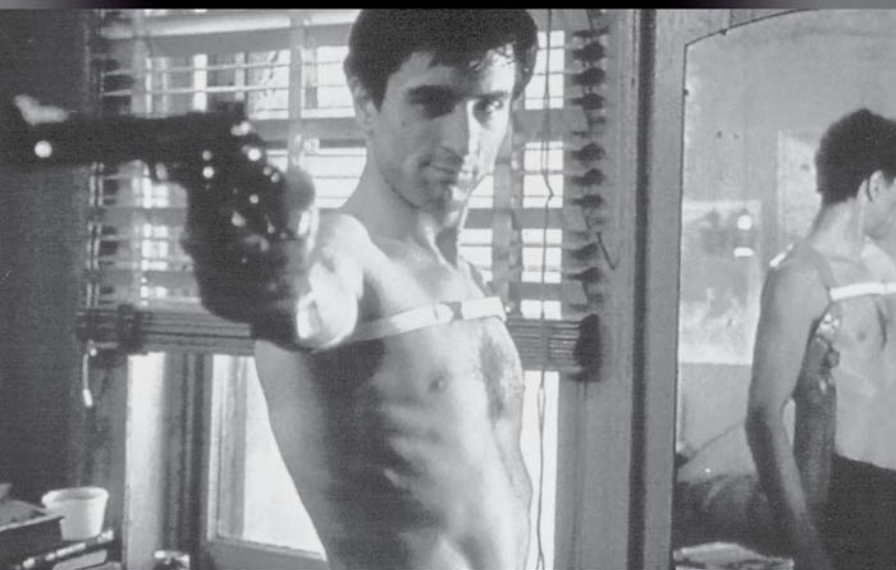


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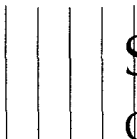
CRIME FILMS AND SOCIETY



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SHOTS IN THE MIRROR

Crime Films and Society

Nicole Rafter

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FOR CHARLES ALEXANDER HAHN

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Preface

Some will say I wrote this book so I could spend a couple of years watching movies. While there may be some truth to that, I prefer to think that the book grew out of my misgivings about the way my colleagues and I were teaching criminology courses. Ignoring almost every other source of information on crime and criminals, we concentrated on the sociological literature. Although I slipped in bits of history from time to time and assigned an occasional short story or film to stimulate discussions, I knew I was not satisfying my students' hunger (one I discovered almost daily during office hours) to talk about criminological issues raised by movies. Films were clearly one of the wellheads of their ideas about legality and illegality, the volume of various types of crime, and the motives of lawbreakers. Uneasy about this gap between the classroom and daily life, I designed a course called "Crime Films and Society."

I soon found, however, that there was only one book on the subject and that it in fact mainly discussed gangster movies, whereas I wanted to cover cop, trial, and prison films as well. Since then a few studies on crime and the media have appeared, but none deals exclusively with movies. (Indeed, most of them concentrate on news media and television.) I needed a book that would take the messages of crime films seriously and uncover not inaccuracies in their depiction of crime but their central themes and ideologies. I wanted to know what crime films say about law, why they so often turn criminals into heroes, and why audiences of all ages and genders find them deeply enjoyable. So I wrote this book.

Movies have become the central vehicle for the dissemination of popular culture in the United States. Due to the globalization of film markets, movies also play a major role internationally in the dispersion of images, myths, and values. For many of us, they are a significant source—perhaps the most significant source—of ideas about crime and criminals. Thus, it seems important for ordinary moviegoers to know something about the history of crime films, how they interrelate with society, what they say about the causes of crime, and

the moral valences of their criminal heroes. I have written this book for general readers as well as students in courses on criminology and film, and I have sentenced scholarly debates to solitary confinement in the footnotes. Everyone watches crime movies, and I would like the text to be as accessible as movies themselves, our most democratic form of entertainment.

The American Film Institute's 1998 list of the hundred top movies names nineteen crime films, including *The Godfather* (#3 on the list), *Sunset Boulevard* (#12), *Psycho* (#18), *Chinatown* (#19), *The Maltese Falcon* (#23), *Bonnie and Clyde* (#27), *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (#30), *The Godfather, Part 2* (#32), and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (#34). A composite list that I compiled by pestering friends, colleagues, students, and total strangers on airplanes for their top ten crime films includes those nine movies but also outliers such as *Trainspotting*, *The Untouchables*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *White Heat*. My own list changes all the time, but on it *The Godfather*, *Psycho*, and *Taxi Driver* usually compete for first place; *Reservoir Dogs*, *Goodfellas*, *Rear Window*, and *The Grifters* also place in the top ten.

Drew Todd, who is completing his doctorate in film studies at Indiana University, wrote chapter 1, and although I have made many revisions, it is still essentially his work. Charles Alexander Hahn ("my son the lawyer") wrote the first two drafts of the chapter on courtroom films, and although this chapter, too, is greatly changed, it retains key elements of the original. To Alex I am also grateful for his enthusiastic support of this project from its inception, close readings of several chapters, and some astute film analyses. In recognition of his role, I have dedicated this book to him.

I owe thanks as well to many other people, including Lisa Cuklanz of Boston College for helping in the initial stages of this project; Gary Edgerton and Lucien X. Lombardo for inviting me to participate in their film festival at Old Dominion University; James Burton Hahn for sharing his vast knowledge of movies; Sarah Rachel Hahn for her sensitive readings of films and for urging me to see the stunning, sad *Eye of God*; Jeroen G. W. Kok and Peter J. Lepeska for their ideas about the future of crime films; Stefan Machura and Stefan Ulbrich for their work on law in the movies; Michael Shively and Courtney Smith of Northeastern University for film suggestions; Debra Stanley of Central Connecticut State University for carrying the burden of a joint writing project while I worked on this book; and Judith Yarnall for the talks on film violence. Others who contributed include T. Susan

Chang; Susan Erony; Jacque Friedman; Joseph Ferrara, Daniel Towner, Kit Cooke, and the library staff of Johnson State College in Vermont; Valerie Jenness; Gary Marx; Dario Melossi; Theodore Sasson; Alexandra Todd; and Friend Weiler. Robert Hahn was, as always, my staunchest support, in this case fixing the VCRs, editing every chapter (some more than once), and sitting through a number of movies that he would have preferred to skip. These friends and colleagues are the good guys; insofar as there are problems with this book, I am the bad guy.

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Contents

Note on Use of Dates xiii

Introduction 3

1 | The History of Crime Films—by Drew Todd 15

2 | Why They Went Bad: Criminology in Crime Films 47

3 | Cop Films 71

4 | Courtroom Films—with Charles Alexander Hahn 93

5 | Prison and Execution Films 117

6 | The Heroes of Crime Films 141

7 | The Future of Crime Films 165

Appendix | Films Cited with Release Dates 181

References 187

Index 193

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Note on Use of Dates

I use dates sparingly in the introduction but thereafter give the date of release whenever a movie is first mentioned in a chapter. An appendix lists all films referenced in this book and their release dates, so readers who want to look up a date in midchapter can find it there. In nearly all cases, my source for release dates is *VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever* (Connors and Craddock 1998).

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SHOTS IN THE MIRROR

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Introduction

Crime films reflect our ideas about fundamental social, economic, and political issues; at the same time, they tend to shape the ways we think about these issues. When we look at the relationship between crime films and society, we see a dynamic interplay of art and life. This book examines that interplay from the multiple perspectives of film history and technique, social history, criminal justice, and criminological theory.

Within this broad analytical framework, *Shots in the Mirror* argues that crime movies, whether they portray cops, courts, prisons, or crime itself, implicitly make two arguments at once. On the one hand, they criticize some aspect of society—police brutality, prison violence, legal barriers to justice, or the threat of crime; on the other, they typically offer us some solace or resolution by showing a triumph over corruption and brutality—the savage cop’s arrest, the admirable prisoner’s escape, the lawyer’s victory over legal barriers, or the criminal’s ultimate fall. Thus, crime films offer us contradictory sorts of satisfaction: the reality of what we fear to be true and the fantasy of overcoming that reality; the pleasure of entering the realm of the forbidden and illicit and the security of rejecting or escaping that realm in the end.

This double movement characterized nearly all crime films until about 1970 and continues to characterize most of them today. Since 1970, however, an alternative tradition has been developing that refuses the easy solutions of the past. Bleak and stern, this alternative tradition of critical crime films rejects heroic fantasies and happy endings to show us the confirmed delinquent’s delight in violence (*A Clockwork Orange*), the destruction of the good man who tries to staunch the flow of crime (*187*), the sorry existence and inevitable execution of the minor gangster (*Donnie Brasco*), the ruinous results of greed (*A Simple Plan*), and other intractable issues in social justice. No one is saved in these critical crime films; indeed, there may be no hero at all, or the apparent hero may be indistinguishable from the villain. While this alternative tradition is unlikely to replace the easy satisfactions of more familiar crime films, it will continue to pose

sharp challenges across the spectrum of crime film genres, probing deeply into the social realities of crime.

Although film plays a central role in generating representations and understandings of crime, criminologists have traditionally ignored it, clinging to a narrow social science perspective that pays little attention to the interactions of crime and culture. No one—within any field—has tried to explain the ongoing attraction of crime films, which have engrossed audiences since the earliest days of silent films, or to analyze the ways in which crime films construct our worlds, ideals, and norms of acceptable behavior. This book aims at understanding how crime films contribute to and reflect our ideas of crime and justice, good and evil, and at identifying the nature of their attraction. It also tries to trace crime films' history, speculate about their future, and detect some of the thematic undercurrents that have flowed through them over time.

Although the overall topic of crime films has been neglected, a few of its subdivisions have attracted thoughtful analysis. At least four writers have produced books on gangster films: Jack Shadoian (*Dreams and Deadends*, 1977), Carlos Clarens (*Crime Movies*, 1980),¹ John McCarty (*Hollywood Gangland*, 1993), and Jonathan Munby (*Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, 1999). Earlier McCarty wrote on another type of crime film in *Psychos: Eighty Years of Mad Movies, Maniacs, and Murderous Deeds* (1986). *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992), Carol Clover's lively analysis of gender in the modern horror film, focuses on slasher, occult, and rape-revenge movies, but much of what it says about the structure and appeal of horror movies also applies to thriller and vigilante crime films. *Using Murder* (1994), Philip Jenkins's thoughtful analysis of the social construction of repeated homicide, includes material on serial-killer movies, while *Moving Targets* (1994), Helen Birch's collection on the representation of female killers, discusses ways in which gender shapes the translation of celebrated cases into art forms, including movies. Over the years a mountain of material has accumulated on film noir, the black-and-white mystery movies of the 1940s and early 1950s, and another body of critical commentary has built up on directors who specialize in crime films, such as Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino.

Today sociologists are studying how various media affect society,² and criminal justice departments are starting to offer courses in crime and the media. Although the texts designed for these courses still concentrate on news media rather than film,³ articles on crime films

now appear with some frequency in law-related journals and edited collections. Researchers at the London School of Economics are working on a major historical study of shifts in film genres and their proportion of crime content.⁴ Clearly, crime films are coming into their own as an area of study, as scholars in various disciplines turn their attention in this direction. This book tries to bring focus to this emerging area of inquiry.

Scholars' reluctance to examine the topic of crime films has no doubt stemmed from the sprawling and complex nature of the topic. Thousands of movies depict a crime of some sort, but it is not analytically useful to call them all crime films. For instance, the *Beverly Hills Cop* series, *Heathers*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and the *Naked Gun* series all pivot around crime but are predominantly comedies. *Shock Corridor*, a 1963 movie by director Sam Fuller, follows a journalist on his hunt for the killer of a mental hospital patient, but this film is concerned more with madness than with crime (at the end, the journalist himself, disabled by electric shock treatments, goes crazy). While *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) presents excellent credentials as a crime film, including an apparent murder, male prostitution, sex with a minor, breaking and entering, and numerous larcenies, the film concentrates on friendship and love, revealing the gentleness—even innocence—of two derelict hobos. Its crimes are incidental to the story of their relationship. These examples, which could be multiplied almost endlessly, illustrate a few of the conceptual problems in the definition of crime films.

Defining Crime Films

My solution to the problems of conceptualizing crime films is to define them as *films that focus primarily on crime and its consequences*. Crime films do not constitute a genre (a group of films with similar themes, settings, and characters) as Westerns and war films do. Rather, crime films constitute a *category* that encompasses a number of genres—detective movies, gangster films, cop and prison movies, courtroom dramas, and the many offerings for which there may be no better generic label than, simply, *crime stories*. Like the terms *dramas* and *romances*, *crime films* is an umbrella term that covers several smaller and more coherent groupings.

That umbrella is large but not infinite in scope. From the crime films category I exclude action films (the *Die Hards*, for example, and

the *Lethal Weapons*) on the ground that their primary interest lies not in exploring crime and its consequences but in displaying nonstop episodes of superhuman heroism. (I do look briefly at action movies in chapter 6, however, when I want to create a comprehensive typology of crime film heroes, and in chapter 7, where I forecast the future of crime films.) I further exclude comedies; courtroom films that deal with civil rather than criminal cases (*The Verdict*, *The Music Box*); films whose main goal is historical, even when that history involves crimes and punishments (the 1996 version of *The Crucible*, for example); horror films; Westerns (unless, like *The Wild Bunch*, they have a central interest in explaining some aspect of crime—in this case, the enjoyment of cruelty); science fiction (*The Blade Runner*); and war movies (although I do include *The Caine Mutiny* and films on military trials during peacetime, such as *Judgment at Nuremberg*, in my chapter on courtroom dramas). With one exception, I also exclude crime films originally made for television.⁵ While the boundaries that historically have divided film and television are crumbling, made-for-TV films are nonetheless shaped by such different considerations of audience, artistic aspiration, duration, and financing than feature movies that they call for separate analysis.

Reluctantly, I exclude foreign movies as well, not from the crime film category but from most of this book, partly to keep my topic manageable and partly because they grow out of different traditions and have different characteristics than Hollywood crime films. This means excluding some classic crime films (Godard's *Breathless*, Kurosawa's *Rashomon*) and others that also speak eloquently about crime and its consequences (Bruce Beresford's *Breaker Morant*, Zhang Yimou's *Shanghai Triad*, Claude Chabrol's *The Story of Women*). However, chapter 1, on the history of crime films, does refer to some particularly innovative and influential foreign movies.⁶

Within my self-imposed constraints, I developed four criteria for choosing which crime films, among the hundreds of remaining possibilities, to emphasize in this book. First, I considered critical reputation and audience reception. Second, I considered the degree to which a film says something important about the relationship between crime and society or has shaped understandings of that relationship. For example, I treat the big-three gangster movies of the early 1930s (*Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*) as well as *The Godfather* and *Natural Born Killers*—all films that take a cogent and forceful stand on the social origins of crime—and also *The Bad Seed*,

a movie that claims that criminality is hereditary and hence impervious to social influences. Third, I considered a film's significance to film history (either in technical, critical, or filmic terms, or in terms of subject, script, content, and sensibility), which led me to include D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), one of the earliest gangster movies, and *Dirty Harry*, the first highly successful cop film and the trigger for a national controversy about police brutality.

Fourth and finally, I include movies that provide useful points of entry for discussing crime films' implications for the politics of everyday life, particularly for constructions of human value on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality. These criteria enable me to discuss the best and most important crime films and avoid the worst and most trivial, the endless stream of ephemera about airplane hostage situations, cop buddies, and babes in prison. However, because I have an interest in breadth as well as depth of coverage, I include lesser films in my lists of examples. Overall, I deal in one way or another with well over three hundred crime movies, covering over one hundred of them in some depth.

Crime Films and Ideology

To date, the chief question asked by the legal and criminal justice literature on crime films has been whether media representations of crime and justice processes are accurate.⁷ My approach is different. Instead of comparing crime films to social realities and measuring the gap between them, I conceive their relationship as dialectical, as a two-way street: Crime films draw from and in turn shape social thought about crime and its players. My approach is less concerned with the realism of representations than with their ideological messages, by which I mean the assumptions about the nature of reality that are embedded in film narratives and imagery.

As an illustration, consider the imagery of *Thelma and Louise* (1991) after the two women embark on their crime spree. Time and again director Ridley Scott frames the women against huge expanses of blue sky, mountain ranges, and open country. Filling the screen and dominating these magnificent backdrops, Thelma and Louise gain an aura of significance and elemental power. Moreover, because moviegoers associate this type of framing with the traditional Western (in which an abased camera often looks up at the horse and rider, framing them against wide-open spaces) and with the traditional

male buddy film (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Defiant Ones*, *Easy Rider*), the two women take on associations of perfect friendship, independence, purity, force, and strength. These meanings, deriving from the nature of film and our responses to it, form some of ideological messages of *Thelma and Louise*, messages that are buried in the imagery and narrative line and cannot be extracted from them.⁸

My view of ideology is close to that of film theorist Ann Kaplan, who uses the term *ideology* to refer not to "beliefs people consciously hold but to the myths that a society lives by, as if these myths referred to some natural, unproblematic 'reality.'"⁹ *Myths* in this context is not a pejorative word but merely a descriptive term for the fundamental notions that people hold (usually without much conscious thought) about how the world is structured, what is valuable and unworthy, who is good and who is bad, and which kinds of actions are wrong or right. We cannot negotiate the world or get through a day without drawing on the myths, attitudes, beliefs, convictions, and assumptions that constitute ideology. *Thelma and Louise* explicitly illustrates this meaning of ideology by showing how Thelma (played by Geena Davis) abandons traditional notions about ideal womanhood (act harebrained, stand by your man) in favor of the convictions that Louise (played by Susan Sarandon) holds about the value of freedom and independence. As this example also illustrates, ideology is in a constant state of flux. In the process of encountering the world, we absorb new narratives and mental pictures that may encourage shifts in our fundamental myths and assumptions. Much as Thelma goes through encounters with men that encourage her to change her attitudes toward heterosexual romance, so too (albeit with less drama) do moviegoers experience cinema narratives and imagery that may challenge their attitudes about crime and criminals.

Ideology is related to power. The myths, attitudes, and assumptions that we live by influence what can be said and what modes of expression can be used. What is not said is easily as important, ideologically, as what is said. Before films began portraying African American police officers, it was more difficult to picture them, and so long as African American cops were portrayed as compliant second fiddles (as they are, for instance, in *Magnum Force* [1973], one of the Dirty Harry movies), it was difficult to picture them as heroes. Not until we began to find black leads such as Denzel Washington in *Devil*

in *a Blue Dress* (1995) and Morgan Freeman in *Seven* (1995) did African American men fully achieve Eastwoodian stature as heroic sleuths.¹⁰ Earlier, through absence or marginalization, they were denied access to a form of power. Thus, movies mold ideology by what they fail to show as well as by the narratives they do present, and part of my aim in this book is to point out the ideological significance of missing representations and silences. This is a way of examining how movies affect power.

Crime Films and Pleasure

Their serious implications notwithstanding, crime films have a nearly endless capacity to confer pleasure. Aside from unusually critical movies, crime films provide escape from daily life, opportunities to solve mysteries, chances to identify with powerful and competent heroes, and discussions of morality that are comfortably unambiguous. Their predictable plots and stock characters, far from disappointing audiences, deliver the pleasure of variations on the familiar. Moreover, crime films tend to reassure us that our society and system of criminal justice are salvageable despite their many failings.

All movies offer the joy of escape; crime films offer the additional joy of watching others suffer. "People just love seeing other people in jeopardy," actor Pierce Brosnan observes. "It is the same fascination as driving by road accidents. You swear you are not going to be one of those people who look, but you look anyway."¹¹ (One of my students made the same point by explaining that she enjoys crime movies because "for two hours I can watch someone else struggle.") Moreover, crime films are often inspirational in their portrayal of underdog characters who triumph against all odds. They offer access to places most of us never get to in person, such as drug factories, police interrogation rooms, glamorous nightclubs, and prison cells. Good crime films portray these places in terms so vivid, gripping, and emotionally compelling that we identify with their characters even when we know that the stories are in large part fantasies. Opening a window on exotica, crime films enable viewers to become voyeurs, secret observers of the personal and even intimate lives of characters very different from themselves.

Crime films also offer us the pleasurable opportunity to pursue justice, often at the side of a charismatic and capable hero. We can not only figure out the meanings of clues but also identify with someone

who is abnormally intelligent, self-possessed, confident, and successful. Characters such as Mike Hammer (*Kiss Me Deadly*), Clarice Starling (*Silence of the Lambs*), and William Somerset (*Seven*) are determined and effective in their tasks, pursuing difficult goals without hesitation—and with astounding success. Viewers enjoy identifying with such protagonists and with the attractive stars who portray them.

A key source of crime films' enduring attraction (and again, for the moment I am setting aside the recent crop of critical crime films) lies in the way they provide a cultural space for the expression of resistance to authority. While most people support social control of some sort, crime films have carved out a piece of cultural and intellectual territory where it is acceptable to entertain antagonism toward the criminal justice system, the state, and other institutions of power and to feel, for an hour or two, like a heroic rebel. Crime films' anti-authority messages, however, are conveyed through moral, narrative, and cinematic frameworks that constrain or even work against the critique. Thus, while crime films are often subversive, they also promote systems of social control by making these seem normal, unproblematic, or even useful. Crime films condemn such institutions of power as prisons, but at the same time they reinforce them. As cultural theorist bell hooks has noted, a "film may have incredibly revolutionary standpoints merged with conservative ones. This mingling of standpoints is often what makes it hard for audiences to critically 'read' the overall filmic narrative."¹² Simultaneously radical and conservative, crime films can appeal to nearly everyone.

Escape from Alcatraz, a 1979 film starring Clint Eastwood, provides an example of this double movement. Through various rhetorical devices, the movie encourages us to sympathize with the prisoners and hope that their escape plot succeeds. An evil warden and associate warden reinforce this sympathy on the level of character and narrative, and viewer antagonism toward social control is visually reinforced by camera work that dwells on miles of cells, pipes, and other apparatus of containment.

At the same time, however, *Escape from Alcatraz* offers no criticism of the prison system as a whole. There is nothing extremist here that might offend or incite. The prisoners' pain is blamed on particular, sadistic officials, not incarceration itself. (In fact, *Escape from Alcatraz* includes a couple of "good" officers to show that the system is not all bad.) No class differences divide the convicts, whose cama-

raderie is disturbed only by Wolf, the stock homosexual rapist. Nor are there profound problems in race relations at this Alcatraz, where few people of color are imprisoned in any case and the black leader almost immediately bonds with Eastwood's character. The film reduces racial tensions to banter in which Eastwood and the black man (played by Danny Glover) call each other "boy"—affectionately. Pleasure here includes escape into a world of simple morality and intense friendship. It also includes the cost-free thrill of identifying with a revolt against authority that frees the good guys, embarrasses the nasty warden, and leaves the status quo undisturbed.

Critical Crime Films and the Alternative Tradition

Recently, a few innovative filmmakers have rebelled against crime films' tradition of safe critique and sanitized rebellion, developing a critical alternative of alienated, angry movies that subject viewers to harsh realities and refuse to flatter either their characters or their audiences. For instance, the same year that *Escape from Alcatraz* was released, there appeared another prison movie, *On the Yard*, that flew in the face of prison film tradition. The most appealing character is killed in the middle of the movie—for a cigarette debt—and forgotten. Although inmates team up for mutual support, there are no heroic friendships between buddies, and prisoner factions openly war for control of the yard. More recently, *American Me* (1992), a movie about the Mexican Mafia, also broke with prison film formulas. Made by Hispanic director Edward James Olmos, *American Me* paints an unrelievedly bleak picture of Hispanic culture disintegrating under the twin pressures of American mores and the Mexican Mafia's criminal activities. Children commit murder, personal relationships founder, and the leader dies ignominiously in his cell.

Retrospectively, we can identify the progenitors of this line of critical crime films. They are rooted in the tradition of films noirs, the brooding mysteries and gangster films of the 1940s and 1950s that take corruption for granted, assuming that brutality and criminality are part of the human condition.¹³ More specifically, critical crime films can trace their ancestry to director Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1949), a tragic, haunting tale of a very-much-in-love couple who aspire to little more than bourgeois comfort but are brought down by their fixation with firearms—and their willingness to use them. Another progenitor was Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), which,

its syrupy interludes notwithstanding, insists on the evil in human nature and demonstrates an unashamed fascination with torn flesh and spraying blood.

The critical tradition took shape with the appearance of such films as Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), an iconoclastic probe of the hardships of criminal life, and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), in which the detective hero stands by helplessly as the bad guy triumphantly carries off an incest victim. Director Stephen Frears made another of these dark crime films, *The Grifters* (1990), a movie that again uses incest as an index of the corruption of the criminal heart. In one of director Abel Ferrara's contributions to the line, *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), the lead character (played by Harvey Keitel) is a cop who spirals downward into a filthy world of alcoholism and drug addiction; he is even rude to Jesus, who comes down from the cross to save him. Other films in this line include *American Buffalo* (1995), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981), *Kids* (1995), *Normal Life* (1996), *Q & A* (1990), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1993), and *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985).

Critical crime films have none of the high spirits or good humor we find in more celebrated recent movies such as *Goodfellas*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Fargo*, and *Pulp Fiction*. Grim in tone, they are shot through with bitterness. They are not defined by their lack of happy endings, for crime films have always killed off their heroes. Instead, the crucial differences lie in their lack of a traditional, admirable hero and in their hopelessness. The bad lieutenant may be saved by Jesus, but neither he himself nor anyone else can rescue him from depravity. Michael Douglas's D-Fens, the lead character in *Falling Down* (1993), can never do anything but fall under the weight of his rage against a world in which middle-class, white male earnestness reaps no rewards.

These critical movies comprise but a small minority of all crime films and are likely to remain few in number. However, their refusals to pander to popular taste do pose sharp ideological challenges to crime film traditions. While mainstream crime films continue to offer the pleasure of rebellion within safe constraints, this subgroup insists on the impossibility of heroism and the inevitability of injustice.

This book's chapters are organized around themes and genres that have been pivotal in the history of crime films and have conveyed particular sets of ideas relating to crime and society. Chapter 1 deals

specifically with the history of crime films and the emergence of various genres. It is less concerned with ideology than with how, over time, movies have interacted with the social contexts in which they were produced. Chapter 2 examines what crime films have to say, sociologically and ideologically, about the causes of crime. It also examines the much debated issue of whether media representations of violence cause crime, arguing that crime films do not lead to crime but rather make available narratives about crime and criminality that viewers then incorporate into their beliefs about how the world works.

The next three chapters deal with specific genres within the crime films category. Chapter 3 concentrates on cop films, tracing their evolution, discussing their obsessive preoccupation with ideal masculinity, and examining new directions in which they are heading. Chapter 4, on courtroom dramas, deals with their key characteristics and their central theme of the illusiveness of justice. It goes on to argue that of all crime film genres, this one has been least successful in addressing current concerns, and to suggest why this is the case. Chapter 5 investigates key themes in traditional prison films and discusses the critical prison movies, recent documentaries, and self-reflexive films that are turning the genre in new directions.

Chapter 6 focuses on crime films' tendency to portray criminals as heroes. This chapter asks and proposes answers to questions about why crime films tend to treat criminals as heroes, how they make criminals seem heroic, and how they reconcile their message of criminal heroism with cultural assumptions about the wrongness of crime. The concluding chapter, chapter 7, draws on film history and speculations about the future of American society to predict the future of crime films.

Notes

1. The Clarens book has recently been reissued with a new afterword (Clarens 1997).
2. For an overview as well as an example of this work, see Gamson et al. 1992; also see Sasson 1995 and, for a review of the communications literature, Straubhaar and LaRose 1996.
3. Barak 1994, Bailey and Hale 1998, Surette 1998.
4. Allen, Livingstone, and Reiner 1998. As their title (*The Changing Generic Location of Crime in Film*) indicates, these authors take an approach that is quite different from mine.
5. The exception is *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996), a documentary that has little to do with either Hollywood or television

narrative traditions and that breaks new ground in its representation of crime and its results.

6. I include *A Clockwork Orange*, although it was made in Great Britain and used British actors, because it was written and directed by an American (Stanley Kubrick). *A Clockwork Orange* is an early example of the trend, noted in chapter 7, in which filmmaking is becoming an international enterprise.
7. See, for example, Bergman and Asimow 1996 and the essays on films in Bailey and Hale 1998. In contrast, and for an example of the social constructionist approach that I adopt here, see Ruth 1996, a study of the "invention" of the gangster that is "concerned with the meanings rather than the facts of crime" (1).
8. For more on the ideological meanings of *Thelma and Louise*, see Spelman and Minow 1992.
9. Kaplan 1983: 12–13.
10. For earlier approximations, see, for example, Richard Roundtree's popular *Shaft* films (*Shaft* [1971], *Shaft's Big Score* [1972], *Shaft in Africa* [1973]), about the adventures of a black private eye.
11. Koltnow 1997.
12. hooks 1996: 3.
13. In fact, what I call the alternative tradition of critical crime films is close to what J. P. Telotte, in *Voices in the Dark* (1989), calls "the *noir*" spirit (3), noting that "the *film noir* can designate a field of deviation that mirrors the problems of modern America in particular and modern man in general" (12). Telotte contrasts the dark voice of *noir* with "the classical film narrative" or "conventional voice," "characterized by a seemingly objective point of view, adherence to a cause-effect logic, use of goal-oriented characters to direct our attention and elicit our sympathies, and a progression toward narrative closure" (3). I use the terms *Hollywood movies* and *traditional films* to indicate the body of work that critical crime films react against. A contrast similar to the one I am drawing here can also be found in Robert Altman's film *The Player* (1992), which revolves around the tension between "happy endings" and "reality." Altman resolves the tension with an ironic happy ending.

1

The History of Crime Films

DREW TODD

I always wanted to use the Mafia as a metaphor for America.

—Francis Ford Coppola

Crime films feed our apparently insatiable hunger for stories about crimes, investigations, trials, and punishment. From almost the first moment of moviemaking, film writers and directors realized that nothing pleases audiences more than deception, mayhem, and underdog characters who refuse to be trampled by institutions and laws. The plots of crime films may draw on actual historical events, reproducing celebrated cases while simultaneously fashioning out of the past new heroes for the present. More frequently, crime film plots are fictions that draw on general attitudes toward crime, victims, law, and punishment prevalent at the time of their making. Whatever the basis of their stories, crime films reflect the power relations of the context in which they are made—attitudes toward gender, ethnicity, race, and class relations, opinions about fairness and justice, and beliefs about the optimal relationship of state to individual. Examining the history of crime films helps explain why different types of crime films flourish at different points in time. By locating movies at some distance, in the sociohistorical contexts in which they were produced, film history enables us to see more clearly movies' underlying ideological assumptions about American society.

This chapter provides an overview of the origins and evolution of crime films, focusing on their thematic history. Its goal is twofold: to establish a chronology of major crime films and genre developments and to show how crime film history reflects more fundamental social and cultural currents. This emphasis on the sociohistorical contexts in which crime films evolved will lay a foundation for a deeper examination of the ideological functions of crime films in later chapters. (Later chapters also develop the distinction, emphasized in the introduction, between mainstream and critical crime films.) The chapter proceeds chronologically, first discussing crime films of the silent film era (the late nineteenth century until the late 1920s) and then the

emergence during the 1930s of two enduring genres, gangster films and prison movies. Next it covers the development during and after World War II of film noir, the movie style that for a while became almost synonymous with crime films. The late 1950s and most of the 1960s constituted a fallow period for crime films. A section on this period explores reasons for its relative barrenness, while a section on the following fertile period, 1967–80, shows how new themes emerged and older genres revived. The chapter closes with remarks on recent changes in crime films.

The Silent Film Era, ca. 1897–1927

Movies first appeared in the last years of the nineteenth century, the result of a series of technological innovations that made it possible to create the illusion of movement on film. The earliest movies lasted but a few minutes; they were too brief to develop characters or complex plots, but they delighted audiences with their ability to re-create events and conjure up magical illusions. Some of the first movies were shown in vaudeville theaters, between live entertainment acts; by the early twentieth century, movies were more likely to be shown on their own in nickelodeons, theaters where patrons paid a nickel to see them.¹ Nickelodeons, as Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy point out, were a working-class form of entertainment, and silent films often reflected “sympathy for the common man and the prevailing criticism of the corrupt and wealthy.”² However, it was not yet clear what movies would or could be, or what place they would have in American life and culture. Would they depict real-life events? fictional tales? true or invented crime stories? How would movies relate to the newspapers, theater, vaudeville, and the visual arts? Under what circumstances would people view them? Who would comprise their primary audience? Such questions were asked—and at least partially answered—during the silent film period.

In the United States, movies emerged during the so-called Progressive Era (roughly 1900–1920), a time of intense social reform, though one in which middle-class reformers felt there was a great deal of work to do. One major concern was social unrest and street crime. Cities were expanding rapidly and filling with immigrants and the poor, some of whom formed criminal gangs. “White slavery” or forced prostitution was another pervasive concern. The police, a third important target of Progressive reforms, were in many cases un-

educated, corrupt, and brutal. The Progressive period drew to a close with the enactment of the anti-alcohol Eighteenth Amendment. This act backfired, however, by encouraging bootlegging and organized crime, new causes for alarm. The silent film era, then, was one during which Americans became seriously worried about the manifestations of crime. For the first time, large numbers of ordinary citizens began to think about both the sources of criminality and ways to improve social control.

Few early movies have survived. "By some estimates," John McCarty writes, "as much as 80 percent of the entire output of the silent film era has been lost to us forever" due to stock deterioration or deliberate destruction.³ Insofar as one can tell from the fragmentary evidence, Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) may have been the first crime film. Although today it is often classified as a Western, early-twentieth-century viewers may well have considered *The Great Train Robbery* a movie about crime, an argument with which Richard Maltby concurs in his work on genre recognition: "Contemporary audiences recognized *The Great Train Robbery* as a melodramatic example of one or more of the 'chase film,' the 'railway genre,' and the 'crime film.'"⁴ This early narrative film is also notably violent for its time. Innocents are shot by the criminals and one man is viciously bludgeoned to death with a rock and then thrown off the moving train. From the very beginning, then, the crime film promised its viewers explicit violence.

The first enduring type of crime film was the gangster movie, and one of the most innovative of the early gangster films was director D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912). A one-reeler of less than fifteen minutes, *The Musketeers* tells the story of an impoverished but virtuous young woman (played by Lillian Gish) hounded by the Snapper Kid, a mobster and seducer. Outdoor scenes were shot in the gangland territory of New York's Lower East Side, and the "extras" were said to include actual gang members. *The Musketeers* establishes early precedents for the gangster genre by focusing on urban problems, portraying them naturalistically, and featuring dapper thugs, corrupt policemen, helpless female victims, and gang violence.⁵

Regeneration (1915), directed by Griffith's colleague Raoul Walsh, may have been the first feature-length gangster film.⁶ Based on an autobiography, it tells how a gangster was saved from a life of crime ("regenerated") by a social worker. *Regeneration* influenced later gangster films through its development of a new screen type, the criminal

antihero in whom base and virtuous impulses coexist.⁷ Walsh realized that the most interesting characters are complex and paradoxical. His decision to concentrate on a character who combines good with bad struck a chord with viewers, who may have become bored by predictable tales of villainy and virtue. In his essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," Robert Warshow discusses this responsiveness in slightly different terms: "The real city . . . produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and are afraid we might become."⁸ Walsh's antihero was an immediate success, and nearly every subsequent gangster film followed this early example.

With Prohibition in place, speakeasies numerous, and organized crime flourishing, Hollywood churned out gangster films during the 1920s. American crime films in fact largely evolved out of the gangster genre, whose grimy cities and themes of corruption anticipated the bleak moral universe of the detective noirs of the 1940s.

European films of the silent movie period differed radically from those of Hollywood, featuring the serial killers and convoluted psychotics that help define crime films as we know them today. More gothic in style and tone, more philosophical, aberrant, and psychological in their interests, European silent films reflected post-World War I continental culture. Still recovering from the divisive war, Europeans tended to create darker and more plaintive art. Of equal importance, Freudian analysis was taking root in European culture, which had long been receptive to notions of inborn and acquired psychopathology. Europeans were readier than Americans to accept the notion that a "villain" resides in each of us and that dysfunction often inheres in families and other social structures.

In addition, Europe had long been fertile ground for gothic, even morbid, narrative and art. Paintings, music, and literature (from *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* to works by Pieter Brueghel, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and, in his later years, Beethoven) reflected this fascination with the perverse and disturbed. The gothic and symbolist traditions encouraged European filmmakers to explore mental pathologies and murderous impulses. Directors such as Robert Wiene, F. W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang made pictures featuring mad criminals and monstrous crimes. Now considered quintessential crime films, these works made a strong case not only for their eloquent German expressionistic style (marked by

chiaroscuro lighting, complex settings, and sharply angled camera work) but for the crime film itself.

In Robert Wiene's expressionistic masterpiece *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), for instance, a magician uses hypnosis to commit his heinous crimes. Murnau's silent classic *Sunrise* (1927) deals with a city woman who disrupts a quiet, rural community and persuades a farmer to kill his sweet wife. Although made in America, *Sunrise* was an anomaly when it opened in 1927, displaying a psychological and moral cynicism unusual in American art and entertainment of the period.⁹ Its shadowy, expressionistic style further marked it as European. Not surprisingly, the German-born Murnau had arrived in Hollywood only the year before he made *Sunrise*. Americans showed their admiration by awarding Janet Gaynor, the film's lead, the 1928 Academy Award for Best Actress.

After making several important silent crime films (for example, *Dr. Mabuse* [1922]) and before his later classics (such as the noirish *Fury* [1936] and *Scarlet Street* [1945]), Fritz Lang directed his grisly *M* (1931). In it Peter Lorre plays a pedophilic serial killer who lures children with candy in order to violate and eventually murder them. In the end we understand that M is helpless and sick, unable to control his lust to kill. This film was a very early talkie, but it proceeds much like a silent movie, an effect heightened for Americans by subtitles translating the German original. With one foot in the silent film era and the other in the new world of sound movies, *M* bridges one of the great divides in film history.

The 1930s

Sound movies made their debut in 1927, an event that inaugurated the richest decade in crime film history, one in which two classic genres, the gangster film and the prison film, came of age. "Seemingly overnight the silent film era ended," writes Douglas Gomery.

Hollywood switched completely to talkies. In 1925 silent filmmaking was the standard; a mere five years later Hollywood produced *only* films with sound. The speed of the transition surprised almost everyone. Within thirty-six months, formerly perplexing technical problems were resolved . . . and fifteen thousand theatres were wired for sound.¹⁰

While sound intensified the demand for movies of all types, crime itself helped make the 1930s a golden decade for the crime film. Prohibition

ended in 1933, but organized crime did not. J. Edgar Hoover, crusading on behalf of his Federal Bureau of Investigation, popularized not only the heroic efforts of his "G-men" (for "government men") but also the exploits of what he called "flag-bearers of lawlessness," such as John Dillinger, "Pretty Boy" Floyd, "Baby Face" Nelson, and Wilbur ("The Tri-State Terror") Underhill.¹¹ At the same time, the famous Wickersham Report of 1931 and numerous state follow-ups condemned criminal justice agencies for ineffectiveness and corruption. Criminals and officials alike stimulated a public appetite for movies about crime and punishment.

The three most vivid of the early gangster films—*Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932)—appeared at the start of the decade, setting the pattern for the many imitations that followed. In that pattern, an ambitious, ruthless criminal rises to the top only to die violently. He and his cronies sport double-breasted suits, fedoras, and tommy guns; they talk tough, scorn dames, and are infinitely more interesting than the bland G-men who gun them down. Two of the three stars of these vehicles—Edward G. Robinson from *Little Caesar* and James Cagney from *Public Enemy*—became tough-guy icons. (Paul Muni, the lead in *Scarface*, went on to more varied roles.)

To deflect charges that they were sympathetic to criminals, the big-three gangster films of the 1930s tried to fashion an anticrime image. *Scarface* begins with a text announcing, "This picture is an indictment of gang rule in America and of the callous indifference of the government to this constantly increasing menace to our safety and our liberty. . . . And the purpose of this picture is to demand of the government: 'What are you going to do about it?'" Similarly, *Public Enemy* starts by claiming that "it is the ambition of the authors . . . to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal." But the movies fail to live up to their admonitions. They portray gangsters as desperate men in a desperate hour, victims of a society that stresses wealth and status while failing to provide working-class men with the means to achieve these ends. Despite their proclamations of anticriminal intent, 1930s gangster films turned criminals into heroes.

No matter how violent and unlawful the movie gangsters, many Americans identified with them, sharing their economic disadvantages and dreams of wealth during hard times. The stock market crashed in 1929, shortly before the big-three gangster films appeared.

These movies echoed the financial predicaments of many ordinary Americans during the Great Depression and, in so doing, influenced the genre thereafter. They connected criminality with economic hardship and portrayed gangsters as underdogs. Walking a populist tight-rope, these films spoke to Americans struggling to make ends meet while simultaneously attacking crime and the government's ability to control it.

Public Enemy, organized around chapters in the life of gangster Tom Powers, opens with his childhood in a working-class immigrant family. Tom is uninterested in a life of virtuous poverty. Watching his family work strenuous hours just to break even, he concludes that crime does indeed pay. Although Tom grows into a tough-talking, barbaric character, seemingly meant to be hated, it is difficult not to root for him. He is far more appealing than his tepid, straight-as-an-arrow brother, and his lines are smart, honest, and authentic. What he lacks in charm (and Tom is the character who rubs a grapefruit in Mae Clark's face) is counterbalanced by his chutzpah and determination to succeed. Even after we have seen him destroy everything in his path, Tom can disarm us with his modesty: Gunned down, stumbling in a gutter, he mutters, "I guess I'm not that tough after all." When his mangled body is dropped on his family's doorstep, we are left feeling that Tom is a victim as well as a villain.

Like the gangster genre, prison movies had roots in silent film, and they too became popular in the 1930s. Even more so than gangster movies, prison films left viewers cheering for the "wrong" side. These movies naturally emphasize the most dramatic aspects of prison life: inmates' deprivations, the electric chair just down the hall, and intricate plans for escape. Due to this perspective (we rarely see prison life from the warden's angle), the viewer has little choice but to recognize the good in convicts and rally behind their against-all-odds escape efforts. The past is seldom mentioned, and when it does come up, we learn that the convicts were framed. This pattern was established early, beginning with *The Big House* (1930), and it has remained integral to the prison genre ever since.

Few prison films fail to indict the state and its authorities, casting them as brutal oppressors. Much as we learn to sympathize with the convicts, we learn to despise the officials who torment them. This antistate perspective is best exemplified by the melodramatic exposé *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932). Based on a true story, it features Paul Muni as James Allen, a World War I veteran who, having

inadvertently become an accomplice to a holdup, is sent South to toil on a chain gang. Becoming spiteful and bitter, Allen berates the criminal justice system for jailing the wrong man: "The state's promise didn't mean anything. It was all lies! . . . Why, their crimes are worse than mine! Worse than anybody here! They're the ones that should be in chains, not we!" After escaping, being recaptured, and reescaping (and thus displaying the tenacity that thenceforth distinguished the screen's toughest inmate heroes), Allen is corrupted by circumstances and injustice. Hissing "I steal!" he becomes the criminal he was alleged to be. Few subsequent prison films blame the state so explicitly for inducing criminality, but most at least hint at this theme.

I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang was a product of Warner Bros., the crime studio par excellence during the talkies' first decade. In the 1930s, Warner Bros. was the grittiest of the major studios. Unlike Paramount and MGM, it did not circumvent the Great Depression; instead it churned out cynical, daring, and streetwise films like *I Am a Fugitive*, *Scarface*, and *Marked Woman* (1937). Into the 1940s this same studio continued to make important crime films. To compete with the other majors, it upgraded production levels, hiring a fleet of talented young directors (Michael Curtiz, Howard Hawks, John Huston, and William Wyler, among others), many of whom specialized in "A" noirs and crime pictures (*Mildred Pierce* [1945], *Casablanca* [1942], *The Big Sleep* [1946], *The Maltese Falcon* [1941], and so on).

In spite of Warner Bros.' influence, however, Hollywood movies of the 1930s portray crime predictably, relying on conventional ideas of criminality. Although murder mysteries abounded during this period, few if any subscribed to the psychoanalytical themes and bizarre characterizations of European films. Some American-made movies featured antiheroes, and others, such as John Ford's *The Informer* (1935) and Fritz Lang's *Fury*, were unusually cynical, psychological, and stylistically sophisticated, anticipating film noir. On the whole, however, there were few signs that crime films were on the cusp of radical change.

