparing for her son's convalescence. Then Wellman cuts to a low-angle shot from inside the front door. The door opens and the gangster-hero, swaddled in bloodstained sheets, stares blankly beyond the camera and stands rigid for a moment before he topples directly toward the viewer. Tommy's tragic demise emerges as an indictment not only of the urban criminal, but also of the urban society that created and destroyed him. Thus *The Public Enemy* represents a considerable achievement for its director, who effectively exploited the audience's ambiguous regard for the sympathetic yet murderous public enemy.

If the gangster is to be considered a tragic figure, as he is by Warshow and others, then what is his "tragic flaw"? Fundamentally, it is his inability to channel his considerable individual energies in a viable direction. Society is partially re-



Tommy Powers (James Cagney) looks on helplessly as his partner (Edward Woods) is assassinated by rival gangsters in *The Public Enemy* (1931). (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research)

sponsible, of course, in that it denies individual expression and provides minimal options to the struggling, aggressive male from an inner-city, working-class background. The only options to a life of crime—or so these films would seem to assert—are the police force, the priesthood, or the city transit company. The audience is attracted to the gangster, in fact, because he is a dynamic, self-reliant individual applying himself in the only profitable and engaging occupation available. For a brief time, at least, the gangster is on top of his own pathetically limited world.

Because of his fierce drive to express his individuality and to achieve personal success, the gangster-hero is often at odds not only with society and its institutions (the judiciary, the police force, the banks) but with other criminal organizations as well. The classic Hollywood gangster may be devoted to an immediate gang-family, as is Tommy Powers, but he is certainly not a scion of organized crime. Anarchy runs deep within his character, and he resents conforming to any organization, regardless of its ideological persuasion. The gangster's self-sufficiency makes him a middle-man, like the Westerner—it pits him against both police and rival gangs. Unlike the heroes of Monument Valley, however, the gangster is not

totally sympathetic. His role is ambiguous only from his own amoral, utterly pragmatic perspective; we in the audience realize that the hero's misdirected efforts ensure only temporary success and doom him to eventual failure and death.

Like the obligatory gunfight which resolves the Western's conflicts, the death of the movie gangster is an essential generic formality. As Colin McArthur has observed, "That the gangster must ultimately lie dead in the streets became perhaps the most rigid convention to the genre"³ (McArthur, 1972, p. 55). On a superficial narrative level, the gangster's death serves to enhance the genre's celebration of social order and sense of community morality. We must acknowledge, however, that this endorsement of social order is qualified throughout the story by the importance of the gangster's willful self-assertion. It also is tempered by the fact that his very death is the consummate reaffirmation of his own identity.

Stephen Karpf addresses these ambiguities in his analysis of the classic gangster films, suggesting that, "Even with Rico's death it cannot in fact be said that the film taught a moral lesson. Rico was in many respects an admirable person. He bettered himself in the only way he understood. There was never [any] indication that the more socially acceptable characters and their way of life were preferable to Rico and the road he had chosen. The point is made even more graphically in *The Public Enemy* when individuals on the right side of the law are shown to be either boring or hypocritical. Rico's death is in a great measure gratuitous, a kind of sacrifice to an external code, enforced from outside the construct of the film"⁴ (Karpf, 1973, pp. 59-60).

While Karpf seems to be building a case for LeRoy, Wellman, and other directors bowing to the pressures of industry censorship, we should keep in mind that the Production Code as such was not enforced until approximately three years after the release of these films. If there is any operative "code" in these movies, it is Hollywood's implicit code of social order, which governed the resolution in virtually all of its classic genre films. This gangster's death may honor an artificial, gratuitous code, but no more so than the romantic embrace which resolves the musical comedy, or the gunfight which resolves the Western. In fact, these classic gangster sagas maintain a narrative balance between the hero's individuality and the need for social order as effectively as any of Hollywood's countless genre films, despite their overtly prosocial "message" and predictable execution of the hero at film's end.

The consummate gangster saga: Howard Hawks' *Scarface*

If any of the early gangster films seemed intent upon upsetting that balance, it was Howard Hawks' brilliant but disturbing *Scarface*, whose characterization of the gangster and his milieu created a nightmarish vision of urban malaise that could not be offset by the hero's eventual death in the gutter. Paul Muni's portrayal of the maniacal, tragicomic "Scarface" Camonte, accentuated by Hawks' direction

and narrative pacing, depicts with sustained wit and intensity one gangster-hero's precipitous rise and fall. Hawks establishes the film's surreal landscape and its code of irrational brutality in the very opening sequence. A mob leader is executed while attending a lavish party in his honor, and the assassination generates a gang war for control of the city. The war enables the aggressive Camonte to rise through the ranks and eventually displace his own criminal mentor as the city's chief gangster. Unlike the savvy thugs portrayed by Cagney and Robinson in earlier films, Muni's "Scarface" is not clearly superior in courage and intelligence to his rivals or his own henchmen. In fact, his rise to power seems somewhat arbitrary, due primarily to the fact that Camonte was among the first gangsters in the city to procure a machine gun, that new innovation in the technology of urban warfare.

Perhaps what so disturbed audiences about *Scarface* was Muni's characterization of the less-than-heroic gangster-hero. Rico and Powers' obvious superiority to their colleagues and their environment—i.e., their participation in the myth of the self-made American man—served to temper their criminality. But Tony Camonte's primitive brutality, simple-minded naiveté, and sexual confusion made him a figure with little charisma and with virtually no redeeming qualities. Most of the film centers upon Tony's devotion to his mother and his insane overprotection of his sister (Ann Dvorak). Eventually, Tony's sister and his partner (George Raft

The most intense and disturbing portrayal of the American gangster was Paul Muni's Tony Camonte in Scarface (1932). Here, Camonte (right) defies local police as his sidekick, Little Boy (George Raft), looks on. (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research)



as "Little Boy," a role which established Raft's persona as a subdued, coin-flipping hoodlum) fall in love, and Tony responds with rage. He murders Little Boy when he discovers that the couple are sharing an apartment, and learns too late that they were actually married.

