

Crime Films and Prison Films

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OVERVIEW

Chapter 7 provides:

- A consideration of the enduring appeal of crime films.
- A discussion of some of the most popular crime film genres including cop films, private eye movies, the Western, pirate films, gangster movies and the gritty British crime film.
- An analysis of some of the main themes which commonly emerge within these genres, with a particular focus on the various forms of masculinity represented in crime films.
- A discussion of the prison in cinema, its role as allegory and its relationship to penal reform.
- A consideration of the documentary film.
- An exploration of what 'remakes' of classic crime films can tell us about changing cultural attitudes to crime and justice, using *The Taking of Pelham 123* as a case study.

KEY TERMS

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| ■ audience | ■ masculinity |
| ■ catharsis | ■ narrative arc |
| ■ crime film | ■ prison film |
| ■ documentary | ■ realism |
| ■ film noir | ■ remakes |
| ■ genre | |

The *crime film* is arguably the most enduring of all cinematic *genres* which makes writing this chapter somewhat daunting. Where does one start and finish with a subject as vast as 'crime film'? What to include and what to miss out? How to condense into a single chapter movies as diverse as *Bullitt* (1968) and *Batman* (1989), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) and *Midnight Express* (1978), *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Heat* (1995), *Tightrope* (1984) and *Man On Wire* (2008), or *Pirates of the Caribbean: the Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) and *Captain Phillips* (2013)? The answer is that it is impossible. The 'crime film' incorporates and underpins an array of better-known genres including cops-and-robbers, the gangster film, the pirate movie, the Western, the private eye film, the classic 'whodunnit', the heist movie, anime and *film noir* and, ultimately, all this chapter can do is to introduce the reader to a few ideas and encourage further reading and watching. The chapter discusses crime films, *prison films*, documentaries and 'remakes', and will largely focus on those films that have enjoyed significant commercial success. This highly selective

and deliberately populist stance is in contrast to other criminological treatments of film which aim to cover 'the best and most important crime films and avoid the worst and most trivial' (Rafter, 2000: 7), and/or which try to say *something* (however pithy) about every film that can be included within a particular genre for fear that some pedant will shout 'but what about ...?'. This chapter simply hopes to raise some interesting but exploratory issues about a handful of somewhat randomly selected films which tie in to some of the themes raised elsewhere in this volume.

The appeal of crime films

First of all, though, it is instructive to ask the question: what accounts for the enduring popularity of the crime film? Generally such movies will centre on a criminal, a victim and an avenger (Leitch, 2002) and the similarities, differences and interactions between these adversaries usually constitute an exciting and tension-building dynamic. Another possible reason for their attraction is that they incorporate elements which appeal to the audience's own antisocial or deviant tendencies or to their ambivalence toward the police and other authorities; hence the number of incompetent or corrupt cops and judges we encounter in movies. We sometimes find ourselves empathizing with the villain rather than the good guy and even the most depraved offenders can be attractive and charismatic in the movie world (Anthony Hopkins' portrayal of serial killer Hannibal Lecter in the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, for example). In cinema, activities which in real life are often grubby, mundane or quite administrative – such as organized crime – are given an aura of mystery, glamour and recklessness. Some film-makers and critics maintain that crime film is cathartic; it allows audiences to live out their normally suppressed deviant fantasies in a vicarious but harmless manner and gives them a glimpse of other worlds (from the old-fashioned casino to the courtroom) that may be unknown to them in the real world. In some cases, film may illuminate worlds that are not just unknown but unknowable to many viewers. Films about prisons and the Mafia are two examples of subjects that are surrounded in myth; hidden societies that fascinate and intrigue. Curiously, then, the mediated version of these worlds is better known to most people than the reality, and many individuals who do enter these realms may have expectations of them that come straight from the movies – and may even adopt personas or modes of behaviour in imitation of characters from films (Jewkes, 2002; Larke, 2003; Fiddler, 2007; Parker, 2009b).

Audiences may also achieve *catharsis* through the conversion of potentially unbearable social anxieties into entertainment, as latent moral panics are

scaled down from the global to the subcultural and threats as diverse as terrorism, invading aliens and natural disasters are vanquished by charismatic heroes within the comfortably generic lines of the crime film (Leitch, 2002). Alternatively, as noted in Chapter 1, the media's inclination to make all audience members equal in their potential 'victimness', may result in an obsessive fascination with such narratives. Consequently, like all other media, films may represent an hysterical replaying of the possibility of being a victim and staving it off (Osborne, 1995). Or perhaps crime films appeal simply because they permit closure: they reassure us that criminal behaviours *can* be explained and that serious offences *can* be solved. They offer immutable definitions of the 'crime problem' and guide our emotional responses to it (Rafter, 2007).