About 1940 the gangster film entered a period of relative dormancy. For the next two decades, mobsters appeared mainly in bit parts or as desperate, aging representatives of a dying breed. In Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* (1941), for instance, Humphrey Bogart stars as a middle-aged gangster trying to do one last job before retiring to an honest life. The honorable mobsters of his generation, who killed only when double-crossed, are being replaced by a younger, brasher

type. His last stand in the mountains, outnumbered and outgunned, is thus emblematic not only of the traditional gangster's decline but also of the gangster film's. The genre remained largely moribund until revived by *The Godfather* in the early 1970s.

Film Noir, ca. 1940–1955

As the gangster film declined, the movie industry reached a dramatic turning point: the advent of a new style of film that transformed Hollywood and later became known as film noir. Noir was not a genre but rather what Spencer Selby calls "a historical, stylistic and thematic trend . . . within . . . the American crime film of the forties and fifties."¹² Thus, noir's emergence went unremarked, and years passed before critics began to agree on a set of defining attributes. (They are working on it still.)¹³ Cynical, daring, and risqué, noir was worldly in its themes and sophisticated in style. The term (literally, "black" or "dark" film) refers to the mood of these productions as well as to the black-and-white film stocks with which they were made. As James Naremore points out in his history of the idea of film noir, the term has become a metaphor for these movies' preoccupation with nocturnal settings, the underworld, eroticized violence, existential misery, exotic nonwhite characters, death, and nightmarish irrationality.¹⁴ Noir inverted Hollywood traditions, ushering in a heightened emphasis on form and a new kind of viewing experience. Many aspects of American cinema were reshaped by noir, but none more than crime films, which noir entirely reconstructed.

Of the sources that fed the development of film noir, one of the most influential was American filmmakers' growing interest in European techniques and styles. Importation of European approaches such as German expressionism accelerated with the arrival in Hollywood of foreign directors (Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, and Alfred Hitchcock, among others). Moreover, a new generation of American directors, including Orson Welles and William Wyler, began using innovative techniques such as deep focus and long camera takes. Open to stylistic experimentation, these filmmakers welcomed the artistic approaches of European directors. Their attention to style revolutionized the industry.

A second factor contributing to the development of noir was that Hollywood had become home to some of the country's better writers, including Raymond Chandler, William Faulkner, and Dashiell

Hammett. These authors produced fluent and original screenplays about crime. Noir's dark characters and complicated subplots replaced the simple narrative structures that had hitherto been synonymous with American filmmaking. Criminals now blended with the innocents, confusing the moral order. Previously linear, chronological plots became labyrinthine, at times chaotic. Criminal motives, limited in the 1930s gangster movies to money or power, became increasingly cryptic and pathological, reflecting a cynical, almost hopeless disillusionment with society.

New gender relationships also contributed to the development of noir and came to characterize it. Although strong women had achieved star status in the 1930s, they had been all but excluded from crime films. In the 1940s the barriers began to erode, a reflection of the changing roles of women in the larger society. As World War II siphoned men out of the labor market and into the armed forces, women moved into jobs traditionally held by men. But as soon as the war ended, women were sent back into the home, a sign of Americans' uneasiness about women's (temporary) emancipation. Film noir echoed this uneasiness. While it created a niche for women—sometimes very powerful women—for the most part it portrayed them disparagingly, as vamps and psychotics.

John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* and Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* exemplify the early noir detective thriller. Adapted from seminal mystery novels—the former by Dashiell Hammett and the latter by Raymond Chandler—these films introduce the “private dick” (deftly played in both cases by Humphrey Bogart, the male icon of noir): sardonic, nocturnal, and corruptible, a glass of scotch in one hand and a married woman in the other. He lives in an ethical limbo, working both sides of the law, navigating between the justice system and the underworld. Not all noirs revolve around a private investigator, but film noir quickly became famous for its hard-boiled, tough-guy male leads, particularly the detectives Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. “The ideal noir hero,” Naremore observes, “is the opposite of John Wayne.”¹⁵

The female counterparts in these two films also set early examples, creating classic models of the femme fatale: conniving, double-crossing, and smooth-talking, traps waiting to ensnare men who fall for their beauty and skin-deep charm. In *The Maltese Falcon*, where she is played by Mary Astor, the femme fatale almost lures detective Sam

Spade to his doom. The main female character in *The Big Sleep*, played by Lauren Bacall, is more lovable and indeed had to be, as Bogart and Bacall were already one of America's most famous couples. However, she, too, is a powerful character who plays hardball in a traditionally male game. Most femmes fatales originate from the mystery pulp fiction made popular in the late 1920s and the 1930s by the likes of James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, for instance, private dick Marlowe describes his ideal woman in typical noir terms: "I like smooth shiny girls, hard-boiled and loaded with sin."¹⁶ Hammett's *Red Harvest* provides another early model of the sly, money-hungry seductress who inhabits most films noirs: "She's money-made, all right, but somehow you don't mind it. She's so thoroughly mercenary, so frankly greedy, that there's nothing disagreeable about it."¹⁷ "The noir heroine," Naremore points out, "is no Doris Day."¹⁸

When the cagey detective and seductress share the screen, fireworks ensue. In some cases the couple battle to the death with elaborate strategies and merciless determination. In Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), starring Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, the heartless femme fatale arranges to eliminate her newest lover (with whom she killed her second husband for his insurance policy); discovering her scheme, he responds with a chess move of his own, arriving at her house armed. Bullets fly, she dies, and he stumbles out of her house mortally wounded. When not at each other's throats, however, noir's male and female leads are usually in each other's beds. Sexual relations, while not explicitly shown, are implied more strongly than ever in these noir thrillers, defying the censors' injunctions against big-screen sex.

Noir injected a bleakness into American cinema, a desolate quality that distinguishes it from the optimistic Hollywood productions of the 1930s, with their flat lighting, tidy narratives, and satisfying conclusions. In *Hollywood Genres*, Thomas Schatz attributes this bleakness to social conditions in World War II America:

This changing visual world . . . reflected the progressively darkening cultural attitudes during and after the war. Hollywood's *noir* films documented the growing disillusionment with certain traditional American values in the face of complex and often contradictory social, political, scientific, and economic developments.¹⁹

Previously clear divisions between good and evil grew murky. Everyone appears criminal in the shadowy land of film noir, hopelessly tainted by sin, lust, and greed. Even the innocents and the detectives succumb to corruption. In *The Maltese Falcon*, for example, detective Sam Spade is the prime suspect in his partner's murder, and he seems more concerned with finding a scapegoat than finding the actual killer. In *Double Indemnity*, the honest insurance detective becomes a ruthless, duplicitous killer.

The characteristic that most obviously distinguishes noirs from earlier crime films is their highly stylized appearance. In contrast to the simpler point-and-shoot methods of earlier American cinema, noirs display superb craftsmanship and technique. They exploit the infinite possibilities of lighting, shadow, and the versatile camera, creating complex compositions that extend the films' themes and central dilemmas. This emphasis on style appears in literally hundreds of films from this era, not all of them crime movies or conventional noirs.

By midcentury, Hollywood had embraced the aesthetics of noir. Directors such as Michael Curtiz (*Casablanca*), John Ford (*Grapes of Wrath* [1940]), Howard Hawks (*Red River* [1948]), George Stevens (*A Place in the Sun* [1951]), Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane* [1941]), and Billy Wilder (*The Lost Weekend* [1945]) made expressionistic, well-crafted films of all genres. Likewise, noir crime films, earlier limited mainly to detective thrillers, broadened in theme and story line. Remaining noir in tone and style, they shifted attention from the detective to the criminal. And, anticipating later crime films, they became increasingly pathological, erotic, and violent (*The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946], *Sunset Boulevard* [1950], *Touch of Evil* [1958]).

Crime films thrived for about a decade after World War II, outnumbering even retrospective war pictures and expanding their commentary on social issues. These films evoked the spirit of the era and reflected the period's transitions. In the war's aftermath, after reveling in victory and apparent stability, America entered the Cold War years, a period of difficult adjustment and division. Beset by self-doubt, suspicion (McCarthyism and the Red scare), anxiety (threats of war with Russia and nuclear catastrophe), and rapid change (suburbanization, technological advances, shifts in gender and race relations), Americans embraced social and cultural conformity; builders created look-alike housing developments such as Levittown, and advertisers targeted the faceless American suburbanite.

In reaction to these developments, an insurgent, avant-garde arts movement burgeoned on all fronts. Abstract expressionist painting, bop and postbop jazz, and Beat Generation poetry and prose introduced new styles of dissonance and rebellion. Without becoming avant-garde itself, Hollywood was deeply affected by the new social and cultural currents. Senator Joe McCarthy's demagogic campaign against communists led to witch-hunts for Hollywood leftists and to the blacklisting of moviemakers. With the stakes raised, some directors felt impelled to do more than merely entertain their viewers.

Audiences, in turn, were ready for more challenging and daring films. In society at large, resistance to depictions of sex and obscenity was weakening, a change that influenced Hollywood productions. In the mid-1950s, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court narrowed the definition of obscenity. *Playboy* hit the market in 1952. Americans began accepting central tenets of Freudian theory, which led to new interpretations of criminality and a more liberal view of sex. In response to these social shifts, and in an attempt to lure television viewers out of the home and into the theaters, the Production Code in 1956 loosened its stance on typically taboo topics like drug abuse and prostitution. For Hollywood in general, this meant more productions geared to adult audiences, a change that helps to explain the rise of the melodrama (*East of Eden* [1954], *All That Heaven Allows* [1955], *Giant* [1956], *Peyton Place* [1957]), and the "sex" comedy (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* [1953], *The Seven Year Itch* [1955], *Some Like It Hot* [1959]). For the crime film, these changes meant shocking, highly psychological productions, replete with new kinds of killers, offenses, and motivations and a brasher display of screen violence.

Joseph Lewis's *Gun Crazy*, released in 1949, shows how crime noirs changed in the postwar period. Written by a blacklisted screenwriter, Dalton Trumbo, *Gun Crazy* delves into perversion and ends in tragedy. Alarming and extremist, it tells the story of a man and woman united by their obsession with guns. They meet while she—a modern-day Annie Oakley with an attitude—is performing in a carnival shooting show. They marry and he dreams of a job with a gun manufacturer, but she wants more than middle-class suburbia. Threatening to end the relationship, she persuades him that crime alone will provide the kind of life she needs. As the young criminals roam the countryside, robbing banks and warehouses, they come to revel in a life of lust and depravity. When the law catches up with



Peggy Cummins and John Dall in *Gun Crazy* (1949), a prototype for subsequent lovers-on-the-lam movies. Cummins's character, halfway between the femme fatale of 1940s noirs and the independent woman of 1990s crime films, reflects changing roles of women in the broader society. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

them, they flee to his childhood stomping ground, only to be gunned down by a lakeside in the early morning mists.

At first glance, *Gun Crazy* seems to provide merely another portrait of noir's femme fatale, driven by greed and luring a good-hearted man to his destruction. As her character develops, though, it transcends the conventional femme fatale, becoming overtly sadistic. Against her husband's wishes, she kills an innocent clerk, her eyes widening with excitement. Although more a she-devil than a liberated woman, she stands on equal ground with her male counterpart, wielding weapons as well as any and masterminding their crimes.

Gun Crazy was received as little more than a cheap "B" picture, but in retrospect we can see that it marked an important stage in crime films' evolution. Presaging *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), which in turn influenced a generation of crime films, *Gun Crazy* was one of the first movies to feature the now familiar male-female crime team. Even though it perpetuates misogynist notions of the criminal woman, it expands her character. Its memorable camera work and deftly staged robbery of a meat warehouse, with hundreds of dangling carcasses, push viewers to a new closeness in identification with the bad guys.

Moreover, *Gun Crazy*'s bold inclusion of aberrant psychology and sexuality, as well as its focus on the criminals' degeneration, make it a precursor of more recent crime films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Boogie Nights* (1997).

Other postwar crime noirs (Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm* [1955], for instance) brought the new social concern of drug addiction to the big screen. *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and *The Desperate Hours* (1955) reveal the period's newfound fascination with the psychology of crime.²⁰ Even more relevant to the times was *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), an archetypal noir detective film with a distinctly Cold War twist. Mike Hammer, a trash-talking detective, finds himself in the middle of a security crisis, searching for a mysterious box containing radioactive uranium. In the final sequence, the Pandora-like femme fatale succumbs to curiosity and opens the box, releasing the sinful by-products of modernity and ushering in the nuclear age. Burdened by small budgets, no-name actors, and pulpy dialogues, few postwar noirs equaled *Double Indemnity* or *The Big Sleep* in quality. Yet their bravura aesthetic and thematic relevance captivated audiences and critics alike, changing the direction of the film industry. The detective noir has inspired countless remakes and homages (among them *Devil in a Blue Dress* [1995] and *L.A. Confidential* [1997]). That subsequent directors as disparate as Carl Franklin, Jean-Luc Godard, Tom Kalin, Akira Kurosawa, and Quentin Tarantino have been influenced by these films suggests their impact on not only crime movies but all cinema.

Dormancy and Development, 1955–1967

In the mid-1950s, crime films began declining in quantity, quality, and popularity. In fact, some of the most memorable crime films of the period from 1955 to 1967 were made outside the United States, as directors such as Jean-Luc Godard (*Breathless* [1959]), François Truffaut (*Shoot the Piano Player* [1960]), and Akira Kurosawa (*High and Low* [1962]) paid homage to the now classic noirs of previous decades. Many circumstances contributed to this sudden dearth of Hollywood crime films.

Like the Western, film noir had enjoyed several decades of peak production before its scenarios and leitmotifs became not only worn but also untimely. As all film genres eventually do, it entered a period of quiescence. Moreover, by 1955 American society was entering a phase quite different from that in which noirs had thrived. The

civil rights movement, entrenchment of the Cold War, space travel, and advances in cinematic technology redirected Hollywood toward espionage thrillers (the James Bond series, *The Manchurian Candidate* [1962], *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* [1965]); stylized epics (*The Guns of Navarone* [1961], *The Sound of Music* [1965]); romance and folly pictures (*Love Me Tender* [1956], *Pillow Talk* [1959], *Beach Blanket Bingo* [1965]); sci-fis (*The Blob* [1958], *The Castle of Fu Manchu* [1968]); and race-oriented dramas (*A Raisin in the Sun* [1961], *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* [1967]).

There were exceptions to this rule of midcentury dormancy, however, none brighter than the work of Alfred Hitchcock. In the early 1950s, the British-born Hitchcock emerged as a leading director of American crime movies. Though he generally departed from film noir, Hitchcock borrowed extensively from it in both style and themes. More than most of his contemporaries, he incorporated aberration and Freudian psychology into his films, a tendency well exemplified by *Spellbound* (1946), the tale of a man whose troubled past surfaces with the help of an analyst. Most famous for his polished, sophisticated thrillers (*Rear Window* [1954], *North by Northwest* [1959], *Vertigo* [1958]), Hitchcock also made a number of noirish films centered on the psychology of crime.

Rope (1948), starring James Stewart and based on the infamous Leopold and Loeb case, follows two wealthy bachelors as they plan and execute what they conceive as the "perfect" murder. They have no motive other than to boast of having gotten away with the crime. Their twisted psyches (and Hitchcock's delight in the perverse) come to the fore when they serve dinner on top of the trunk containing the body. Hitchcock's 1951 masterpiece, *Strangers on a Train*, opens as a tennis player named Guy meets the deranged Bruno on a commuter train. When Guy half-heartedly wishes that his two-timing wife were dead, Bruno suggests that they swap murders, as he himself would be happier without his father. Guy agrees, mainly to placate the persistent Bruno. Bruno follows up on his half of the bargain, however, strangling the woman in an extended and grisly scene. The son of a doting mother and despotic father, Bruno is a version of the maniacal killer whose violent rages stem from a dysfunctional family. Thereafter, Hitchcock went on to make other well-crafted crime hits such as *Dial M for Murder* (1954), *The Wrong Man* (1956), and *To Catch a Thief* (1955) before crowning his career with *Psycho* (1960).

Psycho introduced a new kind of screen violence: gory, graphic, and sexually charged. To heighten the effect, Hitchcock allows the viewer no escape or relief. Early in the film, for example, he kills off Marion (Janet Leigh), the person we are most likely to relate to, in a shower scene that became one of the most celebrated moments in cinematic history. During the scene, moreover, Hitchcock flagellates viewers with shrieking violin sounds that we can no more evade than Marion can the slashing knife. The killer—the seemingly meek, clean-cut Norman Bates—is in fact contorted by psychosis and dual personality syndrome, acting out his homicidal urges in the guise of his dead mother. *Psycho* opened a door in the Hollywood crime film for the grisly, lurid, and violently deranged. It also emphasized the elements of wit and playfulness that so strongly characterize crime films of the late 1990s.

Another development for the crime film at midcentury was the trial drama, a type that came of age in this period. Often left out of the crime film pantheon, perhaps due to its inherently static qualities, the trial film deserves more attention than it has received.²¹ Like prison films, courtroom dramas often hinge on the accused person's innocence, while they exploit the dramatic potential of the courtroom setting. The protagonist, whether defendant, defense attorney, or jury member, restores justice, sometimes by exposing the true culprit in the course of the trial and sometimes by defining justice broadly, in terms of "natural" law (*Anatomy of a Murder* [1959]; *Inherit the Wind* [1960]; *Witness for the Prosecution* [1957]; *Judgment at Nuremberg* [1961]). Integral to the classic trial dramas of the mid-twentieth century, however—and one way they differed from prison films—was their indictment of not so much the justice system as society as a whole.

While the accused may be wrongly charged, these films criticize narrow-mindedness and other social ills, portraying trials as effective means of discovering the truth. *12 Angry Men* (1957) concentrates on a closed jury session in which a young Hispanic man's guilt is all but assumed. Gradually, though, a lone juror (Henry Fonda) convinces his peers otherwise, revealing flaws in the prosecution's arguments and a subtle racism among the jury. *12 Angry Men* views this hold-out's victory as a victory for the American judicial process, while condemning the irresponsibility, racism, and selfishness of the other eleven jurors. *They Won't Believe Me* (1947), a weaker film, makes the

same basic point. The jury members recognize the defendant's innocence, but he, expecting them to convict, jumps out a window to his death just before they announce their verdict.

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962), filmed in the early years of the civil rights movement, directly attacks a racist America struggling to reconcile its diversity and differences. (The previous year, John Ford released *Sergeant Rutledge*, a Western trial picture about a black cavalry sergeant falsely accused of raping and murdering a white woman.) The jury is blind to all details of the case except that the accused is a black man and the plaintiff a white woman. Her mendacious charge of rape is confirmed by the town, jury, and judicial system, but the fact that Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck), the heroic defense attorney, has defended the man is a sign that the system can be redeemed.

In George Stevens's *A Place in the Sun* (1951), the accused on trial is a working-class man entangled in the paradoxes and hypocrisies of America. Aspiring to higher status, as his society demands, George Eastman (Montgomery Clift) is unable to cross class lines, having impregnated a lower-class woman (who in turn is denied access to an abortion). The ambiguities of Eastman's alleged crime—the drowning of his pregnant girlfriend (Shelley Winters)—and the thwarting of his relationship with his debutante lover (Elizabeth Taylor) reflect the insurmountable class barriers that ultimately condemn Eastman to execution. American values as well as the young man were put on trial by *A Place in the Sun*. As more recent courtroom dramas demonstrate, this element of social critique is the constant, while subsidiary themes (class inequities, greed, racism, sexism), determined by the era of production, are the variables.

Renewal: 1967–ca. 1980

The Hollywood crime film reasserted itself in 1967 with the release of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Thereafter the gangster film revived, as did the detective movie and prison genre. An entirely new genre, the cop film, emerged from the remains of noir's private investigators, and the antihero was reborn, this time in the guise of the psychotic loner and vigilante police officer. Crime films again flooded the silver screen, and American youth were readier than ever before to idolize crime films' heroic rebels. In retrospect, however, we can see that even in the supposedly radical 1970s, few moviemakers were willing to ac-

tually challenge the status quo. At best, they kept up with the transformations wracking American society.

In 1967 the United States was in the midst of one of its most tumultuous periods, with no reprieve in sight. Racial issues had come to a head with riots in the big cities and street warfare between resentful minorities and the predominantly white police. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, and Malcolm X exacerbated already deep divisions, raising fears for the stability of the social order. Other eruptions occurred over the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War and hypocrisies of the Nixon administration. As baby boomers came of age, many turned to drugs, street celebrations, and political demonstrations, forming a counter-culture and warning one another to mistrust anyone over thirty years old. A new generation of directors, including Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg (the so-called movie brats), began making films attuned to modern times. In addition, crime was again looming as a major public concern, with presidential commissions of 1967 and 1973 calling for overhauls of the criminal justice system.

Hollywood eased up on its suppression of sex and vice, freeing directors of the late 1960s from constraints. Since the early days of silent film, moralists had worried that movies could corrupt youth by exposing them to sin and crime. Hollywood had reacted creatively, agreeing to self-regulation in order to avoid government censorship. In 1922 the industry established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America to serve as its censor and public relations arm. The association imposed strict standards—for instance, by excising an incest theme from the 1932 version of *Scarface*—and the industry adopted a Motion Picture Production Code that ruled out depictions of sex, vulgarity, and some types of crime.²² “Totally forbidden,” writes Jack C. Ellis,

were presentations of drug traffic or the use of drugs, sexual perversion, white slavery, sex relations between the white and black races, and nudity. . . . Proscribed were [such terms as] “alley cat,” “bat” or “broad (applied to a woman).” Also prohibited were: “Bronx cheer (the sound); . . . cripes; fanny; fairy (in the vulgar sense); finger (the).”²³

Hollywood began to loosen these self-imposed rules in the 1950s and 1960s in a bid to attract youthful audiences away from television.²⁴ Otto Preminger’s *Man with the Golden Arm* ignored the censors to

become the first film to deal openly with drug addiction, for example. In the late 1960s Hollywood abandoned the production code in favor of a rating system that classified films by letters such as G (suitable for general audiences), R (restricted; people under sixteen years old had to be accompanied by a parent or guardian), and X (restricted entirely to people over sixteen). From now on theaters would have to do the policing, and filmmakers were free to depict almost anything they chose.

Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* made its bold debut in 1967, a politically tumultuous year when anger against the state and authority neared its peak. In this context (and with help from influential reviewers and an unusual distribution history), the film about youthful rebels netted over \$20 million, revitalizing the crime movie. Based loosely on the lives of bank robbers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow (played by Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty), the film follows their crime spree across the Southwest. *Bonnie and Clyde* venerates the criminals as populist folk heroes. (In one bank robbery scene, for instance, Clyde gives back money to a poor farmer.) Thoroughly modern and brazen, the movie appealed to youth defying authority and tradition. It also reflected recent shifts in gender relations, with Faye Dunaway playing an equal to Warren Beatty. Instead of luring an innocent man into trouble, like the standard femme fatale, or standing passively by, she works as his partner-in-crime.

The bloody conclusion of *Bonnie and Clyde* seemed paradigmatic to 1960s youth. Betrayed by a friend's father, the amiable couple are gunned down in a horrific scene of police overkill. Beautiful, young, and in love, they become martyrs for an era. This tragic ending notwithstanding, *Bonnie and Clyde*, like other films of its period, failed to provide a coherent or specific critique of institutions of power, instead offering random violence and aimless rebellion.

In addition to setting the stage for explicitly modern, violent crime films, *Bonnie and Clyde* triggered a revisionist movement in American cinema. Hollywood began to produce genre films that, like *Bonnie and Clyde*, relied on but updated older conventions. Directors of the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of them products of newly instituted film schools, emulated the classics in style, story line, and characterizations but modernized them for a new generation of viewers. Musicals now kept time to rock and roll, Westerns presented a Native American perspective, and a new wave of crime pictures, from gangster sagas to private detective and police films, made overt reference

to the golden age of noir while also reflecting the tumult and disillusionment of the Vietnam War era. Crime movies had long been cynical, but these latest editions embraced a futility only hinted at in earlier films like *Gun Crazy*.

In previous decades the central conflict was usually resolved with the criminal's capture. Crime pictures of the Vietnam War era and beyond, in contrast, redefined the problem of crime as systemic in origin and, often, as insurmountable (*A Clockwork Orange* [1971]; *Straw Dogs* [1972]; *Chinatown* [1974]; *Straight Time* [1978]). (Here begins the alternative tradition of the critical crime films discussed in the introduction.) Contributing to the darker mood of these new crime films was Hollywood's elimination of the production code's "decency" standards, a change that enabled movies to become more violent, risqué, and gory.

If *Bonnie and Clyde* revived the gangster genre, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) restored it to a position of primacy in American cinema. Critically acclaimed, *The Godfather* reinstated the gangster saga not only in Hollywood but also in America's mythic imagination. The film follows the changing of the guard in a prominent gangster family—from an orderly and traditional rule, which abided by a strict set of codes (no drugs, for example), to one less chivalrous, more violent, and embittered. This transition is easily likened to the one America was undergoing at the time of the film's making—from a relatively unified nation characterized by popular leadership, peace, and orderly succession, to one rendered cynical and divided by war, civil protests, assassinations, and political corruption. Starring Marlon Brando and Al Pacino, *The Godfather* lionizes its elegant and savvy gangsters, who control even the legal system. At a time when Watergate and the war in Vietnam were undermining the moral authority of the state, *The Godfather* presented the family as a surrogate state, the source of the Corleones' morality, security, stability, and sense of purpose.

In Coppola's sequel, *The Godfather, Part 2* (1974), the family no longer provides a refuge from state ineptitude. Like Nixon's inner circle, the family fails morally, and it degenerates until it serves only one purpose: ensuring its own survival. Despite this moral bleakness, however (or perhaps partly because of it), *The Godfather, Part 2* reinforced the stature of the gangster genre, which continued its revival into the 1980s and 1990s with such films as *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), Brian De Palma's 1983 version of *Scarface*, *The*

Untouchables (1987), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Donnie Brasco* (1997).

Detective films and prison movies also experienced a revival in the late 1960s and 1970s. Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), based on a Raymond Chandler novel, stars Elliot Gould as a modern-day Philip Marlowe, while Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* evokes Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (another Philip Marlowe movie).²⁵ Like the original *Big Sleep*, *Chinatown* takes place in Los Angeles, and its cocky private detective, Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson), is a direct descendant of *The Big Sleep*'s detective. Both movies are sinuous, psychological, and stylish. However, *Chinatown* includes far more sexual violence than its predecessor (its plot hinges on intergenerational incest), and its conclusion—in which the heroine is killed, her sexually abusive father lays claim to his daughter/granddaughter, and the detective stands by despairing—is far more cynical.

The new prison films, too, closely followed the formulas of earlier classics while piling on profanity, violence, and sex. Nearly all of them back the inmates, portraying government authorities as despotic crooks, even while failing to raise objections that might lead to specific prison reforms. *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) inaugurated this revival, followed by *Midnight Express* (1978), *Papillon* (1973), *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), and—one of the few prison films that does provide a constructive critique—*Brubaker* (1980). This renaissance carried prison films into the 1980s and 1990s, where they continued to attract audiences, comment on the times, and denigrate authority. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), for example, uses the prison setting to attack United States-backed Latin American dictatorships. More recently, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) won critical acclaim and financial success by resurrecting nearly every convention and theme of the prison genre.

Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry films gave birth to the cop movie, an entirely new genre within the crime film category. Eastwood brought his inimitable tough-guy persona to these films, reinventing the police detective as (in the words of the hostile critic Pauline Kael) an "emotionless hero, who lives and kills as affectlessly as a psychopathic personality."²⁶ A vigilante, Harry Callahan is fed up with a corrupt and inept system. In the first film of the series, director Donald Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971), the hero battles a serial killer who repeatedly slips through the system due to legal niceties or departmental ineptitude. Refusing to let the killer escape, Harry defies

orders, pursuing and shooting the crazed murderer himself, in cold blood. Harry's anger, and that of the film, differ from the anger of 1940s and 1950s rebel films, which protest against the boring, homogenized life of middle-class America. In the *Dirty Harry* films, anger is directed against the state for leaving citizens defenseless, and it is mixed with fear and fantasies of vigilante justice.

In the first sequel, *Magnum Force* (1973), Harry faces an even more dangerous threat, an inside ring of neofascist cops who assassinate not only offenders who evade the law but also ordinary citizens whose lifestyles offend them. Significantly more violent than *Dirty Harry*, *Magnum Force* evokes the period's strong mistrust of authority while at the same time making a conservative statement about the need for more law and order. Other cop films of the era, such as *The French Connection* (1971) and the factual *Serpico* (1973), also expose corruption among municipal officials and keepers of the peace. Although few are as good as these early examples, cop films continued to flourish through the 1990s.

Beyond developing genres, the 1970s produced an intriguing kind of crime film, unlike anything made since German expressionism, in which the antihero is deranged. Apocalyptic in vision, these movies turned the everyday world on its head by presenting a violent vigilante as savior. (In retrospect one can see that *The French Connection's* Popeye Doyle, played by Gene Hackman, presaged this line.) Films such as Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Straw Dogs* are good examples, but the best is Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

In *Taxi Driver*, Robert De Niro plays Travis Bickle, one of the screen's most riveting characters. A Vietnam vet turned cabdriver, Travis can't stand the "filth" of New York City, describing it as "sick, venal." Here the state has failed completely: By sending Travis to Vietnam, it turned this innocent into a pathological monster. New York has become a sewer, a vision of hell, and Travis drives through the night disgusted by the garbage, the whores, the drug pushers, hoping that someday "a real rain will come and wash all the scum away." With no one to trust or believe in (certainly not the politician, with his empty promises, or the invisible police), Travis turns vigilante, deciding that he must do his own part to "clean up the mess."

Having purchased an arsenal of handguns and trimmed his hair into a mohawk, Travis plots to rescue Iris (Jodie Foster), a child prostitute. In a graphic (and publicly vilified) scene, Travis raids her pimp's turf, slaughtering downtown lowlife. Fingers are blown off,

and blood coats the floor and walls. Later, with Iris safely (though unwillingly) returned to her small-town family, Travis is hailed as a hero, even though he is clearly unstable and on the verge of psychosis through much of the film. Ironically, though, he is the only character who seems concerned that teenage girls are turning tricks on the streets. By the mid-1970s, the traditional screen hero, who once had gotten by with good looks, brawn, and bravery, was obsolete. He had been replaced by a psychotic outcast, embittered and impulsively violent, left to his own devices in a town without a sheriff.

Recent Developments: The 1980s and 1990s

When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, he ushered in a conservative era with promises of increased defense spending, lower taxes, and boosts for big business. Part of Hollywood reacted with films that implicitly criticized Reagan's social and political policies, both domestic and international. For crime movies this meant a spate of political films that portrayed historical and fictional incidents of corruption and demagoguery. A decade earlier, Watergate, environmentalist concerns, and the women's and civil rights movements had created a social context conducive to politically charged films (*All the President's Men* [1976], *Norma Rae* [1979], *The China Syndrome* [1979]), but in the United States the political crime film did not come of age until the 1980s. After Reagan left office, it continued to develop as a vehicle for critiquing official policies and citizens' political apathy—the only sort of crime film to consistently question systemic oppression. Examples include *Missing* (1982), *Silkwood* (1983), *No Way Out* (1987), *Matewan* (1987), and *In the Name of the Father* (1993).

Silkwood, based on actual events and starring Meryl Streep, documents Karen Silkwood's battle to expose the misdeeds of her employer, an Oklahoma nuclear power plant. Hoping to conceal hazardous defects, the management tries to silence Silkwood, but despite her meager resources and the resistance of both her friends and her labor union, she smuggles information incriminating the power plant to the newspapers. Her mysterious death in a single-car crash implicates not only the power plant but also America's nuclear policy for disregarding and covering up public safety concerns. In *No Way Out*, a CIA liaison discloses a murder covered up by an elite group in the federal government. Whether these films expose political or corporate corruption, white-collar crimes or murder, they tend to indict

the same crowd: wealthy, white, conservative men who hold the reins of power in America's business and political establishments.

During the 1980s there also emerged a new crop of politically charged prison and courtroom dramas that indirectly attacked the U.S. international agenda and addressed domestic policies on capital punishment, gender, race, and sexual preference. The prison film *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, for instance, deals with prejudice against homosexuality, while—along with *Cry Freedom* (1987)—it questions America's foreign policy by depicting oppressive regimes promoted by the United States. And *The Accused* (1988) comments on the legal and social abuse endured by women who attempt to bring rape charges.

Based on the notorious Big Dan rape case of New Bedford, Massachusetts, *The Accused* focuses on the presumed ambiguities of what is typically called a date-rape situation, asking whether a victim sometimes precipitates sexual assault. In this instance, before the rape, Sarah Tobias (Jodie Foster) had been drinking and dancing provocatively with her assailants in a bar. The film highlights issues of victim "character" that had recently been brought to public attention by rape-law-reform activists: Sarah lives in a trailer with her boyfriend, uses vulgar language, and smokes marijuana. Clearly, she is not the pristine virgin required by traditional rape prosecutions, which forced accusers to prove unblemished innocence. Yet the film insists on Sarah's truthfulness, her experience of violation, her need to tell her story in the courtroom, and her right to be legitimized through official procedures. It ends with her successful testimony in court and the conviction of three men who stood by cheering while others raped her.

Addressing urban and racial dilemmas, Hollywood produced numerous gang and ghetto pictures. Many fared well at the box office, demonstrating an appeal due at least in part to their apparently authentic portrayals of inner-city streets. Often reinforcing the antidrug and antiviolenace themes of the period, these include *Bad Boys* (1983), *Colors* (1988), *New Jack City* (1991), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *South Central* (1992), *Menace II Society* (1993), *Fresh* (1994), and *Kids* (1995).

The serial killer film, too, began to solidify as a specific type in this period. Serial killers had been depicted in earlier movies (*M*; *Psycho*; the British-made *10 Rillington Place* [1971]; *Badlands* [1974]), but these films had not emphasized seriality; nor had they borne much

relation to one another. In the 1980s and 1990s, in contrast, there appeared a large number of films that dwelt on the repetitive nature of some murders. While many of these films were teen terror flicks, they also included adult examples such as *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1990), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), the documentary *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992), and two Morgan Freeman films, *Seven* (1995) and *Kiss the Girls* (1997).

In a prescient 1979 article titled "*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," John G. Cawelti noted changes in recent movies such as *Chinatown* and *The Wild Bunch*. Older genres were being transformed, Cawelti argued, by some newer films' tendency to burlesque or parody established genre patterns, their cultivation of nostalgia, and their critique of the myths (such as the myth of a hero) on which traditional genres were based. Cawelti's observations proved to be prophetic of a new type of crime film that, because it goes so far in the burlesque of traditions, might best be labeled *absurdist*.

At first the new absurdist films were unpretentious and sparse in style. Stylized yet gritty and dryly humorous, they often evoked a dream state. David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and the Coen brothers' *Blood Simple* (1984) provide early examples. In each a paper-thin semblance of normality belies a comical yet perverted underworld, dysfunctional and deadly to the core. Nothing is as it appears: Seemingly innocuous suburbs are overrun with psychopaths, and because normality never presides in these unpredictable realms, justice and escape are always just beyond reach.

More recent absurdist films such as *Fargo* (1996), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), and *True Romance* (1993) share this taste for fantastical, semicomical violence but are considerably more brash and slick. They reach out to a younger audience more tolerant of screen violence and its comedic potential and more likely to have been bred on the rapid-fire editing of MTV and on commercials' disjunctive style. While they continue to display a surrealistic tendency, like the earlier *Blue Velvet*, their exaggerated violence and aberrant crime sequences mirror an all-too-familiar aspect of American society. In the age of O. J. Simpson and John Bobbitt, when teachers enlist students to kill their spouses, schoolchildren pack guns, and the evening news reports kidnappings and murders, nothing, it seems, is too foul for contemporary films and their audiences.

Incorporating the trends Cawelti detected, absurdist crime films are nostalgic yet undeniably modern, conventional yet radical. They simultaneously venerate and poke fun at genre tradition. Garnering large followings and critical acclaim, absurdist movies have now extended the crime film category, spawning a renaissance that continues to inspire movies twenty years after Cawelti's essay was first published. Absurdist films take many forms, but they are typically characterized by playfulness (sometimes deadpan, as in *Fargo*), multiple points of view (*Reservoir Dogs*), concern with identity and identity politics (*Natural Born Killers*), irreverence (including a refusal to take themselves too seriously), eclecticism, and self-reflexivity.

In Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, the most controversial of the absurdist crime films, two romantic misfits hitch up and wreak havoc, killing everyone in their path. They are out for not money but notoriety, not revenge but media attention. Products of abusive families and media violence, Mickey and Mallory Knox vent their anger by slaying innocent citizens. They intermix love and violence, flaunting a deviant psychosexuality, much like the couple in *Gun Crazy*. Whereas Bonnie and Clyde toured the country as populist folk heroes, robbing from the rich and mocking authority, Mickey and Mal have no allies other than their fans. Stone, mounting an extended attack on the vapid sensationalism of modern media and society, ridicules frothing reporters who chase after the couple for their newsworthiness. But his critique, its manic energy and inventiveness notwithstanding, is not entirely persuasive, given the film's tendency to reproduce the sins it condemns.

Quentin Tarantino, the boy wonder of absurdist crime films, scored three direct hits in three consecutive years with *Reservoir Dogs* (which he wrote and directed), *True Romance* (which he scripted), and *Pulp Fiction* (which he coauthored and directed). (Tarantino also had a hand in the script of *Natural Born Killers*.) His slice-of-life films treat violence and crime lightly, often prompting laughter at displays of carnage and human mutilation. In *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, one criminal slices off a cop's ear while dancing to the upbeat song "Stuck in the Middle with You." Similarly, in *Pulp Fiction*, when John Travolta's character accidentally blows someone's brains out, his main regret is for the mess in the back of the car; and the heroine of *True Romance* sets an assailant on fire with a hair dryer.

Wisecracking violence, however, constitutes only a fraction of the appeal of Tarantino's densely layered, allusive movies. *Reservoir Dogs*

observes the unities of place and time in a gesture toward Greek drama made ridiculous not only by the disparities in heroism but also by movies' freedom from time and space constraints. *Pulp Fiction*, on the other hand, slides around in time as inventively as any film since *The Terminator* (1984). In an homage to the noir *Kiss Me Deadly*, the two mercenary killers of *Pulp Fiction* carry a case that seems to contain drugs but when opened emanates a shining glow, like the earlier film's box of uranium. At the end of *True Romance*, the lead characters become lead characters in a movie.

Joel and Ethan Coen's *Fargo* illustrates many of the new developments in crime films. Like Tarantino's movies, *Fargo* elicits laughter at odd moments, as when one of the hired killers stuffs his partner's body into a wood-chipper. Weird and yet plaintive, it leaves viewers confused and disoriented, unsure of how they're supposed to react. The characters lack emotion, strength, and moral standards: A husband responds to business debts by bumping off his wife; the criminals kill a cop on an open highway, dragging the body away as cars whiz by; and the wealthy father, though determined to rescue his abducted daughter, thinks mainly in terms of profit margins and dies in a semicomical parody of a classic crime film shoot-out. Even Marge Gunderson, the savvy and pregnant cop (played by Frances McDormand), at times seems no more than a lifeless apparition. Married to an anesthetized husband, sinking with him in a stupor before their TV set, Marge is fiercely moral but personally vapid. Whether "good" or "bad," all of *Fargo*'s characters seem lost in a snowy world without direction or stimulus.

An important but subdued moment emphasizes this point: As Marge drives the captured killer to the station, she asks whether his criminal deeds are worth the money he was promised. The film then gives us a point-of-view shot from the kidnapper's perspective as he looks out the car window at the giant plastic statue of Paul Bunyan and his blue ox—a monument to the artificiality and banality of modern society. He doesn't answer her pointed question. In fact, there is no answer. The criminal has as much reason to kidnap for money as he has to spend the rest of his days toiling at a banal job or aging in a prison cell. In this vacuous realm, both avenues lead to the same place: futility. Whereas in many films this type of sequence is the defining moment, the point when the movie delivers its moral, in *Fargo* and its absurdist contemporaries, the moral is that there is no moral.

While some directors were striking out in directions forecast by Cawelti's essay, others adhered more closely to crime film traditions. Martin Scorsese, whose *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver* were among the most perfectly realized crime films of the 1970s, produced three crime films in the 1990s, two of them rather lifeless (*Cape Fear* [1991] and *Casino* [1995]) but the third a landmark: *Goodfellas*, based on the biography of gangster Henry Hill. As high-spirited as *Pulp Fiction*, manic as *Natural Born Killers*, and violent as either, *Goodfellas* nonetheless stays within the realm of the possible, indeed mirroring us in the quotidian as Henry cooks spaghetti sauce with one hand and tries to move a cocaine shipment with the other.

Even more traditional are the recent offerings of Sidney Lumet, a director who has produced strong crime films since his 1957 debut with *12 Angry Men*. Lumet, the director of such classics as *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and *Prince of the City* (1981), more recently made *Q & A* (1990), a very dark film about a crooked cop, and *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1996), the first film since *Knock on Any Door* (1949) to successfully feature a prosecutor as hero. Eschewing the razzle-dazzle camera work, frenetic pace, and whacked-out characters favored by many directors, Lumet continues his straightforward, earnest explorations of the weaknesses and strengths of the criminal justice system. At the same time, other directors such as Taylor Hackford (*Dolores Claiborne* [1994]), Tom Kalin (*Swoon* [1991]), Ridley Scott (*Thelma and Louise* [1991]), and Andy Wachowsky and Larry Wachowsky (*Bound* [1996]) are expanding the boundaries of crime films with heroes who are feminist, gay, and lesbian. Yet others, following the example of Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), are devising radical new approaches to crime film documentaries.

Taking advantage of popular appeal, Hollywood studios and independent directors have turned crime and its consequences into one of the most frequently depicted topics in American film. Rivaling romance for general interest, criminality has long dominated film plots and fascinated audiences, eliciting sympathy as well as loathing, and nourishing secret voyeuristic desires. One key to this fascination lies in the subject's seemingly limitless horizon—from crimes themselves, in their near-endless variation, to the causes of crime; the work of cops, detectives, judges, attorneys, and jurors; and the dark cells of prison and glaring, overlit walls of the gas chamber. But if crime and its consequences have inherent interest, crime films also

owe their ongoing success to the ways they represent crime. In each decade, crime films have shocked and bewildered, angered and appeased their audiences by offering a window onto contemporary society, the workings of law and justice, and the latest permutations in chicanery and cruelty. Ultimately, these films give us a way of examining our world and ourselves. Because crime films are so clearly linked to social norms, values, rules, and everyday practices, they mirror and reflect back on a society in constant motion, evoking more saliently than any other film type our culture's deep and shifting attitudes toward morality and the state.

Notes

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1. Gomery 1991: 27.
2. Roffman and Purdy 1981: 10.
3. McCarty 1993: 1.
4. Maltby 1995: 117, citing research by Charles Musser. For a scene-by-scene analysis of *The Great Train Robbery*, see Ellis 1979: 42–43.
5. For fuller discussions of *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, see McCarty 1993: 1–4 and Clarens 1980: 15–21. The latter source includes photographs.
6. McCarty writes: "Raoul Walsh's *The Regeneration* (1915) is the oldest surviving *feature-length* gangster film; in his autobiography, *Each Man in His Time*, Walsh contends that it was the first full-length gangster film ever made, which may well have been the case" (1993: 5; emphasis in original). Other crime film historians (e.g., Clarens 1980: 31) recognize Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927) as the first gangster film. The difference may lie in the definition of *feature-length*; *Regeneration* lasts fifty minutes.
7. McCarty 1993: 5.
8. Warshaw 1974a: 131.
9. But see Tod Browning's perverse films, such as *The Unknown* (1927).
10. Gomery 1991: 164–65.
11. J. Edgar Hoover, as quoted in Barnes and Teeters 1944: 633.
12. Selby 1984: 1.
13. See Naremore 1995–96.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*: 19.
16. Chandler 1992 (1940): 196.
17. Hammett 1972 (1929): 26.
18. Naremore 1995–96: 19.
19. Schatz 1981: 113.
20. *The Asphalt Jungle* ultimately attributes the Sterling Hayden character's life of crime to his family's decision to sell his boyhood farm. In the film's bizarre

denouement, after having driven for days, he staggers onto his old farm's pasture, where he dies of a gunshot wound, near his old horse.