Little Boy's death precipitates Camonte's fall from criminal grace. Not only has Tony eliminated his own spiritual guide and chief strategist, but brought his obsessive desire for his sister out into the open. Appropriately, Tony and his sister die together in a barrage of police gunfire. They are both resigned to their inevitable demise by this point—in fact, Tony has devolved by film's end into a virtual human ape. After his sister is shot and killed, Tony runs wildly into the street in a final suicidal expression of his individual identity, thus providing the requisite death-in-the-gutter finale.

The gangster and the audience

Tony's moral/mortal retribution in the final moments of the film doesn't begin to offset the disturbing intensity and antisocial nature of his character. Outraged citizens, special interest groups (especially the Catholic Church), and even the federal government felt that this film was worthy of censorship. Unlike Rico's dying appeal to the "Mother of Mercy" and Powers' remorse from his hospital bed, Camonte expresses no regret either for his criminal career or his impending death. There is no indication at the end of the film that he has seen the error of his ways.

Like the earlier gangster biographies, *Scarface* incorporated a written prologue that stated its prosocial intentions. *Little Caesar* had opened with a biblical reference: "He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword"; *The Public Enemy* insisted that its aim was "to depict an environment, rather than glorify the criminal." *Scarface* opens with the assertion that the film is an "indictment" of the social conditions that produce criminal types, and it asks the viewer, "What are you going to do about it?" This prosocial posturing was lost on the audience, though, as was the sequence that was subsequently inserted because the producers felt the film was still too overtly anarchic for the public's sensibilities.

In this added sequence, a group of well-meaning bureaucrats decry the evils of crime and injustice. One of the establishment figures actually speaks directly into the camera about the evils of crime and social disorder. In a similar sequence later in the film, a dogmatic outspoken cop offers this response to a colleague who suggests that Camonte is a "colorful character":

What color is a crawling louse? Say, listen, that's the attitude of too many morons in this country. They think these big hoodlums are some sort of demigods. What do they do about a guy like Camonte? Sentimentalize him. Romance. Make jokes about him. They had some excuse for glorifying our old Western badmen. They met in the middle of the street at high noon, waited for each other to draw. But these things sneak up and shoot someone in the back and then run away.

These scenes are so out of character with the rest of the film that they now seem almost comical, and in a sense they further legitimize Camonte's antisocial disposition. Moreover, the failure of this and other disclaimers to undercut the gangster-hero's appeal is a good indication of the rhetorical power of Hollywood's narrative codes: camerawork, editing, dialogue, characterization, and even the star system work together to engage our sympathy for the criminal. So from a technical (as well as a thematic) standpoint, the gangster-hero functions as an *organizing sensibility* in these films, serving to offset the other characters' naive moralizing and to control our perception of his corrupt, Kafkaesque milieu.

Beyond the fact that we will rally behind the gangster's perverted dedication to the American ideals of rugged individualism, capitalism, and upward mobility, we also sympathize with the trace of humanism that invariably leads to his downfall. In each of the films we've been discussing, the gangster's demise is not caused by his criminality nor by the efforts of the police; instead, his death results from his own inability to sustain his code of anarchic ruthlessness. Adherence to Tony Camonte's dictum—"Do it first, do it yourself, and keep on doing it" (which might just as easily be Dale Carnegie's)—enables the gangster to progress smoothly through his life of crime. Only when he violates this code of brutal self-reliance does he fall.

His violation invariably is generated by a commitment to the gang-family. Camonte in *Scarface* is maniacally protective of his sister and kills his partner for robbing her of her virtue; Rico in *Little Caesar* cannot bring himself to kill his former partner who is about to turn state's evidence; Tommy Powers in *The Public Enemy* is killed trying to avenge the murder of his childhood friend and partner against impossible odds. In each instance the willful individualist compromises his virtuous selfishness and unwittingly seals his own fate. Thus the gangster finally is victimized by his own inability to escape the influence of mother, home, and culture. After all, even the most hard-bitten hoodlum loves his mother; even the most animalistic criminal is in some ways human.

The gangster's humanity is perverted by social forces which have confused his moral perspective, however, giving "human nature" itself a rather ambiguous twist within the gangster's peculiar ideology. Each of the classic gangsters displays a deep devotion to family that is projected onto their sidekicks (Joe Massara in *Little Caesar*, Matt Doyle in *The Public Enemy*, and Little Boy in *Scarface*). The sidekicks are presented at the outset of the films as initiate-heroes but, like their counterparts in many Westerns, they eventually reject the gangster-hero for the more traditional values of marriage, home, and family. Rejection by his junior partner leads directly to the hero's death in these films, indicating that his gangster-family cannot displace society's traditional family structure.

The gangster's confused sexuality is underscored not only by his devotion to—and often his jealousy of—his partner, but also by the way he treats women. Whereas the gangster inevitably is devoted to his mother, he treats all other women as mere emblems of his criminal lifestyle. They are like the clothes, automobiles, jewelry, and other ornaments of his profession. Any efforts by a woman



ing the final shootout: with every-
 xcept his sister either dead or hav-
 erted him, Scarface Camonte is
 to "get his." But critics and au-
 dies wondered whether his death at
 m's end sufficiently offset the ro-
 ziced portrayal of the gangster-
 (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater
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to domesticate him are spurned, a convention which is graphically displayed in *The Public Enemy*, when one of Tommy's girlfriends (Mae Clarke) nags him at the breakfast table and is rewarded with a grapefruit in the face.

The gangster's latent humanism, then, extends only as far as his own gangster-family and ultimately serves an ironic, paradoxical narrative function: It enhances the gangster's heroic appeal, but it also ensures his destruction. Most significantly, it subverts the apparent moral and social messages that these classic gangster films superficially project. The notion that "crime doesn't pay" is continually qualified by the suggestion that the criminal, regardless of social class, education, or opportunity, can control his own destiny in an otherwise alienating, depersonalizing environment. Destiny may kill him, but the intensity of the hero's commitment to his fate indicates that power and individuality are more important than a long life.