While much of the appeal lies in the thrill inherent in most crime film genres – the pursuit of the 'baddie', the high-speed car chase, the casual violence, the clever build-up of tension, or whatever – these scenes are often little more than set pieces which would leave the audience disappointed and unfulfilled if left out. Many crime films have a limited *narrative arc* and are relatively predictable in terms of their structure, storyline and dialogue. For example, the 23-part *James Bond* series succeeds in being a multi-million dollar global franchise, as well as a very British institution, partly by virtue of its sheer formulaic-ness. While Daniel Craig's 007 is a darker and more violent character than Bond as played by Pierce Brosnan or Roger Moore, it is only his new-found sensitivity to (some) women – and, much to some fans' chagrin, his blond hair – that differentiate him from the first incarnation of Bond played by Sean Connery in 1962. While the production team behind Bond have had to respond to the rapid-fire camerawork and impressive stunts that showcase Jason Bourne, the decision to continue with the tried-and-tested formula of 007 movies also suggests that the franchise is impervious to the ideas of different directors (there have been ten directors so far). Both Steven Spielberg and Quentin Tarantino are reported to have wanted to direct a Bond film, perhaps thinking they could bring something fresh and personal to the franchise. They may have been rejected precisely because something new is not considered desirable.

To take another example, gangster or 'mob' movies usually have a structure formed, in part, by the obsession with rules that is fundamental to the genre. Based on unquestioning loyalty to the 'family', honouring one's debts to each other, and regarding the 'godfather' or gang leader with a mixture of fear and respect, the group is constituted as the supreme social authority and, while the rules are frequently broken, with double-crossing and dealing providing much of the pace and anticipation of the genre (as well as underlining the message that crime doesn't pay), the social structure and unshakeable authority of the gangster family remains intact. Moreover, there is a strong, recognizable lineage that takes us from the gangster movies of the 1920s and 1930s through *The Godfather Trilogy* (1972, 1974, 1990) and *Goodfellas* (1990) to Guy Ritchie's parodic *Lock,*

Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (1998) and Quentin Tarantino's even more stylized pastiches of gangsterdom in *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). We understand each by reference to the others and it is partly the audience's assured familiarity with the codes and conventions of the genre that accounts for their continuing success (Langford, 2005). Finally, the message that crime doesn't pay also frequently underpins movies based on real-life stories – for example *Blow* (2001), *The Krays* (1990) and *Goodfellas* (1990) – even if they have spent the best part of two hours demonstrating quite graphically that it does.

The crime film: masculinity, autonomy, the city

The pleasing familiarity of a formula also extends to cinematic themes. Indeed, what strikes me as I start to reflect on the topic is that there are a small number of key premises and characterizations that shape many crime movies. One theme that appears to run through all crime genres is a particular type of 'manliness'; a rugged *masculinity* that combines with heroic agency (Sparks, 1996) to form a self-confident and self-reliant protagonist. The 'tough guy' has been a staple of cinema since the first gangster movies were produced in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Exemplified by characters such as Tony Camonte in *Scarface* (1932; remade in 1983) and Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* (1931), strong heroes (even if engaged in illegal activities) held huge appeal for American audiences in the Depression era who were disenchanted by authority and wanted to take control of their lives (Leitch, 2002).

Since that time, crime films have presented an archetype of individualistic masculinity set against larger forces, whether the wide expanse of the high seas or cattle plains (and the primitives who inhabit these territories), or the formal, occupational organizations and structures that contain and curtail their individual autonomy and maverick tendencies. For example, *cop films* (let us use *Dirty Harry* as an archetype) are dominated by the loner who battles against the bureaucracy and incompetence of their own police department, or at least refuses to play by the rules (Carrabine, 2009). In addition to being obsessive and isolated at work, the American cop usually has a private life which is deviant, dysfunctional or nonexistent and his lonely isolation has been described as 'the most immutable of all the genre's conventions' (Leitch, 2002: 222). The *gangster movie* reveals the 'fantasy of a secret society with masculine rituals' (Larke, 2003: 128) and the 'Godfather' is surely the alpha male of the film world. The *pirate film* – from the swashbuckling epics of the first half of the 20th century that showcased matinee idols such as Errol Flynn and Tyrone Power, to the recent *Pirates of the Caribbean* series starring Johnny Depp – has been characterized as 'a man fighting for the right in a world that does not

understand the right as he sees it' (Parish, 1995: 3, cited in Parker, 2009a: 174). The freedom, solitude and resourcefulness evoked in the *Western* appears to have a near universal appeal to men and boys: 'it's fair to say that in the minds of many men, even if only for fleeting moments, there's a hankering to be as free and rugged, as engaging and boisterous, as hardworking, daring and independent, as truly American, as the cowboy' (Hassrick 1974: 139; cited in Parker, 2011). The *heist movie* is about the masculine pursuit of professionalism and perfection – the 'perfect crime' – at the expense of domestic and familial ties (Rayner, 2003). More complex is the *film noir*, which may be read as a definition and defence of masculinity as the hard-boiled hero grapples with 'the dangers represented by the feminine – not just women in themselves but also any non-"tough" potentiality of his own identity as a man' (Leitch, 2002: 72; see also Krutnik, 1991). In short, the hero embodies a charismatic, self-contained, hyper-masculinity. He may be unusual, unpleasant even, but he is always a 'complete man' (Chandler, 1944: cited in Sparks, 1996).