21. But see Bergman and Asimow 1996, Denvir 1996, and Greenfield and Osborn 1995b.
22. Clarens 1980: 85.
23. Ellis 1979: 198.
24. Gomery 1991: 306.
25. An updated *Big Sleep* starring Robert Mitchum was released in 1978, but its tired treatment of older themes mainly provoked jokes based on the title.
26. Kael 1991: 452. For a more favorable view of Harry Callahan's character, see Schickel 1996.

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2

Why They Went Bad

CRIMINOLOGY IN CRIME FILMS

A psychopath ain't a professional. . . . You don't know what those sick assholes are going to do next.

—Mr. White, speaking of
Mr. Blond in *Reservoir Dogs*

Crime films serve as a cultural resource, creating a reservoir of images and stories on which viewers draw when they think about the causes of crime. Many crime films also endorse a particular explanation of crime. Whether they merely hint at a criminological theory or beat us over the head with one, crime films expose viewers to national (and even international) debates about the causes of crime. Films draw on popular criminological explanations and in turn embody these explanations, feeding them back to mass audiences.

Films constitute an ideal tool for probing the nature and causes of deviance. Depicting bad deeds done in secret, movies can dig down to the bedrock motives for an offender's behavior. Through flashbacks they can reveal the childhood traumas that warped a character's outlook; through settings, they can argue that the filth, chaos, and violence of bad neighborhoods induce criminality. Films can show us the calm rationality of offenders who calculate their offenses and the bitter slide into criminal ways of a prisoner who has been unjustly convicted. They can also explore the psyches of famous criminals of earlier decades, interpreting and reinterpreting the motives of historical figures such as Nathan Leopold, Clyde Barrow, Charlie Starkweather, and even Pamela Smart, thus giving us stories with which to remember and understand our own past.

Ultimately, crime films' remarkable capacity for explaining criminal behavior works on an ideological level, feeding our assumptions about the nature, extent, and significance of crime. Crime films help shape beliefs so fundamental that we are scarcely aware that we have them: the belief that crime *can* be explained, for instance, and opinions about who is qualified to explain it; our view of the world as basically benign or threatening; and unstated and unexamined stereotypes about

who is likely to be dangerous. They tell us not only what to think but also how to feel about crime, criminals, and criminal justice.

True, many crime films show little interest in the causes of law-breaking. Movies about cops, courts, and prisons tend to be indifferent to the causes of crime,¹ as do absurdist films such as *Blood Simple* (1985), *Bulletproof Heart* (1995), and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). In noirs, too, crime is usually part of the scenery, a fact of life or excuse for showing a private detective in action. But other movies explore the causes of crime in depth, and a few (*I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* [1932], *A Simple Plan* [1998]) seem to have been written primarily to make a criminological point.

Crime films tend to reflect the criminological theory or theories in vogue at the moment they are produced. During the 1930s, when criminologists pointed to inner-city conditions and immigration as causes of crime, films depicted ethnic mobsters struggling for control against a backdrop of brutal urbanization. In the late 1940s and 1950s, when Freudian explanations of crime became popular, films presented a host of morally twisted characters, in effect using the camera to psychoanalyze them. In the 1960s and 1970s, when non-conformity became heroic and criminologists taught that there are few fundamental differences between deviants and the rest of us, films glorified characters who turned to crime to escape the monotony of poverty. And in the 1980s, when criminologists and the public alike indicted drugs and family violence as causes of crime, films like *River's Edge* (1987) also endorsed these theories. In an intriguing development, some 1990s films, echoing the message of parent groups and pundits, began blaming the media—including movies themselves—for crime. But while movie explanations of crime tend to parallel current criminological theories, they have greater staying power. Criminologists drop discredited theories; movies recycle them. Once used, a movie explanation of crime turns up time and again, irrespective of scientific credibility. Filmmakers' choices of theory tend to be opportunistic, dictated less by enthusiasm for a particular criminological position than by a hunch about what will play well.

The most successful crime movies are often those that are one step ahead of popular opinion—films that burst the current criminological framework to introduce new ways of thinking about crime. The big-three gangster films of the 1930s—*Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932)—appeared just as the Chicago

School of criminology,² which emphasized the criminogenic nature of big-city neighborhoods, got under way. *Bonnie and Clyde* was released in 1967, as criminologists were normalizing criminal behavior. *Dirty Harry* (1971), one of the earliest signs of reaction against this normalization and a harbinger of conservative theories to come, appeared in 1971.³ *Natural Born Killers* (1994) was the first mass media production to vehemently condemn the mass media themselves for inducing criminal behavior.⁴ Instead of following criminological trends, these films helped set them, at least among the general public.

As a rule, the more ambiguous or complex the criminological message, the better the film. People enjoy debating movies' meanings. Did Michael Corleone's motives change between *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather, Part 2* (1974)? Did Claus von Bulow, as portrayed in *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), try to kill his wife? In *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939), did the cop act ethically when he freed the young criminal who had so clearly reformed, allowing him to escape justice? If the message is too explicit or ham-handed in its delivery, there is less to analyze. Similarly, if there is but a single explanation for a character's behavior, or if the main interpretation is morally simplistic, viewers will leave dissatisfied. (Critics complained, for instance, that in *Boyz n the Hood*, the character of the father, Furious Styles [Laurence Fishburne], is little more than a didactic device, a mouthpiece for writer-director John Singleton's own views on the causes of inner-city crime.) The best films brim over with complexity, challenging viewers intellectually and imaginatively to participate in the act of interpretation.

Movies on the Causes of Crime

Movies attribute criminality to an enormous range of factors, but they favor three basic explanations. One set of films emphasizes environmental causes, illustrating how criminalistic subcultures or other situational factors can drive people to crime. A second set stresses psychopathy or mental illness, demonstrating that psychological abnormality is a source of criminal behavior. Aspirations for a better life (more money, more excitement, more opportunity to rise through the class structure) dominate the motives of a third set of film criminals, those who freely choose crime over dull conformity. A fourth explanation of crime, bad biology, is favored by neither

moviemakers nor criminologists but is nonetheless treated occasionally by both, forming a significant explanatory substratum and giving us yet another window on the relationship of crime films to society.

Born Bad: Biological Theories of Crime

Films that attribute criminality to bad biology rely frequently (though not necessarily consciously) on the work of Cesare Lombroso, a nineteenth-century Italian physician who claimed to have identified the "born" criminal. Offenders of this type, according to Lombroso, are throwbacks to an earlier evolutionary stage, biological freaks whose hereditary defects are mirrored in their apelike bodies and primitive morality. Unlike more ordinary offenders, born criminals commit crimes repeatedly; they are helpless to do otherwise because they are criminal by nature.⁵

Vestiges of Lombroso's theory turn up in the first *Scarface*, in which, during the first half, Paul Muni plays the lead character as a violent and lustful primitive, incapable of lawful behavior. (Muni is even made up to look a bit like a gorilla, with heavy eyebrows and sloping brow.) Similarly, *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) features a brutish gangster named Moose Malloy whom detective Philip Marlowe describes as "a dopey ape." (The director had Mike Mazurki, the six-foot-tall actor who played Moose, stand on boxes and walk around on risers to make him loom even larger.) Echoes of Lombroso sound again in *Born to Kill* (1947), in which a thug (Lawrence Tierney) who is huge in body but small in brain shoots people who annoy him. "Why did you do it, Sam?" his best friend (Elisha Cook Jr.) asks after one of the killings. "I've been scared something like this would happen, the way you go off your head, and it's been worse . . . since that nervous crackup last summer. Honest, Sam, you go nuts about nothing, nothing at all, you got to watch that, you can't just go around killing people whenever the notion strikes you. It's not feasible." To which the unredeemably brutish Sam replies, "Why isn't it?"

Lombrosian elements can further be found in science fiction, horror, and adventure films. In *The Neanderthal Man* (1953), for instance, a mad scientist injects himself with a serum that gives him a simian face, hairy hands, and the urge to kill.⁶ In the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* series (1974 and following), the barbaric faces of the Sawyer family indicate that they are genetically predisposed to their crime of

choice: dismembering teens. And in *Deliverance* (1972), based on James Dickey's novel about a river exploration gone awry, the backwoods sodomists resemble Lombroso's born criminal mentally, morally, and physically.

Biological explanations of crime reach their movie apogee in *The Bad Seed* (1956), in which a sinister tot named Rhoda commits serial murder. Dr. Reginald Tasker, a friend of Rhoda's mother (and, conveniently, a psychiatric criminologist), explains that there is "a type of criminal born with no capacity for remorse or guilt." Offenders of this type have "no feeling for right or wrong," he continues, because they are "born with the kind of brain that may have been normal in humans 50,000 years ago." Such people, Dr. Tasker concludes, are "bad seeds," creatures who are "absolutely doomed to commit murder after murder." This explanation, already close to Lombroso's criminal anthropology, moves even closer to it as we learn that Rhoda's ferocity is hereditary. Her maternal grandmother, too, was a homicidal maniac.

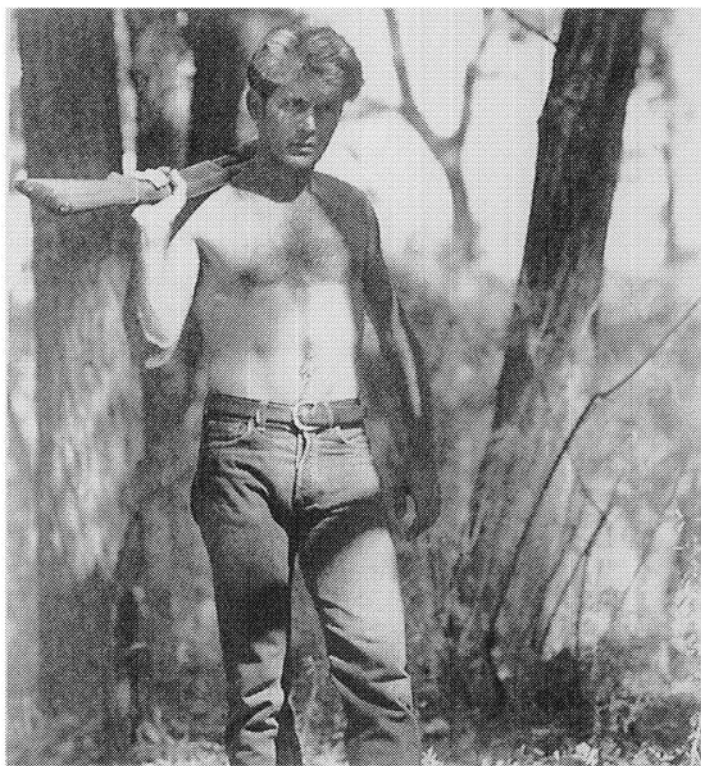
Lombroso's theory of criminal anthropology codified a set of images and ideas about inherent criminality, arguing that the worst criminals bear on their bodies specific signs ("stigmata," Lombroso called them) of their degenerate nature. Lombrosian images and ideas have worked their way into movies and, in turn, are perpetuated by film. That Lombroso's theory, and not another biological explanation of crime, has over time been most popular with filmmakers flows from the fact that it is the most visual. (The idea that the causes of crime lie hidden in the genes lends itself less readily to the big screen.) The visual codes of criminal anthropology have become part of the vocabulary of crime films.

Made Bad: Environmental Theories of Crime

Other films depict offenders whom circumstances have forced into crime, and in these films (in sharp contrast to movies with biological explanations), criminals are essentially normal. Offenders may end up as hardened misfits, but initially they are like everyone else: blank slates on which the social environment engraves behavioral patterns. Films of this type are highly deterministic; arguing that escape from one's situational fate is unlikely or impossible, they offer their characters few alternative courses of action, a point they drive home with images of entrapment (a big fish in a little bowl, a dead-end alley filled with

garbage). Criminologists subdivide environmentalist explanations into subcultural theory, social control theory, social learning theory, and the like, but filmmakers blur such distinctions to speak generally about the negative impact of unsavory environments on character and behavior.

Badlands (1974), Terrence Malick's celebrated film of a teenage couple on a murder spree, provides a pure example of this type.⁷ Based on the 1950s case of Charlie Starkweather and his girlfriend, Caril Ann Fugate, it opens with Holly (Sissy Spacek) recounting how circumstances turned her into the emotionally deadened, love-starved fifteen-year-old that she is:



Badlands, 1974, with Martin Sheen playing a character based on the real-life serial killer Charlie Starkweather. Crime movies give viewers glimpses into the minds of characters whose behaviors would otherwise be incomprehensible. They give us narratives for interpreting our experiences. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

My mother died of pneumonia when I was just a kid. My father'd kept their wedding cake in the freezer for ten whole years; after the funeral he gave it to the yard man. He tried to act cheerful, but he could never be consoled by the little stranger he found in his house. Then, one day, hoping to begin a new life, . . . he moved us from Texas to Ft. Dupree, South Dakota.

Holly's father punishes her for a minor infraction by shooting her beloved dog, thus intensifying her emotional brutalization and giving her a motive for escape. The boy Holly falls in love with, Kit (Martin Sheen), is similarly a product of his environment, a trash collector so poor that he bums cigarettes and peddles junk from garbage cans. (Later, working in a stockyard, he learns to kill steers.) Almost inevitably, the two run away and begin killing people. Holly finishes the story in the same flat, dispassionate tone with which she's narrated it from the beginning: "I got off with probation and a lot of nasty looks. I married the son of the lawyer who defended me. Kit was sentenced to die in the electric chair, . . . and he did." She seems to be describing events over which they had no control.

Environmental explanations dominate in the best of Martin Scorsese's crime films. The credits for *Mean Streets* (1973) roll over a movie-within-the-movie, a crudely made home video that shows the main character, Charlie (Harvey Keitel), in his usual haunts and that more generally reveals the forces that turned Charlie into a street hustler.⁸ Charlie's friends, too, are involved in crime, most of them for the same environmental reasons, as demonstrated by early scenes of sleazy bars, drug addicts, and fencing stolen property. Similarly, *Taxi Driver's* (1976) Travis Bickle is the product of limited opportunity and a tour of duty in Vietnam, where he learned to save the world by shooting people. One of the other cabdrivers, known as the Wizard (Peter Boyle), observes, "You are your job," and ironically, Travis does become his job at the end, despite interludes as a would-be political assassin and an outraged killer. *Goodfellas* (1990), the Scorsese film about mobster Henry Hill, starts with Henry explaining that as a kid, he lived across the street from gangsters. Looking back fondly on his misspent youth, Henry recalls:

To me, being a gangster was better than being the president of the United States. . . . I knew I wanted to be a part of them [the local mob]. To me it meant being somebody in a neighborhood that was full of nobodies. They did what they wanted; they parked in front of a fire hydrant and nobody

ever gave them a ticket. . . . People like my father could never understand, but I belonged, I was treated like a grownup. Every day I was learning to score.

For such Scorsese characters, criminality is preordained by their life situations.

Bad-environment explanations also turn up frequently in movies about black ghetto crime, such as *Menace II Society* (1993) and *Boyz n the Hood*. The latter starts by showing us what typical ghetto children encounter on their way home from school: garbage, dead bodies, unemployed young men, crack-addicted mothers. The only boy to escape, Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding Jr.), has been raised by parents who actively oppose ghetto values and the racism that breeds them. A film about white delinquents, *They Made Me a Criminal*, proceeds similarly. The main character, a prizefighter played by John Garfield, is framed for a murder, but he has been so brutalized by his environment as to make the false accusation look likely. But when, fleeing the law, he ends up on an Arizona ranch, a kind of Eden where two dedicated women are working with delinquent boys, Garfield's character reforms. He goes on to reform the kids and even to redeem an embittered cop who tracks him down in Arizona.

Bad-environment movies tell us that violence originates in a violent society. Even the most murderous characters start as innocents, no worse than the rest of us but with fewer chances to escape the destiny that circumstance decrees. Or if, like *Straw Dogs* (1972), the film begins with adults, we are shown other conditions that make it all but impossible for the lead characters not to become violent. Of all criminological theories, the bad-environment explanation is the one that movies draw on most frequently, no doubt because it takes the blame off criminals, enabling scriptwriters to glorify them, or at least to portray them as normal men and women, sinned against as well as sinning. Movies about organized crime (including *Angels with Dirty Faces* [1938], *Donnie Brasco* [1996], *Once Upon a Time in America* [1984], and *Prizzi's Honor* [1985]) nearly always espouse environmentalist explanations; they want us to sympathize with their characters.

Twisted Psyches: Abnormal Psychology as a Cause of Crime

Almost as numerous are films that explain crime in terms of psychological abnormality, a type that includes both versions of *Cape Fear*

(1961, 1991), in which an insane ex-prisoner stalks the prosecutor who put him behind bars; *The Jagged Edge* (1985), in which a man loves to kill women; *Seven* (1995), in which a man loves to kill sinners; and—one of the best crime films of all time—*White Heat* (1949), in which an epileptic gangster (James Cagney) who is deeply attached to his mother dies atop an exploding gas tank crowing, “Made it, Ma! Top of the world!”⁹ The offenders in twisted-psyche films suffer from a range of psychological impairments. Some are obsessives, others sadomasochists, narcissists, or homicidal maniacs. A favorite diagnostic category is psychopathy, a particularly photogenic condition in which the protagonist, though charming and seductive, so totally lacks conscience as to qualify as insane.¹⁰

It is important to distinguish between movies with a cameo psycho, a loony included merely for local color, and those with an explanatory psycho, a crazy included to account for crime. Cameo psychos appear in dozens of crime films (Richard Widmark as Tommy Udo, the psychopathic killer in *Kiss of Death* [1947]; Clu Gulager as the hit man who loves his work in *The Killers* [1964]; Robert De Niro as Johnny Boy in *Mean Streets*; Michael Madsen as the dancing slasher in *Reservoir Dogs* [1992]). The Evil Woman who drives the plot of so many noirs is often no more than a cameo psycho; her criminality, though profound, is a given. She supplies the lead male with his motives (most frequently, sex and greed), but noirs are seldom interested in the origins of the Evil Woman’s amorality, nor do they often use it per se as an explanation of criminal behavior.

Movies with explanatory psychos reach back to German expressionism (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1919], *Nosferatu* [1922]). Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) perpetuated the expressionist tradition by using labyrinthine streets and deep shadows to mirror the tortured mind of the child-murderer. In the 1940s, noirs revived the expressionist tradition and incorporated Freudianism, developments that encouraged them to represent mental pathology. Much as mid-twentieth-century criminologists used a double standard, explaining most male crime in terms of greed and most female crime in terms of abnormal psychology, noirs depicted male criminals as repugnant but normal characters and female criminals as infantile and morally depraved. In *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), for instance, the male criminals are ordinary mobsters and scientists, but one of the three female characters is a fugitive from a mental institution, the second a childish psychotic, and the third a nymphomaniac.

Gun Crazy (1949) draws subtle and delicately nuanced portraits of two criminal psychopaths who, as one of them observes, go together “like ammunition and guns.”¹¹ Annie Laurie Starr (Peggy Cummins) and Bart Tare (John Dall) meet at a carnival, where in her sideshow she bets onlookers that they can’t outshoot her. Bart accepts her challenge and wins, thanks to a fixation on guns that he has had since childhood (and that earlier landed him in reform school for stealing a revolver). At the point when he meets Laurie, however, Bart is essentially a decent guy, obsessed by guns but far from criminal. Laurie, however, has already killed a man (although neither we nor Bart learn that till later). It is she who pushes Bart into robbery (she wants more money than he can earn), and it is she who kills, starting with a supervisor who forbade her to wear slacks to work. At the end, when Laurie and Bart are run to the ground in a marsh, we can hear two of Bart’s old friends coming in a boat to capture them. Laurie prepares to ambush them, but Bart, who loves her dearly, shoots her to prevent this and then dies at the hands of his friends.

Psychopathy is not the only cause of crime in *Gun Crazy*, which adds love, ambition, greed, and elements of the Evil Woman explanation to the causational picture. However, from the start we are shown that mental abnormality, in the form of Bart and Laurie’s fascination with firearms, is the key cause of their downfall. In this respect *Gun Crazy* differs sharply from *Badlands* and *Thelma and Louise* (1991), films that explain their killer couples in environmental terms.

The most celebrated movie investigation of the criminal psyche—the classic that set the standard for subsequent films in this vein—is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), starring Anthony Perkins as the young man who has murdered and mummified his mother and continues to murder guests in his motel, dumping their bodies in the swamp out back. Toward the end of *Psycho*, a psychiatrist tries to explain Norman Bates’s mental pathology:

His mother was a clinging, demanding woman. . . . Then she met a man. . . . He [Norman] killed them both. . . . He had to erase the crime, at least in his own mind. . . . He hid the body in the fruit cellar. . . . She was *there*, but she was a corpse, so he began to think and speak for her. . . . At times, he could be both personalities . . . but other times, the mother-half took over completely. . . . If he felt a strong attraction to any other woman, the mother-side of him would go wild. . . . *Mother* killed the girl.

Some viewers accept the psychiatrist's explanation; for others, however, his glib prattle about split personalities fails to account for Norman's mental peculiarities.

Deeply influenced by the symbolic geographies of German expressionism, *Psycho* objectifies Norman's psychoses: in the motel, with its overtones of illicit sexuality; in the cesspool-like swamp out back, with its hints of toilet-training gone awry; and in the dark mansion, which, harboring a nasty secret in its innermost recesses, becomes an image of both Norman's convoluted mind and his mother's body. The haunting terror of *Psycho*, and a factor that lifts it far above other psychological thrillers, lies in the way it implicates viewers in Norman's beastly acts. Through the very act of watching the film, we emulate Norman's creepy voyeurism, a parallel he forces us to acknowledge in his closing scene as he (and his mother), smiling complicitly, return our gaze.

A key transitional scene occurs in the parlor of the Bates Motel, where Norman gives Marion her last supper. One of the most remarkable settings in film history, the parlor is filled with stuffed birds that anticipate both Marion's death and Mrs. Bates's taxidermic condition. Predators with cruel eyes and frightening beaks, the birds also stand for Norman, who will soon be peering at Marion in the shower and tearing at her flesh. Moreover, the camera looks up at the birds (as it does at Norman), intensifying their menace. The arrangement of the characters, the room, and the birds: These elements of setting contribute powerfully to Hitchcock's message about psychological abnormality as a cause of crime.

Movies that correlate criminality with deviant sexuality form a noteworthy subtype of the film of psychological abnormality. The child-murderer in *M* is a sex psychopath, and Norman Bates, with his babyish face, wispy body, and fussy manner, is coded for effeminacy. The vigilante cops with whom Clint Eastwood contends in *Magnum Force* (1973) are described as sexually "queer." Buffalo Bill, one of the serial killers in *Silence of the Lambs*, is a transsexual, and the homicidal preacher of *Night of the Hunter* (1955) is a sexual sadist. In the case of female characters, films sometimes present sexuality itself as deviant, then use it to explain why the woman deserves to be harmed. In *Psycho*, for instance, the moment we see Marion Crane (Janet Leigh)—in her bra! in a hotel with a lover! in the afternoon!—we know she is going to be punished.

*Aspiration and Longing: Rational Choice
Explanations of Crime*

Many films attribute crime to aspiration and longing—ambition, dreams, lust, or simple boredom. *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) falls into this category, as do *House of Games* (1987), *A Place in the Sun* (1951), and the majority of heist and caper films. Criminals in aspiration-and-longing movies, like those in bad-environment films, are normal human beings, driven by the mundane motives of need and greed, but they have more choice. Whereas bad-environment films give characters few if any alternatives, arguing that their behavior has been determined by outside forces, aspiration-and-longing films endow their criminals with free will. Their characters survey their circumstances and decide to commit crimes. These decisions are rational—logical (if ill-advised) solutions to the problems at hand. Characters in these films tend to be complicated, people torn by ethical dilemmas. Because they make choices, and because those choices are wrong, they become tragic figures, damning themselves.

The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946), for example, harshly punishes its main characters for making bad decisions: The woman dies in an auto accident, the man in the gas chamber. The film starts when Frank (James Garfield), a charming if unfocused young hitchhiker, is dropped off near a roadhouse in rural California. The owner, Nick, needs a helper, and Frank takes the job, but he immediately falls for Nick's glamorous wife Cora (Lana Turner, resplendent in platinum hair and spotless white outfits). Cora, who longs for a more interesting husband than the oafish Nick and for a better life than that of hash-slinger, reciprocates Frank's interest, and off they go for a moonlight swim.

Cora and Frank eventually kill Nick, motivated by desire for his money and one another. The movie portrays them sympathetically, revealing their admirable qualities along with the bad. It shows that they deserve a better hand than the one they've drawn and also gives them every excuse for the murder. At the same time, though, it condemns them for it. Forcing viewers into the young couple's moral position, the movie makes us share their ethical predicament.

The inevitability of punishment is reflected in *The Postman's* enigmatic title, the meaning of which emerges when, in the last scene, the district attorney drops by Frank's death cell. Court officials, the DA reports, have discovered that Frank was in fact not responsible for the death of Cora (the crime for which, ironically, he was sentenced), but

they have also discovered new evidence proving that he and Cora conspired to kill Nick. Better go to the gas chamber now, the DA advises, and save California the cost of a new trial that is certain to lead to conviction for Nick's murder. Accepting his fate, Frank agrees, remarking,

There's something about this that's like—well, it's like you're expecting a letter that you're just crazy to get, and you hang around the front door for fear you might not hear him [the postman] ring. You never realize that he always rings twice. . . . The truth is, you always hear him ring the second time, even if you're way out in the backyard. . . . I guess God knows more about these things than we do.

In this metaphor, the postman becomes the god of retribution, calling again for Frank.

The Killing (1956), an early film of director Stanley Kubrick, also shows likable characters making bad choices and bringing down consequences on themselves. This story concerns a racetrack heist, a very elaborate scheme that fails during the getaway when a suitcase falls off an airport luggage cart, flies open, and spills stolen money over the airport tarmac. Starring Sterling Hayden as Johnnie Clay, the ex-con who plans the heist as one last job before he and his girl get married and go straight, *The Killing* develops Johnnie as an appealing character: smart, handsome, and cool. But Johnnie is captured in the end, and we realize that he has thrown his life away, tossed it, like the floating bills, into the wind.¹²

Crime is again a rational choice in *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), director Sidney Lumet's portrayal of the screen's sweetest (and least competent) bank robber. Sonny (Al Pacino) robs a Brooklyn bank despite a host of forces working to keep him in line: his hectoring mother and wife, responsibility for his kids, his fundamental sense of decency, and his non-violent nature. In every respect Sonny is the antithesis of the traditional film bank robber. Not until well into the film do we discover his motive: Sonny needs money to finance a sex-change operation for Leon, his male lover. (Lumet postpones this revelation until we have accepted Sonny as totally normal.) Robbing the bank out of free choice, Sonny makes a world-class bad decision that leads to death for his sad sack partner-in-crime (John Cazale) and a lengthy prison term for himself.

The Alternative Tradition and the Fallen World

So far this chapter has discussed the causes of crime in traditional crime films, in which the usual moral pattern is violation, discovery,

punishment, and resolution. Someone breaks the law—due to bad biology, bad environment, abnormal psychology, rational choice, or some less frequently cited cause. The violation is discovered and attributed to the criminal who, no matter how likable, innocent, bright, and brave, is then punished, restoring the world to its former equilibrium. But what of films in the alternative tradition, those critical crime movies that refuse the pat endings and feel-good morals of traditional films? Films in this tradition, as observed in the introduction, lack conventional heroes and tend to be alienated and bleak. What do they have to say about the causes of crime?

Criminologically, alternative-tradition films hark back to noirs, movies that are relatively uninterested in specific causes of crime but take a dim view of human nature in general. Corruption is intrinsic to noirs like *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941); metaphysically, it forms the foundation for their being. Noirs, critic Leonard Quart writes,

projected a world that was almost universally corrupt and morally chaotic. . . . Many characters in film noir were impotent and helpless in the face of evil, bending to its force, which seemed to reside in an inalterable human nature. Others struggled against it but in the process were tainted by evil even when they achieved a victory. And there were still other characters who acted as if they were the personification of that corruption.¹³

In this Fallen World, crime is not the exception but the rule.

In alternative-tradition films, as in noirs, the atmosphere is saturated with menace and depravity. To be sure, movies such as *Chinatown* (1974), *The Grifters* (1990), *Normal Life* (1996), and *Q & A* (1990) present characters with specific motives such as lechery and covetousness, but in them, as in noirs, the entire context is one of corruption. Alternative-tradition crime films incorporate the Fallen World of noirs, modernize it with drug factories and female mobsters, and make it their own. In them, righteousness and salvation are impossible.

Romeo Is Bleeding (1993), starring Gary Oldman as Jack, a degenerate cop, illustrates the way alternative-tradition movies ultimately explain crime in terms of a Fallen World and inevitable sinning. The film opens with Jack already taking bribes, doing favors for mobsters, and cheating on his wife; there are no introductory Edenic scenes to contrast with Jack's post-Fall condition. He deteriorates, partly out of greed but mainly because self-destructiveness is part of human nature. Toward the end, as he sends his wife (Annabella Sciorra) out of

town to protect her, he arranges to wait for her every May 1 and December 1 at a certain Arizona roadhouse. Realizing how much he loves her and how completely he has wrecked his life, Jack extricates himself from various subplots and moves to Arizona, where he waits for his wife in an isolated, decaying restaurant that symbolizes his (and the human) condition. Naturally, she never appears.

Movies, Crime, and Ideology

Beyond their criminological messages, movies communicate other meanings that are best defined as *ideological* because they contribute to our taken-for-granted beliefs about the causes of crime. One of crime films' most potent ideological messages is, simply, that crime can be explained. This assumption is such a familiar part of our thinking that we rarely stop to examine it. We accept it partly because, sub rosa, nearly all crime films imply that lawbreaking, even in its most bizarre and heinous forms, is comprehensible. Films get into the minds and lives of criminals, including violent offenders, offering narratives that account for their misdeeds. In addition, to the extent that they endorse specific explanations of crime, movies lend credence to those theories. Only alternative-tradition films raise the grim possibility that crime cannot be explained, that it may simply be a form of evil or a mysterious fact of social life. They alone suggest that crime may be unfixable.

A second ideological message of crime films is that there are certain individuals who are able and, indeed, specially equipped to figure out the causes of and solutions to crime. Who these individuals are differs from film to film. In *Psycho*, *The Bad Seed*, and *Silence of the Lambs* they are psychiatrists. In *Boyz n the Hood* it is Furious Styles, the wise father; in noirs it is often a private investigator; and in cop, court, and prison films, it tends to be a criminal justice official or private lawyer. The point is that crime films usually assume that there is some cultural authority who can explain crime and knows what to do about it—an assumption they pass on to audiences.

This is a comforting message. Crime films raise anxieties and instill fear, but they usually conclude by sending experts to our rescue. In movies, few criminals are so monstrous that they cannot be understood or so clever that they elude the authorities forever. For decades, crime films assumed that the authority figure would be a white, middle-class male—another aspect of their ideology. More recently, in keeping with

the movement toward cultural pluralism, the specialist's identity has broadened to include black men, white women, and other nontraditional authorities. The possibility that *no one* can cope with crime is raised only by a few bold, alternative-tradition movies such as *187* (1997), *State of Grace* (1990), and *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985).

Third, crime films feed ideology by defining "the crime problem." In reality, the most common types of crime are nonviolent property offenses, but one could watch movies for a week before finding a petty theft. Instead, murder seems to be the most common offense, followed closely by attempted murder and serial murder. In a study of how crime is portrayed by news media, Michael Welch and his colleagues point out that "crime news is . . . shaped according to the dominant ideology," according to which

street offenses are the most costly, most dangerous, and most threatening form of crime. . . . Financial losses assessed for different types of offenses, however, contradict this image of crime. It is estimated that the cost of street crime hovers around \$4 billion per year, whereas the cost of white-collar and corporate crime reaches \$200 billion. . . . Further, approximately 24,000 homicides were committed in the United States in 1995 [but in] the same period, more than 56,000 workers died as a result of injuries or diseases caused by unsafe working conditions.¹⁴

The media, Welch and his colleagues conclude, stress street crime but neglect such social harms as white-collar and corporate offenses "because of ideological constraints." Precisely the same point could be made about crime films.

"In the crime and justice area," Ray Surette writes in an article titled "Predator Criminals as Media Icons," "one result of the media's central role is the construction of mass media-supported crime myths" which have almost nothing to do with crime actualities but nonetheless "provide knowledge that becomes permanently incorporated into our socially constructed world models."¹⁵ Surette focuses on the myth of the violent predator who does little but prey on innocent citizens, but there are others as well, such as the myth that we live in danger from serial killers—an offender type that, statistically, is exceedingly rare. Movies also reinforce the myth of a close association between mental illness and crime (in fact, mentally ill people are more likely to be victimized than victimizers) and the age-old myth of the Evil Woman who leads men astray, a figure perpetuated by noirs and more recently by *Body Heat* (1981), *The Grifters*, and

Basic Instinct (1992). Movies generate these skewed perceptions of crime not to mislead the public but to attract audiences with lures of proven efficacy: action, emotional thrills, blood and gore.

While movies' emphasis on violence and death may distort public perceptions of "the crime problem," movies also have the potential to correct such misunderstandings and increase public awareness of the effects of crime. The representations of prison rape in *An Innocent Man* (1989), *Short Eyes* (1979), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), for instance, probably increased public sensitivity to the problem of prison violence, while the depictions of family violence in films such as *River's Edge* and *Dolores Claiborne* (1994) may have heightened public awareness that such crime can cause intergenerational harm. And Lumet's portrait of Sonny in *Dog Day Afternoon* undermines the stereotype of the bank robber as a hardened street criminal. But only alternative-tradition films (and just a few of them) actually challenge ideological definitions of "the crime problem." *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), *Q & A*, and *Romeo Is Bleeding* suggest that cops may be part of the crime problem, while *Falling Down* (1993) shows us a white, middle-class male as dangerous as any street criminal.

Finally, films tell us how to feel about crime and the contexts in which it occurs. Killing and armed robbery may be crimes, *Bonnie and Clyde* explains, but sometimes they are committed by innocents—an explanation repeated twenty-five years later by *Thelma and Louise*. While films do not *determine* our emotions, they do provide narratives that we use to frame our emotional responses to actual criminal events. *A Simple Plan* suggests that we are all capable of grand larceny; *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) maintains that there are no circumstances under which crimes against humanity can be excused. Movie narratives may fade in memory, cancel one another out, modify previous narrative lines, or pile up to create a cumulative impression. Some glorify lawbreakers; others encourage us to look for a psychopath in every cabdriver and motel clerk. Collectively, however, film narratives shape our feelings about crime and its contexts.

Few crime films simultaneously perform all these ideological functions: assuring us that crime *can* be explained; identifying criminological authorities; defining "the crime problem"; and guiding our emotional reactions to crime. But all crime films contribute to the sets of mental images viewers use to think about crime and crime control.

Beyond the ideological messages already discussed, many crime films have more specific ideological content, a point that can be

illustrated by comparing three movie versions of one of the twentieth century's most notorious crimes, the 1924 killing of Bobby Franks. When they were still young men, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb killed this boy from their Chicago neighborhood on the theory that as unusually intelligent people, they were above the law. The context of the murder story included a number of intriguing elements—homosexuality, debates over mental illness and criminal responsibility, Nietzsche's idea of the superman, issues of wealth and religion (Leopold and Loeb both came from wealthy Jewish families), and the spectacle of the most famous defense attorney of the day, Clarence Darrow, staving off death sentences; as a result the Bobby Franks killing has inspired a play, a novel, and other books as well as the three film versions.

The first movie, based on a novelized version of the story, was director Richard Fleischer's *Compulsion* (1959). This movie hints broadly at an unnatural sexual attraction between Leopold and Loeb, although (perhaps to confuse the censors) it also gives them girlfriends. Its ideological emphasis falls not on sex but on the law. *Compulsion* sings a sustained hymn of praise to the law, personified by three male characters: the district attorney (E. G. Marshall) who solves the crime; the defense attorney (Orson Welles) who argues successfully against the death penalty; and the judge who, heeding the defense, tempers justice with mercy by sentencing the young men to prison for life plus ninety-nine years. These lawyers' tireless pursuit of justice is contrasted with the despicable superman theories of the killers. Inexorably, the majestic, heroic law bears down, showing them an impartiality and compassion they cannot even comprehend.

The second movie version, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), skirts the murderers' Jewishness and relegates their homosexuality to a subtext in order to focus on the crime itself and the superman theories that inspired it. Derived from a play, this version locates the events in a Manhattan penthouse where the Leopold and Loeb figures (John Dall and Farley Granger) serve dinner to their victim's family, using as a table the wooden chest in which they've hidden the body. Also present is their old prep school headmaster (James Stewart), who figures out what has happened and brings in the police. This version is concerned with the crime itself and with the relationship of fathers and sons, especially that of the headmaster father figure who catches the bad boys and will see that they are punished.

On a deeper level it is concerned with self-destruction, not only by the young men but also by the headmaster, who, because he taught the superman theory to killers, is partly responsible for their deed.¹⁶

Ideologically, *Rope* conveys messages about the desirability of being powerful and in control. The setting, atop Manhattan, is one of power and privilege. The young men attempt to exercise power but fail to control themselves in the aftermath, thus revealing what they have done. Through his intelligence and sleuthing ability, the headmaster gains power over the other two, but even his control is suspect in the end due to his triangulation with the killers. The figure who is most powerful and most in control, *Rope* implies, is the filmmaker. As often happens in Hitchcock films, the movie ends up being about relationship between viewer and director, with Hitchcock playfully underscoring his control over us, his audience.

The third and most recent version, *Swoon* (1991), is writer-director Tom Kalin's postmodernist retelling of the Leopold and Loeb story. *Swoon* starts the story at an earlier point in time than the other two movies, follows it through Leopold's death in 1971, and reanalyzes the young men's identities as Jewish and gay, all the while commenting visually on the two previous films. Kalin asks questions about the relationship of film to history and about the nature of illusion and film documentary. He explores the role of film in the social construction of past events and in our ideas about sexuality, gender, and race. Unlike *Rope*, which stays out of the courtroom, *Swoon* includes court scenes, but there are no heroic lawyers here, only the psychiatrists who pathologized the young men's homosexual relationship. Witty, self-conscious, and stagy, *Swoon* rescues Leopold and Loeb's love from the coy slanders of the two earlier versions, normalizes it, and brings it to the fore. The film ends up making an ideological statement about movies themselves—what they can be, stylistically, and what they can reveal both about characters' inner lives and about events in the nation's past.

Do Movies Cause Crime?

One of the central controversies of our time concerns whether movies encourage people to behave violently and to engage in other sorts of criminal activities. Sociologists and psychologists design studies to determine whether the media influence actual behavior, and newspapers and television carry frequent allegations of copycat criminality. Thus,

it seems fitting to conclude this chapter on criminology in movies with a discussion of the question "Do movies cause crime?"

There are good intuitive reasons for suspecting a relationship between movie-viewing and criminal behavior. Advertisers and politicians spend billions annually on the assumption that media influence behavior. Violent crimes seem to be ubiquitous; so do violent films. Furthermore, we know that movies can set trends—in dress, speech ("Make my day"), and even career choices (as when, after the release of *Silence of the Lambs*, droves of young women decided to join the FBI). The assumption that films can induce antisocial behavior, moreover, lies behind our history of film regulation and censorship. Today, groups such as Women Against Pornography continue to protest against media violence on the grounds that it encourages real-life violence.

Anecdotal evidence seems to support this view. The night *Boyz n the Hood* opened, audience violence after the screening left two viewers dead and over thirty injured.¹⁷ Film crimes do sometimes inspire copycat crimes, as when John Hinckley Jr., imitating *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle, attempted to assassinate President Reagan in the hope of impressing Jodie Foster, one of the film's actors.¹⁸ Similarly, in 1998 in Olympia, Washington, five young women and girls who had repeatedly watched *Set It Off* (1996), a movie about female bank robbers, held up the local bank. "Bank heist mimics film," announced one headline,¹⁹ while another described the event as a "movie rip-off heist."²⁰ Such anecdotes suggest that at least under some circumstances, movies lead directly to crime.

Social science research, however, indicates that the relationship between media and criminal behavior is not that simple. For decades, social scientists have been trying to determine whether the media influence behavior and, if so, how. Their studies have produced evidence that some media influence the behavior of some people some of the time.²¹ However, this evidence is difficult to interpret, and it does not necessarily apply to movies. In fact, most of the studies have focused on the effects of television violence on children and of advertising campaigns on consumers and voters. Many have been conducted under conditions (for example, in psychology laboratories) very different from those in which people view movies, and some have concentrated on measuring aggression (for example, the number of punches delivered to an inflatable "Bobo doll"), not actual criminality. Experiments indicate that media violence does tend to increase aggressive behavioral outcomes, but these effects are often

short in duration, and they do not show up in all viewers. Summarizing these studies, Surette writes:

The evidence concerning the media as a criminogenic factor clearly supports the conclusion that the media have a significant short-term effect on some individuals. . . . The more heavily the consumer relies on the media for information about the world and the greater his or her predisposition to criminal behavior, the greater the effect. . . . Violence-prone children and the mentally unbalanced are especially at risk of emulating media violence.²²

But it is premature and even simplistic to suggest that movies cause people in general to commit crime. Human behavior is influenced by multiple factors, in combinations so complex that no one has yet devised a way to isolate them from one another.

As for incidents in which movie-watching apparently has led specific individuals to criminal behavior, details of these cases suggest other, more plausible explanations. John Hinckley Jr. was one of those “mentally unbalanced” people whom Surette describes as “especially at risk of emulating media violence.” The female bank robbers seem to have been unusually naive and even stupid. (They left a copy of the film in their house and boasted about their heist, both before and after the event.) In the case of *Boyz n the Hood*, it seems odd to blame this antiviolence movie for the violent incidents that accompanied its opening. Because *Boyz* deals with racism, it may well have inflamed some viewers’ frustration with racism, leading them to postscreening violence. But the underlying cause of the violence is likely to have been racism itself rather than the movie. In director John Singleton’s opinion, “it wasn’t the film [that caused violence]. It was the fact that a whole generation [of black men] doesn’t respect themselves, which makes it easier for them to shoot each other.”²³ In any case, only an infinitesimally small fraction of the people who saw *Boyz* assaulted people immediately thereafter.

Film scholar Sharon Willis warns against assuming that if one identifies with a movie character, one will want to imitate that character’s behavior. In reaction to reviews predicting that *Thelma and Louise* would lead to open warfare on men, Willis argues that

identification is not a state, but a process, and . . . it is likely to be mobile and intermittent, rather than consistent. We will do better to think of viewer identifications as scenarios, rather than fixations. . . . Finally, a more complicated analysis would not imagine that fantasmatic identifications

forged at the movies are acted out, and acted out as directly imitative behavior. And this is because identification is not necessarily mimesis.²⁴

This seems a sensible way of understanding viewer reactions to movies. When we identify with films characters, we get "scenarios" that we then store in our memories. Most of us are quite aware that these scenarios are fantasies; identification does not lead automatically to imitation in the case of movies any more than in that of novels.

Movies, then, give us narratives or explanatory stories. Narratives seem to be crucial to our efforts to make sense of our lives. Donald E. Polkinghorne, a specialist in this area, holds that narrative is "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful."²⁵ We are constantly bombarded with stimuli, none of which has obvious meaning; we make sense by organizing the fragments of experience into stories. Films are one source of our narrative lines. As Australian film scholar Graeme Turner writes, "The world 'comes to us' in the shape of stories. . . . This is not to say that all our stories *explain* the world. Rather, story provides us with an easy, unconscious, and involving way of constructing our world . . . and sharing that 'sense' with others."²⁶ Movies probably do not cause violence, therefore, but they do create narratives, giving us plots, imagery, and "scenarios" that we store in our reservoirs of narrative lines.

Sometimes film narratives are explicitly proposed as frames for public events. This happened in 1991, when law professor Anita Hill challenged Clarence Thomas's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court on the ground that he had sexually harassed her. Commentators who wanted to discredit Anita Hill compared her to the Glenn Close character in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), who viciously retaliates against a former lover. Using the film's narrative, commentators attempted to reframe Hill's story as one in which she was not victim but offender. But this sort of deliberate attempt to force public events into a movie framework is unusual. More frequently, our use of our fund of film narratives is unconscious.²⁷

Few of us are likely to be pursued by a maniacal former lover or to embark on a cross-country crime spree. However, movie narratives occasionally do coincide with our own experiences, perhaps opening up new possibilities of interpretation or even action. In such cases films do not *cause* us to act in any particular way, but they may give us a clearer or more compelling story line for action we have been contemplating. (This is what evidently happened in the Olympia,

Washington, bank heist.) Mostly, though, films entertain us, giving us a break from action-as-usual. We savor narratives that carry us far from our humdrum lives into a more exciting and romantic world. Movies cause pleasure.