The popularity of these early films did little to sway the variety of governmental, educational, religious, and other special interest groups who felt that they were providing unwholesome role models for impressionable viewers. In fact, the volume of their outcry was roughly proportional to the popularity of the films in question. By the time *Scarface* was released in 1932, it was evident that the Hollywood studios and the previously ineffectual MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers

and Distributors of America) somehow would have to accommodate the growing public concern over the effects of gangster films on the society at large. The studios' collective decision to abide by their own Motion Picture Production Code, largely ignored since it had been established in 1930, seemed by 1934 to be the only way to avoid either massive boycotts or, worse still, federal intervention and censorship.

The production code and the death of the classic gangster

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

—"General Principles" of the MPPDA's Production Code⁵

These moral guidelines for Hollywood filmmaking were published in 1930, the same year as *Little Caesar* and before its many offspring were produced. It seems that most filmmakers ignored the General Principles and the Production Code. Or perhaps more appropriately, they simply took them for granted; Hollywood didn't have to publish a manifesto to assert that its genre films were mass-cultural morality tales. But even the prosocial messages—for example, that "crime doesn't pay"—could be undercut or severely qualified via narrative strategy and the style of cinematic presentation.

As Part One of this book suggests, the ambiguity of the gangster film's or of any other Hollywood genre's value system is virtually built into its narrative formula. In the early years, this ambiguity was realized and exploited only by the more talented and sensitive filmmakers, but it is ultimately this ambiguity and its accompanying narrative complexity that rendered the formula flexible enough to work its way into the fabric of American culture. Despite the film industry's avowed efforts to support the status quo (as much from economic necessity as from moral commitment), filmmakers and audiences were cooperating in refining genres that examined the more contradictory tenets of American ideology. Hollywood studio heads may have consistently placated educators, religious leaders, government officials, and other civic watchdogs with cosmetic "self-regulation" of movie content.

But the popular film narratives that were reworked and refined into genres were not so simplistic in their treatment of social reality.

Patterns of industry censorship

The film industry's earliest efforts to stem the tide of public concern over objectionable subject matter led to the National Board of Censorship in 1908. This board proved to be an adequate industry-based means of regulation until the feature film emerged as the standard movie fare in the mid-teens. As the conventions of the Hollywood narrative were developed, particularly the conflict-to-resolution plot structure that enabled filmmakers to treat "immoral" codes of behavior condemned at film's end, our culture's moral guardians loudly objected. When state censorship was threatened, the studios countered in 1922 by forming the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA, which in 1945 became the Motion Picture Association of America, the MPAA). This organization was designed to reaffirm and strengthen the industry's policy of self-regulation.

The MPPDA was run by former Postmaster General Will H. Hays—and was termed the "Hays Office"; by 1924, it devised a "Formula" that governed the adaptation of novels and stageplays for the screen. This regulatory gesture had little impact on the industry, so in 1927 the Office came up with a slightly stronger list of "Don'ts and Be Carefuls"⁶ (Steinberg, 1978, pp. 450-460). Like the earlier Formula, this list was composed of suggestions on the treatment of those areas of content deemed potentially objectionable: profanity, nudity, drug abuse, perversion, prostitution, interracial marriage and procreation, scenes of childbirth, sex hygiene, ridicule of religion or the clergy, and the "willful offense to any nation, race, or creed." (The range of moral issues in this brief list alone indicates the complexity of the nation's values and attitudes, although these contradictions clearly were ignored by the Association.) All of the above were off-limits to filmmakers "irrespective of the manner in which they are treated," whereas the subjects of crime, theft, firearms, brutality, rape, seduction, and law enforcement fell under a separate heading—"special care."

It was not until the "talkies" and the concurrent Jazz Age morality that the need to bolster the "be carefals" became apparent to industry heads. In 1930 Martin Quigley and the Reverend Daniel Lord were commissioned to draft a more comprehensive and detailed code. Quigley, publisher of the *Motion Picture Herald*, and Lord, a Jesuit priest who had served as moral adviser on earlier productions, wrote the MPPDA's Production Code which, for a quarter of a century, set down the law for Hollywood movies.

The Code opens with a preamble in which its authors state the range and influence of the Hollywood cinema: "Though regarding motion pictures primarily as entertainment without any explicit purpose of teaching or propaganda, [motion picture producers] know that the motion picture within its own field of entertain-

ment may be directly responsible for spiritual and moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking"⁷ (Steinberg, 1978, p. 460). In a later portion of the document, "Reasons Supporting Preamble of Code," Quigley and Lord are even more direct in their correlation of the industry's Production Code with the country's moral code. Theatrical motion pictures, they assert, are both "entertainment" and "art," and as such carry certain "moral obligations."

Regarding film as entertainment, they write:

Mankind has always recognized the importance of entertainment and its value in rebuilding the bodies and souls of human beings. But it has always recognized that entertainment can be of a character either HELPFUL or HARMFUL to the human race. . . . Hence the *Moral importance* of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. . . . A man may be judged by his standard of entertainment as easily as by the standard of his work.

And regarding film as art:

Though a new art, possibly a combination art, [the cinema] has the same object as the other arts, the presentation of human thought, emotion, and experience, in terms of an appeal to the soul through the senses. . . . Art can be morally good, lifting men to higher levels. This has been done through good music, great painting, authentic fiction, poetry, drama. Art can be morally evil in its effects. This is the case clearly enough with unclean art, indecent books, suggestive drama. The effect on the lives of men and women is obvious.

After outlining the various criteria which render commercial cinema the most widespread and influential of all forms of mass-cultural communication, Quigley and Lord offer the following summation: "In general, the mobility, popularity, accessibility, emotional appeal, vividness, straightforward presentation of fact in the film make for more intimate contact with a larger audience and for greater emotional appeal. Hence the larger moral responsibility of the motion pictures"⁸ (Steinberg, 1978, pp. 464-467).