The private eye – who often appears in film noir – is sometimes described as the urban cowboy of the screen and, once again masculinity is a defining feature:

The popular image of the private eye has less to do with his idealized, often obsessive professionalism, however, than with his masculinity. Far more than films about police detectives or amateur detectives, [private eye] films regard detective work as a test of what Frank Krutnik calls the private eye's 'self-sufficient phallic potency'. This convention is so deeply ingrained in private eye films that it is hard to appreciate how arbitrary and strange it is ... there is no reason to assume that testosterone ought to be a prerequisite for the job. (Leitch, 2002: 197)

Leitch goes on to explain that the genre's celebration of masculinity is exemplified by *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) in which the private eye hero, Sam Spade, is pitched against a voracious femme fatale and three men clearly characterized as homosexuals. Spade is thus 'admirably, heroically masculine' precisely because he is not female and not gay: hence the private eye's manliness must constantly be confirmed through conflicts with asexual or bisexual characters – or more often with female or gay male characters – whom the film leaves 'demystified, disempowered, defeated and dehumanized' (Leitch, 2002: 198).

That is not to say that all cinematic heroes are the same or even that their (hetero)sexuality is as clearly defined as Leitch's description suggests; crime films permit a wide variety of masculinities within a diverse array of settings and narratives (Sparks, 1996). In fact Davies and Smith (1997: 19) go so far as to suggest that since the late 1980s representations of white males as domesticated, feminized or paternal have dominated film genres to such a degree that it is only in the films of Quentin Tarantino that 'macho masculinity' (which we might characterize as violent and uncompromising, although always underpinned by

wit and humour) remains intact. This seems an overstatement and one that overlooks both that even 'macho masculinity' can have many facets. It is also worth remembering that some of Tarantino's regular cast members have taken a Tarantino-esque version of masculinity into other roles, as the discussion below of John Travolta's character in *The Taking of Pelham 123* will illustrate. Furthermore, hyperbolized representations of masculinity may be cyclical: Sparks observes that the exaggerated muscularity of Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and their ilk in the cinema of the late 1980s and 1990s may have been in reaction to instabilities in notions of masculine gender identities at the time, i.e. the domesticated, feminized and paternal roles that Davies and Smith refer to. But since that time we have seen a new type of hero emerge, personified by *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and its sequels. While undeniably an action hero, actor Matt Damon has said of his character; 'Bourne is about authenticity, not fashion, frippery and style. He's about essence and, unlike Bond, you'd never see him watching a girl coming out of the sea with a bikini on. There's none of those old-fashioned macho attitudes' (*Telegraph*, 11 August 2007).

Ironically, Bourne might not be directing his gaze at the near-naked female form but it seems that it is not just representations of women which are erotically charged in mainstream cinema. The appeal – to men rather than women – of the muscular physiques of Stallone and Schwarzenegger are summed up by Sparks, following Laura Mulvey, as a 'narcissistic identification of the male spectator with images of mastery and omnipotence' (Sparks, 1996: 352). To these former action heroes we might add Daniel Craig as James Bond in *Casino Royale* (2006) emerging from the sea in his swimming trunks in a pastiche of the iconic moment in *Dr No* (1962) where Ursula Andress steps from the sea in a white bikini, and Johnny Depp as camp pirate Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series who embodies the male beauty and joyous love of adventure that marked the classic pre-war films about outlaws and pirates and was intended to appeal to men and women equally (Parker, 2009a).

It is also not the case that there is no female counterpart to the masculine hero; there are, of course, examples of women leads in Westerns (*Calamity Jane*, 1953), cop films (*Blue Steel*, 1989; *Fargo*, 1996), assassin movies (*Nikita*, 1990; *Kill Bill Vols. I and II*, 2003 and 2004), films about serial killers (*Monster*, 2003), pirate films (*Cutthroat Island*, 1995), films about outlaws (*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967), buddy/road movies (*Thelma and Louise*, 1991), and 'girls-with-guns' (for example in countless Japanese anime films – and films starring Angelina Jolie), but they are anomalies. For Martin Parker, these heroines are interesting, and might be celebrated as examples of a feminist politics, but this is largely because there are so few examples of women in these genres, and he notes that, in the main, women are still portrayed in fairly predictable ways:

The suffering housewife, the raped hostage, the accomplice in love, the golden hearted prostitute and so on. Women usually only make sense in relation to men,