In fact, "Do movies cause crime?" may not be nearly so good a question as "Why do people enjoy depictions of violence?" We surround ourselves with violent imagery, which can be found in religious paintings, children's stories, and Shakespeare's plays as well as in movies. *Why We Watch*, a collection of essays on the attractions of violent entertainment, concludes that people enjoy representations of violence when these provide "an engaging fantasy, an unpredictable path toward a predictable end, the restoration of justice and the depiction of morality, and opportunities for arousal and its reduction."²⁸ Many viewers object to movie violence, but many others seek it out, again indicating that if movies cause anything, it is not crime but pleasure.

In sum, crime films give us narratives for thinking about the nature and causes of crime. Many incorporate a theory of crime, but most do so opportunistically rather than in order to promote a specific interpretation. Crime films influence ideologies of crime and justice through their assumptions about the comprehensibility of criminal behavior, who is best qualified to cope with it, and its distribution by offense type. But, so far as we know at the moment, movies do not cause crime; their power to influence behavior is apparently limited to nudging crime-prone individuals in directions they are already headed. What movies do cause is narratives, stories that, for better or worse, help us interpret both crime and our lives. They form a bridge, with heavy traffic in both directions, between "the real world" and our imaginations, between social experience and its interpretation.

Notes

1. But see *Knock on Any Door* (1949), a courtroom film that endorses a bad-environment theory of crime, and *The Onion Field* (1979), a cops-courts-and-prison film that attributes crime to the killer's psychopathic personality.
2. Shaw 1929, Shaw and McKay 1931.
3. *Straw Dogs* (1972) has it both ways. The tale of a math professor goaded into extreme violence, *Straw Dogs* both normalizes violent behavior and condemns it.
4. See also *RoboCop* (1987) and *To Die For* (1995).
5. Lombroso-Ferrero 1972 (1911). For a related argument, see Mitchell 1995.
6. Parish and Pitts 1990: 314.

7. Cf. Douglass 1981, which treats *Badlands* as a story of psychopaths. However, Douglass acknowledges (37) that *Badlands* explains Kit and Holly's psychopathy in environmental terms.
8. "The research on *Mean Streets* was my life," Scorsese has said. "There was no research. I literally took one step out of the neighborhood and made that movie" (Gussow 1997).
9. The epilepsy is a biological touch inspired by Lombroso, who taught that many born criminals have fits.
10. For useful histories of the representation of psychopathy in American movies, see Douglass 1981 and McCarty 1986; the latter includes a listing of over four hundred "psychofilms" made between 1915 and 1986.
11. More recent movie psychos are seldom drawn with such a fine brush. Contrast the leads in *Gun Crazy* with the vivid but blatant psychos in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991): Buffalo Bill, who is making a dress out of the skins of his victims, and the cannibalistic Dr. Hannibal ("I'm having a friend for dinner") Lector.
12. The floating bills echo the close of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948). *The Killing*, which replays an early scene over and over, showing us ever more clearly what was really going on, may have inspired Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997), another movie in which a key scene is repeated from different points of view.
13. Quart and Auster 1991: 29–30.
14. Welch, Fenwick, and Roberts 1998: 223.
15. Surette 1995: 133.
16. On *Rope's* homosexual subtext and its ideological meanings, see Lawrence 1999 and Wood 1989.
17. "A Bad Omen for Black Movies?" 1991: 48.
18. For a fuller discussion of copycat crimes, see Surette 1998: 137–51.
19. *Boston Globe*, 13 August 1998: A10.
20. *Burlington Free Press*, 13 August 1998: A2.
21. This evidence, along with various models of the nature of the effects of media on behavior, is presented at length in Straubhaar and LaRose 1996: 411–33.
22. Surette 1992: 140.
23. Singleton 1991.
24. Willis 1993: 121.
25. Polkinghorne 1988: 1.
26. Turner 1993: 68 (emphasis in original).
27. My thanks to Lisa Cuklanz for the Anita Hill example. Another example, this one involving the movie *Wag the Dog* (1997), occurred in 1998. President Clinton, immediately after admitting that he had had a sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky and had lied about it under oath, ordered the bombing of several suspected terrorist bases, an action that evoked immediate news media comparison with an attempted presidential distraction in *Wag the Dog*.
28. Goldstein 1998: 225. See also Prince 1998 and, for different but related approaches to the issues of film violence, Cerulo 1998, Studlar 1992, and Willis 1997.

3

Cop Films

We need a twenty-four-hour-a-day police officer. A cop who doesn't need to eat or sleep. A cop with superior fire power and the reflexes to use it.

—RoboCop

In *The Great Cop Pictures*, James Robert Parish writes that the main preoccupation of this genre is the “understanding of American law enforcers.”¹ This statement has a patriotic ring, but it is at best a half-truth. Cop films do indeed focus on the nature of police work, but there are larger and subtler types of social definition at work in these movies, which are also concerned with distinguishing the realities of policing from its ideals, with defining the ideal man, and with projecting the ideal role of the police in a democratic society.

Cop films comprise the newest genre within the crime film category. Police officers themselves have been depicted in movies since the early twentieth century and in television series since the 1950s, but the police drama did not fully emerge on the big screen until the early 1970s, when *Dirty Harry* strolled onto the scene.

Several factors conspired to retard the genre's development. One was a problem in characterization: Filmmakers found it difficult to make good guys entertaining. It was much easier to deliver adventure, illicit sex, and mayhem by concentrating on lawbreakers. Another hindrance was the popularity of Westerns and noirs, both of which featured a central, law-restoring character with a gun. There was little need for police heroes as long as we could rely on lonesome sheriffs and private eyes. Then, too, for over a century police officers had low status in American society. To become a cop required little more than an eighth-grade education and male anatomy, and the police worked long hours for low pay and minimal respect. Their standing began to rise, however, with the 1967 publication of a multivolume report by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, a work that sought to redefine policing as a profession requiring advanced education, technical skills, and scientific training.² This report helped make the new genre possible.

Evolution of the Genre

Before *Dirty Harry* (1971) led cop films into the promised land, movies represented law enforcers in terms of three stereotypes: foolish patrolmen, tough federal agents, and cool private investigators. Silent movies depict patrolmen as ludicrous oafs, men who can be counted on to slip on a banana peel and hold a letter upside down. For example, Buster Keaton's *Cops* (1922) turns the police officers into objects of merriment, and Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops became symbols of madcap ineptitude. Gangster films of the 1930s elaborated on this image, portraying the patrolman as a stupid "flatfoot" or "gumshoe"—coarse, Irish, and corruptible. This stereotype (almost an opposite of what became the Dirty Harry ideal) continued to turn up into the 1970s. For example, it lies behind the characterization of McCluskey, the crooked police lieutenant in *The Godfather* (1972) (played by Sterling Hayden). A sleazy Irishman who accepts payoffs and beats up helpless citizens, McCluskey is dining with a mobster when Michael Corleone blows his brains out.

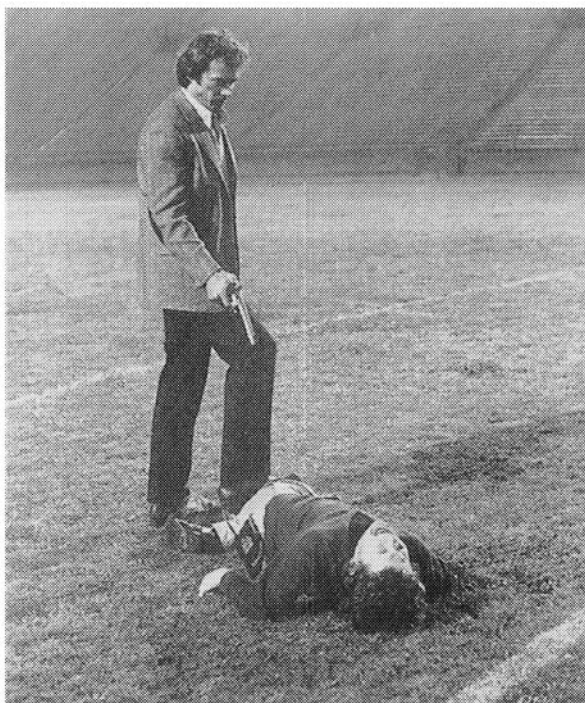
This unflattering image was upgraded by a new cop figure, the tough federal agent, who made his film debut in the 1930s. Professional and straight-laced, the federal officer was created to solve a dilemma. Hollywood had recently released a string of gangster and prison films in which hoodlums were heroes. When Catholic bishops and other moralists condemned these films, Hollywood responded with a new series of movies such as *Let 'Em Have It* (1935), *Show Them No Mercy* (1935), and *You Can't Get Away with It* (1936), in which the forces of law and order triumph. These mainly featured the "G-" or government-men of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose publicity-conscious director, J. Edgar Hoover, encouraged positive propaganda from Hollywood. A problem remained, however: While the movie feds were competent, most were still much less engaging than the bad guys. The problem was partially solved in *"G" Men* (1935), starring James Cagney as a crime-fighter who began life on the wrong side of the tracks. Raised by a mobster who finances his education, Cagney becomes a lawyer. No clients knock on his door, however, so when a G-man friend is killed, he joins the FBI. Thanks to his familiarity with mobsters' ways, he is able to outshine the other agents. Cagney's engaging, street-fighter character could have rescued *"G" Men* from the usual woodenness had the film not gone on to preach about the FBI's need for expanded enforcement powers.

The obstacle of the boring good guy was finally overcome by noirs, which devised a third image for the crime-buster, that of the cool private investigator: sexy, debonair, and a whole lot smarter than everyone else. Humphrey Bogart, who starred as Sam Spade in John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and as Philip Marlowe in Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946), became the archetypal private detective, living dangerously on the borderline between criminality and lawfulness. Even David Bannion, the cop hero of the noir *The Big Heat* (1953), becomes palatable when his wife is blown up by a car bomb meant for him, transforming him from a devoted family man into a hellbent vigilante. When Bannion (Glenn Ford) refuses to bow to mob pressure, his crooked boss demands his badge, thus furthering Bannion's transformation into a marginal figure we can identify with. Moving into the underworld, the former police officer befriends a gun moll whose face has been scalded and scarred by the ultimate bad guy (Lee Marvin). Neither sinner nor saint, the noir hero was a bit of both.³

A unique solution to the boring good guy problem turns up in *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1954), starring Spencer Tracy as a one-armed stranger who disembarks from a train in a tiny desert town and vanquishes its bad guys. Tracy has come to find out what happened to a Japanese American man who had settled in the area during World War II. Local cowboys murdered him, Tracy discovers, out of bigotry and "patriotism." An aging, gentlemanly civilian, Tracy's character may be atypical of crime film heroes, but as a sleuth and authority figure who restores order, this role foreshadows the heroes of later cop films.

Dirty Harry

Several factors converged in the 1950s and 1960s to produce, at last, the cop film genre. The precursor genres featuring men with guns, the Western and the noir, were running out of gas. "There was a need," writes Richard Schickel, "to find a contemporary place for hard loners—traditional males, if you will—to live plausibly. And the most readily available wilderness, the concrete wilderness, suddenly seemed more interesting and dangerous than ever" due to rising rates of urban disorder and street crime.⁴ The new medium of television introduced the police series: *Dragnet* (1951 to 1959) and *Hawaii Five-O* (1968 to 1980) demonstrated the enormous drawing



Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* (1971), a progenitor of the cop film. Until recently, films in this genre devoted themselves to defining the ideal man, an image they derived from and fed back into the broader society. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

power of police action episodes, a lesson Hollywood took to heart. The 1967 President's Commission report brought new respectability to policing; at the same time, police overreactions to student protests and urban riots forced both the public and police to rethink the role of law enforcement in a multiracial, class-divided society.

A key transitional event occurred in 1967, when veteran director Don Siegel paired up with actor Clint Eastwood to make *Coogan's Bluff* (1968).⁵ Picking up on the Western's heroic lawman, *Coogan's Bluff* follows not a police officer but something close: a sheriff. Moreover, this sheriff tracks a killer from Arizona to New York City, thus anticipating the union of the Western with the city-centered noir that was about to produce a new genre. *Coogan's Bluff* itself is an embarrassing film, awkward and offensive, but it is significant as a forerunner. The cop film was nearly at hand.

Dirty Harry appeared in the wake of some of the most tumultuous events in U.S. history. The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, and Malcolm X made people wonder whether the police were in control. When police officers killed peaceful demonstrators at Kent State University, fought with protesters during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, and struggled for five days with gay men outside New York's Stonewall Inn, many people wondered whether they were out of control. Critics across the nation reproached the police, who had indeed accumulated a sorry record of brutality. About 1970, however, public opinion began swinging back toward law-and-order positions. Eastwood himself was conservative, as was *Dirty Harry*.⁶ With perfect timing, the movie caught public attitudes toward the police just as they began reversing themselves.

The film portrays Eastwood's character, Harry ("Well, I'm all broken up about that man's rights") Callahan, as the ideal cop. Brave and uncomplaining, he is willing to sacrifice his life in the line of duty. If Harry does die, the film informs us, it will be because bleeding-heart liberals have tied cops' hands, making it impossible to keep criminals off the streets. Unwilling to let obvious offenders escape, Harry sometimes has to play dirty, breaking the rules to keep the peace. *Dirty Harry's* adulation of the police and its liberal-bashing contributed to the movie's success, as did Eastwood's sardonic manner and tough-guy talk. But the movie's apparent enthusiasm for vigilante justice enraged the critics.⁷

The second film in the series, *Magnum Force* (1973), addresses the critics' objections in two ways. First, it presents a group of *really* bad cops to contrast with Harry and demonstrate that he is in fact a model of restraint. These are neofascist traffic cops who speed around on motorcycles shooting everyone who displeases them, including scantily dressed girls and black men. Second, *Magnum Force* cleans up Harry's own act. Now he follows the rules even when he despises them. Notwithstanding his newfound moderation, Harry manages to vanquish the fascistic traffic cops as well as the usual criminals.⁸

A crucial factor in the *Dirty Harry* movies' success was the ease with which they shifted the familiar character of the gunslinger to an urban police setting. Without missing a beat, the Siegel-Eastwood team rescued the superannuated but still compelling hero of Westerns from genre decay by transferring him laterally, character intact, into the cop flick. In an essay on the Western hero, film writer Robert Warshaw speaks of the gunslinger's melancholy, seriousness, and "moral clarity," of his "personal nobility," modesty, and reluctance

to impose himself.⁹ These traits are equally characteristic of Eastwood's cop hero, with his sense of limitation and constrained diffidence. Warshaw's Westerner "appears to be unemployed," a "man of leisure"; although Harry Callahan works for a living, his scorn for superior officers and his civilian clothes indicate that he, too, is a freelancer. Much as the Westerner's horse signifies physical freedom, Callahan's car signifies his freedom to roam the city, which turns out to offer as many spectacles as the wide-open spaces. With little more than a change of outfit, then, the Westerner migrated to the cop film, enabling viewers to switch genre allegiances without bidding farewell to the gunslinger's essential character. Eastwood, who had starred in a number of Westerns, was the ideal actor for making this transition.

The ease of this character migration illuminates not only the success of the first Dirty Harry films but also the nature of cop films more generally. "One of the greatest obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre," writes film theorist Robin Wood, "has been the tendency to treat the genres as discrete. . . . At best, they represent different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions."¹⁰ When it first appeared, the cop film was less a unique new form than a new "strategy" for analyzing the nature of heroism and the hero's relationship to society. Like the Westerner, Harry Callahan patrols a border between barbarity and society, abandon and self-control, what John Cawelti in another context calls the "frontier between savagery and civilization."¹¹ That frontier is both geographical and psychological, a line that must be drawn within the city and within the hero himself.

After Dirty Harry

A flood of cop films followed *Dirty Harry*. *The French Connection* (also 1971) starred Gene Hackman as Popeye Doyle, another half-wild police officer, and it set a new standard for the urban car chase with its scene of high-speed pursuit under New York's Third Avenue "el." *Serpico* (1973) featured Al Pacino, fresh from his triumph in *The Godfather*, in the true story of a New York City cop who ratted on crooked officers and suffered the consequences. By portraying Serpico as an eccentric who, by virtue of being a good guy in an evil department, is himself a bit of an outlaw, Pacino manages the difficult feat of making an official hero appealing. With additions such as *Fuzz* (1972),

Flatfoot (1978), and *The Black Marble* (1979), the new genre was off and running. Sometimes it stumbled, as with *The Onion Field* (1979), a movie that begins dramatically with the kidnapping and shooting of two police officers but then loses its way by following the story into the courts and prison. The blaxploitation detective films (*Shaft* [1971], *Shaft's Big Score* [1972], and *Shaft in Africa* [1973]) probed in another direction that did not prove fruitful in the long run.¹² Even the missteps, however, were part of the process through which the new genre figured out what it could and could not do well.

One of the boldest of the new cop movies was *Cruising* (1980), the story of an undercover officer investigating a series of slasher murders of gay men. Starring Al Pacino as the New York City cop who learns about not only homosexuality but also his own attitude toward it, the movie precipitated furious protests against its lurid views of life in a gay subculture.¹³ However, Pacino's cruiser is both plausible and attractive; and at the end, with his girlfriend cross-dressing in the next room and the movie hinting that he himself may have become a slasher, the cop searches his reflection in the mirror as if questioning his own sexual identity.

Also innovative is *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1997), the fourth in director Sidney Lumet's cycle of films about the inescapable moral dilemmas of policing. (The other three are *Serpico*, *Prince of the City* [1981], and *Q & A* [1990]. Lumet traces his interest in police corruption to childhood: "When I was a kid we'd be pitching pennies and the cops would come along, break us up and keep the pennies.")¹⁴ In *Night Falls* the lead figure, Sean Casey (Andy Garcia), is a former cop turned prosecutor who must choose between protecting a criminal and safeguarding his own father, a detective whose corruption he has uncovered. Like *Cruising*, *Night Falls* finds a creative solution to the old problem of how to focus on an official hero without boring the audience. It gives him a moral dilemma to struggle with while he cleans up the department.

The cop film genre began subdividing into types.¹⁵ One variety is the rogue cop movie, in which the lead officer will do anything to destroy his or her opponent. Direct descendants of *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection*, with *The Big Heat* as a distant ancestor, rogue cop movies include *Ten to Midnight* (1983), *Cop* (1988), and *One Good Cop* (1991). A second type is the corrupt cop movie, in which the lead officer misuses his or her position for personal gain. This category includes *An Innocent Man* (1989), *Internal Affairs* (1990), *Romeo Is*

Bleeding (1993), and the high-spirited *Unlawful Entry* (1992), in which Ray Liotta plays the bad guy with a gusto reminiscent of James Cagney. The corrupt cop category also includes *Copland* (1997), a movie in which a pack of wicked officers is eventually done in by an internal affairs investigator (Robert De Niro) and a lumpish local cop (Sylvester Stallone, transformed from action hero into a character so thick in mind and body that, as reviewer Anthony Lane put it, "he's like a brick wall walking into himself").¹⁶

Other types that appear with some frequency are the buddy cop movie, the cop comedy, the honest cop film, and the woman cop picture. The buddy category, which often features an odd-couple partnership, includes *48 Hrs.* (1982), *Alien Nation* (1988), *Colors* (1988), *The Rookie* (1990), and *New Jack City* (1991).¹⁷ Cop comedies such as the *Police Academy* series (1984 and following), the *Beverly Hills Cop* series (1984, 1987, 1994), the *Naked Gun* series (1988, 1991, 1994), and *The Hard Way* (1991) make themselves acceptable by parodying not police officers but other cop films. The honest cop movie has seldom improved over its progenitor, *Serpico*, but includes such variations as *Prince of the City*, *Witness* (1985), and *The Untouchables* (1987). *Deep Cover* (1992), starring Laurence Fishburn as an undercover agent who embraces his drug dealer role a bit too enthusiastically, combines the honest cop and the corrupt cop film. Hollywood started including women cops in police movies in the 1970s, but for a long time these women ended up in bed with their partner (as in *The Black Marble*), or had to take orders from other cops and even civilians (*Above the Law* [1988]), or got shot for their efforts to enter male territory (*The Enforcer*).¹⁸ Only recently have films such as *Blue Steel* (1990), *Copycat* (1995), and *Point of No Return* (1993) begun to feature women cops as heroes in their own right. In the late 1980s, cop films of all types started degenerating into action comedies, although entertaining films in this genre, such as *Sea of Love* (1989) and *Heat* (1995), continued to appear.

Several new types of cop films seem to be emerging. One is the aging cop story (*Shoot to Kill* [1988], *Twilight* [1998], and, to the extent that it is a police film, *Falling Down* [1993]). Another is the neo-noir, a revival (in color) of the detective films popular fifty years ago. *L.A. Confidential* (1997), for instance, romps gleefully through noir plot clichés as secrets are revealed, detectives speed across town to locate the next clue, and the prostitute turns out to have a heart of gold. Set in the 1950s with a story line involving an unholy alliance among

corrupt police officers, a media gossip columnist, and organized crime figures, *L.A. Confidential* demonstrates that everyone is morally compromised, as of course they should be in a good noir. This movie also adds touches for the modern sensibility, most remarkably a police officer of ambiguous sexual orientation, played to perfection by Kevin Spacey.

Cop Films and Masculinities

Cop films serve as a vehicle for the definition of masculinity, participating in the construction and reconstruction of gender on the national level, influencing how we react to men and how we ourselves "do" gender when we dress, walk, and talk. Since the early 1970s, cop films have repeatedly raised the question "What makes a good police officer?" Sometimes they do this explicitly, as when, in *Robo-Cop* (1987), the bad guy captures the good cop and then sneers, "You a good cop? Hot shot? Sure you are. Why you got to be some kind of a *great* cop to come in here by yourself." More often, cop films raise the question of what makes a good police officer indirectly, through character and plot. Specific responses to the question vary, but their general definitions tend to be the same: The good police officer, cop films tell us, is an ideal man. To identify one, look for the other.

Even before the police drama emerged in generic form, films raised this issue about the nature of the ideal crime investigator, and earlier movies, too, tended to answer it with traditional definitions of masculinity, picturing the ideal man as fearless, heterosexual, independent, unemotional, and superhumanly powerful. That is, they tended to draw on and reinforce dominant notions of masculinity. Recently, however, movies have started to break with traditional definitions, offering new images showing that the ideal cop or private detective can be nonwhite, female, and a quite ordinary (though of course heroic) person.¹⁹

Traditional Masculinities

Like many noirs, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) focuses on a private detective, in this case Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), the hero of a popular novel series by Mickey Spillane. Mike's masculinity is initially defined by his tough-guy talk, the surly banter with which he figuratively hammers the other characters. The film opens on a terrified woman

running down a lonely road at night; after almost hitting her with his automobile, Mike's first words are, "You almost wrecked my car. Well? Get in." But the woman is more amused than offended by this churlish gallantry, and the audience, taking its cue from her, settles in to enjoy Mike's nonconformity.

Another aspect of Mike's masculinity (as his surname hints) is sexuality. He is a "bedroom" detective, we learn, a private investigator who specializes in proving infidelity in divorce cases, and his secretary Velda would happily be his sexual slave. But while women throw themselves at Mike, he treats them with indifference. His job is not to seduce but to save them.

Appearing shortly after World War II, *Kiss Me Deadly* offered escape into unregimented glamour for young men returning from combat and settling down to more humdrum lives. Mike lives not in one of the cookie-cutter housing developments where many GIs were raising their families but in an elegant apartment with a rolling bar and high-tech answering machine. Untrammelled by wife, kids, or regular job, Mike roams the city at will, driving classy sports cars and rescuing nearly nude blonds at night to the velvety tones of Nat King Cole. The film's opening—the woman running, the credits zooming, the car swerving—bespeaks an existence of excitement and speed.

To underscore Mike's masculinity, *Kiss Me Deadly* contrasts him with two groups of other men, police officers and menial laborers. Neither has much to do with the plot; rather, they function as foils, their deficiencies highlighting Mike's virtues. Mike easily fools police officers at a roadblock, and he has no use for the hectoring feds who solicit his help. In comparison to Pat Murphy, a nasty plain-clothes officer, Mike is a model of chivalry.

While cold-shouldering police officers, Mike befriends working-class men who, depicted as slow-witted or simply square, provide a second group of foils. Some of these are immigrants: Nic, the Greek car mechanic who speaks baby talk; an elderly Italian porter who idolizes Mike for some obscure favor; a singer who takes no offense when Mike breaks his treasured Caruso record. Others, like the trucker whom Mike visits briefly, are saps who eat dinner with their families.

In the world of *Kiss Me Deadly*, then, Mike towers above everyone else physically, intellectually, and morally. He can enter any building, detect the tiniest clue, solve the most impenetrable mystery. Fearless, clever, sexy, and cool, Mike can win almost any fight and

persuade almost anyone to do his bidding; even policemen grudgingly admire him. Tireless and unflappable, Mike is never at a loss for wisecrack. Moreover, beneath that hard shell he is all heart. This is the man women long for and other men dream to be.

Mike Hammer is only one type of noir hero, as Frank Krutnik points out in a study of noir and masculinity. Krutnik argues that all noirs deal centrally and obsessively with masculinity, a preoccupation indicating anxiety about manliness. "The hero's potency has to be proved and asserted," Krutnik writes, even in noirs that, like *The Maltese Falcon* and *Kiss Me Deadly*, showcase a hard-boiled private eye. The conventional figure of "'tough,' controlled and unified masculinity is invoked not so much as a model of worthwhile or realistic achievement but more as a worry mark of what precisely is lacking."²⁰ A second type of noir, which Krutnik calls the "male suspense thriller" and illustrates with such films as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), depicts the hero in a crisis of both masculinity and authority; and in the third type, the "criminal-adventure thriller" (*The Lady from Shanghai* [1948], *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946], and again *Double Indemnity*), the hero's masculinity is undermined by his desire for a forbidden woman.

It is important to recognize that images of masculinity vary considerably, even within the noir category, and that insistent assertions of manliness may be a sign, as Krutnik asserts, of an underlying insecurity. That said, it is nonetheless true that noirs generally endorse an image in which the ideal crime-fighter looks much like *Kiss Me Deadly's* Mike Hammer: gutsy, indomitable, and aloof.

Nearly twenty years after the release of *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Magnum Force* defined the ideal male in much same terms, thereby indicating the power of this particular version of masculinity. *Magnum Force*, as noted earlier, formed part of an ongoing political debate over the nature of good policing—its goals, its limits, and its relationship to law. This debate, which drives the plot, is also presented as a quarrel within Harry Callahan, a conflict between the neofascist tendencies attributed to his character after the first *Dirty Harry* film and the respect for law he claims in *Magnum Force*. In the latter, Briggs, the leader of the vigilante cops, hurls at Harry the very accusation *Dirty Harry's* critics had earlier thrown at Clint Eastwood: "You're a killer, Harry—a maniac." By this time, however, we know that Briggs himself is the true maniac, the cop who acts as judge and executioner. Unlike Briggs and the other rogue officers, Harry will uphold the law.²¹

In *Magnum Force*, Harry's professional and personal efforts to distinguish good policing from bad are embodied in the camera's search for a full view. Camera angles at first make it impossible to tell who some people are. We see parts of a body, not the face; or a figure marches at us with a blinding flashlight. Like Harry, viewers have to work for a complete perspective on police use of deadly force in a pluralistic society.

Magnum Force takes its title from Harry's gun, the symbol of his virility. The film's credits roll over a huge black handgun, a .44 Magnum that points leftward until the credits end, at which point it turns toward us, an emblem of both police power (for good *or* ill) and phallic potency. From then on, guns and flashlights repeatedly point our way, threatening to go off. Harry, it goes without saying, is the best shot of all. (At one point he seems to lose a shooting match to one of the vigilantes, but the loss turns out to have been a ruse to recover the officer's bullets for use as evidence.) Harry's shooting proves his manliness.

Harry Callahan, like Mike Hammer before him, attracts women like flies but brushes them off, preoccupied with more important matters. Of the three women in *Magnum Force*, two make passes at Harry. The death-squad cops, too, are mad about Harry and his big gun. Harry professes indifference: "If the rest of you could shoot like them, I wouldn't care if the whole damn department was queer." But the film *does* care, defining good men as straight, bad ones as homosexual.²²

Neither Harry Callahan nor Mike Hammer develops as a character, but in Harry's case, there are at least hints of humanity. Beneath that flinty exterior, he is grappling with issues of social justice. As movie critic Amy Taubin writes, "One could read the lack of flexibility in Eastwood's body as a deficiency in acting skill or talent. But it's also what makes Eastwood uniquely suited to represent masculinity under siege. Eastwood's body is a metaphor for the psychological and moral struggle to be an upright man."²³ The struggle of *Magnum Force* is not simply a fight between honest and deviant cops. It is also a fight within Harry to reject vigilantism and recognize, as he remarks to Briggs, that a "man's got to know his limitations."

Magnum Force's Harry Callahan is wearier than Mike Hammer, more beat up by the world. He ponders weightier issues and is more socially concerned. Yet the similarities between the two characters outweigh their differences. Both are tough and brave, yet soft under

their callous exteriors. Both are unimpressed by authority and superhumanly clever (like Mike Hammer, Harry has almost magical powers of detecting bombs). These similarities appear despite the differences in historical context because the two films draw on the same archetype of masculinity, the same myth of the hard, strong man, unemotional and independent.

Masculinities and Race

That the lead characters of *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Magnum Force* are white is so obvious and predictable that we may take it for granted (especially if we are white), hardly realizing that race enters into cinematic definitions of both the good police officer and the perfect man. Nonetheless, on the ideological level, cop films have traditionally defined whiteness as a preferred status. Films do not make this point explicitly, of course, and moviemakers may well deliver the message unconsciously. (Indeed, they may be dismayed to recognize it in their work.) But movies are full of meanings that are not explicitly articulated, including messages about race.

If there are no African American characters at all in a movie, an African American may be more aware than whites of watching what critic Anna Everett calls a "segregated" film—one from which people like themselves are excluded. Even if whites recognize the exclusion, it will probably have different meanings for them. Moreover, in "integrated" films—movies with some African American actors and characters—African American viewers may be more conscious than whites of the racial hierarchy in which members of their group seldom qualify as the hero. Again, even if whites are conscious of the hierarchy, it will have different implications for them. In addition, because one of the pleasures of watching a police movie is identification with the hero, African Americans may forfeit some of that pleasure when the hero is white. One subtextual message in many movies is that whites are what Everett terms "privileged or ideal spectators."²⁴

Film subtexts often assume or imply black inferiority. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, for instance, the highest-status black person, Nat King Cole, is present merely as a disembodied voice, singing "Rather Have the Blues" on Mike's car radio. The black bartender and black singer at Pigalle, a bar Mike frequents, function only as props, to create atmosphere and show that Mike is a liberal; they, too, are dehumanized.

Eddie, the black gym manager, provides comic relief with his oversized cigar, petty criminality, and cowardice; he is less a character than a personification of Sambo-like foolishness. Moreover, Mike does not even acknowledge the presence of a black man in the dead woman's apartment, packing her belongings. These messages of black inconsequence and inferiority, like *Kiss Me Deadly's* parallel messages about ethnicity, elevate both Mike Hammer and Anglo-Saxon whiteness.

Kiss Me Deadly appeared on the verge of the civil rights movement; two decades later, *Magnum Force* carried similar messages about race. Harry's African American sidekick, Early Smith (Felton Perry), exists mainly to burnish Harry's image. Early is needed to demonstrate that Harry is not racist and that he is an excellent mentor, a good "father" to Early, in contrast to Briggs, the bad "father" of the rogue cops. Indeed, Harry saves Early's life. But Early is also a foil: Less mature than Harry, he is also weaker, more squeamish, and more apprehensive. He merely watches during an airport scene in which Harry rescues a hijacked plane. While Harry detects a bomb in his own mailbox, saving himself and neighbors from destruction, the less alert Early dies when his mailbox bomb explodes. Early exists to make points about Harry, not as a character in his own right.

The most explicit sex scene in *Magnum Force* involves an African American pimp who rapes an African American prostitute and then beats her to death. Here the film draws on the long-term association of blackness with sexual savagery. The scene has almost no relevance to the plot; it exists to imply that whites are more civilized than blacks and to offer an opportunity for voyeurism to viewers who might be offended by the rape of a white woman.

For anyone who belongs to groups that movies subtextually denigrate, spectatorship requires what W. E. B. Du Bois called a "double consciousness": One is forced to identify simultaneously with one's oppressor and one's own group.²⁵ To experience the pleasures of film, one must to some degree negate oneself. Thus, spectatorship recreates social hierarchies.

Devil in a Blue Dress (1995) turns noir traditions inside out, most overtly by featuring a sleuth, Ezekiel ("Easy") Rawlins (Denzel Washington), who is black. While nostalgically re-creating a black suburb of the post-World War II period, the movie exposes the era's overt racism. Mouse (Don Cheadle), the knee-jerk assassin, provides comic relief and a sharp contrast to Easy's more mature and complicated character, but instead of laughing at Mouse, the film dwells affec-

tionately on his gold tooth, his natty clothes, and his harebrained violence. The film's antiracist message is embedded in plot as well as setting and character: The story concerns a rich white man who refuses to marry the woman he loves when he discovers her mother was Creole. As Easy becomes an expert investigator, *Devil in a Blue Dress* upsets noir assumptions about the ideal detective's race.

Other recent films, too, try to counterbalance earlier, raced definitions of the Good Cop. *Shoot to Kill* features Sidney Poitier as an aging cop who teams up with a younger, more agile civilian (Tom Berenger) to traipse through the Pacific Northwest in search of a killer. And in *Seven* (1995) we get—at last—a police movie in which the black cop (Morgan Freeman) is not only the hero but also a better officer than his younger WASP partner.

Revising Traditional Masculinities

As these examples indicate, in the 1980s police films began to comment critically on earlier cinematic conventions of masculinity. While they continued to pose the question of what constitutes good policing, some police films answered it differently and more inclusively.²⁶

One sign of this trend was the appearance of *RoboCop*, a spoof of other cop films. The robotic officer parodies the concept of an Eastwoodian supercop who feels nothing, fears nothing, and shoots everything in sight. RoboCop talks tough, but in this case the wise-guy phrases are computer-programmed. RoboCop, like Harry, has a bigger gun than other officers and (in a scene that specifically cites *Magnum Force*) beats them all at target practice; however, the mindless RoboCop keeps shooting till the target is destroyed. Through such exaggerations, the film mocks standard notions of masculinity.

Confronting definitional issues head-on, *RoboCop* poses this question: If we could build a mechanical police officer—invulnerable to bullets, programmed to detect all offenders, and equipped to wipe them out without pause—would *this* be the ideal cop? The movie explores the question through a character that is a cross between an (almost) dead police officer named Murphy (Peter Weller) and a robotic shell. Half-human and half-machine, RoboCop realizes the perfect-cop dream of earlier police films. True, he is absurdly violent, but his vigilantism has almost rid Detroit of crime. Just as he is about to kill Detroit's number-one bad guy, Clarence Boddeker, however, he gets a message from his internal computer: UPHOLD THE LAW. RoboCop,

like Harry Callahan before him, suddenly becomes admirable because he does *not* take the law into his own hands. Soon we are given yet another reason for respect: In a final battle with the evil enforcement droid ED-209, RoboCop wins because his partial humanity makes him more intelligent. At the film's end, he dismantles his metal frame, renouncing invulnerability and returning to ordinary manhood. Murphy's search for identity, and the film's search for the perfect officer, is complete.

RoboCop's gender critique halts abruptly, however, when it turns to femininity. Reflecting the then recent entry of women into policing, the film gives Murphy a female buddy, Ann Lewis (Nancy Allen). Yet it takes the male's point of view, asking how women cops affect male officers' sense of masculinity. At their first encounter, Lewis and Murphy verbally tussle over who will drive the squad car, an argument he settles by slipping behind the wheel. Later we see Lewis bringing Murphy coffee, an act that is supposed to show that she has risen above petty concerns about servitude but actually suggests the opposite. Lewis is invariably—and cheerfully—subservient.

Lewis is also less competent than Murphy. When she catches a member of Boddeker's gang who is urinating, she glances down, enabling the man to disarm her; thus, moments later she cannot protect Murphy from Boddeker's sneers and gunfire. This scene implies that women's entry into policing can spell death for their partners—just what opponents of female officers were predicting.

RoboCop uses a double standard toward nudity, following the age-old practice of encouraging men to gaze on nude females but censuring women who gaze on nude males. The scene in which Lewis "peeks," Peter Lehman points out in a study of gender and nudity in art, contrasts markedly with an earlier scene in which we see a police-woman dressing alongside policemen in a locker room. The nudity in the earlier scene, Lehman writes, "has no erotic interest" for the police officers, the camera, or viewers; when people look at the breasts of this woman, the glance is insignificant. But when a woman looks at a man's sexual organ, as Lewis does, all hell breaks loose.²⁷ Incorporating this double standard, *RoboCop* again endorses traditional notions of women as passive sex objects and men as determiners of who gets to look at whom, even while poking fun at other gender stereotypes.

Internal Affairs, starring Andy Garcia as the new guy in the internal affairs division of the Los Angeles Police Department and Richard Gere as his quarry, a sleazy, manipulative cop, shows a

greater awareness of and sophistication about gender issues. Yet it is unable to move beyond a deep ambivalence toward female cops, represented here, in a fine performance by Laurie Metcalf, by Garcia's partner. Metcalf's character outranks Garcia's, and he both respects her superior skills and values her as a friend. But at the same time, *Internal Affairs* has Garcia give her orders and describe her as a "dyke." Gere shoots her in the end, and the film closes without revealing whether she is going to live, another sign, perhaps, of its ambivalence toward female cops.

Director Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) goes further in questioning stereotypes and reversing traditional ideas about what it means to be a good police officer. Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is exactly what her names suggests: clear, sterling, and bright. Her character incorporates some traits of earlier male police heroes; for example, although men find her attractive, Clarice shuns romance to focus on her work. Her only real competition as hero is Hannibal ("The Cannibal") Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), and he is "pure psychopath," evil to her good. Like male officers, Clarice does not drop her eyes when others stare but returns looks with a steady gaze. This insistence on her right to look, moreover, does not bring doom, as a mere female glance does in *RoboCop*.

While Clarice Starling's character echoes that of earlier police heroes, however, it also creates a new model. Clarice does not talk tough or insult others. She is not a know-it-all ("I want to learn from you," she tells Hannibal). Nor is she unfeeling; in fact, the film centers around her attempt to come to grips with the death of her father, her need for a good parent, and her pity for unfortunates. Although Clarice is as impassive as Harry Callahan in the face of horrors, she can also cry.

Like many male cop film heroes, Clarice has an African American sidekick, in this case another agent-in-training. Although Ardelia is a less important character than Clarice, she is not given negative traits to contrast with Clarice's positive ones. The two women sleuth together (in nightgowns, no less!—shades of Nancy Drew), cooperating to solve the mystery of the killer's identity.²⁸

Devil in a Blue Dress poses yet another sort of challenge to traditional cinematic definitions of the good police officer. While the film's central theme is racism, this is also a movie about breaking free of dysfunctional concepts of masculinity and being a good man. Through the character of Easy Rawlins, it shows that the ideal man

can be tough and sensitive at the same time. Whereas the hard-bitten detective of traditional noirs is a static character, perfectly formed from the start, Easy's character develops as he learns how to outsmart his enemies. At the start of the film he is penniless and unemployed; at the end he plans to become a private investigator. In the final scene we see Easy surrounded not by the sports cars and guns that have long signified masculinity but by companions, children, and families. It is a domestic scene, a representation of an aspect of life—ordinary, relaxed, community life—that earlier police films rigorously excluded. "I sat with my friend," Easy observes in the closing voice-over, "on *my* porch, at *my* house, and we laughed a *long* time." Mike Hammer would have sneered.

Cops in Absurdist and Critical Films

Absurdist and alternative-tradition films comment, albeit in very different ways, on both conventional cop film heroes and the politically correct heroes of more recent police films. Making fun of cop film traditions, absurdist films parody their earnestness and mock their idols. *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), for instance, clowns around with two coplike characters, one of them Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), an undercover police officer whom the robbers think is their accomplice. Wounded in an early scene, Mr. Orange spends most of the movie on the floor bleeding to death from a stomach wound. That his agony seems to occur in "real time," taking as long as the movie itself, creates tension between the viewers' expectation that someone will call an ambulance and the criminals' outlandish indifference. Even Mr. White (Harvey Keitel), the sole character concerned about Mr. Orange's plight, refuses to call a doctor and spends a lot of time on the floor with Orange, locked in a sticky embrace. The second coplike character is a security guard whom we see tied to a chair and brutalized by the "stone-cold psychopath" Mr. Blonde, who performs a courtship dance, cuts off the guard's ear, and inquires, "Was that as good for you as it was for me?" Writer-director Quentin Tarantino shows no reverence whatsoever for traditional cop heroes, dicing and sending them up with glee.

Another absurdist movie, *Fargo* (1996), satirizes the trend toward culturally sensitive cop heroes through the character of Marge Gunderson, who is not only female but also hugely pregnant. Banal and bland, obsessed by food, and devoted to a dolt, Marge nonetheless

catches the killer, reacting matter-of-factly to what he is doing to his accomplice in the wood-chipper. The writer-director team of Ethan and Joel Coen take the potentially boring, Goody Two-shoes character of Marge and, through their deft lampooning of cop film traditions, make her memorable.

Alternative-tradition films, on the other hand, give us unredeemable cops, lost souls doomed to wander forever in a maze of cynicism. *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985) begins with an older secret service agent being shot to death under ambiguous circumstances; we cannot tell whether or not he was part of the counterfeiting scheme. His younger partner (William L. Petersen) sets out to avenge the death but, pursuing that end through illegal means, moves ever deeper into the heart of darkness. His new buddy (John Pankow) is shocked ("Why don't you just go to his [the bad guy's] house and blow his brains out?" he asks sarcastically. "That's what you want to do, isn't it?"). But the avenger has already decided that "I can do whatever I want," and so he does, until he himself is killed. At that point the new partner takes over as the bad cop, starting another cycle of brutality and betrayal.

State of Grace (1990), another critical film, stars Sean Penn as an undercover cop who returns to his old New York City haunts and links up with his former gang friends (including brothers played by Gary Oldman and Ed Harris). Penn's assignment grows increasingly difficult as he becomes divided between his loyalties to his criminal friends and to the cops with whom he secretly works. Eventually crushed by the strain of this double life, he tries to quit the force but cannot. His girlfriend (Robin Wright), sister to one of the gang members, dumps him when he confides that he is a cop. Without resolving the issue of torn loyalties, the movie ends by killing nearly everyone off during a final, hyperviolent shoot-out in a bar. Penn's character survives, but he seems destined for a life of sorrow and despondency.

Movies in the alternative or critical tradition gravitate toward the character of the corrupt police officer, demonstrating (*Bad Lieutenant* [1992], *Q & A*, *Romeo Is Bleeding*) that there is no such thing as a good cop. By implication, they also suggest that there is no such thing as a good man. In both respects they differ from the noir tradition in which they have their origins. Noirs expose a murky world in which everyone is tinged with sin and despair, but their private eyes are nonetheless admirable, wise guys who can solve the mystery and get the girl. Alternative-tradition police films, on the other hand, have no heroes.

When absurdist films deny us heroes, they do so in order to comment on other movies—to burlesque crime movie traditions. Alternative-tradition films, in contrast, aim at negating the very idea of the hero.