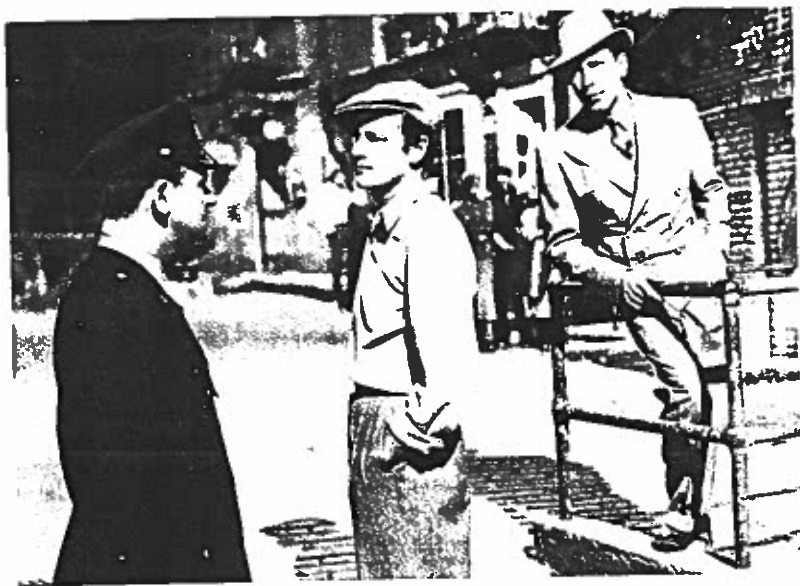
Unlike the previous "Formula" and the "Don'ts and Be Carefals," the 1930 Production Code was initially designed as more than simply a litany of vague suggestions for filmmakers. The Code seems to have been used essentially as a public relations device but was not closely enforced during the early 1930s. This is evident not only in the gangster genre but also in other areas: in the titillating, suggestive Mae West comedies, in von Sternberg's direction of the sensuous (and often adulterous) Marlene Dietrich, and in the casual amorality of the upper-crust comedies such as Lubitsch's *Trouble in Paradise* and Cukor's *Dinner at Eight*. Even the musicals of the period reflected Hollywood's more liberal—or what Quigley and Lord would have considered more decadent—moral attitudes. *Gold Diggers of 1933*, for example, dealt with prostitution and hustling ("gold digging"), and even included a production number in which women were shot in nude silhouette.

Recasting the gangster

Hollywood's evolving sexual mores generated less public consternation than did its portrayals of criminals and their violent, antisocial lifestyles, however. The growing popularity of gangster films between 1930 and 1933 put increasing pressure on Hollywood and the MPPDA to enforce its Production Code. The most effective pressure came from the Catholic Church, whose Legion of Decency, formed in 1934, threatened Catholics with eternal damnation for viewing any movies that it "condemned." The Hollywood studios, anxious about losing the Catholic audience, decided to put some teeth into the existing Hays Code, and initiated the Production Code Administration (PCA) under Joseph Breen.

Not only did the PCA judge all films released, it also fined those studios which did not abide by its decisions. So the Hays Office became the Hays-Breen Office,

*Recasting the gangster: rather than portray a gangster-hero whose criminality was a given element in his character, many post-1934 films centered upon impressionable youths forced to decide between criminality and going straight. In William Wyler's *Dead End* (1937), Joel McCrea's character is poised between law and order and the local hood (Humphrey Bogart). (Hoblitzelle Theatre Arts Collection)*



and the gangster genre, along with a few others, underwent a substantial overhaul. As stipulated within the Production Code,

The treatment of crimes against the law must not:

1. Teach methods of crime.
2. Inspire potential criminals with a desire for imitation.
3. Make criminals seem heroic or justified^o (Steinberg, 1978, p. 469).

LeRoy, Wellman, Hawks, and the various other filmmakers involved in the gangster genre's classic (1930-1933) period certainly could have argued that their films were within the moral framework of the Production Code, especially since they honored its implicit demands of moral retribution. But the gangster-hero's position within the genre's narrative structure—i.e., as hero, as the organizing sensibility through whom we perceive the urban milieu—generated considerable sympathy for his behavior and attitude. These filmmakers were capable of stylizing the gangster's milieu to reflect his psyche (through lighting, composition, set design, camerawork, editing), thus casting the urban environment and its social institutions in a generally unfavorable light.

Once they displaced the gangster figure from the center of the narrative—either by doubling him with a more effective prosocial figure, by instilling in him some "redeeming" qualities, or simply by reducing him to a supporting role—both the urban crime story and its style of presentation changed considerably. When the gangster was no longer "organizing" his world and its events, Hollywood's portrayal of urban crime became less vividly impressionistic, less intense, and less ambiguous—although not necessarily less brutal or violent. When the gangster was no longer the hero of the urban crime film he became, quite simply, a hardened criminal.

Genre variations in the late 1930s

After 1933, the genre went into a period of diffusion and decline which extended throughout the decade, and only occasionally was it able to recapture the visual style, characterization, and narrative complexity of the classic gangster sagas. During the latter half of the decade, the genre was dominated by two watered-down variations: the gangster-as-cop variation (*G-Men*, *Bullets or Ballots*, *Public Enemy's Wife*, *Racket Busters*, etc.), in which Cagney, Robinson, and other former screen gangsters were recast as lawmen who were virtually carbon copies of the criminal characters; and the Cain-and-Abel variation (*Manhattan Melodrama*, *Dead End*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, etc.), which counterbalanced the gangster with an equally strong (or perhaps stronger) prosocial figure. This latter variation was anticipated by *The Public Enemy*, in which Cagney's swaggering hoodlum was counterpointed by his straight-arrow brother. Cagney's thug utterly overwhelms his

sibling, however. Thus the prosocial character functions in that film primarily as a foil for the gangster-hero. In the Cain-and-Abel variation, this opposition is more balanced, in that a more significant character was written (and generally a more prominent star was cast) as an "answer" to the gangster's criminal posture.