Notes

1. Parish 1990: ix.
2. President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice 1967.
3. This aspect of noir tradition was carried into the 1960s by the James Bond series, featuring a hero who, like noir heroes, was both naughty and good.
4. Schickel 1996: 258.
5. In the same year, 1968, Siegel also released *Madigan*, another urban police film, this one starring Richard Widmark and Henry Fonda.
6. Paul Newman, a liberal, and Frank Sinatra turned down the Dirty Harry role before it was accepted by the more conservative Eastwood.
7. Carlos Clarens (1980: 303) writes: "*Dirty Harry* was reviewed in *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* as a violation of civil rights . . . and attacked as excessively violent by practically everybody." For quotes from the reviews, including those by the *New Yorker's* Pauline Kael, who was deeply offended by the film, see Schickel 1996.
8. The other sequels are *The Enforcer* (1976), *Sudden Impact* (1983), and *The Dead Pool* (1988).
9. Warshow 1974b.
10. Wood 1992: 478.
11. Cawelti, as quoted in Maltby 1995: 121.
12. George 1994: 52–63 lists several other blaxploitation cop films that apparently have not been rereleased in video. He concludes that *Rocky* (1976), by showing Hollywood "that the black action crowd can be attracted by films with prominent black second bananas, such as this film's Apollo Creed," dealt "a crucial death blow to the already sagging blaxploitation genre" (63). Also see Reid 1995.
13. The history of the film and gays' objections to it are outlined by Vito Russo (1987), who calls *Cruising's* release "the last straw in a long stream of Hollywood horrors" about gay life (239). Compare Willis (1997), who argues that *Cruising* is "not so much homophobic as intent on targeting and aggravating homophobic fantasies that the spectator may harbor" (233 n. 27).
14. Lewine 1997: CY4.
15. Weiler 1997.
16. Lane 1997: 78.
17. For a history of buddy films and analysis of their implications, see Fuchs 1993.
18. See Hale 1998.
19. For an argument that recent police films portray the white male detective "as the embodiment of gender anxiety," see Willis 1997: chap. 2.
20. Krutnik 1991: 8

21. Some critics of *Magnum Force* were outraged by Harry's observation, "Nothing wrong with shooting as long as the right people get shot." However, they failed to notice that he uttered that line ironically, speaking to Briggs. Harry himself no longer endorses this position (if he ever did). In his view, Briggs and his death-squad groupies are guilty of police brutality and murder.
22. *Magnum Force* again tweaks homosexuals in a scene in which a fey neighbor flirts madly with Harry.
23. Taubin 1993: 10.
24. Everett 1995–96: 28.
25. Du Bois 1997 (1903): 49. The psychiatrist Franz Fanon (1968) referred to this experience as having a "colonized" mind.
26. For a fuller view of the changes in gender representation of which cop films were a part, see Jeffords 1993.
27. Lehman 1993: 117.
28. While *Silence of the Lambs* rejects many of the gender and racial assumptions of earlier cop films, it reforges links between criminality and homosexuality. The character of Buffalo Bill is little more than a collection of clichés about gay men: He communicates with his current victim in faggy baby talk; he has had a male lover; he hates women even while trying to become one. In our fullest view of him, Buffalo Bill is in drag, a nipple pierced by a ring, dancing nude (in the buff, as it were). *Silence of the Lambs* has shaken off other biases but continues to link criminality with homosexuality.

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4

Courtroom Films

WITH CHARLES ALEXANDER HAHN

Nick Romano is guilty, but so are we, and so is that precious thing called society. . . . Knock on any door, and you may find Nick Romano.

—Defense lawyer in *Knock on Any Door*

It used to be easy to define courtroom films: They were dramas in which the main character was a heroic lawyer who solved the mystery and settled other dilemmas in the course of a trial. But this traditional definition has eroded. Contemporary movies, stressing activities that do not naturally occur in the courtroom, such as gun battles and sex, increasingly embed a short trial scene in a longer adventure story. Moreover, contemporary films seldom depict lawyers as heroes on the grand scale or courts as places where fundamental social and moral issues are settled.¹ Law schools and legal studies programs, offering new courses in movies and law, have contributed to the evolution of the courtroom genre toward “law films.” The newer category includes movies which, like *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *The Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *The Untouchables* (1987), raise questions about the nature and functions of law while spending little or no time in a courtroom.²

To follow what has happened over time to the courtroom drama, this chapter uses the older, genre-based definition, examining films with a trial scene that, though not necessarily lengthy, is critical to the film’s message and contributes significantly to the resolution of the case at hand. The chapter concentrates on traditional courtroom dramas but also covers several other movies (such as *I Want to Live!* [1958]) that fall primarily into another category but have pivotal trial scenes.

Characteristics of Courtroom Dramas

Courtroom films set up a tension between two sorts of law: immutable natural law or justice, on the one hand, and fallible man-made law, on the other. They let us know what justice would consist of in the

current case and then use that ideal as a template for what should happen.³ At the same time, they show us how, in the current case, man-made law fails (or is about to fail) to reach that goal, and they proceed to play with the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal. Courtroom films usually include an *injustice figure*, the person responsible for creating or maintaining the gap between justice and man-made law.

Most courtroom films also include a *justice figure*, a hero who tries to move man-made law ever closer to the ideal until it matches the justice template. The film's resolution occurs when man-made law becomes identical to the underlying pattern. The justice figure is usually (but not always) a lawyer; and in a few court dramas, the position of justice figure is held by several characters at once. In *Marked Woman* (1937), for example, a "clip-joint hostess" (Bette Davis) and the district attorney (Humphrey Bogart) work together to convict an organized crime boss who has been taking over New York City's nightclubs. On rare occasions, movies with important courtroom scenes have no justice figure at all. *A Place in the Sun* (1951), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), and *The Wrong Man* (1956) lack justice figures, and, significantly, they also have no villains, absences that flow from their bleak views of the world as a place where people either create their own tragedies or are struck down randomly by fate.⁴

In standard courtroom movies, the closing of the gap between law and justice occurs in the trial scene, where the triumph of the good lawyer over the nasty one signals resolution of the film's dilemma. However, many courtroom films include other or additional signs of resolution and success. Some conclude with a return to the setting of the first scene, a demonstration that the original equilibrium has been restored.⁵ Courtroom films in which injustice has driven happy couples apart end with a scene of reunion. In Alfred Hitchcock's *The Paradine Case* (1947), for instance, the lawyer (Gregory Peck) and his wife reunite after an estrangement caused by his all-too-impassioned defense of a beautiful woman. Similarly, in *The Young Philadelphians* (1959), after successfully defending an old friend against a false first-degree murder charge, lawyer Paul Newman leaves the courtroom hand in hand with his long-lost love, heading, no doubt, for the altar.⁶ Varying this pattern, *Marked Woman* brings the potential couple (the clip-joint hostess and the DA) together after the trial but has them recognize the huge class differences that divide them. And so,

saying farewell forever outside the courtroom, they drift apart in the foggy night.

Yet another device that courtroom films use to resolve their plots is to show, at the end, that good personal relationships parallel good legal relationships: Everyone eventually recognizes and happily accepts the rule of a wise father/judge. These movies are full of confusions over authority and legitimacy, disorders that manifest themselves in both lawbreaking and the dissolution of previously strong relationships. Many conclude with a good father or father figure (who may also be a judge) settling the case and restoring order.

While many trial films are purely fictitious and older ones often emphasize that "any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental," others are based on actual cases. *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996) recounts efforts to bring to justice the killer of civil rights hero Medgar Evers. *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), one of the best-known of all courtroom movies, incorporates details of both actual World War II war-crimes trials and the broader political context in the United States and Germany. *I Want to Live!*, *In the Name of the Father* (1993), and *Compulsion* (1959) also build on actual cases. In turn, court films feed back into society, becoming touchstones, commonplace referents, and even rallying points for reforms. The name of Atticus Finch, the heroic lawyer of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), is invoked frequently during awards ceremonies at bar association dinners, and *In the Name of the Father*, director Jim Sheridan's compelling account of a 1970s frame-up of Irish men and women by the British government, became a reference point for people around the world as they evaluated Ireland's political violence. (Confusing film with reality, some Britons condemned actor Emma Thompson for helping the Irish in *In the Name of the Father*.) Conspiracy theorists used Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) to argue for access to files on the Kennedy assassination. The recent trial documentaries *Brother's Keeper* (1992) and *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996) draw even tighter lines between crime films and society.⁷

The Grand Theme

Nearly all courtroom films focus on a single theme: the difficulty of achieving justice. While they take up and explore a wide range of subsidiary issues, their overriding point is that as a goal, justice is

elusive, demanding, and often more ambiguous than it first appears. Courtroom films sound this theme in various ways, some through stories of false convictions, others by demonstrating the difficulty of identifying the true culprit, and yet others by emphasizing systematic faults in the criminal justice process. Movies of this type also put forth various opinions about the complexities of justice: Some condemn courts for delays, and others praise them for patient deliberations; some despise lawyers and others glorify them. Many show justice officials triumphing after a long struggle with injustice; others openly mock trial procedures. But few fail to stress that justice is an exacting goal, reached only through arduous quests and multiple sacrifices.

To illustrate this theme, a number of courtroom films depict miscarriages of justice. *Trial by Jury* (1994) shows a single mom who dutifully accepts a jury assignment only to deliberately derail the trial when the mobster-defendant has his goons threaten her kid. In *The Juror* (1996), justice is again thwarted when an insidious gangster (Alec Baldwin) intimidates a juror (Demi Moore) into voting "not guilty" in a mob trial. To some extent, justice is reclaimed after the trial, when the juror guns down the gangster, but justice is easily perverted, the movie shows, during the trial itself. In *Jagged Edge*, too, a trial fails to convict the guilty person (in this case through mistaken acquittal), and justice is achieved only later, when the ungrateful killer goes after his defense attorney and she shoots him in self-defense. (*The Letter* [1940] traces a similar pattern.) A particularly silly variation on this idea is rung by *The Star Chamber* (1983), featuring Michael Douglas as a vigilante judge. He and his judicial colleagues, unhappy about cases in which civil rights laws have forced them to free obvious offenders, hire killers to execute these criminals on the streets.

Other films demonstrate how justice can miscarry by telling of false or unfair convictions. *Call Northside 777* (1948), the story of two Chicago men convicted of killing a police officer, shows a newspaper reporter (Jimmy Stewart) becoming convinced of the men's innocence and surmounting immense obstacles to persuade the pardons board to release them. *Call Northside* argues that it is impossible for an innocent man to prove what was actually going on at the crime scene, especially after eleven years behind bars. *I Want To Live!*, *In the Name of the Father*, and *True Believer* (1989) also center on false convictions, while *Murder in the First* (1995) is built on the unassailable premise that three years in one of Alcatraz's "dark" cells is a disproportionate punishment for stealing five dollars to feed a starving child.

Without arguing that justice fails, a number of movies simply stress its burdens and complexities. *The Accused* (1988) probes the guilt of bystanders to a rape, and *Marked Woman* explores witness intimidation (the thugs carve up the clip-joint hostess's face and kill her kid sister). With a poignancy all the more vivid for the fact that it is a documentary, *Brother's Keeper* demonstrates that an elderly, retarded man cannot possibly defend himself against a false molestation charge. The innocent defendant in *They Won't Believe Me* (1947), despairing of a fair trial, kills himself just before the jury returns with a not-guilty verdict. *A Few Good Men* (1992) and *The Rainmaker* also emphasize the elusiveness of justice.

Trial films are particularly fond of the insanity defense as a tool for depicting the hazards of determining guilt. *Compulsion* asks viewers to decide whether young men who killed as a "true test of the superior intellect" were, though legally sane, so mentally ill as to warrant excuse from the death penalty. *The Caine Mutiny* (1954), too, involves viewers in deciding issues of mental illness and culpability. It shows World War II sailors agonizing over whether to remove the erratic Captain Queeg (Humphrey Bogart) from command during a storm in which his bizarre behavior threatens to sink the ship. With great reluctance, the first officer (Van Johnson) finally announces, "Captain, you're a sick officer. I'm relieving you as captain of this ship," only to have Queeg retort, "You'll all hang for conspiracy and mutiny." At trial, psychiatrists testify that Queeg, though paranoid, is sane. Only when the defense attorney hammers Queeg with questions about particularly odd incidents does the captain's veneer of normality crack, revealing the crazed soul beneath. The accused sailors are freed, but to the end, the degree of Queeg's mental illness, and of their own guilt, remains in doubt.

Some trial films use a whodunit-style mystery to indicate the limitations of court processes. *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), based on the trial of Claus von Bulow for attempting to kill his wealthy wife, ends (as did the von Bulow trial itself) with a not-guilty finding but with lingering suspicions that the outcome depended more on the quality of the lawyering than the innocence of the defendant. In *Presumed Innocent* (1990) and *Primal Fear* (1996), trials again fail to uncover the culprit.

Scrutinizing the intricacies of criminal law, courtroom films reach a wide range of conclusions about legal processes, from adulation to contempt. Many find the law majestic. *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), a

film about lynching, is one of these. Two outsiders (one of them Henry Fonda) are passing through an isolated Western town when they become witnesses to mob violence. Local ranchers capture three other travelers, quickly “try” them for a recent murder, and hang them from a tree limb. These travelers have hardly been “finished” with bullets before the sheriff gallops up to announce that the man whom they thought had been murdered is not dead after all. Depressed and repentant, the lynchers troop into the local bar and listen while Fonda reads a last-minute letter from one of the condemned men to his wife. “Law is a lot more than words you put in a book,” the letter explains. “It’s everything people ever have found out about justice and what’s right and wrong. It’s the very conscience of humanity.”

Equally intoxicated with the law is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, another film about lynching (a topic that lends itself to admiration for legal processes).⁸ Atticus Finch, a progressive lawyer in a backward town in Georgia, takes on the defense of a black man accused of raping a local white girl. As local rednecks gather for a lynching, Atticus protects the defendant by posting himself outside the jail. At trial, justice itself is thwarted by the defendant’s conviction, but the justice figure of Atticus grows in stature until, visually, he fills the entire courthouse, an upward-looking camera framing his head with the “colored” gallery as with a crown. *A Time to Kill* (1996) returns to the topic of a black man accused of violence in a southern town; with four lawyers, it makes a louder (if less persuasive) case for lawyers as searchers for truth and justice.⁹ Law is again elevated by movies in which a trial reveals the true villain (as in *Young Mr. Lincoln* [1939] and *The Paradine Case*) or a heroic lawyer argues eloquently for the cause of justice (as in *Inherit the Wind* [1960], *Judgment at Nuremberg*, and *True Believer*). *12 Angry Men* (1957), confining its action entirely to the claustrophobic room in which a murder-trial jury is sequestered, at first seems like an attack on criminal law, for few jurors take the process seriously. One wants to hurry to a guilty verdict so he can go to a baseball game; another concludes that the defendant is probably guilty because he is a foreigner. But *12 Angry Men* in fact mounts a powerful argument for the jury system, in which a lone but courageous individual can assure justice. The system may not be perfect, the film tells us, but it works well in the end, and it is a microcosm of the democratic process, in which the search for consensus eventually leads to wise decisions.

Counterbalancing such enthusiasm is a set of films that portray the law and lawyers negatively. It includes *The Letter*, in which a woman is mistakenly acquitted of murder. At trial, her lawyer knows she is guilty but helps her purchase the letter which, if allowed into evidence, would incriminate her. She is punished only later, outside the court system, by a vindictive widow. Another example is the first version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, with its double-crossing prosecutor and despicable defense attorney. During Cora's trial for her life, these lawyers play legal games with one another; they are less adversaries than friendly competitors who exclude Frank and Cora from the proceedings.¹⁰ *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) goes after lawyers tooth and nail: The trial judge is an elderly cipher; the defense attorney is disabled, sexually impotent, and obnoxious; jurors pick their teeth during the trial; and the trial itself becomes a farce. In both the first version of *Postman* and *The Lady from Shanghai*, the morally negative lawyers are Jewish, reinforcing what film scholar Anthony Chase identifies as one of movies' main negative lawyer archetypes, the New York shyster.¹¹ This archetype is reinforced by the second version of *Postman*, in which the manipulative defense lawyer is named, emphatically, Katz.

Thus, courtroom films sometimes locate the obstacles to justice in society itself, while at other times they blame the legal system and its all-too-fallible practitioners. In long run, however, they usually show the impediments being overcome. The actual malefactor is revealed, the intimidated juror gets revenge, the falsely convicted are released from prison, and a hero emerges from the rubble of bigotry and inequity. This was the usual pattern, at any rate, until about 1980, when (as the next section shows) courtroom movies began accenting not so much the difficulty as the impossibility of achieving justice.

The Evolution of Courtroom Movies

Hollywood began producing courtroom films in the early 1930s and continues producing them in large quantity. Lines of development are neither steady nor clear-cut, but it is possible to discern three phases in the evolution of courtroom films: an experimental period that began in the 1930s and bore fruit in the 1940s and 1950s with "law noirs"; a heroic period that began in the mid-1950s and petered out in the early 1960s; and a period of depletion, 1970 into the present,

during which trial movies have tried but often failed to meet the challenges posed by a new set of cinematic and political circumstances.

*The 1930s to the Mid-1950s: Experimentation
and the Law Noirs*

The 1930s were a time of experimentation, a decade during which directors searched for ways to depict legal struggles that were both persuasive and entertaining. The start of the decade saw the release of *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934), a movie that pits a good lawyer against a criminal by following actress Myrna Loy as she first tries to reform her gangster boyfriend, Blackie (Clark Gable), and then becomes the wife of a crusading district attorney, Jim (William Powell). Although the two men have been best friends since childhood, Jim prosecutes Blackie and eventually, having become the state's governor, decides to deny commutation of Blackie's death sentence. At this point *Manhattan Melodrama* runs into the obstacle of the unappealing good guy. Blackie is such an engaging villain, and he goes to the electric chair with such debonair aplomb, that Jim seems dour and rigid in comparison, compromising and cheapening the triumph of justice. Even Myrna Loy is disappointed.

The end of the decade saw the release of *Young Mr. Lincoln*, the most heroic of all heroic-lawyer movies. Law itself is dignified by Lincoln's attraction to it, and the film reveres the future president as not only a superb lawyer but also a perfect American. Featuring Henry Fonda as a lanky Lincoln look-alike, the film anticipates *To Kill a Mockingbird* with a scene in which the attorney blocks the door to the jail where his defendants are being held, holding an angry crowd at bay. The trial becomes the movie's most dramatic moment as Lincoln adroitly unmasks the true killer. But in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, as in *Manhattan Melodrama*, the hero needs a more loathsome opponent. Justice is less a struggle than a foregone conclusion.¹²

Yet another approach to the courtroom film was explored by *Fury*, a protonoir released in 1936. The most bitter courtroom film in Hollywood history,¹³ *Fury* stars Spencer Tracy as Joe Wilson, a young man who is mistakenly arrested and imprisoned on kidnapping charges. A lynch mob gathers outside his jail and sets it on fire—the first instance of fury. With his fiancée Catherine looking on, Joe appears at his cell's window, seemingly in flames; and presumably his body is destroyed in the subsequent explosion. Joe lives, however,

and plots revenge against the would-be lynchers, who are brought to trial en masse for his murder. Keeping even Catherine in the dark about his survival, Joe plans to sit back and allow all the defendants to be executed—the second instance of fury—and relents only because he cannot bear the thought of life without Catherine. At the most dramatic moment, Joe interrupts the trial and reveals himself. Sparing the defendants brings him no joy, however; Joe remains deeply resentful, and the criminal justice system stands condemned for a second failure to do justice. If *Fury* leaves a sour aftertaste, it is because injustice goes unpunished and the justice figure, Joe, fights solely for himself.¹⁴

After this decade of experimentation, the courtroom genre hit its stride in the 1940s with the cycle of cynical and stylistically expressionistic films that movie scholar Norman Rosenberg has deftly labeled *law noirs*. Law noirs, Rosenberg writes, present a “baleful view of lawyers” and “portray people, some entirely innocent and others not-so-innocent, trapped in a highly fallible legal system.”¹⁵ Unlike more traditional Hollywood fare, law noirs “raise doubts about the ability of the trial process to achieve satisfactory closure.”¹⁶ The cycle begins with *The Letter*, which throws criminality against a background of colonialist racism, and with *Stranger on the Third Floor* (also 1940), in which justice is again achieved only outside the court system. Those movies were followed by *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *They Won't Believe Me*, *Call Northside 777*, and *The Lady from Shanghai*. *Knock on Any Door* (1949) solves the “unappealing good guy” problem by featuring Humphrey Bogart as a defense attorney who, having grown up in slums, can match the bad guy punch for punch.¹⁷ The cycle extends into the 1950s with a late law noir, Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man*, the story of a family ruined by a mistaken arrest.¹⁸

From the 1930s into the 1950s, courtroom dramas attracted outstanding directors, including John Ford (*Young Mr. Lincoln*), Alfred Hitchcock (*The Wrong Man*, *The Paradine Case*), Fritz Lang (*Fury*, *Scarlet Street* [1945], and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* [1956]), Nicholas Ray (*Knock on Any Door*), Orson Welles (*The Lady from Shanghai*), and William Wyler (*The Letter*). Intriguing visually, these films use the strange camera angles and striking black-and-white patterns for which noirs in general are admired. Law noirs make justice figures engaging by turning them into outsiders of one sort or another—a journalist who cleans up the courts' mess in *Call Northside 777*, the murderous Malaysian widow in *The Letter*, the tough-guy attorney

in *Knock on Any Door*. In addition, they give these justice figures worthy opponents, goliaths of injustice that sometimes turn out to be the criminal justice system itself. Thus, viewers can have it both ways, identifying with outsiders to the justice system who end up as saviors of law and order.

*The Mid-1950s through the 1960s:
The Heroic Tradition*

Courtroom drama took a turn toward the right in 1957 with *12 Angry Men*, first in a series of films that conclude that justice can be achieved through the courts. *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), *Inherit the Wind*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* went on to portray lawyers as men who labor heroically within the system to ensure that man-made law coincides with the justice ideal. Rooted in *Young Mr. Lincoln* and *The Ox-Bow Incident*, with their admiration for law, these movies became the classics of courtroom movies, representatives of what many consider to have been the genre's golden age.

In their generally uncritical perspective on the judicial system, these classics are products of their times, reflections of a society that was wealthier, more secure, and less chaotic than the America of the Great Depression and World War II years. Like the best-selling novels on which a number of them are based, the courtroom classics present trials in mythic terms, as battles of good against evil; their courts are hallowed halls, places where the truth, after a titanic contest, emerges victorious. Turning lawyers into cultural heroes, the classic courtroom movies picture them as professional wizards and guardians of the country's sacred traditions.

The classic courtroom films are also traditional cinematically. They use standard devices such as close-ups of nervous witnesses and dramatic outbursts by onlookers, punctuated by the hammer of a judge's gavel. Compared to law noirs, their photography is straightforward and somewhat static. They are, to be sure, cinematically skillful, as in the framing of Atticus Finch's head during *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s trial scenes or Lumet's subtle shifts of lenses and camera angles during *12 Angry Men*.¹⁹ But their camera work is less dramatic than that of law noirs, and less radical—one might almost say more respectful.

Reverence for the law runs strong in *Witness for the Prosecution*, starring Charles Laughton as an aging English barrister who, defy-

ing his nurse's instructions, decides to defend an accused murderer. Director Billy Wilder's courtroom is a large, grand place, full of tradition and great men. Bewigged and fiendishly clever, Laughton wins a not-guilty verdict from the jury, only to discover that the defendant did in fact commit the murder. "Vole, you have made a mockery of English law," the barrister admonishes, charging his client with a sin that is clearly much worse than murder. When Vole is stabbed by his common-law wife (Marlene Dietrich), whom he has also double-crossed, Laughton vows to defend *her*, and *Witness for the Prosecution* ends with him charging off to the next contest, revitalized by the thrill of striving for justice.

Judgment at Nuremberg places a judge in the hero's role. Portraying the post-World War II trial of men who themselves served as judges during the Nazi regime, it concentrates, uniquely, on what one character describes as "crimes committed in the name of the law." The key issue is whether judges are fundamentally responsible to man-made law or to natural law. Is it true, as one defense attorney argues, that "a judge does not make the laws; he carries out the laws of his country," or must judges answer to a higher kind of law, justice itself? The film responds to this question primarily through the character of the presiding justice, Judge Dan Haywood (Spencer Tracy), depicting him as a self-deprecating man with a sense of humor who seeks to understand how the wisest judges in Germany could have participated in the Nazi regime. Haywood goes out of his way to be fair.

Judge Haywood's counterpart is the chief figure on trial (Burt Lancaster), a jurist famous for having "dedicated his life to justice—to the concept of justice." Although at first this German judge refuses to participate in the trial, he comes to accept his responsibility for the failures of the Nazi regime, admitting that he and the other defendants knew that the people they sentenced were sent to concentration camps. In effect, this injustice figure condemns himself for choosing man-made over natural law.

In *Judgment at Nuremberg*, as in *12 Angry Men* and *Witness for the Prosecution*, a solitary figure's moral courage carries the day. Judge Haywood convicts the defendants and, despite international pressure for leniency, sentences them to life imprisonment. He bases his decision on belief in a moral law that transcends man-made laws and must be followed by all human beings. The very first time a Nazi judge condemned an innocent man, Haywood declares, he transgressed this moral law.

The tension between public hunger for swift justice and the right to a fair trial, already addressed in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was further explored in *Inherit the Wind*, a reenactment of the “monkey trial” case of 1925, in which fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan squared off against liberal Clarence Darrow to argue that religious beliefs should dictate how science is taught in the schools. Spencer Tracy plays Drummond, the Darrow character who defends a local teacher facing criminal charges for informing his students about evolution. The prosecuting attorney (Frederick March) is a demagogic religious conservative, and the trial takes place in Hillsboro, “the buckle on the Bible belt.” With small-town bigotry and self-righteousness permeating the courtroom along with the fetid southern heat, the teacher’s chances for a fair trial seem nil. Drummond’s arguments on behalf of freedom of thought chip away at Hillsboro’s prejudices, however, and the teacher, though convicted, is merely fined. Tracy’s monumental performance as Drummond, slaying the dragon of biblical literalism, makes this one of the most satisfying of all trial films.

Anatomy of a Murder, concerning an army lieutenant accused of killing a man who may or may not have raped the lieutenant’s wife, is less dramatic in presentation, at least from today’s perspective. (At the time of its release, audiences may have found it racy, for it was one of the first movies to deal explicitly with rape and extramarital affairs, and lawyer James Stewart, breaking with all previous standards of decorum, presents a pair of torn panties in evidence.) Nonetheless, Stewart’s portrait of a homespun attorney, simple yet crafty, reinforces the archetype of the heroic, all-American lawyer. This Lincolnesque figure triumphs through honesty, brilliance, and perseverance, and his victory is only slightly diminished by the surprise ending.

While not themselves classics, other films of the period contributed to the heroic tradition. In *The Young Philadelphians*, Paul Newman plays the tax lawyer as all-around guy: friend to construction workers and wealthy old ladies alike, and savior of the Main Line elite when they fall to bickering over their fortunes. *Compulsion* features a holy trinity of lawyers—the judge, prosecutor, and defense attorney—who labor mightily to achieve justice for the ungrateful young killers. Particularly through the impassioned rhetoric of the defense attorney (Orson Welles), *Compulsion* portrays law as impartial, majestic, even godlike—quite the opposite of the self-indulgent youths.

A few films of the period hung back from the stampede to glorify law and lawyers. *A Place in the Sun* presents an enigma, a man who did indeed plan to kill his pregnant fiancée but is unsure about his responsibility for the boating accident in which she drowned. Thus, the menacing and vengeful prosecutor (Raymond Burr) somewhat misses the mark in demanding the death penalty, and as the young man (Montgomery Clift) walks to his execution, we wonder whether this is justice or legalistic brutality. In *The Caine Mutiny*, the defendants are celebrating their courtroom victory over Captain Queeg when their defense attorney (Jose Ferrer) tongue-lashes them for the mutiny: Had they supported the captain in his hour of need, the mutiny would have been unnecessary. Although the sailors have been legally exonerated for their rebellion, the attorney assures them that they are not morally innocent. *I Want to Live!* goes even further, showing that criminal justice officials framed an innocent woman (Susan Hayward) and knowingly sent her to the gas chamber. Based on the actual case of Barbara Graham, executed at San Quentin in the 1950s, this film is narrated by a journalist who repents of his sensationalist reporting of the case and decides to expose the miscarriage of justice.²⁰ Aside from these three movies, however, few midcentury films bucked the trend toward adulation of the law.

*From the 1970s to the Present:
Depletion of the Genre*

As if pausing for rest after their heroic exertions, court films made few appearances between 1962 (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) and 1979 (*And Justice for All*).²¹ During the hiatus, massive changes occurred in the movie industry, the judicial system, and the country's attitudes toward authority. Cinematically, films became more reliant on action and violence. Color film became the rule, forcing photographers to learn how to work in what was in some respects a new medium. Criminal law underwent a civil rights revolution, with new requirements for *Miranda* warnings, appointed counsel, and (in serious cases) automatic appeals. Frustration with government and social protest movements, by-products of Watergate and Vietnam, made veneration for the law seem sappy, while the entry of women and people of color into law schools exposed the one-sidedness of the white male imagery of the ideal lawyer. Justice and injustice had to be reconceptualized.

Situated at the nexus of these artistic, legal, and social changes, courtroom dramas released after the 1962–79 hiatus had trouble finding their footing. *And Justice for All*, for instance, is an awkward, uncertain film. Starring Al Pacino as a rebellious young defense lawyer, the film spends much of its energy criticizing the adversary system for being more concerned with wins and losses than with truth. Vignettes in which justice goes awry show that the guilty may go free and the innocent be incarcerated. *And Justice for All* succeeds mainly in its gritty portrayal of state courts not as dignified halls of justice but as corridors crowded with deal-making cynics. *The Onion Field* (1979) and *The Star Chamber* are similarly jaded in their view of justice and are equally uneven cinematically, but in these movies, the legal material is less central, edged out by psychopaths and action sequences. In such posthiatus court films, we see less a continuation of earlier traditions than stumbling efforts to develop new forms and formulas. Filmmakers are in fact redesigning the genre, struggling to create new justice and injustice figures and to find fresh ways to depict gaps between natural and man-made law.²²

A series of woman-lawyer movies revived trial films in the mid-1980s. It began, spectacularly, with *Jagged Edge*, the tale of a corporate lawyer who reluctantly agrees to defend a man accused of the gruesome knife murder of his heiress-wife. Glenn Close plays the lawyer, Teddy Barnes, who has an affair with her client, Jack Forrester (Jeff Bridges), before discovering that he actually is the killer. Masked and clad in black, Jack comes after Teddy as she lies in bed—a repeat of the wife’s death scene. But this time, the intended victim is prepared.

Jagged Edge set off a debate over whether Teddy Barnes and the woman lawyers of subsequent trial films represent successful professionals or failed females, women who violate their true nature by straying from the kitchen. In a well-reasoned law review article, Carolyn Lisa Miller argues that *Jagged Edge* in fact transforms Teddy Barnes “from powerful attorney to powerless woman, resituating her in her ‘proper’ role.”²³ The film pivots on “the power of men to violently reshape or destroy female identity,” Miller continues, noting that we never learn Teddy’s full “female” name or why she has a man’s nickname.²⁴ From the start, *Jagged Edge* protects the killer by concealing his identity, and “by assuming his point-of-view in the [wife-murder] scene, [it] adopts his identity as its own.”²⁵ The movie shows Teddy breaking her professional code of ethics by becoming involved

with Jack, and in court, when his relationship with another woman is revealed, it depicts her as a stereotypical hysterical woman.

Blinded by love, the lonely professional woman is unable to see through Jack's camouflage until she stumbles upon conclusive evidence of his guilt. Miller points out that the discovery scene occurs while the heroine is changing the sheets in Jack's bedroom suite. "Why is this attorney functioning as a maid in her client's mansion, and why upon discovering this inculpatory evidence does she fail to call the police? In a single move, she is robbed of her public power and placed within the domestic sphere, where she remains" till the film's end.²⁶

Two of the next three woman-attorney films share *Jagged Edge's* assumptions about the incompatibility of the statuses of "attorney" and "woman." *Suspect* (1987), starring Cher as Riley, a hard-working attorney, implies that Riley is destroying her femininity through overexertion. Angst-ridden and dateless, she revives only when she has an affair with a juror in a case she is defending. Thus committing an ethical violation that could lead to disbarment, Riley places her need for a man before her career. With a similar lack of professionalism, in *Physical Evidence* (1989) defense lawyer Theresa Russell falls in love with her client (Burt Reynolds).²⁷ Only in *The Accused* does a 1980s courtroom drama present a woman criminal lawyer (Kelly McGillis) who is a true justice figure, strong, competent, and capable of concentrating on her work even with men around.²⁸

Courtroom dramas proliferated in the 1990s (at least twenty-three appeared between 1990 and 1996), but as the numbers went up, quality fell. While trial scenes continue to be used to create suspense and bring finality to the resolution, one seldom finds an entire movie building toward a trial scene.²⁹ Instead, these scenes are now enmeshed in a fabric of other, more animated sequences; they have become episodes in a thriller. Reflecting actual trials (such as those involving O. J. Simpson and the assailants of Rodney King) in which justice seemed to many to have gone astray, courtroom films of the 1990s mistrust the criminal justice system's ability to accomplish its mission. Many begin with the assumption that the system is broken beyond repair.

Presumed Innocent, based on a best-seller by attorney Scott Turow, features Harrison Ford as Rusty Sabich, a criminal lawyer indicted for killing a female colleague with whom he had an affair. The plotline conceals Sabich's guilt or innocence until the climax. Although he is

ultimately exonerated, the judicial system is portrayed as a hollow shell of its former nobility. The trappings remain—the ornate courtrooms, the legal formalities—but beneath the veneer, something is rotting. The bad smell emanates in part from the judge, who pushes for Sabich's acquittal in order to conceal his own malfeasance.

The judicial system blunders again in *Primal Fear*, where Richard Gere defends a choirboy who murdered a priest. When the audience learns that the accused was molested by the priest and suffers from multiple personality disorder, it roots for the outcome Gere ultimately secures—not guilty by reason of insanity. However, Gere learns in the final scene that the choirboy faked his psychosis and is in fact a sadistic killer. At this point, there is nothing Gere can do. He and the entire system have been duped. So, in a sense, have viewers, for we have been kept in the dark by the film, much as Gere was kept ignorant by his client.

Trial films of the 1990s show little sustained interest in the social issues that engrossed earlier courtroom dramas. They feign interest in equality by using multiethnic and multiracial characters (the Hispanic defense attorney [Raul Julia] in *Presumed Innocent*, a female African American judge in *Body of Evidence* [1992]), but they say little about ethnic or racial injustice. Figures such as “the ubiquitous African American judge,” Sharon Willis points out, “exhibit racial difference, but sideline it, so that they also help to . . . counterbalance . . . any depictions of African Americans as criminals, and so to inoculate crime dramas against inflection, or infection, with racist overtones.”³⁰ While they sprinkle female attorneys across their courtrooms, they seem less gripped by gender issues than by a desire to include shots of libidinous lawyers undressing. The gap between man-made law and true justice has become a plot gimmick.

Woman-lawyer films remained popular in the 1990s, with attorney Barbara Hershey sleeping with her pornographer client in *Defenseless* (1991), law student Julia Roberts tracking down the assassin of Supreme Court justices in *The Pelican Brief* (1993), and attorney Susan Sarandon finding an outlet for her thwarted maternalism in *The Client* (1994). *A Few Good Men* features Demi Moore as a marine attorney defending two young marines charged with murder. However, the film concentrates on another lawyer, one played by Tom Cruise, whose character develops from lazy slacker to champion of justice. The movie's title is perhaps more accurate than the filmmakers intended, for although Demi Moore's character outranks Tom

Cruise's, her role in court is limited to passing him papers so he can argue the case.

In Sidney Lumet's *Guilty as Sin* (1993), yet another brilliant blond attorney (Rebecca DeMornay) defends yet another creep (Don Johnson) against yet another charge of wife-killing. In this case, however, the lawyer does not succumb sexually, and when she realizes that she is dealing with a serial woman-killer, she tries to frame him. He instantly sees through her ruse, however, and as soon as the jury returns the not-guilty verdict, he comes after her. In the ensuing struggle, both fall from a balcony, he to his death, she to multiple fractures and the wry observation, as an ambulance drives her away, that this is a tough way to get rid of a client. "She has not won a legal case, however," a critic observes, "since client-killing is not in the Model Code of Professional Responsibility"; and once again the female attorney has functioned "as the erotic object for the audience as well as for the characters in the film."³¹

There are, of course, exceptions to both the generally poor quality of 1990s courtroom films and their tendency to portray women lawyers as flying pigs, creatures that were not meant to be. One of the best films of the decade, *In the Name of the Father*, opens with a dazzling spectacle of Irish commoners battling English police, and although it alternates trial scenes with action sequences, it keeps track of its themes. That the defense lawyer is a woman is incidental here, and her sexuality is no more at issue than is Atticus Finch's in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The disappointing quality of most recent courtroom films stems not from their negativity about the law but from their mindless reliance on shopworn conventions and depleted traditions. In fact, they do not say much at all. Lacking anger or other signs of conviction, they seem to be written by computers programmed to reproduce formulas. Their usual theme—the impossibility of achieving justice—cannot be persuasively conveyed through camera tricks, manipulative scripts, and recycled plots. It is no wonder that courtroom movies are gradually being replaced by "law films" that pose questions about justice and responsibility in noncourt settings.

Limitations and Ideology

While recent trial films criticize the criminal justice system, none falls into the category I have been calling the critical or alternative

tradition. None, that is, renounces the feel-good devices of Hollywood to present an oppositional view in which injustice not only prevails but also causes social harm. *Individuals* are hurt in *The Star Chamber*, *Jagged Edge*, *The Accused*, and so on, but we know that most of them will recover. Teddy Barnes will return to corporate law, right-wing judges will learn to live with defendants' rights, and rape bystanders will realize they should assist victims. Moreover, injustice figures are punished in these movies, and their evil does not survive them to infect society. There is simply no courtroom equivalent of *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), in which injustice rages out of control, consuming innocents in its path.

This absence of alternative-tradition trial films reveals something fundamental about the nature of courtroom dramas. Alternative-tradition cop films, as noted in chapter 3, grew out of the bleakness of detective noirs, with their morally ambiguous private investigators and acceptance of crime as a normal condition. Although courtroom films, too, went through a noir phase, law noirs did not reject Hollywood conventions as completely as did detective noirs, nor did they argue that justice is beyond reach. For example, *Call Northside 777* has a hero, the crusading journalist, and although its ending is not joyous, the falsely convicted men do get out of prison. Similarly, while *Stranger on the Third Floor* demonstrates the unreliability of eyewitness testimony, it concludes with the capture of the real villain.³² *Knock on Any Door* has a hero—a strong one in Humphrey Bogart as Nick Romano's tough but understanding defense attorney; and even *Fury*, its bitterness notwithstanding, concludes with the reunited couple embracing in front of the judge.³³ Thus, whereas detective noirs provided a base for present-day critical movies about policing, law noirs created no such foundation for current courtroom films.

Another reason for court films' lack of an alternative tradition lies with the genre itself. Trial scenes are rigid in their requirements, permitting little in the way of plot innovation. In terms of character, too, they tend toward inflexibility. By definition, most of their justice figures must be lawyers; and given the limited role of judges in U.S. trials, most of those lawyers must be defense attorneys or prosecutors.³⁴ In addition, trial scenes are limited cinematically; the ways to film a legal dispute are finite in number. Due to this overall rigidity, filmmakers have been unable to use the genre to evolve more diverse, complex, or tragic views of legal injustice.

Courtroom films make no dominant type of ideological declaration. According to one, justice can be achieved; according to the next, it is out of reach. Individually, these films send powerful ideological messages. The characters in *12 Angry Men*, for example, have been carefully designed to drive home a 1950s message about pluralism and consensus,³⁵ and the woman-lawyer films of the 1980s and 1990s form part of the backlash against feminism. But over time, courtroom films have staked out a wide range of ideological positions, providing what Norman Rosenberg calls “cultural texts by which to chart a variety of hopes and fears about law and courts.”³⁶

Their ideological inconsistency distinguishes trial films from criminological and crime-fighter movies. Criminological movies, as we have seen, have two fairly constant ideological themes: that crime is explicable and that there are experts who know how to control it. Crime-fighter movies, too, are relatively uniform in their underlying concerns with masculinity and the nature of the ideal cop. In courtroom dramas, in contrast, ideology is more likely to shift with the time of production.

Court films’ ideological significance ultimately lies less in what they say than in the images they use to say it—in their mythologies about what happens during criminal trials. The reality of criminal justice processes is of course very different from movie depictions; about 90 percent of all criminal cases are plea-bargained, for instance, and the 10 percent that do go to trial are as likely to have bench trials as jury trials. But few people are aware of these realities; most of us derive our fundamental assumptions about the workings of criminal law from the media. Representations of law furnish raw material for public debates about justice; in our haste to discuss the issues, we may not notice that there is something odd about the materials, especially if we lack courtroom experiences to compare them to.

The influence of these representations of law is now international in scope. Due to the worldwide dominance of American films, viewers in countries with very different legal traditions think their trials follow the American pattern. Two German film scholars report that in interviews, German defendants expressed surprise at the physical arrangement of their courtrooms, which did not look like the courtrooms they were used to seeing in American television shows. The scholars describe another study in which German children and adults, when asked what they knew about courts, said that they got most of their information from movies, especially American crime

films.³⁷ If ideology is the myths people live by, then the images of courtroom films constitute a rich and globally powerful source of ideology about the nature of legal processes.

Notes

Charles Alexander Hahn is a lawyer in Boston, specializing in civil litigation, and is also a film buff.

1. One exception to this rule is *The Rainmaker* (1997), a film about an idealistic young lawyer who wins his first case to the tune of \$50 million, in the process exposing the criminality of the insurance company that refused to cover medical costs for a young man dying of leukemia. The hero, Rudy Baylor (Matt Damon), also helps old ladies and battered wives, and he is legally ambidextrous, equally capable in criminal and civil law. However, *The Rainmaker* counterbalances Rudy with a host of shysters and crooked attorneys. Rudy is blocked from collecting the \$50 million from the insurance company, and at the end he renounces the practice of law because he cares "how I do it." "Every lawyer," Rudy concludes with a wisdom far in advance of his experience, "at least once in every case, feels himself crossing a line he doesn't really need to cross; it just happens, and if you cross it enough times it disappears forever, and then you're just another lawyer joke, just another shark in the dirty water." Thus, while *The Rainmaker* gives us a heroic lawyer and social issues of some magnitude, it is too negative about law and lawyers to signal an actual return to the uplifting trial films of earlier years.
2. For examples of the new type of analysis, see Herman 1992, Papke 1996, and, more generally, Black 1999 and Denvir 1996. For a pedagogical discussion of the use of films in legal studies courses, see Greenfield and Osborn 1995a.
3. Robert C. Post (1987) makes a parallel point in his article "On the Popular Image of the Lawyer." Post distinguishes between two images of law in popular culture, writing that "the concept of 'law' itself has assumed a double meaning. Law is on the one hand the positive enactments of the state. Law in this sense is technical, ambiguous, and complex. It can almost always be circumvented. . . . Lawyers stand accused of breaking a different kind of law, the law which is associated with justice and with our values as a community" (383).
4. The second version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981) becomes flaccid partly because it lacks the legal framework of the first. Scriptwriter David Mamet retains some courtroom material from the first version, but without the opening scene, in which Frank is delivered into the movie by the DA, and the last one, in which the DA leads him off to execution, the other material becomes incoherent.
5. *Jagged Edge* (1985) wittily inverts this pattern, returning at the end to another scene of the masked killer stalking a woman in bed.
6. For other examples, see *The Wrong Man* and *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934).
7. Director Fritz Lang claimed that his film *Fury* (1936) influenced the way evidence was presented in subsequent trials. When Peter Bogdanovich asked

Lang why he had used films in *Fury's* courtroom sequences, Lang replied: "I didn't know very much about procedure in an American trial, so M-G-M gave me a few experts and all of them were opposed to showing the films in court and, later, the stop-frame as an exhibit. I took the liberty of doing it, and afterwards, in many actual cases, it was permitted in court" (Bogdanovich 1967: 29). If *Fury* did in fact lead to the use of filmed materials as evidence in actual trials, this is surely one of the most dramatic examples of films directly affecting society.

8. In this case, the lynch mob is after a black man, but in other films of the period, the target is white. Directors and scriptwriters often would have preferred to depict lynchings more honestly, showing that blacks were the usual victims. However, they were prevented from doing so, either by studio heads (see Bogdanovich 1967: 32 for L. B. Mayer's censorship of *Fury*) or the Production Code Administration (see Maltby 1995: 369–70).
9. Although *A Time to Kill* condemns the KKK vigilantes who come after the black man, Carl Lee Hailey, it supports Hailey's own vigilante actions (he is on trial for shooting two white men in cold blood for raping his daughter). Thus, it ends up making a provigilante statement.
10. However, the defense attorney (Hume Cronyn) does manage to have Cora sentenced to probation, even though she was charged with killing her husband, and later both lawyers are rehabilitated as characters, an inconsistency not explained in the film.
11. Chase 1986: 284, 293 n. 38.
12. For a scene-by-scene analysis of ideology and technique in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, see Editors of *Cahiers du Cinema* 1979.
13. *Fury's* bitterness, critics speculate, may have derived from the background of its director, Fritz Lang, who had recently fled Nazi Germany for the United States. Indeed, there may be "a parallel between the gradual and menacing growth of hatred in [*Fury's*] crowd lust for a lynching, and the Hitler terror" (L. Eisner, as quoted in Chase 1986: 297 n. 44).
14. Much less successful by current standards is a trial film released the next year (1937), *The Life of Emile Zola*. Starring Paul Muni as the French author on trial for slandering army officials whom he accused of framing Alfred Dreyfus, the Jew sent to Devil's Island for a crime he did not commit, this film is impressive for its courtroom setting, but the lengthy speeches become stilted and preachy. At the end, to escape his jail sentence, Zola flees to England, where he waits until the scandal runs its course, Dreyfus is freed, and he himself is exonerated.
15. Rosenberg 1996: 282.
16. Rosenberg 1994: 345.
17. Anthony Chase observes that *Knock on Any Door* was probably "the first film that is made about juvenile delinquents rather than for juvenile delinquents" (1986: 283 n. 9; emphasis in original).
18. Hitchcock had earlier directed *The Paradine Case*, another courtroom film but one that does not fit the law noir category due to its lack of sense of corruption and its upper-class setting and characters. *The Paradine Case* is as much a mystery as a courtroom film.

19. In his autobiographical *Making Movies*, Lumet describes the "lens plot" of *12 Angry Men*. "As the picture unfolded, I wanted the [jury] room to seem smaller and smaller." Thus, he slowly shifted to longer lenses, at the same time lowering the camera from above eye level to eye level in the second third of the film and below eye level in the third. These changes increased the sense of claustrophobia and tension. "On the final shot, an exterior that showed the jurors leaving the courtroom, I used a wide-angle lens" and "raised the camera to the highest above-eye-level position," thus releasing the built-up tension (1995: 81).
20. In an unusual combination, the journalist's character thus functions as both an injustice figure and a justice figure.
21. One exception was Orson Welles's *The Trial* (1963), a film that closely follows Franz Kafka's hallucinatory novel and bears little resemblance to any other courtroom movie. Another exception was *Madame X* (1966), a Lana Turner vehicle that may be the worst trial film ever made.
22. See also Berets 1996.
23. Miller 1994: 212.
24. Ibid.: 212 n. 32.
25. Ibid.: 213.
26. Ibid.: 215 n. 39. At the end, *Jagged Edge* shifts into an absurdist mode. Borrowing perhaps from the droll tag-lines that conclude some of director Billy Wilder's comedies, Teddy Barnes's sidekick consoles her for her boyfriend's betrayal by remarking "Ah, fuck him; he was trash." This flourish helps raise *Jagged Edge* above the dour earnestness of many other women lawyer films.
27. *Nuts* (1987), centered around a female character who is not an attorney but a high-priced call girl accused of murder, avoids the sexual stereotyping of other courtroom films of this period, but only by substituting another negative stereotype, that of the hysteric—the "nut" of the title.
28. For a fuller analysis of female attorney movies, see Bailey, Pollock, and Schroeder 1998.
29. An exception is *A Few Good Men*, a film that takes place mainly in the courtroom and has little or no "action." Successful at the box office, *A Few Good Men* won audiences over through dialogue and exposition—a rare feat in the 1990s.
30. Willis 1997: 5.
31. Miller 1994: 227, 224.
32. The only exception to the rule that law noirs retained Hollywood's happy-ending conventions seems to be *They Won't Believe Me*, and it had little influence on other movies.
33. The embrace was not the director's idea. In an interview, Fritz Lang said, "I hated the kiss, because I think it wasn't necessary. A man gives a speech that . . . is very well written and extremely well delivered, and then suddenly, for no reason whatsoever—in front of the judge and the audience and God knows who—they turn around and kiss each other. . . . It's such a coy ending now" (as quoted in Bogdanovich 1967: 26–28; emphasis in original).
34. In an unpublished paper on Hollywood courtroom dramas, Stefan Machura and Stefan Ulbrich (1998) argue that the relative weakness of the judge in

American trials strengthens conflicts between prosecution and defense and pushes the trial itself into the center of the stage. Thus, the relative weakness of the judge in actual trials is one reason for the international popularity of American trial films.

35. Biskind 1983: 10–20.
36. Rosenberg 1994: 360.
37. Machura and Ulbrich 1998.

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Prison and Execution Films

This is hell, and I'm going to give you the guided tour.
—The evil warden in *Lock Up*

The prison film genre took shape during silent film days; toward the end of that period, studios were releasing one or two movies about prison life each year.¹ Ranging from stories of jailbreaks and inmate reformation through melodramas about unjust convictions and hangings, these silent films created a cinematic vocabulary that was incorporated by talkies in the 1930s and that, as the 1990s success of *The Shawshank Redemption* demonstrates, continues to be popular today.² Movies of this type are essentially fantasies, films that purport to reveal the brutal realities of incarceration while actually offering viewers escape from the miseries of daily life through adventure and heroism. Presenting tales in which justice is miraculously restored after long periods of harsh oppression, prison movies enable us to believe, if only briefly, in a world where long-suffering virtue is rewarded. In recent decades, a few filmmakers have begun producing movies that critique the traditional fantasy formulas or bypass them entirely, an indication that, after close to one hundred years, the prison film may be on the verge of transformation.

Characteristics of the Genre

Certain stock characters, plots, and themes turn up over and over again in traditional prison films.³

The Cast

The Big House (1930), one of the first prison films with a sound track, revolves around three convicts: Butch, an older, hardened criminal who is experienced in the ways of the prison; Kent, a yellow-bellied snitch; and Morgan, the handsome, middle-class hero who never squeals and is a loyal friend to Butch. It turns out that Morgan did nothing worse than commit forgery—once. He escapes long enough to fall in love with Kent's sister, only to be recaptured and returned,

broken-hearted. When a riot breaks out, Butch and Kent die, but Morgan halts the violence single-handedly, an act for which he is rewarded with his freedom. At the movie's close he leaves prison to marry Kent's sister and live "abroad," where he can start over as an honest man. Two other characters also play important roles in *The Big House*: the warden, who is wise, tough, and fair ("If you've got grievances," he tells the prisoners, "come to me. . . . I'm running this show, and I'm ready for you"); and a "rat," who sneaks around gathering information for the administration.

These same character types show up in a second prison film of the early 1930s, Howard Hawks's *The Criminal Code* (1931). *The Criminal Code* tells the tale of a fine young man who is mistakenly convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to ten years in the penitentiary. There Bob bonds with other prisoners, including Gallway (Boris Karloff), a hardened criminal plotting a revenge murder. One buddy plans an escape, only to be thwarted by a stool pigeon. "The years go on," we are told by an intertitle, "drab—empty—hopeless years," and indeed we do find that six years of hard labor in the prison's jute mill have broken Bob spiritually and physically. Fortunately, the prison doctor realizes that Bob "isn't a criminal at all." "There is something there worth saving," he informs the warden, "and it is almost gone." The kindly warden reassigns Bob to work at his house, where the young man and the warden's daughter fall in love. When Bob is erroneously blamed for a murder, he refuses to break the criminal code by squealing, even though this refusal may lead to the gallows. But the warden's daughter saves him, they embrace, and Bob is behind bars no longer.

Ingredients of these and other early prison films became staples of the genre: convict buddies, a paternalistic warden, a cruel guard, a craven snitch, a bloodthirsty convict, and the young hero, who is either absolutely innocent or at most guilty of a minor offense that does not warrant prison. Some movies vary the secondary characters: In *Murder in the First* (1995), for instance, the buddy is not a fellow prisoner but a lawyer (Christian Slater) who helps prisoner Kevin Bacon close down the dungeons at Alcatraz. Few, however, tamper with the essential innocence of the lead character, with whom viewers must be able to identify. In *Each Dawn I Die* (1939), the hero (James Cagney) is a crusading journalist, framed for manslaughter by crooked politicians. *Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962) stars Burt Lancaster as the convict with a heart of gold. In *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), petty offender Paul Newman sacrifices himself to save his chain-gang bud-



Convicts George Raft and James Cagney plotting in *Each Dawn I Die* (1939). The attraction of prison films lies partly in their depiction of close male friendships and heroic revolts, partly in their offer of access to the secret world of convict life. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

dies from a cruel overseer; and in *Mrs. Soffel* (1984), Mel Gibson and his brother escape from the jail where they are waiting to be hanged, even though they are, by their own account, "innocent as snow."

Only the character of the warden changes significantly over the years, as the sympathetic father figure of the early talking films becomes a heartless brute. By 1984, the release date of *Mrs. Soffel*, the warden had evolved into a male chauvinist, fat, cruel, and insensitive; by 1995, the release date of *Murder in the First*, jailer Gary Oldman began his day by slashing prisoners with his razor. *Brubaker* (1980), in which Robert Redford plays a heroic warden, is no more than a partial exception to the rule of the steadily worsening warden, for Brubaker's mission is to reform a penitentiary where his predecessor raked in bribes and encouraged convicts to rape and maim one another.

The Shawshank Redemption (1994) includes character types that have hardly changed since the 1930s: the innocent hero; the experienced convict buddy; the malevolent warden; and a knot of wicked prisoners who try to harm the hero. The degree to which these characters

are crucial to prison films is suggested by the way they turn up in a different but related type of prison film: titillation movies with titles like *Caged Heat* (1974)⁴ and *Slammer Girls* (1987). These babes-behind-bars films, too, feature innocent inmates with confidants and treacherous enemy prisoners; if the superintendent is kindly, there will be a butchy and sadistic assistant superintendent to take up the traditional role.⁵

Stock Plots

The major incident of a traditional prison film is usually a riot or escape; much of the preceding footage concerns the planning for this event. *The Big House*, for example, culminates in a spectacular riot during which armored tanks roll into the prison (and right over the camera). In these movies, escapes tend to be coupled with revenge on the bad guys, as in the case of *Midnight Express* (1978), the story of a clean-cut American youth who is caught smuggling hashish out of Turkey and sentenced to life in an incredibly brutal Turkish prison. His parents fail to gain his release, and his buddies languish and die, but he finally escapes, killing the most bestial guard on his way out. In *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), the flight of Clint Eastwood's character is itself retaliation against the hard-hearted warden, who will lose his post. Eddie, the hero of *Mrs. Soffel*, manages not only to escape from death row but also to take his brother and the warden's wife with him, and although Henri Young, the central figure of *Murder in the First*, remains in custody, he triggers investigations that close Alcatraz's dungeons and lead to the arrest of the depraved jailer. When the main character of *The Shawshank Redemption* escapes, he also cleans out the warden's bank accounts, arranges the arrest of the ruthless guard, and blows the whistle on the warden's kickback scheme—one of the most fulsome revenge sequences in prison movie history. In all these films, good triumphs over evil and the moral order is restored.

Riot (1969), starring Jim Brown and Gene Hackman as the cons Culley and Red, sounded the breaking-loose theme in ways that uncannily anticipated the two most deadly riots in U.S. prison history. The film's riot starts when inmates in the punishment wing, including Culley (who is unfairly being sent to solitary by a racist "bull") and Red (a natural leader), take advantage of a sudden opportunity to jump the guards. From the punishment wing the disturbance spreads throughout the prison. Some inmates present their demands

at the front gate while others dig a tunnel under the wall to the rear. The tunnelers reach daylight just as officials retake the yard, and all are killed except Culley, who escapes.

Two years later, when New York State inmates took over Attica prison, they, too, seized an unexpected opportunity to jump a guard, and as on-the-scene footage shows, the state regained control by stationing officers on the walls with rifles aimed down at the yard almost exactly as they had been posed in *Riot*. Nine years later, when inmates at the Santa Fe, New Mexico, penitentiary rampaged, they got drunk on homebrew and butchered one another much as inmates in the film had. These parallels between art and life, film and history, occurred because *Riot's* filmmakers went out of their way to accurately reproduce prison conditions. Although the movie has fictional elements, it was filmed entirely on the grounds of the Arizona State Prison, with the institution's warden and inmates playing themselves, and it purports to have been based on an actual escape attempt. Thus do fiction and reality intertwine, with fiction sometimes foreshadowing reality.

Not only stock plots but also stock scenes show up in prison films across the generations. *The Big House*, seemingly enchanted by the cinematic vistas its camera was discovering, depicted roach-racing in the yard, maggots in the food, knives passed from hand to hand under the mess-hall table, dungeons, tossed cells, and shifty-eyed plotting during the chapel services—scenes that became leitmotifs of this film type. Convicts in *Each Dawn I Die* use the weekly movie as an occasion to knock off their enemies, as they do again half a century later in *In the Name of the Father* (1993). When Paul Newman joins a chain gang in *Cool Hand Luke*, he busts rocks in a tradition that began with *The Whipping Boss* (1922) and was perpetuated by *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932). Graphic scenes of life behind bars became de rigueur, one of the elements audiences expected to find in prison movies.

Stock Themes

Nearly all prison films dwell on the theme of rebellion against injustice. Innocents, we find, are being punished, not only by incarceration but also by diabolic officers and nasty fellow convicts, a point these films drive home with obligatory scenes of brutalization. To restore justice, the prisoners sometimes take matters into own hands

(*Cool Hand Luke*, *Escape from Alcatraz*, *Midnight Express*, *Papillon* [1973], *Riot*, *Riot in Cell Block 11* [1954]). At others, someone comes to their rescue, as in *The Last Detail* (1973), a going-to-prison film in which the agents of justice are the petty officers who escort a naive young sailor from their naval base to a northern prison. During their week-long journey, the older men (Jack Nicholson and Otis Young) befriend the sailor (Randy Quaid) and, appalled by his approaching fate (eight years behind bars for snitching \$40), decide to initiate him in the pleasures of life. The following week of adventure and perfect companionship is their way of settling accounts and helping Quaid's character through the years of incarceration. In *Murder in the First*, the agent of justice is the buddy figure, the young lawyer who helps Henri Young shut down the dungeons and records his story for posterity, throwing in admiration to balance the scales. The central concern of traditional prison films, then, has been oppression, transgression, and the restoration of a natural order of justice.

A second and related theme is that of control. These movies pose questions about who controls whom and what being under someone else's control implies for prisoners' manhood. For example, Luke, in *Cool Hand Luke*, repeatedly baits the guards, controlling them psychologically even though he knows he'll be punished in the long run. He does so because he knows his tactics will help the other convicts regain self-control and throw off the guards' false authority, gained through chains and dogs. In short, Luke restores his buddies' manliness. Manliness also surfaces as an issue in *Riot*, in which the racist guard, affronted by Culley's dignity, attempts to humiliate him.

In many films, prison becomes a metaphor for the state or some other oppressor that controls and limits the hero, sapping his potential. Imprisonment in *American Me* (1992), the movie about Chicano gangs in East L.A., comes to stand for the self-destructive violence with which gang members enchain their own communities. *Brubaker's* prison becomes a symbol of a political system that tolerates corruption among warden and guards. "Henry, stop the digging," warns one of the system's representatives, referring to Brubaker's literal and figurative unearthing of skeletons. And when *Cool Hand Luke's* hero explains to his mother that "I just can't seem to find no elbow room," he indicts not only incarceration but all the establishment forces that restrain youthful nonconformity.⁶

A third theme that runs through prison films concerns the gap between appearance and reality. At first, appearances fool both the he-

roes and the viewers who perceive through their eyes. The apparently worst convicts, like Butch in *The Big House*, turn out to be sweethearts once you get to know them, a principle summarized in the title of another prison film, *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938). In the latter, the juvenile delinquents who revere the local hoodlum are actually cherubs behind their tough exteriors, and most angelic of all is the hoodlum himself (James Cagney), who pretends cowardice on the way to execution so the kids will stop admiring him and go straight. On the other hand, prison movies are full of hidden enemies; one never knows where danger lies. Friends turn out to be cowards, the shower room is full of rapists, and the officer who seems friendly really plans to shoot you. These films are prone to somersault reversals, revelations, and ham-handed ironies. In the Sylvester Stallone vehicle *Lock Up* (1989), as in many other prison movies, the prisoner is the good man, the warden evil incarnate.

The Attractions of Prison Films

"What we need to ask" about genre, film theorist Robin Wood advises, "is less *what* than *why*."⁷ Applied to prison films, Wood's question becomes: Why has this genre, despite its formulaic characters, plots, and themes, flourished from the 1930s into the present, resilient and often fresh in its reconceptualizations?

The answer has four parts. It lies in the opportunities prison movies offer us, first, to identify with a perfect man; second, to participate in perfect friendships; third, to fantasize about sex and rebellion; and fourth, to acquire insider information about the apparent realities of prison life.

Identification with a Perfect Man

Traditional prison films invite us to identify with heroes, even superheroes. In *Papillon*, the central character (played by Steve McQueen) is sent to a prison on Devil's Island, where he endures lengthy periods in solitary, hard labor in swamps, and encounters with terrifying lepers before he and he alone devises a way to escape.⁸ His buddy (Dustin Hoffman), though equally smart, cannot keep up with these superhuman feats of fortitude. *Cool Hand Luke's* main character defies savage overseers and survives a string of escapades only to be betrayed by a fellow convict and shot to death. The film stages his

death as a crucifixion, however, comparing Luke's willingness to die for others to that of Jesus. Leads in other prison films tend to utter lines like "I could run the whole show from solitary," and sometimes they do, as in *American Me*. In *Bad Boys* (1983), Sean Penn beats up all the bullies in juvie hall, and when his archenemy, Paco, comes at him with a knife, he not only wins but also refrains from killing Paco, thereby exhibiting the moral superiority of the true hero.

Sassy and truculent, the heroes of prison movies remain defiant even in the face of threats or inducements that would sway an ordinary mortal. "You think I'm a stoolie?" asks Barbara ("Babs") Graham in *I Want to Live!* (1958), one of the few prison films to focus on a woman.⁹ Sneering at officials' attempts to bribe her, even though her life is at stake, Babs (Susan Hayward) refuses with a vehement "NO DICE!" Plucky till the end, she insists on dressing up for her trip to the gas chamber. Because such heroes are stronger and more principled than we are, it is pleasurable to identify with them.

The supermen of standard prison films are perfect partly because they embody old-fashioned gender ideals. They prove that there are still real men, men who can lead without pettiness or manipulation and who can walk through the yard (as *Shawshank's* narrator remarks admiringly of lead character Andy Dufresne) as if they were out for a stroll, unruffled and unafraid. These men know how to avenge a slight; they emerge unbroken from months or years in solitary confinement; they are true to themselves and their ideals. They demonstrate that the old-fashioned tough-guy ideal is intact and available, even (or perhaps especially) in prison.¹⁰ No matter how appalling their conditions, movie prisons are also a comforting sort of world, ruled as they are by men who are a little more godlike than the rest of us.

Participation in Perfect Friendships

A second source of their enduring popularity lies in the opportunities prison films offer us to participate vicariously in perfect friendships. These films are full of ideal companions, buddies more loyal and true than any on the outside. Like Christian martyrs, death row prisoners in *The Last Mile* (1932) help one another through the ordeal of execution; when they overpower the guards, one convict willingly dies so another can be set free. In *Bad Boys*, Sean Penn bonds with a Jewish kid who teaches him the ropes and helps him plot the big escape. *Mrs. Soffel's* buddies are brothers; the buddies in *Sleepers* (1996) are the

guys who as kids were sentenced to reform school and are now joined in their quest for justice by their old mentor, Father Bobby De Niro.¹¹ Suffering somehow rewards prisoners with friendships deeper, purer, and more enduring than those experienced by law-abiding citizens. As viewers, we participate in these heroic relationships.¹²

Prison film friendships gain strength from their single-sex settings. These movies relentlessly exclude women. When a woman does appear, she is near death (as in *Cool Hand Luke*), merely part of the scenery (as in *Papillon*), killed off quickly (as in *The Shawshank Redemption*), or banished for her treachery (as in *Murder in the First*). Closed off from the distractions of female companionship, these all-male worlds promote solidarity.

Fantasies of Sex and Rebellion

A third answer to our variation on Robin Wood's "why" question—why are the formulas of prison films attractive?—lies in their encouragement of fantasies about sex and rebellion.

The babes-behind-bars subgenre is the type of prison film most obviously concerned with sexual stimulation. Movies of this type appeal to aficionados of cult and pornography films, especially pornography of the chains-and-whips variety. Featuring young women who tend to remove their bras before riots and mannish, sadistic officers, these films are fixated on the sexual implications of an all-female society, usually from the viewpoint of a heterosexual male who enjoys watching pinups in action.

Less obviously, prison films with male inmates often have a homosexual subtext in which the buddy gets both a perfect friend and a lover. This message remains subtextual, and in fact traditional prison films are somewhat homophobic insofar as they characterize rapists and other bad guys as homosexuals.¹³ This homophobia is a strategy to underscore the hero's heterosexuality and relieve viewers from any worry they might have about admiring a man who is gay. At the same time, however, prison movies hint at physical intimacy between the hero and his best pal. Robin Wood discusses this type of hint in an essay titled "From Buddies to Lovers," in which he writes (of a different group of movies) that "in all these films the emotional center, the emotional charge, is in the male/male relationship, which is patently what the films are about."¹⁴ In traditional prison films, too, the male-male relationship is frequently central to the movie's meaning.

In *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), that relationship becomes overtly gay as the two prisoners merge and assume aspects of one another's personalities. The relationship is almost explicitly gay in *Lock Up*, in which Donald Sutherland's warden cannot take his eyes off Sylvester Stallone's body and expresses his homoerotic attraction through sadistic punishments. Voyeurism is again a strong theme in *Cool Hand Luke*, in which convicts call the most perverted guard, a man who hides behind reflector sunglasses, "The Man with No Eyes."¹⁵ In fact, he seldom takes his eyes off the half-naked convicts, vigilantly watching for a new occasion to connect with their bodies through punishment.

The gay subtext occasionally involves a biracial couple. There are traces of an erotic attachment in *Escape from Alcatraz* between the characters played by Clint Eastwood and Danny Glover, and an even stronger bond develops in *The Defiant Ones* (1958) between the escaped convicts played by Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier, who are literally chained together and compare their condition to a marriage. At the end of *The Shawshank Redemption*, when former prisoners Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) and Red (Morgan Freeman) reunite on a beach in a warm embrace, with the promise of living happily ever after, we witness a relationship that can be understood to include sexuality.¹⁶

Traditional prison films, then, are open to various interpretations and are somewhat more flexible than they may initially appear. Their heroes—masculine ideals who can be considered heterosexual, "sur-reptitiously gay" (Wood's term),¹⁷ or both—appeal to the sexual fantasies of a range of audiences.

Prison films further encourage sexual reveries through their concern with issues of domination and submission, entrapment and escape, control and powerlessness. Their preoccupation with punishment, cruelty, sadism, hidden enemies, and violation speak in undertones of sadomasochism to those who might be listening.

Fostering daydreams of rebellion, on one level prison movies invite us to participate in the mythic ritual of killing the old king (or father, or warden) and ushering in a new and more just social order. Few prison films fail to indict the state and its officials, casting them as brutal oppressors. Much as we learn to sympathize with the convicts, we learn to despise the officials who torment them. These films legitimate fantasies of seizing power.

Prison films often portray inmates as helpless children, at the mercy of all-powerful parents in the guise of rigid officials. In a few cases, such as *Kiss of Death*, one of these officials turns out to be benign, a good parent who helps the hero go straight. But in the majority of prison movies, officials are repressive, and in some cases they actually push the convicts deeper into criminality (*I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, *Murder in the First*). How could it be wrong to resist such curs? Through the heroes, viewers participate vicariously in rebellion against unjust authority and the establishment of a new order that recognizes and honors true worth.

Claims to Authenticity

A fourth and final source of pleasure in prison films lies in their claims of authenticity. The genre offers the inside scoop, a window onto the inaccessible but riveting world of the prison. About half of all traditional prison movies assert that they are "based on a true story" or are "fictionalized accounts of an actual event." *Brubaker* relates occurrences in the life of Tom Merton, a reform warden who did in fact find unmarked convict graves at the Arkansas penitentiary. *Riot in Cell Block 11* derives from the experience of the producer, who had spent time behind bars for shooting his wife's lover,¹⁸ while *The Executioner's Song* (1982) reproduces the final days and execution of Gary Gilmore. Other films that claim to be based on actual circumstances include *American Me*, *Birdman of Alcatraz*, *Dead Man Walking* (1995), *Escape from Alcatraz*, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, *I Want to Live!*, *Midnight Express*, *Mrs. Soffel*, *Murder in the First*, *Papillon*, *Riot*, *Sleepers*, and *Weeds*. In addition, some were filmed at actual prisons: *Riot in Cell Block 11* at California's Folsom prison, *An Innocent Man* (1989) at the Nevada Penitentiary, and scenes in both *Bad Boys* and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) at Illinois's Stateville prison.¹⁹ No other genre so loudly proclaims its verisimilitude.²⁰

Perhaps due to these claims, prison movies form an influential source of information (and misinformation) on what goes on behind bars. They teach viewers how inmates (or purported inmates) talk, contributing such argot terms as *bulls*, *fish*, *hole*, *house*, *screw*, and *shiv* to the national vocabulary. Howard Hawks professed to have used prisoners as script consultants for *The Criminal Code*. "I got together with ten convicts and said, 'How should this end?' and they

told me in no uncertain terms. They had a great deal to do with the formation of many scenes."²¹ Through these movies we gain access to otherwise inaccessible details about prison drug smuggling, inmate therapy sessions, parole board hearings, and life on a chain gang, receiving what the evil warden of *Lock Up* calls "a guided tour" of "hell." When the tour ends, we are nearly as hip as the hero.

Notwithstanding their assertions of authenticity, traditional prison movies are incapable of providing a true picture of life behind bars. Key elements such as the centrality of riots and escapes, the focus on a heroic figure who has been unjustly incarcerated, and the romanticization of life behind bars preclude concentration on what inmate accounts tell us are the central facts of incarceration: boredom and distasteful companions. Inmates watch prison movies not to glean more information about incarceration but for the same reason the rest of us turn to them: for escape into a dream world where those who suffer are saved and indeed rewarded with awe and respect.

The genre's artificiality is perhaps most apparent in its inability to accommodate gender differences. Until recently, if one wanted to see a film about women in prison, there were only two choices: *I Want to Live!* and soft pornography.²² The choices have now been nominally broadened by *Point of No Return* (1993), a Pygmalion story featuring Bridget Fonda,²³ and *The Last Dance* (1996), starring Sharon Stone as the prisoner who walks that final mile. However, *Point of No Return* merely repeats the formula in which an older man (here Gabriel Byrne) saves a young woman by reforming her (here transforming a drug addict into a killer cop), and *The Last Dance* is no more than a clone of a men's prison film, *Dead Man Walking*. The traditional prison movie apparently requires heroic masculinity to such an extent that it is unable to conceive of a woman's point of view on incarceration.²⁴

The counterfeit nature of traditional prison movies is further revealed by their execution scenes, which tend to extremes of melodrama. If movie heroes fear death, that fear is submerged by their dedication to higher principles such as helping their fellow man (*The Last Mile*), reforming delinquents (*Angels with Dirty Faces*), or understanding one's own past (*In Cold Blood* [1967]). In *I Want to Live!*, Barbara Graham insists on asserting herself against unjust authority up to the last minute, while in *The Executioner's Song* Gary Gilmore is curious about those gun holes in the opposite wall even while he is being strapped in the chair to be shot.



Susan Hayward being escorted to the gas chamber in *I Want to Live!* (1958), one of the few prison films outside pornography to focus on a woman. Like many prison movies, this one is based on a true story of injustice. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

New Developments in Prison Films

The limitations of the prison film genre—the lack of fit between its images of prison life and prison life itself, its unrelenting masculinism, the corniness of its execution scenes—have led to a search for new ways of depicting prisons and the death penalty. Genre traditions have not been discarded, but they are being supplemented by movies that break with their formulas. We see this in three trends in recent prison films: the formation of an alternative tradition; the

emergence of a new sort of prison documentary; and the appearance of films that comment on the genre itself.

Formation of an Alternative Tradition

Historically, prison films have taken for granted a clear and stable system of morality. The heroes may be criminals, but they are obviously admirable, the bad guys are obviously abominable, and the heroes win. Based on comforting moral verities, standard prison films raise questions about justice in particular cases but do not doubt that justice exists and lies within human reach. Nor do they ask hard questions about the prison system. What they do best is what they do over and over again: set up a situation in which an individual is being punished unfairly, and then develop a plotline in which the balance of justice is restored.

Bored with the old formulas and anxious to create movies that do not ideologically justify the prison system, about twenty years ago moviemakers began producing prison films in the alternative or critical tradition. These movies refuse to present characters who are clearly heroic or villainous. Instead of taking for granted a stable and universal moral system, they assume that living without a moral compass is part of the human condition. These critical films are less uplifting than their traditional counterparts, but they may be more suitable to a society that lacks consensus on basic religious, philosophical, and political issues, and they are certainly more accurate in their depictions of life behind bars.

The first movie to strike out in this new direction, *On the Yard* (1979), has no hero. The character closest to a hero is a loner (played by John Heard), a lifer who seems to be making some progress with his personal problems when he is murdered over a minor debt. From then on the movie forgets him. It reaches no satisfying resolution and makes no effort to make sense of prison brutalities. Gone are the criminal code, the transcendent rebel, the guard whom it is fun to hate. At best, inmates form weak alliances; most of the time, viciousness prevails.

A second alternative-tradition film from 1979, *Short Eyes*, was shot at New York City's highrise jail, the Men's House of Detention, and is unrelenting in its determination not to prettify the situation. It is so close to documentary that through a long introduction, *Short Eyes* resists giving viewers a story line, instead acclimatizing us to the routines and personnel of a particular cell block. The narrative, when it does begin, concerns a middle-class white man who has been arrested

for child molestation (and is thus nicknamed "short eyes," prison argot for a person guilty of this crime). His innocence is revealed only after other prisoners have brutally raped and butchered him. For a prison film, *Short Eyes* is as far as a movie can get from the concurrent Hollywood production, *Escape from Alcatraz*.

Prison film tradition is again inverted by *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, which gives viewers not triumphant masculinity but a broken revolutionary and a second prisoner decked out in a silk robe and lipstick who is no leader of men but rather the narrator of a World War II romance. The two becomes buddies, but what they do together is not manly in the conventional sense: They gently help one another when they weaken, and they end up openly making love. Not brawn but imagination is the central value in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and although the movie admires courage, the courage it endorses is distinctly different from the bluster of a James Cagney or the imperviousness of a Clint Eastwood.

A bleaker example of the alternative-tradition prison film can be found in *American Me*, Edward James Olmos's controversial movie about Chicano gangs in the Los Angeles area. Santana, the lead character (played by Olmos himself), is head of *la Eme* (the Mexican Mafia), the powerful prison gang that extends into the streets. A cross between Latino machismo and American violence, Santana is at once a victim of his culture and its victimizer. Although young men revere him and he longs to help them, Santana merely leads them into an escalating cycle of drugs and violence. Assassinated in prison, Santana is not even an antihero but rather a nonhero, a failure, an indictment of his culture's loss of traditional values and failure to find new ones. In this empty world, sex is impossible, love cannot save, buddies destroy one another, and savagery rules.

A self-conscious attempt to establish Chicano film, *American Me* documents harrowing passages in Mexican American history. The film, as critic Rob Canfield observes, explores its own "cinematic and cultural lineage as it repositions Latino identities and conflicts in a new light: the urban barrio of the 1990s and the prison institution that has become its new site of struggle. . . . This is a film that spotlights cultural boundaries and unmask the violence that penetrates the borders of urban Latino masculinity."²⁵ While *American Me* has been trounced for its negative images of Chicano culture, it is in fact reformist in thrust, a condemnation of violence and Chicano stereotyping. Its reformism differs drastically, however, from that of earlier prison films (*The Criminal Code*, *The Last Mile*, *Riot in Cell Block 11*),

which aimed at reforming prison management, not society itself. Moreover, while traditional prison films were hopeful, predicated on the idea that prison reform would lead to human reform, *American Me* harshly denies viewers the illusion of simple solutions. Like *On the Yard* and *Short Eyes*, it deals with a social problem that cannot be both accurately represented and solved in a happily-ever-after ending.²⁶

New Prison Documentaries

For decades, there was only one high-quality documentary about prison life: Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), a film shot, through a near-miraculous lapse in security, at Massachusetts's institution for criminally insane men. (*Titicut* refers to the road on which the institution is located. *Follies* refers, on the first level, to the amateur-hour show with which the film opens; later it comes to signify the entire institution, with its doomed attempts to "treat" the mentally ill in a prison setting.) This situation improved with the release of Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), the riveting documentary about a prisoner on death row in Texas. *The Thin Blue Line* is less a documentary about prison life than a probe of the evidence used in this particular case and, beyond that, a pioneering visual investigation of the nature of perception and the creation of meaning. Famed for having led to the prisoner's release, *The Thin Blue Line* has also inspired a new line of documentaries about prison life and the cases of specific prisoners, including *Through the Wire* (1990), *The Execution Protocol* (1993), *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992), and the quasi-documentary *Dead Man Walking*.

Through the Wire, director Nina Rosenblum's exposé of a federal prison for women convicted of political crimes, takes a cinema-verité approach to its subject matter, using the camera to document the institution's sensory bleakness and debilitating routines. Prison footage is interspersed with shots of the women's families, giving background on their crimes, and with newsreel images of the crimes themselves. *Through the Wire* achieved two close-to-impossible goals: It presented extensive footage of routines in one of the most secure and secretive prisons in the United States; and through this exposure, it forced the prison to close and transfer its three revolutionaries to more humane institutions. *The Execution Protocol* again takes us inside an institution that even most prison officials are unlikely to penetrate: a state-of-the-art lockup designed to hold only men with sentences of death or natural life. Guided by a prisoner anticipating execution in the

near future, the tour takes us into the death chamber and observes in minute detail the workings of the lethal injection machine. Most chilling of all, perhaps, are scenes of officials methodically reviewing the "protocols" for an upcoming execution.

Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer, the most complex of the new prison documentaries, focuses on the death-row inmate known as "America's first female serial killer." Director Nick Broomfield traveled to Florida to interview Wuornos, a former prostitute who had confessed to killing seven male customers. He includes footage of negotiations with the prison officials who repeatedly thwart his efforts to meet with Wuornos, as well as scenes with Wuornos herself, whom he eventually succeeds in interviewing. Broomfield also interviews others involved in her story—a former lover who testified against Wuornos, evidently to avoid being charged as her partner-in-crime; a self-proclaimed Christian who "adopted" Wuornos in order to profit from her story; one of Wuornos's johns; and so on. The result is a many-layered tale with multiple views of the woman and her crimes. Wuornos comes to stand for historical truth and the difficulty of discovering it, while the film becomes a paradigm of historical excavation and assemblage, an example of the process of uncovering and reconstructing events. This is a process obscured by Hollywood movies, with their linear narratives, continuity editing, and authoritative presentations of events.

Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer belongs with not only recent prison documentaries but also a group of new documentary films, including *The Thin Blue Line*, *Paris Is Burning* (1991), and *Shoah* (1985), that borrow fictional techniques while calling attention to themselves as artifacts. These documentaries, film theorist Linda Williams observes, seek "truth" in a new sense: not the objective and definitive truth that older, cinema-verité documentaries looked for but a "more contingent, relative, postmodern truth."²⁷ Although Williams uses other examples, her words apply equally well to *Aileen Wuornos*. The new documentary, she writes, offers "highly expressionistic reenactments of different witnesses' versions" of events, as if to emphasize the circumstantial and constructed nature of knowledge. The new documentary "is acutely aware that the individuals whose lives are caught up in events are not so much self-coherent and consistent identities as they are actors in competing narratives."²⁸ *Aileen Wuornos* actually catches witnesses in the process of devising and revising their story lines.

The new "anti-verité documentaries," Williams concludes, "attempt to overturn" the older "commitment to realistically record 'life

as it is' in favor of a deeper investigation of how it became as it is."²⁹ Thus, *Aileen Wuornos* gives us the story not of Aileen Wuornos but of the "selling" of Aileen Wuornos as a serial killer and of the filmmaker's involvement in this process. Life and art flow together. Historical truth exists, but we can get at it only by artifice. Some truths are more accurate than others, but none, we learn from *Aileen Wuornos*, can be stripped down to stand naked and free of the interpretive process. This is a lesson that cannot be learned from Hollywood.

Dead Man Walking adheres far more closely to Hollywood traditions. Based on the autobiography of Sister Helen Prejean, a nun who befriended a death-row prisoner at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, it has stars (Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn), and beneath its high-gloss surface, it carefully articulates two sets of values around the poles of the two central characters. Yet in some ways, this is a documentary-like film. It is based on actual events. It has no hero—certainly not the prisoner, Matthew Poncelet, with his negativity and repellent racism, and perhaps not even Sister Prejean, whose interest in Matthew offends the victims' families. In any case, there is no trace of heroic masculinity, and the film forswears sentimentality in its insistence on the realities of execution.

Dead Man Walking does endorse certain values—the love, nonviolence, and self-scrutiny associated with Sister Prejean—but its emphasis falls on value clashes (between Matthew and the nun, and the nun and the victims' families). Sister Prejean is a friend to Matthew, but hardly a buddy. While director Tim Robbins apparently opposes the death penalty, he lays out both sides of the issue. There is no victory of one central character over the other but rather a merging as they learn to understand one another. Toward the end, their images overlap in the glass window that divides them. Like other nontraditional prison films, *Dead Man Walking* does not pitch the main convict against the state or society but rather presents that character as an emblem of society's problems. If Santana is insufficiently heroic and Matthew Poncelet is pitiful as well as repellent, this is because their films have outgrown the mythologies of traditional prison movies.

Self-Reflexive Prison Films

A third development in some recent prison films is a trend toward self-reflexivity, a self-consciousness about themselves as representations and about the traditions to which they belong. Of course, producers

of traditional prison films are fully aware of what they are doing when they use set characters, canned scenes, and other conventions. *The Shawshank Redemption*, for instance, is entirely conscious of prison film traditions and deliberately nostalgic for them. However, *Shawshank* exploits those traditions without irony or other commentary, acting as though it is delivering a story untouched by interpretation or artifice. Hollywood has always submerged its self-consciousness about film traditions in this way, to give viewers illusions of reality. But recently, some moviemakers have brought that self-consciousness to the surface, speaking to audiences more directly about their craft and what it implies about the relation of movie events to prison realities.

Weeds, for example, playfully spoofs the authenticity claims of traditional prison movies. The chief character, the convict Lee Umstetter (Nick Nolte), writes a play about prison life and produces it in prison, using other inmates as actors. When he and the others are paroled, Umstetter reassembles the troupe and takes his play on the road. One ex-con dies; Umstetter replaces him with an actor (played by actor Joe Mantegna) who *pretends* to be an ex-con (and then plays an ex-con actor). The play, *Weeds*, turns out to be plagiarized—Umstetter cribbed it from the work of the (real) playwright Samuel Beckett. Umstetter revises the play to be more “real” (that is, artificial). Nevertheless, a New York City critic pans the production (now a musical about prison life), writing, “Truth may be stranger than fiction, but it will never be more dramatic.” In other words, to become good art, reality must be transformed; and art will convey “truth”—persuasive impressions of reality—only through artifice.

Weeds’s playful treatment of art-life relationships continues as the ex-cons take their play into a prison, producing it under the watchful eyes of guards who are “real” in the sense of being outside the play (but “unreal” insofar as they are actors in this movie about a prison in which a play is produced). Inspired by Umstetter’s speech on injustice, the prisoner-audience riots, “actually” injuring the ex-con actors, and everyone behaves as though they are acting in a prison movie. *Weeds*, then, presents a paradox: We need artifice for a represented event to seem true, and in movies, we get truth only through art.

Self-reflexivity infuses every frame of Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*, a movie dedicated to probing the interrelationships among violence, society, and the media. It lampoons babes-in-prison films

with shots of Mallory (Juliette Lewis), alone in her cell, wailing the born-bad blues ("I'm baaad, baaad, all baaad"). The callous, sexually repressed warden of traditional prison films reappears here as a hysteric (Tommy Lee Jones), bragging and fulminating while clutching his crotch. The heroic journalist of films like *Call Northside 777* (1948) and *I Want to Live!* here transmogrifies into Wayne Gale, a tabloid TV star who helps Mickey and Mallory escape from prison and, when they turn on him, poses for and films his own execution. Prisoners watch themselves riot on closed-circuit TV while Mickey, reborn as the convict-who-runs-the-show-from-solitary, engineers the riot-escape with which *Natural Born Killers*, like traditional prison films, culminates. "Stone wants us to note how the medium alters the message," writes *Newsweek* reviewer David Ansen; "he wants to force us to watch ourselves watching a movie."³⁰ Wayne Gale's camera becomes the movie's camera, so that we watch ourselves watching a movie being filmed by a camera within the movie. If Stone's directorial self-consciousness ultimately says little about how violent media affect violent crime, it nonetheless says a great deal about the variety and ubiquity of media violence today.

Swoon (1991), writer-director Tom Kalin's version of the Leopold and Loeb case, uses different strategies to reach the same goal as *Natural Born Killers*: exploring issues of representation in movies. Although *Swoon* is every bit as stagy and artificial as Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948),³¹ it is profoundly interested in issues of realism and how a film can accurately re-create the past. Insisting on the representation of aspects of the crime that earlier films repressed or sensationalized (such as Leopold and Loeb's sexual relationship), Kalin's film is in some respects more "accurate," while at the same time it reminds us that it itself is simply a fabrication. Representational issues become thematic through repeated references to the acts of seeing and blinding—glasses lost at the crime scene, subterfuges to elude detection, Leopold's decision to will his eyes to a blind woman—leading viewers to ask what a "full" view might mean in a movie. Like *Natural Born Killers*, *Swoon* deals with time and history, investigating not only how movies represent crimes but also the history of that representation, and *Swoon*, too, constantly interrupts viewers' habitual expectations about plot and illusion to remind us that what we are seeing is "just" a movie. Both films spoof prison film history (*Swoon* partly through a 1920s-like dance number, "When You Wear a Ball

and Chain around Your Ankle"), but unlike *Natural Born Killers*, *Swoon* concludes by summarizing the past, both its own (the previous versions of the Leopold and Loeb story) and that of Leopold and Loeb themselves. Thus, *Swoon*, a quieter, even elegiac film, is equally reflective about its past.

The United States is now thirty years into the biggest prison-building spree in all history, a binge that has led to one of the highest incarceration rates in the world and to huge, impersonal institutions disproportionately filled with people of color. In this context, it is increasingly difficult to escape into the world of Hollywood prisons, where the good guys look like movie stars and injustices are ultimately repaired. In the face of the new realities of incarceration, feel-goodism may be growing obsolete.

In any case, producers of prison films today seem to have two choices. One is to continue making genre movies that, while they may substitute women for men, develop a campy edge, or depict futuristic technologies for immobilizing inmates, essentially repeat the formulas of the past. The other is to create documentaries, critical movies that turn the old conventions inside out, and self-reflexive films that explore new possibilities in representation. Whether we will continue to have two tracks, one for commercial entertainments and the other for political truth-telling, remains to be seen. The two tracks may eventually merge in some way. More likely, the second, experimental track will eventually develop coherence as new types of prison films accumulate and develop a clearer identity.

Notes

1. Query 1973.
2. For a listing of titles, see Parish 1991.
3. Cheatwood (1998) distinguishes "four distinct eras of prison films" (215). However, most of the characteristics he attributes to distinct eras in fact run through them all. Thus, I focus here not on the genre's development but on its typical characters, plots, and themes, indicating some developmental patterns along the way.
4. *Caged Heat* is director Jonathan Demme's first film.
5. For an analysis of stock characters and stock themes in four women-in-prison films, see Morey 1995.
6. Due to this theme of control and release, prison films tend to be preoccupied with boundaries and the crossing of boundaries, including those imposed by law, social class, and race. The boundaries become palpable in *One Flew*

Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975), a quasi-prison film in which a con man (Jack Nicholson) arranges a transfer from the penitentiary to a mental institution, where he breaks the glass in the nurse's station and manages to move people in and out of the walls before hurling himself against one barrier too many.