Manhattan Melodrama (1934) is among the earliest and most interesting of this gangster variation. It was directed by W. S. van Dyke for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and starred William Powell and Clark Gable as the "doubles." The film opens with a priest saving two boys (one of whom is played by Mickey Rooney) whose parents are killed in a steamship fire. The boys are raised by an immigrant Jew, and eventually become well known: Blackie (Gable) as a professional gambler and womanizer with underworld connections; Jim Wade (Powell) as the District Attorney who ultimately prosecutes Blackie and later, as governor, refuses to stay his execution in the electric chair. The doubling of the principal characters is enhanced by the story's love interest (Myrna Loy as Eleanor), whose initial infatuation with Blackie dissolves once she meets the conservative, dependable Jim Wade. "It's the latest style to be callous about home and family," she tells Blackie when she leaves him. Eleanor wants these traditional values and finds them in her relationship with Wade.

The film's closing sequences, certainly among the more bizarre in '30s crime films, show the final confrontation between the two "brothers." Jim Wade, now the governor, is anguishing over whether to commute Blackie's death sentence. His doubts are resolved by the grinning, wise-cracking Blackie, who tells him, "It's okay, Jim, I'm just no good." (A reprise of the film's title theme, "The Bad in Every Man," is played over this exchange of dialogue.) As the pair walk Blackie's "last mile" to the chair, the condemned criminal's reasoning becomes even more lucid: "As far as I'm concerned, you're the best friend I ever had. But above all, you're the governor." Through all this, Gable's captivating charm and irrepressible grin counter the heavy-handed dialogue, reinforcing its illogic and providing an almost surreal tone to the scene. In a brief epilogue following the execution, Jim Wade resigns as governor because of his association-brotherhood with Blackie and walks off into the unknown with Eleanor. In retrospect, Jim's fate is not altogether preferable to Blackie's, whose stylish demise underscores his individual appeal and finally makes him the more sympathetic character of the two.

This death-with-dignity motif is given an even more outrageous twist in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938), where Cagney's familiar gangster is doubled with Pat O'Brien, who is typecast as an inner-city priest. Both products of the same dingy, working-class environment, Cagney and O'Brien select opposing lifestyles that lead them both to death row, where O'Brien as prison chaplain convinces the condemned Cagney to pretend he is a coward to keep the local slum kids from idolizing him. The ever-heroic Cagney agrees to the deception and dies screaming and whining—something that would be totally out of character for both the star and his role were it not for the fact that we in the audience know the truth. Beyond the ambiguous dimension this lends to Cagney's character, there are other contradictions involved: for example, although the slum kids on the screen (actors in a movie) believe in Cagney's cowardice, the audience (real slum kids among the



In *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), Cagney's gangster serves as a negative role model for the now-familiar *Dead End Kids*. (Robert Downing Collection)

people in it) view his death as a final, heroic gesture. Once again, some fancy narrative footwork has masked the celebration of rugged, stoic individualism behind a thin veneer of prosocial posturing.

A less ambiguous and therefore less interesting variation of the gangster genre in the late 1930s was the gangster-as-cop formula, in which the hero retained his brutal, cynical style but was cast as an agent of social order. Such films featured a tough, self-reliant cop who operates by his own rules to fight crime, thus sustaining much of the heroic appeal of his gangster predecessor. In *G-Men* (1935), Cagney plays an attorney (Brick Davis) raised by a businessman with gangster ties. When an associate is killed by criminals, Brick rejects a career as a "shyster" to join the FBI. William Kighley's direction of this film, especially those segments describing the training programs and crime-fighting procedures of "the Bureau," employs a detached, documentary style. This naturalistic portrayal apparently was designed both to enhance the crime-fighters' rather than the criminals' appeal and to lobby for the use of firearms by FBI agents.

Throughout the film, Cagney/Brick is at odds with the criminal element as well as his own superior officers. The eventual showdown with the mobsters responsible for his friend's death is precipitated by the hero's own cocky, aggressive style of police work. Ultimately, this variation on the gangster formula proved notice-

ably lacking in dramatic conflict: an ambitious cop doing his job, no matter how single-mindedly, is much less engaging and complex than an ambitious gangster attacking society.

Related to the gangster-cop films was the middle-man variation, in which the hero is aligned with neither the prosocial nor the criminal forces, although he develops close ties with each. This kind of film generally involves an initiate-criminal's decision—motivated by the love of a good woman and/or the sudden recognition of the error of his ways—to go straight, thereby placing himself between the forces of crime and social order. Such a variation takes the supporting character from the classic gangster films (the subordinate partner of the gangster who eventually rejects crime for the values of hearth and home) and recasts him as the central character.

Perhaps Raoul Walsh's *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) is the most interesting example of this variation. The opening of the film is a seeming throwback to the classic gangster biographies of the early '30s, with Cagney portraying racketeer Eddie Bartlett (supposedly modeled after Larry Fay). Eventually, however, the film lapses into the middle-man motif, when Bartlett falls for a good woman (Priscilla Lane as Jean), whose refusal to marry him precipitates his fall from power. By the film's end Cagney has quit the rackets but cannot escape his criminal past, although he does redeem himself in a final selfless act: to save Jean's husband he executes a ruthless former henchman (played by Humphrey Bogart) who had taken over his chieftain role, and is then gunned down on the steps of a church, pursued by hostile gangsters and police alike. As Eddie lies dead, his former moll (Gladys George) evokes the fate of the classic gangster with the film's closing line: "He used to be a big shot."

This middle-man variation enabled filmmakers to celebrate the mediating hero's individual virtues and also to liberate him from a certain death. In the more effective films of this type—like *Johnny Apollo* (Henry Hathaway, 1940), *Dark City* (William Dieterle, 1950), and *Underworld USA* (Sam Fuller, 1961)—the protagonist's vacillation between a life of crime and an awakened social consciousness offsets the prescribed resolution of death and moral retribution. The hero may miraculously beat the rap and get the girl, as does Charlton Heston in *Dark City*; or he may be unable to completely sever his underworld ties. Cliff Robertson in *Underworld USA* embarks upon a criminal career that recalls Cagney's in *The Roaring Twenties*, and both films end similarly with the dying hero staggering down a crowded street. A freeze-frame close-up of Robertson's clenched fist, the final image in Fuller's remarkable film, is yet another graphic emblem of the gangster-hero's refusal, even in death, to succumb to the social forces that have created and destroyed him.

The bandit films of the early 1940s

After the 1930s, the "syndicate" variation of the urban gangster film displaced the more naive and romantic original: the classic lone wolf was evolving into an "orga-

nization man." Whereas this style of film presented a more accurate view of urban crime, its characters were scarcely as engaging as their classic counterparts. So by the early 1940s, the genre's narrative logic had evolved to a stage that precluded the success of the isolated gangster within his urban arena. This problem generated yet another variation of the gangster film—the "rural gangster" or "bandit" films. *The Petrified Forest* (1936) and Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) had anticipated this variation. These films cast the gangster-hero into a rural environment, thereby setting up oppositions between gangster and police and also between urban and rural values. In addition, the late-'30s regeneration of the Western genre seems to have contributed to this variation, especially in those films that center upon the Western outlaw.

In Henry King's *Jesse James* (1939), for instance, Jesse and Frank James (Tyronce Power and Henry Fonda) are virtuous country boys whose mother (Jane Darvell) is killed and their land stolen in a conspiracy of big business interests (i.e., the railroad, the banks, and local lawmen). After the film's opening title sequence, we read a preface that sees "The Iron Horse" as an "ogre" that violates the virginal landscape, thus placing both the West and its socializing forces in a context that seems more appropriate to the gangster genre than to the Western. After Jesse has been killed by a disloyal gang member, the local townspeople gather around his grave to celebrate the memory of a renegade hero who had opposed the interests of unenlightened capitalism. It's difficult to avoid associating this deification of Power's Western gangster with the classic gangsters from earlier films who also died fighting society's dehumanizing, fascistic impulses.

The contemporary rural bandit-hero, a virtual hybrid of the city gangster and the Western outlaw, emerged full-blown in 1941 with Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra*. This film takes Humphrey Bogart out of his supporting-role status and follows his character, Roy Earle, through the Sierra Nevada Mountains in his flight from the cops. In the process, Bogart establishes a star-crossed romance with Ida Lupino, learning too late the error of his ways and the transcendent value of human love.

The more effective films of this gangster variation—principally *High Sierra*, Nicholas Ray's *They Drive by Night*, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, and Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us*—created heroes of tragic proportions who reevaluated their past misdeeds but realized the inevitability of their fate. Such an ambivalent portrait of the hero and his changing values is a great deal more complex morally and socially than that of the late-'30s bandit precursors. In those films, the criminal was either utterly depraved (Bogart's Duke Mantee in *The Petrified Forest*) or completely sympathetic (Henry Fonda in *You Only Live Once*). The hero's transition in the more effective films from hardened, cynical gangster to humane, sensitive lover taxes the genre's demands of moral retribution. The tragic irony of the hero's certain death is intensified by his new capacity for romantic love, a radical reorientation of the gangster's perverse, misdirected sexuality. Critics of the gangster genre have long noted the hero's generally aberrant and repressed psychosexual identity. There were suggestions of Rico's homosexuality in *Little Caesar* and of an incestuous rapport between Tony and his sister in *Scarface*. The gangster's preoccupation with firearms, his inhuman brutality, and his mistreatment of any



The legendary Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were given heavy treatment in the rural-bandit variation of the gangster genre—their story has been retold in some half-dozen Hollywood movies. Perhaps the most successful film about them was Arthur Penn's 1967 version, *Bonnie and Clyde*. (Pictured here, Faye Dunaway, Michael J. Pollard, and Warren Beatty.) (Private Collection)

woman outside his immediate family accentuated his apparent sexual confusion. Rural bandit films, however, seem to indicate that flight from urban decadence heals the gangster's antisocial and "unnatural" impulses, even if it cannot cure the more serious problems that will lead him, inevitably, to his death.

Key Largo and White Heat: The gangster's epitaph

There were city-bred gangsters, though, whose flight into the country met with less romantic ends. Certainly the most significant of these are Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson in *Key Largo*, 1948) and Cody Jarrett (James Cagney in *White Heat*, 1949), whose characters seemed to be nostalgic reincarnations of Rico Bandello and Tommy Powers. In these later films, the gangster figures had to share the limelight with another screen persona popularized during the 1940s, the detective. Bogart's Sam Spade provided the prototype in John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, a film that struck an ideal balance in the characterization of the urban redeemer-

hero who operates by his own instincts and moral code, divorced from both the city's criminal element and its ineffectual and usually corrupt prosocial agencies. This detective formula is significant not only because it represents a variation of the gangster/urban crime formula that dominated postwar filmmaking, but also because it provided a narrative context in which the classic gangster could effectively come back to the screen, even if for only a brief glimpse, in the late 1940s.

The classic gangster's intense but ill-fated return was most notable in another pair of films directed by John Huston and Raoul Walsh. These are Huston's *Key Largo*, which traces the return of a war hero (Bogart) to the States, where he falls in love with the widow (Lauren Bacall) of a dead war buddy and defends her from a fleeing gangster (Robinson); and Walsh's *White Heat*, in which an undercover detective (Edmund O'Brien) infiltrates a notorious bandit gang and brings their leader (Cagney) to justice. Ultimately, the detective story in each of these films merely provides a framework for briefly resurrecting the screen gangster, who would be returned to the grave at film's end. Although the detective figure prevails in each film, thus honoring the contract of moral retribution, neither gangster dies in the gutter: Bogie finishes off Robinson on a runaway fishing boat in the Atlantic Ocean, whereas Cagney is blown into oblivion when his exchange of gunfire with O'Brien ignites the huge gas tank on which Cagney is standing. Cagney/Jarrett's apocalyptic demise seems especially fitting for Hollywood's screen gangster, as his seething villainy rises in a towering mushroom cloud in the film's closing image.