7. Wood 1992: 477.
8. According to Connors and Craddock 1998: 641, *Papillon* was based on an autobiography of a French thief, Henri Charriere.
9. This generalization may apply better to movies made after 1930 than to those produced earlier. Such, at any rate, is the impression gained from Ronald Querry's (1973) annotated filmography of prison films released between 1921 and the early 1970s. Querry mentions *Manslaughter* (1922), a Cecil B. DeMille production about a spoiled rich girl who finds redemption in prison; *Midnight Flower* (1923), in which an incarcerated woman falls in love with a minister; *The Lullaby* (1924), in which a man is hanged and his pregnant wife sent to prison; and so on. The degree to which women were featured in but later erased from prison movies is a matter that deserves research.
10. Gender is a key concern in babes-in-prison films as well, but (and the comparison is telling) the characters of such movies are neither superheroes nor perfect ordinary women.
11. *Sleepers's* Father Bobby character is essentially swiped from *Angels with Dirty Faces*, another film in which the delinquents' buddy is a priest.
12. In *Cool Hand Luke* the buddy is the admiring fellow convict who at the last moment betrays Luke; in *Papillon*, it is the swindler (Dustin Hoffman) who shares Pappy's adventures; in *Midnight Express*, it is the drugged-out prisoner-companion. *The Last Detail* varies the pattern by pairing the two petty officers who conduct the sailor to prison; befriended by them, the sailor becomes a third buddy, and therein lies his salvation. In *Weeds* (1987), a film about prisoners who stage a play, the buddy is the inmate who is closest to the play's author. There is even a buddy in *Brubaker*, a movie about a reform warden; in this case it is the elderly prisoner who gives the new warden advice. (Unfortunately, he is crucified upside down for this act of friendship.) One of the oddest pairings can be found in *Kiss of Death* (1947), in which the thief who wants to go straight is befriended by the district attorney.
13. In reality, prison rapists usually are heterosexuals.
14. Wood 1986: 228 (emphasis in original). Wood is discussing such films as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974), and *Scarecrow* (1973). For related arguments, see Fuchs 1993 and Sandell 1996. Steve Neale writes, "Male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed" (1993: 19).
15. Robert Ray points out that *The Man with No Eyes* is "clearly derived from *Psycho's* [1960] highway patrolman, looming at the window of Janet Leigh's car" (1985: 304).
16. The relationship certainly would be understood that way if one of the characters were female; and it certainly would *not* be so interpreted if the

filmmakers had given Andy a girlfriend in the final scene. However, when Red runs toward him on the beach, Andy is alone.

17. Wood 1986: 229.
18. Siegel 1993: 157.
19. On the reasons for filming *Natural Born Killers* at Stateville Prison and the consequences of using live prisoners in the riot scenes, see Hamsher 1997.
20. The content of true prison stories has a built-in urgency that attracts filmmakers interested in social reform and justifies sympathetic views of prisoners. Few filmmakers know the prison world directly; it comes to them (as to the rest of us) through news items and celebrated biographies. Thus, true-life narratives provide access to the otherwise inaccessible social milieu of prisons. Moreover, the real-life incidents that make their way into the news and books are often particularly compelling and sensational stories of injustice and brutality—stories with built-in appeal. Edward Montgomery, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for the *San Francisco Examiner*, was personally involved in Barbara Graham's case and wrote *I Want to Live!* to clear her name. Edward James Olmos, who wrote, acted in, and directed *American Me*, is a crusader on behalf of Los Angeles's Mexican Americans and created the film to warn his people of the destructiveness of gang violence. Robert Redford, the star of *Brubaker*, has long championed liberal causes.
21. As quoted in Clarens 1980: 50.
22. But see note 9 above.
23. *Point of No Return* is an American version of *La Femme Nikita* (1990).
24. It is surely no coincidence that *Mrs. Soffel*, the only traditional prison film directed by a woman (Gillian Armstrong), concludes with scenes—sympathetic scenes—of a woman in prison (Mrs. Soffel herself, as played by Diane Keaton). *Prison Stories: Women on the Inside* (1991), the best made-for-TV film of its type, consists of three stories, directed by three women (Donna Deitch, Penelope Spheeris, and Joan Micklin Silver).
25. Canfield 1994: 62–63.
26. *Blood In . . . Blood Out* (1993), a long-winded epic that deals with themes similar to those of *American Me*, also exemplifies this alternative tradition in prison films.

In a series of incidents that illuminate the complexities of the relationship between film and society, life and art, the release of *American Me* gave rise to considerable violence. Three of Olmos's consultants were killed, and Olmos himself was threatened, in retaliation for the film's negative portrayal of *la Eme*. When gang members were subsequently tried for these crimes, the letter *M* mysteriously appeared on the judge's bench, despite round-the-clock surveillance of the courtroom by the U.S. Marshall's office. *La Eme* apparently decided that because the movie hurt its image, it would kill the filmmakers—which is as though members of the Kennedy family who disliked the movie *JFK* decided to kill director Oliver Stone and star Kevin Costner. The retaliation suggests a confusion of film with life and actually confirms the movie's point about *la Eme* and its destructive violence. In this sequence of events, art represented life, and then life reproduced art.

27. Williams 1993: 11.

28. Ibid.: 12.
29. Ibid.: 15.
30. Ansen 1994: 5.
31. *Swoon*'s opening sequence, in which actors/characters move past the camera as if facing an audience from a stage, refers explicitly to *Rope*, which was based on a play and filmed like one.

6

The Heroes of Crime Films

Let's try to figure out who the bad guy is, all right?

—Mr. Pink in *Reservoir Dogs*

Of the many reasons for the popularity of crime films, the most potent lies with the nature of their heroes. Viewers delight in watching characters who can escape from tight spots and outsmart their enemies, all the while tossing down scotch and flipping jibes. Good-guy heroes please us by out-tricking the tricky, tracking down psychos, solving impossible mysteries. Bad-guy heroes appeal by being bolder, nastier, crueler, and tougher than we dare to be; by saying what they want, taking what they want, despising weaklings, and breaking the law with impunity. Both good and bad guys operate on the basis of austere, unambiguous moral codes that are as bracing as they are simplistic and brutal. When Lily, the elegant racetrack swindler of *The Grifters* (1990), summons a physician to treat her sick son, she advises him: "My son is going to be all right. If not, I'll have you killed." We may smile, but we may also envy, if only a little, the unadorned directness of Lily's approach.

Hollywood gives us more than heroes; it gives us ideas about heroes and the nature of heroism.¹ Why do we revere the powerful instead of the weak (who, after all, struggle more in life)? Why do we admire reckless adventurers more than homemakers, the brash more than the timid? Above all, why do we savor heroes who constantly break the law? Traits glorified by films and other media constitute a kind of ideology of heroism, a set of assumptions about what "admirable" means.

Types of Stories in Crime Films

To build a comprehensive typology of crime film heroes, we need to first create a typology of the kinds of stories that can be found in movies of this type. Eight kinds of stories (which can also be thought of as patterns in plot development)² turn up time and again: the mystery/ detective story; the thriller; the caper; the tale of justice

violated/ justice restored; the disguised Western, in which an outsider saves the victim or threatened community; tales of revenge and vigilantism; chronicles of criminal careers; and the episodic plots of action stories. The types sometimes overlap or combine with one another, but they constitute the essential narrative patterns that one finds in the majority of crime films.

In *mystery and detective stories*, the basic pattern is that of the search. These tales have what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson call "goal-oriented plots," patterns of action to which investigation is key.³ Mysteries and detective films often mete out clues in small, progressive portions, so that the viewer's process of discovery parallels the investigator's.⁴ Sometimes (e.g., *Sea of Love* [1989]) they conceal the object of the search, such as the villain's identity, as long as possible. (At these times mysteries and detective films may overlap with thrillers, as in *Rear Window* [1954].) At other times the goal of the search is clear from the start, and the investigator's job is to find the thing that is missing. In mysteries, especially, the crime may have been committed before the film starts (so to speak), so there is minimal violence on screen and lots of puzzling over clues.⁵ In both mysteries and detective stories, the search can be for a person, a thing (as in *The Maltese Falcon* [1941], where the hunted object is a valuable statuette, and *Kiss Me Deadly* [1955], where it turns out to be uranium), or even an intangible, such as the source of corruption in a police department (*L.A. Confidential* [1997]). Most private investigator and cop films fall into this category, which includes *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1954), *Chinatown* (1974), *Cruising* (1980), *Fargo* (1996), *Kiss the Girls* (1997), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Seven* (1995), and *Witness* (1985).

Thrillers toy with us, leading viewers to expect violence at points where it does not occur and bludgeoning us with violence when we least expect it.⁶ These nail-biters frequently involve a chase in which the central character is pursued by a figure who is in some respect horrifying. In one of the classic thrillers, director Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* (1955), the first pursued character is a young widow (Shelley Winters) who has been tricked into marriage by a fortune-hunter posing as a preacher (Robert Mitchum, in his greatest role). Laughton shows us the preacher with a knife, falling on Willa in bed, but then fades to an ice cream shop, with the preacher moaning to the proprietors about how Willa took off in the night in his old Model T. Suddenly, with no transition, Laughton shocks us with an underwater shot of Willa's body floating among river grasses, hair

combed gently by the currents. At that point, the pursued become the widow's two children, who, having stashed her money in a doll, flee the phony preacher. Paddling down the river or hiding in its banks, the children (and viewers) occasionally think they have made it to safety, only to hear, in the distance, the preacher's chilling song, "Leaning on Jesus, leaning on the light that shines above." By the film's end, a few notes of this song can terrify.

Because thrillers need to repeat shocks and maintain their nightmarish quality, they tend to be episodic. In another classic of this type, *North by Northwest* (1959), director Alfred Hitchcock puts Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) through a series of frights, starting with being kidnapped, proceeding through a chase by a crop-dusting airplane, and ending with a literal cliff-hanger. Hitchcock understood that audiences love to be scared, and scared at regular intervals. A number of his films fall into the thriller category (*Dial M for Murder* [1954], *Rear Window*, *Rope* [1948], *Strangers on a Train* [1951], and, above all, *Psycho* [1960]). Thrillers by other directors include *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Body Heat* (1981), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *The Firm* (1993), *House of Games* (1987), *Jagged Edge* (1985), *The Juror* (1996), *The Last Seduction* (1994), and *Marathon Man* (1976).

More leisurely in pace, the *caper* follows a criminal or group of criminals as they plan a long con: the complicated, audacious heist that will set them up for life. The first part of a caper movie is usually consumed by planning; the leader rounds up the gang and targets the bank, racetrack, rich Texan, or train that is to be robbed, after which everyone practices with stopwatches and getaway cars. The remainder is devoted to the execution of the crime and, in most cases, the last-minute failure of the criminals, although, delightfully, *Bound* (1996) lets its thieves escape to live happily ever after.⁷ Less successful but more typical are the thieves in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), a dark and brooding caper film in which hooligan Sterling Hayden dies just as he reaches his boyhood farm, and those of Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956), in which the suitcase full of money flaps open as the gang's leader boards the plane to escape. One of the best of all caper films is Don Siegel's *The Killers* (1964), starring Ronald Reagan as the criminal mastermind, Lee Marvin as the sneering assassin, and Angie Dickinson as the bait, and involving a prodigious number of cars. An ironic variant on the caper, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), concentrates on the aftermath of a failed caper, during which the robbers squabble over "who the bad guy is."

Justice violated/justice restored movies, in which the main character has been falsely accused or is being unjustly punished, begin with scenes demonstrating the unfairness and emphasizing, through settings of enclosure and oppression, that the injustice is likely to last for a very long time.⁸ Through a plot device such as a jailbreak or unexpected discovery of the true villain, the main character finally breaks free of the unjust situation and is recognized (by the audience, at least) as a much maligned, long-suffering hero. Many prison films fall into the justice violated/justice restored category, including *Escape from Alcatraz*, *In the Name of the Father* (1993), *Midnight Express* (1978), and *Papillon* (1973). In execution films such as *I Want to Live!* (1958) and *The Last Dance* (1996), release is achieved through the protagonist's death, and the recognition of true virtue comes after the fact, through the filmmakers' and audience's sense of loss. Courtroom films, too, sometimes fall into the justice violated/justice restored category. *Presumed Innocent* (1990), for instance, chronicles the trials of lawyer Rusty Sabich (Harrison Ford) as he defends himself against a false murder charge. Though he is eventually exonerated, he is unable to reveal the identity of the true killer; thus, his relief remains partial, and our admiration rests in part on his sorrowful determination to maintain the secret.

More unusual as a justice violated/justice restored film is *Dolores Claiborne* (1994), the story of a tight-lipped, truculent woman (Kathy Bates) who lives on an island in Maine and is suspected of murdering both her wealthy employer and, years earlier, her own husband. In this case the sense of enclosure is provided by the island setting, the false accusations, and Dolores's inability to speak the truth. Release comes when the investigators discover Dolores's actual devotion to her employer and when her sullen daughter (Jennifer Jason Leigh) realizes that Dolores fought the father to protect her from sexual abuse. Dolores Claiborne is redeemed by being recognized as the opposite of what she seemed to be.

Although the old-fashioned Western has faded in popularity, its narrative line has migrated to other genres, turning up there as *disguised Westerns*: tales in which an heroic outsider reluctantly consents to clean up some equivalent of Dodge.⁹ A number of courtroom films conform to this pattern. *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), for example, begins by introducing the ailing barrister who seems too feeble to handle a murder case; once persuaded of the defendant's innocence, however, he revives and saves the day (mistakenly, as it

turns out, but because we leave him charging ahead to the next showdown, the error does not diminish his heroism). *Inherit the Wind* (1960), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), and *12 Angry Men* (1957) also feature outsiders—men different from and better than the majority—who decide to join the fray and in so doing become saviors (of free speech, of children and Holocaust victims, of justice itself).

Some police and prison films qualify as disguised Westerns: *Copland* (1997), in which Sylvester Stallone's sad-sack cop cleans up a suburban police department full of violent glamour boys; *RoboCop* (1987), in which Murphy, the outsider to the human species, cleans up Detroit; *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938),¹⁰ in which the gangster on his way to the death chamber saves the juvenile delinquents; and *Sleepers* (1996), in which former reform school inmates punish the guards who raped them years earlier. Callie Khouri, the author of *Thelma and Louise* (1991), playfully inverts the disguised Western by creating outsiders who intrude upon an actual Western landscape from the domestic realm (Thelma is a housewife, Louise a waitress) and, in the process of getting even with the bad guys, shoot a few holes in Western movie conventions as well.

Revenge and vigilante movies derive from the Elizabethan revenge play, in which the lead figure (such as Hamlet, prince of Denmark) discovers a violation (of himself, his family, and/or his country) and retaliates. More immediately, as Will Wright points out, revenge and vigilante plots derive from a variation on the Western in which the outsider who decides to clean up Dodge is less interested in upholding a principle than in settling a personal grudge.¹¹ As in *Cape Fear* (1961, 1991), *Straw Dogs* (1972), and *The Star Chamber* (1983), revenge and vigilante films tend to feature scenes of stalking.

Murder in the First (1995), in which a brutalized prisoner seeks legal redress, is a revenge film with a courtroom setting, as is *The Accused* (1988), in which the outraged victim demands accountability from the men who cheered while she was raped. Cop films are occasionally cast in the revenge mold: *Sudden Impact* (1983), for instance, deals with a woman who, to avenge herself and her sister for being raped, goes around shooting men—until Dirty Harry saves her from herself. In recent decades, the revenge/vigilante form has tended to combine with other plot types. *Taxi Driver* (1976), for example, merges the vigilante plot (Travis as political assassin) with that of the disguised Western (Travis as New York City's street cleaner), while

Falling Down (1993) marries the revenge plot, embodied in the trajectory of vigilante D-Fens, with that of the detective story, embodied in the hunt for D-Fens by an about-to-retire police officer.¹² *Natural Born Killers* (1994), too, introduces the revenge plot from time to time, partly as a narrative device and partly as an explanation for Mickey and Mallory's violence.

Crime films' most common type of narrative is the *chronicle of a criminal career*. Originating with gangster films, this category includes nearly all examples of that genre, as well as more recent mob movies such as the *Godfather* series (1972, 1974, 1990), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Donnie Brasco* (1996). The category also encompasses many noirs (*Double Indemnity* [1944], *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946]), crime-spree couple films (*Gun Crazy* [1949], *Normal Life* [1996]), street gang stories (*Menace II Society* [1993], *New Jack City* [1991]), and tales of corrupt cops (*Q & A* [1990], *Romeo Is Bleeding* [1993]). These tales of underworld life, beginning with the assumption that criminality is a normal condition, often do not bother to explain how their characters went astray but rather start (sometimes spectacularly) with a violation of the law. (Caper films, too, focus on criminal acts, but they are concerned with a single major crime, not the protagonist's career.)

The eighth story type, the *action film*, overlaps thematically with some of the other categories but is distinctive in its narrative quality. Lacking shapely plots, action films string together a series of episodes, marking transitions with fights and explosions. While they are violent, their violence is deployed not to terrify the audience (as in thrillers) but to create spectacles. Films of this type can be sorted almost endlessly into such subcategories as James Bond movies, the *Die Hards* (1988, 1990, 1995), the *Lethal Weapon* series (1987, 1989, etc.), hostage and takeover movies, airplane films, and so on. Few are fraught with meaning, but the better ones, as Peter Parshall indicates in an analysis of *Die Hard*, assume a mythic quality by following an epic hero "into the underworld to battle with dark forces" that represent, among other things, the uncivilized elements in his own nature.¹³

In addition to these eight main types of crime film stories, there are a few minor types such as the *bildungsroman* or account of the moral development of a central character (*Boyz n the Hood* [1991], *A Place in the Sun* [1951], *A Few Good Men* [1992]).¹⁴ Moreover, some crime films do not fit easily into any narrative category.¹⁵ But the eight categories are sufficiently inclusive and discrete from one another to provide a foundation for analyzing crime films by types of heroes.



New Jack City (1991), starring Wesley Snipes as an organized crime boss. With the advent of movies with all-black or mostly black casts, African-Americans gained access to the culturally valuable image of the outlaw hero. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

Types of Heroes in Crime Films

The simplest way to classify crime film heroes is to distinguish between official heroes (or good good guys) on the one hand and outlaw heroes (or bad good guys) on the other. Film scholar Robert B. Ray observes that the official hero is often cast as a farmer, lawyer, politician, or teacher. Stalwarts of their communities, official heroes stand for law and constructive, law-abiding behavior. Crime films examples include the district attorney of *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934), the almost-retired cop of *Falling Down*, and the heroic lawyers of classic courtroom dramas. In contrast, the outlaw hero, whom Ray identifies as an adventurer, explorer, gunfighter, and loner, stands for “that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements.”¹⁶ Individualistic and anarchic, outlaw heroes represent the freedom to do what one wants, including commit crime. Examples include D-Fens, the angry white male of *Falling Down*; the conscienceless femme fatale (Linda Fiorentino) of *The Last Seduction*; and Michael Corleone, the gangster hero of the *Godfather* series.

In crime films, outlaw heroes far outnumber the official heroes.

Moreover, movies spend much more time developing the characters of outlaw heroes and encouraging viewers to identify with them. These tendencies raise a question: *Why* do crime films want us to identify with outlaws, and why do we enjoy complying?

To answer this question in depth, we need to refine our terms. Ray and others who discuss the official hero/outlaw hero distinction are usually referring to American movies in general (or to American movies and novels in general), not to crime films in particular, and certainly not to subdivisions within the crime films category. In speaking more specifically about crime films, it is useful to make finer distinctions.

The central challenge faced by the heroes of *mystery and detective stories*, as we have seen, is to solve a puzzle: to discover whodunit and where this perpetrator is hiding. As a direct result of this plot type, these heroes are typically clever, persistent, imaginative, and adept. They would make ideal parent figures if they were older and less attractive, for there is no problem they cannot solve. The heroes of mysteries and detective films tend to differ only in that detectives are more likely to be fighters. When the detective is actually a police officer, as in, for example, *Dirty Harry* (1971), his or her immediate ancestor is the lead character of Westerns like *The Wild Bunch* (1969) that feature “professionals,” heroes who are paid to fight for law and justice.¹⁷ The mystery’s hero is often an amateur or eccentric (*The Conversation* [1974], *The Lady Vanishes* [1938], *Sudden Fear* [1952]).

Thrillers depict their heroes as ordinary people who are suddenly thrust into a nightmarish predicament. These protagonists keep a half step ahead of the horror through acumen, inventiveness, resolve, and dexterity—traits common to heroes of this type—but eventually realize that to escape with their lives, they must trap and kill the beast. Thus, we also admire them for their willingness to face the darkness, to engage in mortal combat (even though violence does not come naturally to them), and to win. Because they are tormented before they triumph, thriller protagonists fall into the category that Carol Clover calls “victim heroes,” a type that can accommodate female as well as male heroes (and that eventually, as Clover shows, relocates to slasher films to become the triumphant Final Girl).¹⁸ Noirs often combine the mystery or detective story with the thriller, as in the case of *Sudden Fear*.

Among the most engaging of crime film protagonists, the heroes of *capers* are the ones who plan the heist, assemble the team, and keep the vault blueprints in their back pockets. They are heroic because they are ambitious, smart, and superb planners, but more than that, they

are admirable for the sheer audacity of their plans, the scale of their greed and presumption. True princes of the underworld, they operate with a regal sense of entitlement, a confidence that they were born to boss their underlings around and commandeer other people's money.

The lead characters in *justice violated/justice restored* films are admirable for their patience, superhuman endurance, and ability to overcome all obstacles (eventually). Sometimes they are victim heroes (as in the case of Dolores Claiborne); more often, they are compromised characters, guilty of something but undeserving of the suffering they currently endure. (Rusty Sabich of *Presumed Innocent* had an extra-marital affair with the dead woman; Gerry Conlon of *In the Name of the Father* burglarized houses and was mean to his dad; Barbara Graham of *I Want to Live!* was a floozy.) Capable of growth and change, these heroes tend to become magnanimous and incorruptible.

Because the general term *outlaw hero* masks key differences among the central characters of crime films, it is preferable to refer to the leads of *disguised Westerns* as *outsider heroes*, a term that emphasizes their differentness without implying illegality. The outsider heroes of disguised Westerns fight for the sake of the group. Unlike the more self-absorbed leads of justice violated/justice restored films, they act on principle, deciding to intervene because it is the right thing to do. Atticus Finch, the rape victim of *The Accused*, and the leads of other disguised Westerns are closely related to the traditional Westerner; like him, they are brave, self-sacrificing, lonely (many are widowed or separated), melancholy, and proud. They, too, are fighters, though they prefer other weapons than the gun.¹⁹ (This is true even in *Serpico* [1973] and *Copland*, where the outsider heroes are police officers.) More perspicacious than their friends and colleagues, they recognize trouble where others are blind to it, and when they are headed for death, they foresee their fate (e.g., *Cool Hand Luke* [1967]). These heroes have more integrity than the protagonists of any other type of crime film. Pure, like the archetypal Westerner described by Robert Warshaw, they value honor and nobility.²⁰

Like outsider heroes, the protagonists of *revenge and vigilante movies* are slow to anger; unlike outsider heroes, avengers pursue the bad guys for intensely personal reasons. Patient, calculating, and implacable, avengers may nurse their anger over many years of preparation for the final battle. When the target of their fury is relatively abstract (in *The Star Chamber*, injustice; in *Sudden Impact*, men), the avenger may commit the act of retaliation repeatedly, turning the plot in the direction of action films. For example, the nurse played by Pam

Grier in *Coffy* (1973) is enraged by street drugs, which have crippled her kid sister and led to the death of a friend; her form of retribution consists of shooting drug dealers in her off hours, which she does over and over, from the first scene to the last.

Again, because the term *outlaw heroes* has been used so generally, the central characters in *chronicles of criminal careers* can better be described as *criminal heroes*, a label that stresses their break with lawful society and self-acceptance as offenders. The criminal hero's traits were first defined by gangster movies, which portrayed him as brutal, individualistic, ambitious, and doomed.²¹ As Robert Warshaw argues, the gangster must ultimately be a failure, not only to absolve viewers for identifying with his earlier successes but also because "the gangster is the 'no' to that great American 'yes' which is stamped so big over our official culture," the pessimistic note at the celebration of success, the dark figure hovering at the edge of one's consciousness.²²

Over time the criminal-hero category expanded to embrace the shady detectives of film noir, lovers on the lam, cops on the take, and drug lords.²³ It incorporated the tendency, seen in bad-good-guy Westerns such as *The Wild Bunch*, to show morally compromised heroes, hired guns who were less thoroughly heroic than ancestors like Shane. Today's criminal heroes crave and enjoy power; bolder and more imaginative than ordinary people, they dare to violate boundaries that the rest of us observe. They gamble on being bad, aware of the risks but preferring to die infamous than unknown. Doing what we might like to do, they act with a freedom we are afraid to assume. As a result, we admire them, and when they die, we have a sense of loss and waste. The most interesting criminal heroes—Johnny Boy of *Mean Streets* (1973), Cody Jarrett of *White Heat* (1949), Thelma and Louise, Michael Corleone—destroy themselves either literally or figuratively, thus becoming tragic heroes. We know that they will do themselves in, and it is this knowledge that enables us to enjoy their crimes. An audience, Robert Sklar points out, "can like a bad man who it knows is doomed."²⁴

The protagonists of *action crime films*, the final narrative category, are superheroes. Capable of scaling elevator shafts and performing mechanical wonders while hanging beneath a careening bus, of dodging machine-gun bullets and emerging from explosions unsmudged, action heroes are unflappable, invulnerable, and unbelievable. The plots in which they appear leave little time for character development or the exposure of human qualities beyond attraction to

Table 6.1 Crime film heroes by plot type

Hero type	Plot type
Sleuths	Mysteries and detective stories
Victim heroes	Thrillers
Criminal masterminds	Capers
Mistreated heroes	Tales of justice violated/justice restored
Outsider heroes	Disguised Westerns
Avengers	Revenge and vigilante stories
Criminal heroes	Chronicles of criminal careers
Superheroes	Action crime movies

the opposite sex. These cookie-cutter protagonists make it clear that what many viewers crave is heroes who flaunt all rules, moral as well as social.²⁵

Crime films, then, have a wide range of heroes: the sleuths of mysteries and detective stories; the victim heroes who in thrillers slay the dragons and banish nightmares; the criminal masterminds of caper films and mistreated heroes of justice violated/justice restored movies; the outsider heroes of disguised Westerns; the avengers of revenge and vigilante stories; the criminal heroes of chronicles that follow an offender's career; and the superheroes of action crime films. These hero types are summarized in table 6.1. The traditional distinction between official heroes and outlaw heroes is not terribly useful in the case of crime films, partly because official heroes are few in number and partly because the outlaw-hero category is so broad that it makes distinctions among crime film heroes difficult. Thus, when analyzing the nature of crime film heroes, it is useful to subdivide the traditional outlaw-hero category, distinguishing between *outsider heroes* (the protagonists of disguised Westerns) and *criminal heroes* (the central figures in chronicles of criminal careers). It is in the criminal hero that one finds crime films' unique contribution to the pantheon of movie protagonists—the hero to whom we are drawn even though (or perhaps because) she or he is harmful.²⁶ Viewers' evident fondness for this hero type leads directly to the issue of value conflicts in crime films.

Value Conflicts in Crime Films

Action films aside, crime films deal with value conflicts that permeate our culture: tensions between selfishness and commitment to others, violation and obedience, freedom and responsibility, promiscuity and

fidelity, force and persuasion. Indeed, audiences choose crime films partly because these movies illustrate clashes with which people deal on a daily basis. To depict value conflicts, movies sometimes pit an official hero against an outsider or criminal hero (*Manhattan Melodrama*, *Falling Down*), but more frequently they concentrate on the bad guy, sketchily indicating the opposite set of values through lesser characters (Betsy, the unattainable girlfriend in *Taxi Driver*, for instance, and the feds who chase Cody Jarrett in *White Heat*). In both cases, crime films tend to organize value conflicts around two poles, one represented by the criminal, the other by the good citizen (represented or implied). While crime films differ in the tensions they emphasize, the values associated with the two poles remain fairly consistent across movies, as follows:

<i>the criminal</i>	<i>the good citizen</i>
lawlessness	conformity
freedom	constraint
violence	peace
danger	safety
cruelty	kindness
cynicism	idealism
guilt	innocence
autonomy	commitment
integrity	compromise
spontaneity	deliberation
sassy repartee	polite speech
subculture	dominant culture
adventure	routine
courage	timidity
life	spiritual death
youth	age
masculinity	femininity
mean streets	home
broads	old bags
strength	weakness
wise guys	saps

Here is one answer to the question "Why do we enjoy identifying with movie criminals?" Neither pole has a monopoly on virtue, but it is not hard to tell which is preferable. Moreover, crime films, like other texts that create value oppositions, work a bit like matted seaweed: Lift one strand and you lift them all. For experienced moviegoers, each term in a column implies the others, so that when view-

ers see wise guys and mean streets, they begin to expect broads and guns.

But, it might be objected, many types of films set up similar polarities and oppositions, so the lists above do not really explain the unique appeal of crime films. Indeed, working with a similar kind of list, Ray writes that "the striking point about these oppositions [is] their general applicability" across movie types and that the "particular structures of the western . . . account for the dichotomies basic to all the genres of Classic Hollywood."²⁷

It is true that many texts other than crime films create dichotomous polarities, associating one pole with desirable traits and the other with negative attributes. (According to students of myth, the dichotomizing tendency is fundamental to the way humans organize information about the world.)²⁸ It is also true that these lists of opposites echo one another across texts. (How could it be otherwise when they grow in the same cultural soil?) This does not mean, however, that the lists are identical in either their specific sets of opposites or their overall meanings. Ray cites one list, derived from an analysis of Westerns, that orders terms around the poles of "the wilderness" on one hand and "civilization" on the other.²⁹ Some pairs on this list resemble those on the "criminal versus good citizen" list (freedom v. restriction, integrity v. compromise, self-interest v. social responsibility), but few are identical, and many pairs on the wilderness/civilization list have no equivalents on the list of criminal/good citizen values. (These include the West v. the East, frontier v. America, equality v. class, and agrarianism v. industrialism). Similarly, there are a number of pairs on the criminal/good citizen list that have no counterpart in other movie types (sassy repartee v. polite speech, wise guys v. saps, broads v. old bags). Thus, the crime film hero is in fact associated with a set of distinctive values, and those values do help explain the attraction of this kind of protagonist.

Yet another aspect of the value structure of crime films enables us to enjoy identifying with their heroes: Rather than forcing us to choose between the qualities associated with "the criminal" and "the good citizen," these movies enable us to shuttle back and forth, to have it both ways. In one common pattern, they induce us to identify with the hero till near the film's end, at which point they have the hero shot by a good-citizen type. This turn of events, and others like it, lets us off the hook. We can savor the dangers of the streets *and* the safety of the home, the excitement of violence *and* the pleasures of peace.

Above all, we can leave the theater without guilt for having aligned ourselves with the man with the gun. Movies with criminal heroes, then, do not so much reject the law as embody ambivalence about it and, in conclusion, temporarily lay that ambivalence to rest.

This resolution of value conflicts is what Robert Warshow was thinking of in his seminal essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" when he wrote that "the final bullet thrusts him [the gangster] back, makes him, after all, a failure."³⁰ Like the gangster, Warshow explains, we are all under pressure to succeed, even while we know that our efforts will be undone by death. "The effect of the gangster film is to embody this dilemma in the person of the gangster and resolve it by his death. The dilemma is resolved because it is *his* death, not ours. We are safe."³¹ Criminal heroes play out and temporarily alleviate some of our most profound anxieties. We keep coming back to crime films because they enact struggles that divide us as individuals and as a society. Valuing both sides of the struggle, we feel regret when the bad guys are killed, but we also understand that they must be subordinated.

Fabricating Criminal Heroes

How do movies go about turning criminals into heroes? What steps do they take to help us identify with characters who, outside the film, we might well avoid? Much depends on the persona of the actor, on his or her ability to project simultaneously two contradictory messages (I am despicable, I am delightful), as critics began to discover as early as 1931, with the release of *Public Enemy*. This was one of the first talkies to depict the career of a thoroughly bad man (the mobster Tom Powers, portrayed by James Cagney). Critics of the day understood that Cagney was crucial to the movie's success. One wrote:

I doubt there is an actor extant who could have done what James Cagney does with the extraordinary character of Tom Powers. . . . He does not hesitate to represent Tom Powers as a complete rat—with a rat's sense of honor, a rat's capacity for human love; and when cornered, a rat's fighting courage. And what is more, although his role is consistently unsympathetic, Mr. Cagney manages to earn for Tom Powers the audience's affection and esteem.³²

In later bad-guy roles, Cagney again demonstrated this gift for keeping criminal characters charming; it was his greatest asset as a star.

The creation of successful criminal heroes further depends on the fit between the criminal's characteristics and current concepts of glamour; Tom Powers's character, for example, responded to the public's fascination with Al Capone, a figure who stood for business success, lavish consumption, an exhilarating lifestyle, and urban culture as well as rebellion against the law.³³ On the other hand, many heroes of early movies (the good-boy lead in *The Criminal Code* [1931], for instance) seem ridiculous today.³⁴ The scriptwriter's ability to camouflage flaws and to create other characters who by contrast make the criminal seem worthy also plays a role, as does the use of setting, camera angles, color, and music. To exemplify the elements at play in the fabrication of criminal heroes, it is useful to examine *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) in some detail.

Bonnie and Clyde

Bonnie and Clyde, based on the true story of three companions who went on a bank-robbing spree through the Southwest during the Great Depression, adheres in many respects to what is known about the historical figures. (The actors' poses replicate those in photographs of the original Bonnie and Clyde, for instance.) In terms of characterization, however, the film departs radically from the originals. The historical Clyde Barrow was gay, apparently,³⁵ and at first he traveled with not only Bonnie Parker but also his male lover. Getting rid of the lover, the movie replaces him with the sexually uninspired C. W. Moss and reduces Clyde's homosexuality to impotence. ("I'm no lover boy," Clyde warns when, fifteen minutes after their first encounter, Bonnie jumps him.) Ordinarily, a film would find it difficult to present an impotent man as heroic; in this case, however, Warren Beatty's off-screen reputation as a Don Juan counterbalances Clyde's impotence. Moreover, Clyde in a sense becomes Beatty in the course of the film, developing a love for Bonnie that flowers in sexual success in one of the final scenes. As Richard Maltby observes, "A convincing performance is . . . one in which the character becomes the star persona as the movie progresses."³⁶ By the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the gap between Clyde Barrow and Warren Beatty has closed.

At the time of the movie's release, Faye Dunaway was an unknown, but her extraordinary beauty and svelte coolness did much to glamorize Bonnie Parker, and director Arthur Penn took full advantage of Dunaway's appearance from the first shot, in which her mouth,

luscious with lipstick, fills the screen. Dunaway and Beatty both proved adept at expressing contradictory emotions, especially conflicts between their delight in being wicked and their suspicion that robbing banks was probably not a good idea. Thus, as in the case of Cagney's mob films, in *Bonnie and Clyde* the actors contribute strongly to the iconography of heroism.

This was the right film at the right time, as noted in chapter 1, in that it gave the rebellious youth of the period heroes with whom they could instantly identify. Bonnie was Clyde's equal in crime, and more than his equal in bed, at time when the budding women's movement was calling for gender and sexual equality. The film explicitly contrasts Bonnie with more traditional women, as personified by Blanche (Estelle Parsons), Clyde's silly, screamy sister-in-law. That the film's protagonists stole from banks and did so with guns made them appealing in the 1960s, a period in which some middle-class youths dreamed of leading a violent revolution that would wipe out capitalism. (According to report, at the Hollywood premiere someone in the audience angrily shouted out, "Fucking cops!")³⁷ In an era of ubiquitous peace symbols, *Bonnie and Clyde* further appealed by occasionally devising alternatives to violence, as when they decide not to shoot the Texas Ranger who almost captures them but rather to pose with him in a photograph that they release to the press. *Bonnie and Clyde* was initially panned by mainstream critics, who deplored its violence ("the most gruesome carnage since Verdun," one wrote),³⁸ but poor reviews from stuffy authority figures endeared the movie to the younger generation, and in any case it survived to become a box-office marvel and win two Oscars. The social context in which the movie was released, then, contributed to *Bonnie and Clyde*'s stature as heroes, just as today the aging of baby boomers contributes to the popularity of "mature" actors such as Harrison Ford.

But the key factor in the movie's success was the way viewers empathized with *Bonnie and Clyde*. That audiences were able to identify with what were, after all, two long-dead punks arose from the scriptwriters' skillful downplaying of the characters' negative traits and emphasis on their virtues. Clyde is a model of gallantry (when he first kills someone, he offers to take Bonnie home so she can avoid a murder charge); they are loyal and sensitive to one another's vulnerabilities; and, when they know death is in on the way, they remain defiant. Brave and inventive (as during the final motel escape), Bon-

nie and Clyde are also more refined, smarter, and more playful than the other characters.

The screenwriters create foils to make the protagonists shine all the brighter: comic characters such as Blanche, C. W. Moss, and the courting couple, Eugene and Velma, who briefly join the gang; and bad guys such as the bounty-hunting Texas Ranger and C. W.'s hypocrite of a father. Other people admire Bonnie and Clyde ("Is that really Bonnie Parker?" whispers a resident of the shantytown where they stop to treat their wounds). Although they are violent, the film does everything it can to dull the sting of their violence: They rob banks, not poor people; they are essentially innocents ("He tried to kill me!" an astonished Clyde reports); they refrain from shooting the bounty hunter who helps gun them down; they are killed because they stop to help C. W.'s treacherous father. The bad guys are older, overweight, rednecky, and mean-spirited. In sum, the film carefully structures its value oppositions to ensure that we identify with and delight in its criminal heroes.

Mythic elements further enhance the protagonists' stature. Bonnie and Clyde are Robin Hoods who steal only from the rich. They are Davids fighting the Goliath of "the laws" who pursue them. Such mythologizing would become cloying if the film did not undercut its own romanticism with a subtext about playacting. Nearly every character is to some extent a ham actor, constantly trying on new roles, mugging for an audience.

For example, at first Bonnie cannot get her tone right, torn as she is between attraction to Clyde and a desire to play the lady. Indulging her posturing, Clyde responds, "I bet you're a movie star." He is loath to have her seem a *cheap* movie star, however, so he instructs her to get rid of a spit curl when he notices a waitress with a similar hairdo. He wants Bonnie to play the role, but he wants her to get it right.

Other members of the Barrow gang and even the cops who pursue them are also poseurs, trying on and discarding new identities like costumes. Blanche, the movie's ultimate in inauthenticity, is never at ease with herself, at first acting with ultra-propriety, as she thinks wives should behave, later parading in riding britches with a whip like a lion-tamer. In one very quick shot, a police officer brags into the camera, "And there I was staring square into the face of death." Clyde and his brother Buck, awkward with silences, maintain a show of whoopee fun—a tone that the kidnapped couple Eugene and

Velma adopt instinctively. Clyde's entire persona turns out to be a show, as we discover during a somber late scene when he weaves an optimistic yarn about the future for Bonnie's mother. By giving so many examples of playacting (and the list could go on), the movie comments ironically on its own patina of vivacity, the heroic imagery with which it burnishes the gang members' characters.

Penn's emphasis on playacting underscores his interpretation of Bonnie and Clyde: that they became outlaws to achieve a measure of immortality. Bonnie writes her own "Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde," and Clyde compliments her by remarking, "You made me somebody they're going to remember." They are criminals who construct their own mythology. To highlight the protagonists' awareness of making their own meaning, the filmmakers include several characters who are incapable of artifice, chiefly C. W. Moss, who although he is completely wrapped up in the mythology of Bonnie and Clyde is also bluntly unselfconscious, and Bonnie's mother, the movie's truth-sayer. The opening sequence of old photographs associates the protagonists' posturing with clicks that could come from a gun trigger, a camera shutter, or both, thus framing the film and its violence as a self-conscious construct. As a result, if we notice Penn mythologizing, or if like Bonnie we notice that Clyde has come to believe his own lies, we are unlikely to hold it against them.³⁹

Setting, camera angles, color, and music work together to increase the heroic qualities of Bonnie and Clyde. The setting—rural Texas in the early 1930s—distances the story, indicating that we don't need to take the protagonists' criminality too seriously, a point accentuated by the raucous bluegrass music. Until near the end, *Bonnie and Clyde* is suffused with a golden glow, its colors warm, sunny, and benign. This impression of amiability is accented by "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," the Flatt and Scruggs banjo tune that accompanies chase scenes; high-spirited, fast, exuberant, it forms a musical equivalent to the characters. (Clyde: "You're not going to have a moment's peace." Bonnie: "You promise?") The camera looks up at Bonnie and Clyde, increasing their stature, and close-ups magnify their features to mythic dimensions.

As the end approaches, however, the camera moves slowly away from the central characters, helping viewers disengage before the death scene. At the same time, we begin to get some scenes that exclude the main characters and give others' points of view. The dunes scene, in which Bonnie says farewell to her mother and both she and

Clyde realize that “we ain’t heading to nowhere,” uses a blue filter and blurs the images so as to locate Bonnie and Clyde in another, more melancholy past; during it, many characters wear black. It is followed by a scene in which the couple’s car is shot to pieces by the laws, forecasting their own fate. Bonnie’s ballad, too, foretells their end (“but it’s death for Bonnie and Clyde”). Even while preparing viewers for the slaughter, however, Penn makes sure we will experience a sense of loss: More devoted than ever, the couple become increasingly pure as their enemies grow in malevolence. In the final scene, as Robert Ray points out, “the heroes’ white clothes and car and the sudden flight of birds [make] the massacre seem to violate nature itself.”⁴⁰

Crime Films without Heroes

A few crime films have lead characters who are neither good good guys nor bad good guys but rather no-good bad guys, men and women devoid of redeeming traits. If we categorize crime film protagonists according to their degrees of criminality, as in table 6.2, these no-good bad guys are nonheroes, figures designed to thwart our thirst for characters better than ourselves.

Nonheroes bring us up short, forcing us examine our expectations of movies, refusing to gratify any hope we may have of enjoying fantasies of heroism. Films in which the protagonist is a nonhero belong to the alternative tradition of critical crime movies. They avoid the satisfying resolutions of mainstream movies in order to represent crime and its consequences naturalistically.

In some cases, we can partially identify with nonhero protagonists. *Badlands’s* (1974) teenage misfits can at first be understood by anyone who has chafed at life’s constraints, *Taxi Driver’s* Travis Bickle by anyone who has entertained rescue fantasies, *Straw Dog’s* professor by

Table 6.2 Crime film protagonists by degree of criminality

Degree of criminality	Type of hero
good good guy	official hero
bad good guy	outlaw hero (antihero*) outsider hero criminal hero
no-good bad guy	nonhero

*The term *antihero* has traditionally been used to denote a character who reverses the traits of the traditional hero without entirely negating the idea of heroism.

viewers who know how it feels to be goaded. In other cases, though, it is nearly impossible to identify with the nonheroes of alternative-tradition crime films. We watch from an emotional distance as Alex, the hyperviolent delinquent of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), rapes and pillages; as Santana, the drug-lord protagonist of *American Me* (1992), destroys his community; and as Lily, the swindler of *The Grifters*, steals from and tries to seduce her own son.

The death of the traditional hero proved advantageous for crime films, which provided entertaining alternatives with an endless supply of bad good guys. But alternative-tradition movies push the evolution of the hero a step farther. If bad-good-guy characters invert the traits of the traditional hero,⁴¹ nonheroes erase the very idea of heroism, a difference highlighted by a comparison of the two versions of *Scarface*.

The Tony Camonte of the first *Scarface* (1932), modeled on Al Capone and played by Paul Muni in a script by Ben Hecht, remains attractive despite his disfigurement and primitive violence. He is bigger than life, awesome in his greed and boldness, and, accomplishing his aim, he does rise above the dark city's impoverished masses. The Tony Montana of the second *Scarface* (1983), modeled on the first Tony and played by Al Pacino in a script by Oliver Stone, is more difficult to admire. A drug lord who begins as a petty criminal shipped out of Cuba in the 1980 Mariel exodus, Tony Montana seems smaller than life, dwarfed by the crowded first scenes and the huge detention center where he is initially sent to live. This Tony, too, is a risk-taker, and he, too, makes millions from contraband, but he is more repellent. Both Tonys marry a blond bauble, but the second Tony's wife (Michelle Pfeiffer), anorexic and addicted to cocaine, is self-destructive and frightening. The incest theme, suppressed in the first version of the film, here emerges full-blown, foul and repulsive. Whereas the first version begins like a thriller, cool, slick, and mysterious, the second starts with a sweaty, shifty-eyed Tony, lying his head off to immigration officers.