The classic gangster's last hurrah: Edward G. Robinson as Johnny Rocco in *Key Largo* (1948); James Cagney as Cody Jarrett in *White Heat* (1949). (Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research); (Culver Pictures)



Although Robinson/Rocco's death in *Key Largo* is somewhat less dramatic, the actor's portrayal of the aging anarchist who the criminal world has all but forgotten is evocative and disturbing. Robinson's Johnny Rocco is a mobster who has been deported as an "unfriendly alien" and terrorizes a remote Florida resort while he waits for the chance to pull off a grandiose "job" that will return him to kingpin status. His opposition with war hero/lover/detective Frank McCloud (Bogart) presents a fascinating example of how stars and genres themselves evolve and intermingle. *Key Largo* is a hybrid of the '30s gangster film (dominated by Robinson) and the '40s detective film (dominated by Bogart), and one of its more interesting aspects is the way Huston orchestrates their interaction. Bogart and Robinson alternately dominate the narrative until their final confrontation. In various stages of the film, we recall other film situations: Robinson's role in *Little Caesar*, the Robinson-Bogart pairing in late-'30s gangster films where Bogart invariably played henchman to Robinson's star persona (*Bullets or Ballots*, *Kid Galahad*, *The Roaring Twenties*, *Brother Orchid*), Bogart's graduation to leading-man roles in the early 1940s (*High Sierra*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Casablanca*), and his successful pairing with Bacall in the mid-'40s (*To Have and Have Not*, *The Big Sleep*, *Dark Passage*).

Key Largo's narrative is framed by a romantic melodrama featuring Bogart and Bacall. The core of the film, however, is Robinson's characterization of Rocco and his reunion with Bogart's McCloud—a reunion that sees their previous film roles reversed. When Bogart/McCloud arrives at the island resort in the opening sequence, Robinson/Rocco is hiding out, off-screen, and the plot at this point concerns itself with the Bogart-Bacall relationship (their box-office clout had been enhanced by their marriage a year earlier). Once the couple is firmly established, Robinson/Rocco emerges from an upstairs suite and immediately assumes control of the film.

Robinson's performance as the aging, decadent gangster is impeccable, as is Claire Trevor's portrayal of Rocco's hard-bitten, alcoholic "moll," Gay Dawn, for which the actress won an Academy Award. Bogart plays something of a reluctant hero in this conflict, a man exhausted by his wartime heroics, and thus he remains a peripheral figure. Ironically, in this role Bogart reverses the screen role that first drew attention to him in *Petrified Forest* (1936). In it he played Duke Mantee, a brutal outlaw whose gang terrorizes a small group of people, including two lovers, in a remote locale. Now, in *Key Largo*, Bogart plays the victimized lover who is himself terrorized—and in what becomes typical of the "minor" roles in many gangster films after the mid-'30s, the intruding gangster is by far the more complex and interesting figure.

Throughout the middle section of *Key Largo*, Robinson/Rocco is the focal character and controlling force within the narrative. Huston allows Robinson considerable range in his characterization, and the actor retains just enough sadistic brutality to prevent the audience from developing a sentimental attachment to him. Rocco verbally abuses everyone in sight. He dupes the local sheriff into killing two rebellious citizens in order to cover up a murder he himself committed; he promises his pathetic, despoiled mistress a drink if she'll sing one of the torch songs that

once made her the toast of the underworld, and then refuses her the drink once she has humiliated herself.

Perhaps the most effective and illuminating scene is the shaving sequence, where Rocco (framed in low-angle medium-close-up) reminisces about his lost power and prestige while one of his lackeys dutifully shaves him. Robinson articulates the gangster persona and his fall from grace in striking terms, pontificating on the pragmatics of street crime and reaffirming his own privileged role within the criminal constellation. "There are thousands of guys with guns," he brags, "but only one Rocco."

The narrative conflicts are resolved when a squall hits the resort, upsetting the gangster's operation and forcing Rocco's gang to flee the Keys in a fishing boat. Bogart/McCloud is forced to pilot the boat and kills all the henchmen while Robinson/Rocco remains below, setting the scene for a climactic confrontation. Whereas the hero's execution of the inhuman criminal is very much in keeping with Bogart's virile detective-redeemer role, the shootout is a distinct inversion of the Robinson-Bogart pairings in earlier gangster films. *Key Largo*'s showdown situates Bogart/McCloud topside, looming above a hatchway until Robinson/Rocco emerges from below. Huston films the sequence in an enchange of point-of-view shots so that we view the hero from below framed by the hatchway and then view the villain-victim from above, entrapped within the bowels of the boat and pleading for his life. The Bogart character is well aware of Hollywood's code of retribu-



Humphrey Bogart, having graduated from gangster-henchman to hard-boiled hero by the 1940s, confronts Robinson's over-the-hill gangster in *Key Largo*. (Culver Pictures)

tion, of course—having been victimized by it himself in countless crime sagas—and he pumps bullets into Robinson with obvious relish.

Strong stuff, indeed. But not even *Key Largo*'s brutal finale can prepare us for the psychotic brutality of *White Heat*, which appeared the following year. An effective subversion of the rural bandit variation with its love-conquers-all-but-death plot, *White Heat* traces the perverted life and loves of gangster Cody Jarrett (Cagney), who kills cops and his own gang members with equal disregard and whose heart belongs only to Mother. From the film's opening title shot of a locomotive pulsing toward the camera out of a dark tunnel, until the final apocalyptic explosion which destroys the hero ("I made it, Ma, top o' the world"), Raoul Walsh's narrative is a morass of Freudian imagery and psycho-sexual undercurrents. In fact, the film is as much a sexual psycho-drama as it is a gangster saga, because of Cagney/Jarrett's classic Oedipal relationship with his gangster-mother (Margaret Wycherly). She is the apparent focus of his recurrent seizures, and after she is killed by his jealous, cuckold wife (Virginia Mayo) and his former initiate-partner, Jarrett experiences a transference of his relationship with her to a detective masquerading as a gangster (Edmund O'Brien).

The overt, unromanticized brutality and emotional shock tactics of *White Heat* are striking even to contemporary audiences. With unrelenting intensity Cagney/Jarrett's violent outbursts are directed indiscriminately at anyone who challenges or crosses him. The film opens with the outlaw gang robbing a train in rugged mountain terrain. When one of the engineers overhears Cody's name, Cody shoots him, and later assigns one of his men to kill a gang member who was accidentally burned during the robbery and cannot travel with the fleeing gangsters.

In an ironic foreshadowing of Cody's own plight, the gang member had been struck by escaping steam and had grabbed his face, screaming in agony, much as Cody himself would do during his later seizures. The jet of scalding steam, then, is a visual manifestation of Cody's mental condition—the "white heat" of the film's title—that intensifies until the inevitable explosion at film's end. Not only does Cody's pathological state provide a rationale for his aberrant behavior, it also exonerates society from any responsibility for his criminality. We learn that his outlaw father had been confined in a mental institution and had died of similar seizures. As the narrative develops, it becomes increasingly obvious that Cody is willing to gamble with death because he assumes the same fate that had destroyed his father awaits him.

Cody's sole redeeming quality, like that of Cagney's Tommy Powers in *The Public Enemy*, is his love for his mother, but in *White Heat* even this quality is perverted. It is Ma Jarrett herself who schooled her son in criminality and gang leadership, and Cody's devotion to her borders on the psychopathic. After the initial train robbery and the return to his mountain hideout, Cody has an attack in front of the gang, and it is Ma who takes him into a bedroom and sits him on her lap, soothing his pain and encouraging him to be even more ruthless. Only Cagney could pull off a scene like this one—cringing with mental anguish while sitting on his mother's lap—and throughout the film the actor's caustic demeanor and subtle



Mental heat and mother love: the most serious threats to Cody Jarrett's gangster status in White Heat are his recurring mental seizures and his skewed Oedipal fixation for "Ma" (Margaret Wycherly). (Culver Pictures)

vulnerability render even the inhuman Cody Jarrett somewhat sympathetic. The film is filled with actions and dialogue that virtually no one but Cagney could deliver with any credibility: He assures the pathetic, whining Mayo, "You'd look good in a shower curtain"; punches a lackey who had left a radio on and tells him, "If that radio's dead, it's gonna have company"; he locks a double-crossing gang member in a car trunk and then gives him "a little air" by shooting the trunk full of holes; he walks alone at night after his mother's death and later tells O'Brien, "It was a good feeling, walking out there—just me and Ma."

Although O'Brien's undercover detective, who initially befriends and eventually betrays the gangster-hero, clearly is intended to counterbalance Cagney/Jarrett's antisocial posture, Walsh's characterization of him tips the scale toward the criminal forces. In fact, *White Heat* recalls the classic gangster films where the police and their crime-fighting procedures were scientific and methodical to the point of comic banality. In one sequence three undercover agents are following Ma Jarrett in separate autos. This exchange of dialogue occurs as they establish radio identi-

ties: "We'll use the ABC method. I'm B." "I'm C." "I'm A." Walsh plays the scene straight, cutting from one car to another with the same dull precision exhibited by the agents. When Ma spots the autos, however, the camera assumes her subjective viewpoint. The cutting pace increases, and the narrative recovers its visual and emotional intensity. Throughout Walsh portrays the prosocial forces as objectively, as straightforwardly, as "stylelessly" as possible, reserving his technical and narrative flourishes for the gang.

The ultimate flourish, of course, is the film's climactic inferno. O'Brien informs the local police of the intended payroll heist at a chemical plant. When the gang is intercepted, the members disperse throughout the plant's maze of pipelines, steel walkways, and chemical storage containers. One by one, they are killed or surrender in their flight through this surreal garden of modern technology. Finally only Cody is still at large, and with night about to fall, he climbs to the top of a huge storage tank. During an exchange of gunfire with his pursuers, he lapses into his final seizure, and one of his own bullets sets off a tremendous blast, illuminating the night sky and bidding the antihero an appropriate farewell.

The deaths of Robinson/Rocco in *Key Largo* and Cagney/Jarrett in *White Heat* mark the figurative demise of the classic gangster-hero, that irrational, aggressive social animal who had been born and bred on Hollywood lots and who had so effectively conveyed the darker side of America's city life. The coincidental relaxation of censorship and the audience's increasing sophistication about organized crime worked to sustain much of the gangster genre's original narrative and thematic appeal throughout the 1950s and '60s. But these later films lack the visual and emotional appeal as well as the dynamic individual performances of the classic gangster films. In retrospect, the gangster genre is one of the few Hollywood formulas that did not grow old gracefully, that did not become richer and more complex with age. This may have been at least partially due to the genre's "unnatural" evolution after the Production Code redirected its development.

Unlike the vast majority of the prosocial urban crime films that they spawned, the classic gangster sagas display an intuitive, spontaneous, and highly expressive vision of the American Dream gone berserk. The gangster and his bleak urban milieu brutally exposed the contradictory values, the confused sensibilities, and the existential *angst* of contemporary American life. During the 1930s, however, Hollywood was only beginning to examine these issues. The years during and following the war, with the concurrent rise of *film noir* and the hardboiled detective film, proved to be a fertile period for extending both Hollywood and the audience's general concern for the quality of America's urban-industrial lifestyle.

The Hardboiled- Detective Film

5

Film noir, Citizen Kane, and the rise of American Expressionism

Whoever went to the movies with any regularity during 1946 was caught in the midst of Hollywood's profound postwar affection for morbid drama. From January through December deep shadows, clutching hands, exploding revolvers, sadistic villains and heroines tormented with deeply rooted diseases of the mind flashed across the screen in a panting display of psychoneuroses, unsublimated sex and murder most foul.

—D. Marsham, *Life magazine* (August 25, 1947)

The emergence of *film noir*

Throughout the 1940s, a stylistic and thematic trend was developing in Hollywood which by the end of the decade determined the look and the feel of the industry's most popular and significant productions. *Film noir*, as the style was dubbed by French critics, so dominated late '40s and early '50s films—principally those shot in black and white and involving the issue of urban