Reviewing the second *Scarface* at the time of its release, critic Vincent Canby noted yet another difference between it and the original: Pacino's Tony ignores a crucial rule of the underworld: "'Don't get high on your own supply.' This is a major switch on the work of Hecht, who might have guffawed at the suggestion that Al Capone, Chicago's most powerful Prohibition gangster, might have been done in by alcoholism." And by the end, Canby continues, Pacino's Tony,

incapacitated by and smeared with cocaine, is "close to the brink of parody. . . . It's like watching a Macbeth who is unaware that his pants have split."⁴²

To take the measure of the protagonist in the second *Scarface*, it is instructive as well to compare him to Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*. Michael, unlike Tony, has something to lose: his decency, warmth, and achievements in the straight world. Although he takes up the criminal life, Michael's affection for and loyalty to his family persist for a long time before corruption sets in. Michael loves his children well, if not wisely; Tony longs for children but has none. In contrast to the sumptuous sets and spectacles of *The Godfather*, *Scarface's* sets are tawdry (even for Tony's *Godfather*-like wedding). Michael gains ever more control, while Tony disintegrates in a coke-induced stupor.

With these contrasts, Oliver Stone and director Brian De Palma make a statement about the nature of heroism in the modern world. Early-twentieth-century immigrants could use crime as a shortcut to the American Dream, but today the dream has become empty, sleazy, and worthless, and crime has lost its glamour. Instead of soaring above the masses, crude yet powerful, today's organized crime figure hops around like a toad, ugly, fearsome, and ultimately ineffective.

Bad Lieutenant (1992), directed by Abel Ferrara⁴³ and starring Harvey Keitel, further illustrates how alternative-tradition films use non-heroes to make statements about the impossibility of heroism in the late twentieth century. A nameless New York City cop, the lieutenant is at least as bad as the criminals from whom he extorts drugs and money. Drinking, drugging, and gambling himself to death, he is ruining his family as well and breeding disrespect for the law. However, he is a Catholic, and when a nun is raped (with a crucifix), the lieutenant wants to avenge her. She thwarts him by refusing to give the rapists' names ("They are good boys. . . . Jesus turned water to wine. . . . I ought to . . . turn hatred to love"). Wailing with pain for the nun and for his own wasted life, the lieutenant collapses in a church. Jesus comes to him; the lieutenant curses and hurls his rosary at the figure but also kisses his bloody feet. This is the lieutenant's hour on the cross, and it is followed by a miracle (Jesus turns into a black woman). The lieutenant then learns the names of the nun's assailants, gives them the \$30,000 he desperately needs to pay his gambling debts, puts them on a bus out of town, and is immediately murdered by his creditors. His death causes barely a ripple in the life of the big city.

Bad Lieutenant is as grim as movies get. Those who are meant to uphold the law break it. Society is corrupt, morality dead, and heroism almost nonexistent. *Bad Lieutenant* does imply another set of values—the purity, naïveté, and generosity of the nun, and the redemptive aspects of the cop's generosity to the rapists. But it suggests that there is no reason for behaving decently other than faith in God. Like an old-fashioned morality play, this film urges us to make the leap of faith, but it also suggests that such a leap requires a miracle and can lead directly to death.⁴⁴

Placing commercial success at risk, alternative-tradition crime films do not aim at making viewers feel good; in fact, they can make one feel terrible. If most Hollywood movies center around a likable character who encounters a series of increasingly difficult tests in order to achieve a goal,⁴⁵ then alternative-tradition crime movies are those in which a despicable character encounters a series of increasingly difficult tests only to fail them all. But while they reject the comforting mythology of the heroic individual who can hurdle all obstacles, movies in the alternative tradition expand definitions of what movies can and should be.

Notes

1. See also Maltby 1995: 18, 22.
2. Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 99.
3. Ibid.: 99–100.
4. Maltby 1995: 299–300.
5. McKenna 1996: 227.
6. Andrew McKenna argues that the chief characteristic of thrillers lies in their “display and exercise of violence,” in the way they build up stress by forcing us to wait for the “outbreak of violence” but deferring it till unexpected moments (1996: 226–27).
7. See also, less delightfully, *Killing Zoe* (1994), where a bank worker saves the safe-cracker and they drive off together in the end.
8. In *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), the sense of oppression and enclosure is established even before prisoner Frank Morris reaches the island by a nighttime boat ride through a heavy downpour. “We were not allowed to use salt water for our rain effects because of erosion,” reports director Don Siegel (1993: 443). “We used large barges filled with thousands of gallons of fresh water.” Whatever the water type, the storm created a mood of inescapable misery.
9. See, e.g., Ray 1985.
10. That *Angels with Dirty Faces* is a disguised Western is pointed out in Ray 1985: 75.
11. Wright 1975: 157.

12. As Carol Clover points out in her book on horror movies, the revenge theme is not confined to crime films and Westerns, and, when the trigger event is sexual violation, "the rape-revenge genre . . . is . . . a premier processing site for the modern debate on sexual violence in life and law" (1992: 151).
13. Parshall 1991: 136. Compare Willis 1997: 20, arguing that the white male action hero is "a figure for masculinity in crisis."
14. Other minor types are the crime-story romance (e.g., *Regeneration* [1915]) and crime-event history (e.g., *Rosewood* [1996]).
15. These include *A Lady from Shanghai* (1948), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Superfly* (1972). For a different set of categories, this one based on types of violence in movies, see Newman 1998.
16. Ray 1985: 59.
17. Wright 1975: 85–88.
18. Clover 1992.
19. On the traditional Westerner, see Warshow 1974b and Wright 1975.
20. Warshow 1974b.
21. Warshow 1974a.
22. Warshow 1974b: 136.
23. Very little has been written on the criminal heroes of movies. However, Douglass 1981 does provide a good history of one subtype, the criminal psychopath.
24. Sklar, as quoted in Maltby 1995: 255.
25. See especially Fleming 1998. Fleming argues that action movies "are our revenge on the careful" and that "these films betray our desire to act exactly as we wish, with no concern for the consequences or for the needs of others. Sublime in their return to an infantile solipsism, these movies portray a world in which everyone but the hero is either at his sexual behest or (the more usual state) dead."
26. Here we must include the heroes of caper films as well as the heroes in chronicles of criminal careers.
27. Ray 1985: 74.
28. See Turner 1993 and Wright 1975: chap. 2.
29. Ray 1985: 74, quoting Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (1970: 11).
30. Warshow 1974a: 131.
31. Ibid.: 133; emphasis in original.
32. Robert Sherwood, as quoted in McCabe 1997: 82.
33. Ruth 1996: esp. 2.
34. In *Criminals as Heroes*, a book about not movies but American Robin Hoods such as Jesse James and Billy the Kid, Paul Kooistra argues that the fit between "the actual behavior of the men chosen for the Robin Hood role and . . . the particular social context in which they acted out their criminality" is the factor that determines "why a particular criminal is selected from the heap of common thieves and murderers and fashioned into a heroic figure" (1989: 10).
35. Older sources describe Clyde as homosexual, and while more recent biographies omit this detail, they are often created out of fantasy rather than fact, overeager participants in the Bonnie and Clyde industry. In any case, director

Arthur Penn clearly was familiar with stories of Clyde's initial sexual disinterest in Bonnie Parker.

36. Maltby 1995: 254.
37. Gitlin 1980: 199.
38. *Newsweek's* reviewer, as quoted in Prince 1998: 19.
39. For other discussions of heroism, myth, and irony in *Bonnie and Clyde*, see Cawelti 1992 and Ray 1985: chap. 9.
40. Ray 1985: 323.
41. The term "antihero" is sometimes used as a label for protagonists who invert the characteristics of the traditional hero without rejecting the notion of heroism itself.
42. Canby 1983.
43. Ferrara also had a hand in the script.
44. Whereas *Scarface* and *Bad Lieutenant* have nonhero protagonists, a few crime films have no protagonist at all. One of these is *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), the Henry Fonda movie about passersby who witness a lynching. *The Ox-Bow Incident* has several important characters, but the emphasis is spread among them. Although we witness events through the Fonda character, who is the moral center of the story, he does nothing heroic. This lack of a hero has nothing to do with the movie's message, however, which is concerned not with heroism but with justice.

Another example of a film with no protagonist is provided by director Tim Blake Nelson's remarkable *Eye of God* (1997), an inversion of the Abraham and Isaac story in which the father figure, an aging police officer (Hal Holbrook), tries to save a boy. With its implied critique of Hollywood's ideology of heroism, *Eye of God* falls (as *The Ox-Bow Incident* does not) into the alternative-tradition category. The same is true of another crime movie with no central character, *On the Yard* (1979). But crime films with no protagonist are rare.

45. Maltby 1995: 300.



The Future of Crime Films

How do you end it?

—McNeal, the hero of *Call Northside 777*

Since the very early twentieth century, movies have dominated American popular culture. If one thinks of popular culture as the points of reference shared by members of a geographical or political unit—the images, values, histories, heroes, and myths they have in common—then this observation about the past is likely to apply in the future as well: Movies will continue to eclipse all other factors in the production of popular culture. As in the past, they will reflect popular culture, shape it, and comprise one of the major forces that unite people nationally and even internationally, giving them mutual touchstones. Crime films, while they are but one among many types of movie, are a particularly significant aspect of popular culture insofar as they give voice to ideas about right and wrong, the nature of criminality, the efficacy of courts, and the appropriateness of various forms of punishment. Unlike horror movies and romantic comedies, crime films help to forge agreement (as well as to expose differences) on issues fundamental to social health.

The tendency of crime films to mirror current concerns encourages predictions. If we know something about the history of crime films and can forecast national and international trends, we should be able to predict crime films' probable future. What, then, will crime movies of the future look like? When we view mainstream crime films ten to twenty years from now, which elements will have changed and which will have remained the same?

Continuities of Past and Future

Mass audiences, we know from the past, turn to crime films for two essentials: The good guy has to get the bad guy, and rule violations must be punished. Movies of this type offer simple but nonetheless socially crucial dramas of justice violated and justice restored (or at

least restorable). They reassure us that justice, even if it is not always achieved, still exists as a principle, and they tell us what justice in this case would consist of if the world were perfect. Given that crime films have long provided viewers with a refuge from an unjust world, it is likely that in the future they will continue to offer morality plays that test and reaffirm boundaries, enacting the rituals of violation and punishment.

Movie history further demonstrates that audiences like being scared. Evidently we enjoy identifying with the person being stalked—and with the stalker as well. Terror can be delightful, so long as it can be experienced in the safety of a movie theater or living room.¹ We watch crime films for threats and violence, danger and menace. Crime films of the future will probably give us more of the same: chases, frights, thrills and chills, gunshots and screams.

To judge from movie history, viewers also like heroes. We relish identifying with people who are finer, sterner, stronger, sassier, and less vulnerable than we are. Indeed, we demand mythologies of heroism, stories about superhuman individuals who can solve abstruse mysteries and save victims through their own actions, bypassing any need for social change. We most enjoy heroes who are dissolute and virtuous at the same time, both rebels and saviors. Although outside the movie context we understand that opposites rarely mix, within it we are quite happy to believe in a hero who is outrageously self-indulgent yet mature, spontaneous yet cautious, violent yet gentle. Mainstream crime movies are likely to go on giving us these impossible but captivating heroes.

Finally, to judge from the past, viewers like revenge. We revel in seeing the bad guys suffer and the good guys triumph. Cynics though we may be outside the movie theater, within it we want punishments that are righteous, swift, and severe—and if that is what audiences want, the Hollywood of the future is unlikely to refuse.

New Directions in Crime Films

What new directions will crime films take in the future? What kinds of changes can we expect over the next ten to twenty years? The most significant changes will take place in the ways heroes are defined, in the types of crime that are depicted, and in shifts in the content of the traditional crime film genres.

Changes in the Nature of Heroes

In the years ahead, crime film heroes will become more diverse in terms of age, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference. The youngish, heterosexual white males who have long dominated the imagery of heroism will be joined by new hero types that will ultimately make crime movies a more democratic form of entertainment.

For future crime films, two facts about the population's age structure are consequential. First, the average age of the U.S. population is rising. Whereas in 1995 the average age was thirty-four years, by 2025 it will be thirty-eight years.² Second, the average life expectancy will continue to increase; both men and women will live longer. Thus, by the year 2030, a demographer explains, "people above 65 years will dominate the age structure of the population along with the social, economic, and political issues."³

As a result of these trends, crime films will feature older stars. Movie heroes are already aging alongside their audiences (Clint Eastwood as the seasoned secret service agent of *In the Line of Fire* [1993]; Paul Newman as the aging ex-cop in *Twilight* [1998], a film whose title refers to the last years of life). As more movies follow suit, plots will shift the emphasis away from action and onto sleuthing. Instead of Magnum-toting maniacs, we will get brainy older heroes like Spencer Tracy in *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1954) and Pam Grier in *Jackie Brown* (1997). The definition of *heroic* will expand.

A second implication is less promising in terms of film quality. Hollywood, in its ongoing attempts to churn out blockbusters, will produce crime movies with multigenerational casts. Older stars will be featured alongside younger ones; movies will offer a little something for everyone but will lose focus as they try too hard to please.

On the whole, however, the aging of the population will lead to better crime films because action movies will be eclipsed by capers and mysteries. The crime action film is playing itself out in any case, irrespective of age factors, as audiences weary of oversized, flaccid productions that are dummied down for kids. Most viewers over the age of ten want more in terms of character, acting, and themes. They will get it as older stars, quicker with a quip than with a gun, appear in more tightly plotted and cleverly conceived movies.

In the future, moreover, these stars will more often belong to non-white racial and ethnic groups. Over the next decade, demographers

predict, the proportion of whites in the population will dwindle, while the proportions of blacks and people of Hispanic origins will grow. Non-Hispanic whites will become a minority in about sixty years, according to one census bureau report. "But that future is already here in about 200 U.S. counties in the rural Sunbelt, big central cities, California, and Texas. . . . In less than one lifespan, Americans who belong to racial and ethnic minority groups will outnumber non-Hispanic whites."⁴

These momentous demographic shifts may foretell the end of movies' subtextual messages about the superiority of Anglo-Saxon whiteness. They will precipitate a new era in identity politics, one that will play itself out in films as well as on campaign trails and in legislative halls. In crime films of the future, minority women and men will increasingly play leading roles. Some will star in "segregated" movies, in which the entire cast is of the same race or ethnicity, while others will be featured in "integrated" films.⁵

Until recently, nearly all Hollywood movies were in fact "segregated." What will be different in the future is that segregated crime films will exclude whites, not everyone else. Continuing a trend that began with the blaxploitation films of the early 1970s (*Shaft* [1971], *Superfly* [1973])⁶ and extended into the present with *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), and *New Jack City* (1991), some films will feature mostly black or all-black casts, will be produced by black filmmakers, and will deal with issues of particular concern to black communities. Similarly, Hispanic filmmakers will produce movies that have Hispanic casts and focus on Hispanic concerns, a path already cleared by *Mi Vida Loca* (1994), *My Family* (1994), and *Selena* (1996), among other films. Asian American directors and producers, inspired by the underground hit *Chan Is Missing* (1982), will repeat the pattern. Unlike the all-white films of the past, segregated crime films of the future will reflect not so much exclusion as the power of minority groups to express and explore their own identities.⁷

Moreover, as U.S. society becomes more diverse, race and ethnicity will shrink in importance, leading to more "integrated" crime movies in which people of various colors and ethnicities as well as Anglo-Saxon whites have high-status roles. In this respect, crime films of the future will continue along the route pioneered by *Riot* (1969), in which Jim Brown shared the lead with Gene Hackman, and perpetuated by such movies as *187* (1997), in which Samuel L. Jackson is supported by a multiethnic cast, and *Out of Sight* (1998), star-

ring Jennifer Lopez, George Clooney, Ving Rhames, and Don Cheadle, among others. Similarly, we will get more crime films with both Asian and Caucasian actors, especially now that director John Woo has started to make films (the first was *Face/Off* [1997]) in the United States and Asian stars such as Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, and Chow Yun-Fat have joined him in Hollywood. With increasingly diverse casts, "integrated" crime films will both reflect and encourage a decreased emphasis on race and ethnicity in American culture.

Demographic changes and the globalization of film markets have already led to an internationalization of casting and production: "American" films are increasingly made by foreign-born directors and feature a mix of actors from home and abroad. Films made in non-English-speaking countries are starting to use English, and foreign directors are mixing American with native-born actors. (Luc Besson's *The Professional* [1994], for instance, stars Gary Oldman alongside French actors.) Greater sophistication about racial and ethnic issues will lead to an iconoclastic use of stereotypes, as in a 1997 television remake of Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* (1957): The jury now included a black man—and he was the racist. The globalization of film markets (many movies that fail in this country now recoup their losses abroad) will lead as well to an internationalization of subject matter: We can expect American-made films that focus on Russian mobsters and Brazilian lockups.

Women, too, will increasingly be cast as heroes. Reflecting the changing roles of women in American life, Jamie Lee Curtis, Jodie Foster, Holly Hunter, Jennifer Lopez, and Frances McDormand have already starred as cops. Women have also had leads as crime-fighters or criminals in *Black Widow* (1987), *Jackie Brown*, and *Point of No Return* (1993), and although the star of *Red Rock West* (1993) is Nicholas Cage, his character is led down the garden path by Lara Flynn Boyle, playing a complex but intensely wicked femme fatale. So far there have been few serious movies about women in prison, but that current, as we saw in chapter 5, is reversing. Filmmakers will start producing female equivalents to *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979) and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). As crime films with female stars break old stereotypes, moreover, their tone will become more playful. The Coen brothers exhibit this playfulness in *Fargo* (1996), in which the cop hero is nine months pregnant. *Thelma and Louise* (1991), too, handles role reversals with drollery and wit, while *Bound* (1996) has fun contrasting its lesbian leads with traditional male

heroes. Eventually we will get a *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) with an all-female cast, squabbling over who will get to be Ms. Pink and Ms. Blue.

Changes in Subject Matter

Crime films of the future, like those of the past, will mirror current social issues and comment on major political controversies. Some will draw on true crime stories, while others will feature offenses involving new technologies and still others will spotlight victimization. In addition, over the next decade crime films will start reviving story types popular in the 1940s and 1950s.

New Social Issues

Of all the factors that will determine the world's future, the most significant is population growth. In 1950, the world had 2.6 billion people; by 2050, it will have well over 9 billion, a 350 percent expansion in just one century. The current growth rate, according to a United Nations report, is the fastest in human history.⁸ In some countries, population size has already outstripped the land's ability to support people. This crisis has not yet hit the United States, due to its great size and wealth of natural resources; but even here, the population is expected to double in about sixty-five years, raising onerous questions about resource allocation, reproductive freedom, and general governability. Moreover, because Americans consume many times their share of water and other natural resources, the future is likely to be characterized not only by scarcity but also by intense competition for raw materials among countries and regions of the world.

These tensions will be reflected in a new type of political crime film that deals with international struggles and population terrorism. Individual heroes will not disappear, but they will fight villains who squander or threaten to destroy natural resources on a global scale. Maintaining a trend begun by action movies such as *Armageddon* (1998) and *Deep Impact* (1998), some crime films will revolve around conspiracies and takeovers, but future plotters are likely to be heads of desperate governments, and the takeover targets will be not airports but entire countries.

A related issue concerns global diseases. Starving populations will migrate in search of food while the wealthy globe-trot, both groups risking exposure to illnesses for which they lack immunity. "As more

humans contact the viruses and other pathogens of previously remote forests and grasslands," one scientist observes, "dense urban populations and global travel increase opportunities for infections to spread: The wild beasts of this century and the next are microbial, not carnivorous."⁹ Those beasts will show up in crime films about intentional plagues, the poisoning of water and food supplies, and evil biologists planning to euthanize entire populations. Such films have been anticipated by *Outbreak*, the 1994 Dustin Hoffman movie about a disease-spreading African monkey, but they will deal with scientific facts, not fictions.

True-Crime Films

In pursuit of fresh material and more complex characters, moviemakers will increasingly base their stories on actual criminal events. True-crime movies, of course, have a long and venerable history, one that includes *Boomerang* (1947), a narrative about the mistaken arrest of a vagrant for the murder of a Connecticut minister; *Silkwood* (1983); *The Executioner's Song* (1982); and *To Die For* (1995). In the future, however, producers will turn more frequently to real-life events as they search for alternatives to the flat characters and formulaic events of action movies and the traditional crime genres.

The beginnings of this trend can be detected in recent foreign films. The English movie *Sister My Sister* (1994) relates the riveting story of the Papin sisters, chambermaids who one night dismembered their mistress and her daughter; and the award-winning New Zealand movie *Heavenly Creatures* (also 1994) follows two schoolgirls (one played by Kate Winslet) as they bludgeon one girl's mother to death. The trend can further be inferred from the recent spate of biographical films about artists (*Love Is the Devil* [1998], *Surviving Picasso* [1996], *Basquiat* [1996]). Like both the foreign films and the artists' biographies, true-crime films of the future will concentrate less on plotline than on the central figure's motivations.

They will also tend to blur fact and fiction. This is to be expected, given the semidocumentary nature of many true-life crime films (e.g., *In Cold Blood* [1967]), the rise of "reality" television, and the near impossibility of making a movie in which every detail is historically accurate. It is also to be expected given the recent constructionist turn in documentaries, discussed in chapter 5. There are dangers in this blurring of fact and fiction, however, insofar as it will make it even

more difficult for young people to distinguish fact from fantasy. High school and college students are already often unable to differentiate between history and fiction. For many of them, all visual truths have the same status. Today, Neal Gabler argues in a recent critique, people conceive of their lives as performances and of history as a form of entertainment.¹⁰ If this charge remains accurate, true-crime films of the future will be partly to blame because of the way they adapt and reshape history.

Crimes by and against Technology

As work becomes increasingly technological, we can expect growing numbers of offenses by and against technology, a development that screenwriters will exploit. DNA testing is already being used to identify culprits and exonerate the innocent; a crime film in which the bad guy manipulates DNA to put the good guy behind bars cannot be far away. If scientists succeed (as they hope to by the year 2010) in developing gene therapies to reduce aging, then we can expect crime movies in which the bad guys use gene therapies to disguise their identities and elude the police. (This type of offense has been anticipated by the futuristic razzle-dazzle and identity changes of *Face/Off*.) The virtual buying and virtual selling of the future marketplace will create opportunities for movie criminals to steal on an unparalleled scale and invent other forms of (no doubt virtual) victimization.

Scientists are currently identifying areas of the brain that control sensations such as excitement, meaningfulness, and satiation. A scoundrel bent on truly magnificent revenge, an early-twenty-first-century counterpart to, say, the angry ex-prisoner of *Cape Fear* (1961), could zap a foe's meaningfulness center, reducing him to a state of total alienation for the rest of his life. Or a gang leader could damage her underlings' memories, wiping out their recollections of committing crimes.

As these examples show, technological crime films of the future will characteristically raise issues of evidence and responsibility. Cash machines of the future will identify bank customers not through passwords but through fingerprints, voice patterns, and the unique configuration of one's irises. If a criminal transplants someone's irises into her own eyes and then proceeds to wipe out the donor's bank account, how will the cops identify her? And how will

they solve artificial intelligence crimes masterminded by a computer? Vito Corleone's enemies tried to enter his hospital in order to shoot him; it would have been much more difficult for Michael Corleone to stop them if they had been able to close down Vito's life-support systems from a distant computer. Similarly, if terrorists use a computer to wreck a 300-mile-per-hour train and then erase the fatal command, how can they be traced?

Biological explanations of crime are currently enjoying a renaissance. We can expect a spate of new movies in which brain-damaged or bad-gened predators wreak havoc and others in which cloners replicate the bad guys. We should also expect a fierce movie attack on the so-called medical model of the criminal as sick and abnormal, parallel to the attack mounted years ago by *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

Emphasis on Victimization

Hundreds of films have been made about every aspect of crime and its consequences—with the exception of victimization. The women's movement has changed ways in which incest and rape are depicted, but neither it nor the victims' rights movement has resulted in many movies about crime victims. This dearth is no doubt a by-product of audience demand for heroes; only a rare film like *The Accused* (1988) or *Dolores Claiborne* (1994) manages to turn a victim into a satisfactory hero.

One recent film, *Eye of God* (1997), discovers new ways to deal dramatically with victimization. It succeeds by establishing a narrator who is a bystander to the act of horror, a sympathetic onlooker who can plausibly get close to the events because he is the police chief in the small town where they occur. An alternative-tradition film, *Eye of God* lacks a hero, but it does give us, in the person of the chief, a central figure with whose compassion we can identify. Here, at last, is a model for portraying victimization, one that crime films of the future may adopt.

Several factors suggest that if a successful formula can be found, movies will increasingly turn to victimization for subject matter. One is the power of the victims' rights movement, which over the past three decades has revolutionized sentencing laws and the handling of sex offenders. Given the movement's continuing strength and the tendency of movies to assimilate popular causes, there are likely to be more victimization films just over the horizon. Then, too, the

population is aging, and while the elderly are in fact not more prone to victimization than younger people, they feel more vulnerable and so provide a natural market for such films. Third, audiences may be ripe for movies about victims due to the cynicism about government that has become a hallmark of the late twentieth century; we should expect more paranoia films, following the tracks laid down by *JFK* (1991), *The Firm* (1993), *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), and *Enemy of the State* (1998), about government surveillance and invasions of privacy. Finally, computer interactivity will make us increasingly vulnerable to computer scams, again priming Hollywood's pumps for movies about crime victims.

Revivals of Older Film Types

Filmmakers are about to rediscover the caper, the mystery, and the film of psychological conflict. They almost have to, for this is the most obvious way out of a trap in which Hollywood has caught itself.

The trap is this: Movies have become hugely expensive. Megastars demand fees of \$20 million per film, and to attract distributors and audiences, producers spend as much on advertising as on making the film itself. Faced by these pressures, Hollywood uses superstars (no matter how bored and weary), explosions (no matter how contrived), and best-seller plots (no matter how desultory and episodic) in attempts to win the opening-weekend sweepstakes. The scripts for these films, authored by teams of writers, become flabby and lifeless. Capable directors such as Sidney Lumet openly complain about the way marketing now drives film content.¹¹ Another part of the trap has been set by distributors, who, wanting surefire successes, tend to ignore smaller, independently produced movies. Independent filmmakers frequently produce livelier films, but they have trouble covering production costs and finding distributors. The result: boring films, including dreary crime films.

How or when solutions will arrive is not clear, but they will probably come in the form of lower-budget, more sharply focused films. Some will be made by independent filmmakers, whose numbers are proliferating despite the high costs of production. Studio executives are wising up as well. Both groups are likely to return to older types of films, popular in the 1940s and 1950s, that can be made with minimal cost and require little more than a crisp script. The caper will be reborn (a rebirth anticipated by Steven Soderbergh's *The Underneath*

[1995]), as will the private detective story. Con artists will regain their rightful place in Hollywood's gallery of rogues (a return presaged by David Mamet's *Spanish Prisoner* [1998] and Soderbergh's *Out of Sight*), and movies with psychologically conflicted but nonetheless engaging heroes will return to the big screen (as they did in *A Simple Plan* [1998]).

By all evidence, filmmaking is on the verge of such change. With bloated star vehicles flopping, even the chair of Fox Filmed Entertainment acknowledges that to succeed, "you've got to make movies that are different, you've got to make movies that speak more to the audience than those big effects-driven films. The common complaint is that too many movies aren't about anything. Some of them are fun rides, but I don't think that's enough anymore."¹² In 1997, four of five nominees for the best-picture Oscar were independents. Studios have started dumping projects with uncontrollable price tags. While finding distributors for independent films can be difficult, it is not impossible,¹³ and new markets for these films are opening up online, on cable channels, in classrooms, at the new Slamdance Film Festival, and overseas. Meanwhile, rereleased silent movies are making a comeback, in both theaters and cassette form,¹⁴ a sign of audience thirst for out-of-the-mainstream films. Change is clearly on the way. It is likely to occur in the opening up of a middle ground between the superexpensive blockbuster and the underfunded independent, a middle ground into which tidy mysteries and tense whodunits nicely fit.

Genre Changes

Crime films, as we have seen, often fall into well-defined genres corresponding to the major area of the criminal justice system: cop movies, courtroom dramas, and prison films. In addition, the crime films category includes other, near-genre subdivisions such as gangster films and detective movies. These types are likely to survive intact in the future because viewers enjoy the predictability of genre films. "We know a thriller when we see one," writes Richard Maltby. "Indeed, we know a thriller before we see one,"¹⁵ for we select movies partly on the basis of genre, which enables us to anticipate plot, scenery, character types, and emotional content. Over the next decade, then, the crime film menu will probably continue to include traditional genre fare.

But filmmakers will reinvigorate the traditional forms with new subject matter. We are due, for example, for a new type of mob film.

Francis Ford Coppola reinvented gangsters with the *Godfathers* (1972, 1974, 1990), but that series portrayed a world that was obsolete when the first *Godfather* appeared. Martin Scorsese again reinvented gangsters with *Mean Streets* (1983) and *Goodfellas* (1990), and Mario Van Peebles depicted black gangsters in *New Jack City*, but since then we've had no truly innovative take on organized crime.¹⁶ Some mob films of the future will portray the activities of one fairly typical type of organized crime group: the small, fluid, black or Hispanic gang with local operations. And when Hollywood returns to the Mafia, it will show its changing structure, including the entry of women into traditionally all-male crime families.

Police films, too, are due for renewal. Chapter 3, in tracing the migration of the gunslinger from Westerns to cop films, noted that viewers seem less attached to genres per se than to the figure of the border patroller, someone capable of maintaining the line between society and barbarism. However, it has been nearly thirty years since this figure relocated from the Western to the cop film, and in the interim police movies have become formulaic. Thus, we are probably due for another migration of the outlaw hero, this time from policing to some other occupation that protects ordinary people from the bad guys. The nature of this new profession is open to conjecture, but it may well be genetics or forensic science. If so, the new heroes will carry outsized stethoscopes, and we can anticipate sequels with buddy forensicists, women forensicists, rogue forensicists, and so on.

Of the traditional crime film genres, courtroom dramas have the dimmest prospect for revival. They have devolved, as we saw in chapter 4, into witless reliance on depleted traditions, so much so that even the advent of women lawyers has been unable to resuscitate them. Lacking conviction, they now spend much of their time getting the defense attorney and prosecutor naked with one another. A miracle may occur, giving courtroom movies a new sense of direction, but more likely they will continue the process already under way of transmutation into "law" films, movies that pose questions about justice and responsibility outside of courtroom settings. In some respects, this transmutation is a return to the focus of *M* (1931), the best of Fritz Lang's trial films, in which thieves serve as the child-murderer's judges and jury, and legal issues are deeply embedded in broader questions about the relationship of the individual to society.

The traditional prison film is likely to be transformed by new developments in technology. Due in part to the victims' rights move-

ment, the U.S. prison population grew by almost 400 percent between 1980 and 1995, even while rates of serious crime plummeted. Building new prisons and holding huge numbers of inmates for long terms has seriously depleted state coffers. This extravagant reliance on steel and concrete may soon become obsolete, however. The virtual prison is at hand, a lockup that relies on not physical walls but virtual walls of electronic eyes and body-heat detectors to keep inmates from running. For those who do escape, there will be bio-immobilization, a zap to the part of the brain that is thought to cause crime. Even those left behind in old-fashioned jails and prisons will be able to participate, via in-cell computers, in the virtual world. Incarceration will take on a new set of meanings, meanings that Hollywood prison films of the future will help define.

Critical Crime Films

The previous predictions apply to mainstream movies, not the alternative tradition of critical crime films. It is more difficult to anticipate changes in critical crime films, but one can be sure that works of this type will have a significant impact on the future of crime films generally.

Alienated and sometimes alienating, critical crime films refuse to reassure us that justice and the deserving will in the long run prevail. Movies that, like *Chinatown* (1974), show the bad guy triumphing, or that, like *American Buffalo* (1995), expose the worst of human nature are meant to leave audiences uncomfortable and unsettled. In contrast to the double movement of popular films, which raise seemingly tough questions only to resolve them through the hero's prowess, films in the alternative tradition leave the tough questions unanswered.¹⁷ They will never star a Julia Roberts or Bruce Willis, as *The Player* (1992), a movie about Hollywood endings, playfully demonstrates by featuring Julia Roberts and Bruce Willis in a happy-ending movie within its own text. At another point in *The Player*, when a new girlfriend asks what elements make a film successful, the movie executive (Tim Robbins) replies: "Suspense, laughter, violence, hope, heart, nudity, sex, happy endings—mainly happy endings." She responds, "What about reality?" but instead of answering, he changes the subject, indicating that in mainstream films, reality is irrelevant. Critical films, in contrast, rub our noses in the harsh realities of crime and punishment.

Critical crime films have their own vision of what life is like and what movies ought to do. If mainstream films deal with criminality, critical films deal with evil. Theirs is a more somber vision, of a world without saviors and lives without happy endings. For viewers weaned on Hollywood's gratifications, this vision may seem unpalatable, but it is more in keeping with the nature of crime, which in actuality produces few winners and is rarely glamorous.

A Roadrunner to the blockbuster's Godzilla, the critical movie is sleeker, craftier, smarter, and more elusive. It is also more independent. Likely to be made outside the big studios, critical films are less dependent on profit. Radical where blockbusters are cautious, they subvert the Hollywood paradigm. They have more bite.

And film for film, they have greater significance. Critical crime films offer ambitious moviemakers a chance to produce innovative, challenging films. They increase the number of ways movies have of "being" in the world—their overall range. They also increase the number of things movies can say about crime. It is difficult to think of a mainstream film arguing, as *A Clockwork Orange* does, that a violent predator is better than a lobotomized predator, and arguing it with wild vehemence. In addition, critical crime films create openings for new and more varied types of heroes, including the no-good bad guy. Hollywood gives us Bonnie and Clyde, while the alternative tradition gives us the Tony Montana of *Scarface* (1983) and Dirk Digler of *Boogie Nights* (1997).

Critical movies can be successes, although their successes can seldom be measured in immediate box-office grosses. Orson Welles, the director of *Touch of Evil* (1958), is internationally recognized as a giant among filmmakers, and the film itself has recently been rereleased in movie houses. Martin Scorsese, perhaps the most revered and influential of all contemporary directors, has also triumphed in the alternative tradition. Critical crime films sometimes become thematic and stylistic trailblazers, as has been the case with *Gun Crazy* (1949), *Badlands* (1974), and *Mean Streets*. And herein lies their significance to the future of crime films generally. If we want to know what crime films will be like in the next ten to twenty years, we need to keep track of what is going on in the alternative tradition, watching the new films of Abel Ferrara (*Bad Lieutenant* [1992], *The Funeral* [1996], *King of New York* [1990]) as well as mainstream films such as Alan Pakula's *Presumed Innocent* (1990) and *The Pelican Brief* (1993). By definition, the innovations of critical films are unpredictable, depen-

dent as they are on idiosyncratic breakthroughs and quirky brilliance, but they are equally consequential.

Critical movies will never be numerous, but they are unlikely to disappear, for there will always be filmmakers who want to capture the underside of society, who take crime seriously and refuse to sugarcoat it. In the future, these gadflies will continue exploring the possibilities of film and probing, more deeply than mainstream movies can, the relationships among crime, film, and society.

Whatever the fate of these predictions, crime films of the future will continue to do what crime films have done throughout the twentieth century: mold our thoughts about the fundamental social, economic, and political issues of the day. Crime movies of the early twenty-first century will sculpt our assumptions about the nature of reality and fill our mental reservoirs with a vast supply of imagery for thinking about crime, criminals, and the role of criminal justice institutions in society. As in the past, they will guide us in defining justice, heroism, and the illicit. Movies of this type will feed into our myths about good and evil and give us scapegoats in the form of gangsters who must be killed for doing what we ourselves dream of doing. Above all, crime films will continue to give us pleasure: routes into the enticing but forbidden underworlds of crime, access to the secrets of the prison, the joys of identifying with heroic rebels, the gratifications of vengeance, and the satisfactions of moral certainty.

Notes

1. See especially McCauley 1998.
2. U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996: 14.
3. De Vita 1996: 2 (abstract).
4. Edmondson 1996: paragraph 1.
5. As noted in chapter 3, this helpful distinction between "segregated" and "integrated" comes from Everett 1995–96. Also see Reid 1995.
6. On blaxploitation films more generally, see George 1994, and for a good analysis of the history of black filmmaking and tensions in the blaxploitation films, see Bourne 1990.
7. In one sign of that power, in 1998, for the first time in its twenty-one-year history, the New York Asian-American International Film Festival screened more features made in the United States than overseas.
8. "Science: Population Trouble" 1994: 25.
9. Cohen 1995: paragraph 2.
10. Gabler 1998.
11. Lumet 1995.
12. Weinraub 1997.

13. See especially Pierson 1997.
14. Balmain 1998.
15. Maltby 1995: 107.
16. *Donnie Brasco* (1996) is a good mob film, but essentially it repeats *Mean Streets*.
17. Critical films can of course be found outside the crimefilm category. For instance, Neil LaBute's *In the Company of Men* (1997) is an inverted romance in which the male leads decide to torment a deaf woman. In an interview at the time of release, LaBute "shrugged off the notion that films should have endings that provide emotional resolution. 'It's valid to feel whatever you feel at the end [of the film], including utter disdain. The story should resonate as hollow, desolate, even sad,' he said, alluding to a German reviewer's assessment at Cannes. 'I want it to be a bit of a cautionary tale: "Be careful what you pretend to be because that's what you'll turn into'" (Insdorf 1997: 14). In the years ahead, we are likely to find more critical films across film categories.

Appendix

Films Cited with Release Dates

- 10 Rillington Place* (1971)
12 Angry Men (1957)
48 Hours (1982)
187 (1997)

Above the Law (1988)
Accused, The (1988)
Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer (1992)
Alien Nation (1988)
All That Heaven Allows (1955)
All the President's Men (1976)
American Buffalo (1995)
American Me (1992)
Anatomy of a Murder (1959)
And Justice for All (1979)
Angels with Dirty Faces (1938)
Armageddon (1998)
Asphalt Jungle, The (1950)

Bad Boys (1983)
Bad Day at Black Rock (1954)
Bad Lieutenant (1992)
Bad Seed, The (1956)
Badlands (1974)
Basic Instinct (1992)
Basquiat (1996)
Beach Blanket Bingo (1965)
Beverly Hills Cop series (1984, 1987, 1994)
Beyond a Reasonable Doubt (1956)
Big Heat, The (1953)
Big House, The (1930)
Big Sleep, The (1946)
Big Sleep, The (1978)
Birdman of Alcatraz (1962)
Black Widow (1987)
Black Marble, The (1979)
Blade Runner (1982)
Blob, The (1958)

Blood In, Blood Out (1993)
Blood Simple (1985)
Blow Out (1981)
Blue Steel (1990)
Blue Velvet (1986)
Body Heat (1981)
Body of Evidence (1992)
Bonnie and Clyde (1967)
Boogie Nights (1997)
Boomerang (1947)
Born to Kill (1947)
Bound (1996)
Boyz N the Hood (1991)
Breaker Morant (1980)
Breathless (1959)
Brother's Keeper (1992)
Brubaker (1980)
Bulletproof Heart (1995)
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969)

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, The (1919)
Caged Heat (1974)
Caine Mutiny, The (1954)
Call Northside 777 (1948)
Cape Fear (1961)
Cape Fear (1991)
Casablanca (1942)
Casino (1995)
Castle of Fu Manchu, The (1968)
Chan Is Missing (1982)
China Syndrome, The (1979)
Chinatown (1974)
Citizen Kane (1941)
Client, The (1994)
Clockwork Orange, A (1971)
Coffy (1973)
Colors (1988)
Compulsion (1959)
Conspiracy Theory (1997)

- Coogan's Bluff* (1968)
Cool Hand Luke (1967)
Cop (1988)
Copland (1997)
Cops (1922)
Copycat (1995)
Criminal Code, The (1931)
Crucible, The (1996)
Cruising (1980)
Cry Freedom (1987)
- Dead Man Walking* (1995)
Dead Pool, The (1988)
Deep Cover (1992)
Deep Impact (1998)
Defenseless (1991)
Defiant Ones, The (1958)
Deliverance (1972)
Desperate Hours, The (1955)
Devil in a Blue Dress (1995)
Dial M for Murder (1954)
Die Hard series (1988, 1990, 1995)
Dirty Harry (1971)
Do the Right Thing (1989)
Dog Day Afternoon (1975)
Dolores Claiborne (1994)
Donnie Brasco (1996)
Double Indemnity (1944)
Dr. Mabuse (1922)
- Each Dawn I Die* (1939)
Easy Rider (1969)
East of Eden (1954)
Enemy of the State (1998)
Enforcer, The (1976)
Escape from Alcatraz (1979)
Execution Protocol, The (1993)
Executioner's Song, The (1982)
Eye of God (1997)
- Face/Off* (1997)
Falling Down (1993)
Fargo (1996)
Fatal Attraction (1987)
Few Good Men, A (1992)
Firm, The (1993)
Flatfoot (1978)
- French Connection, The* (1971)
Fresh (1994)
Funeral, The (1996)
Fury (1936)
Fuzz (1972)
- G-Men* (1935)
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953)
Ghosts of Mississippi (1996)
Giant (1956)
Godfather, The (1972)
Godfather, The, Part 2 (1974)
Godfather, The, Part 3 (1990)
Goodfellas (1990)
Grapes of Wrath (1940)
Great Train Robbery, The (1903)
Grifters, The (1990)
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)
Guilty as Sin (1993)
Gun Crazy (1949)
Guns of Navarone, The (1961)
- Hard Way, The* (1991)
Heat (1995)
Heathers (1989)
Heavenly Creatures (1994)
Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1990)
High and Low (1962)
High Sierra (1941)
House of Games (1987)
- I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932)
I Want to Live! (1958)
In Cold Blood (1967)
In the Company of Men (1997)
In the Line of Fire (1993)
In the Name of the Father (1993)
Informers, The (1935)
Inherit the Wind (1960)
Innocent Man, An (1989)
Internal Affairs (1990)
- Jackie Brown* (1997)
Jagged Edge, The (1985)
Judgment at Nuremberg (1961)
JFK (1991)

- Juror, The* (1996)
Kids (1995)
Killers, The (1964)
Killing, The (1956)
Killing Zoe (1994)
King of New York (1996)
Kiss of Death (1947)
Kiss of the Spider Woman (1985)
Kiss Me Deadly (1955)
Kiss the Girls (1997)
Knock on Any Door (1949)
- L.A. Confidential* (1997)
La Femme Nikita (1990)
Lady from Shanghai (1948)
Lady Vanishes, The (1938)
Last Dance (1996)
Last Detail, The (1973)
Last Mile, The (1932)
Last Seduction, The (1994)
Lavender Hill Mob, The (1951)
Let 'Em Have It (1935)
Lethal Weapon series (1987, 1989, 1992)
Letter, The (1940)
Life of Emile Zola (1937)
Little Caesar (1930)
Lock Up (1989)
Long Goodbye, The (1973)
Lost Weekend, The (1945)
Love Me Tender (1956)
Love Is the Devil (1998)
Lullaby, The (1924)
- M* (1931)
Madame X (1966)
Madigan (1968)
Magnum Force (1973)
Malcolm X (1992)
Maltese Falcon, The (1941)
Man with the Golden Arm, The (1955)
Manchurian Candidate, The (1962)
Manhattan Melodrama (1934)
Manslaughter (1922)
Marathon Man (1976)
Marked Woman (1937)
Matewan (1987)
- Mean Streets* (1973)
Menace II Society (1993)
Mi Vida Loca (1994)
Midnight Cowboy (1969)
Midnight Express (1978)
Midnight Flower (1923)
Mildred Pierce (1945)
Miller's Crossing (1990)
Missing (1982)
Mrs. Soffel (1984)
Murder in the First (1995)
Murder, My Sweet (1944)
Music Box, The (1989)
Musketeers of Pig Alley, The (1912)
My Family (1994)
- Naked Gun* series (1988, 1991, 1994)
Natural Born Killers (1994)
Neanderthal Man, The (1953)
New Jack City (1991)
Night Falls on Manhattan (1996)
Night of the Hunter (1955)
No Way Out (1987)
Norma Rae (1979)
Normal Life (1996)
North by Northwest (1959)
Nosferatu (1922)
Nuts (1987)
- On the Yard* (1979)
Once Upon a Time in America (1984)
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)
One Good Cop (1991)
Onion Field, The (1979)
Out of Sight (1998)
Outbreak (1994)
Ox-Bow Incident, The (1943)
- Papillon* (1973)
Paradine Case, The (1947)
Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills (1996)
Paris Is Burning (1991)
Pelican Brief, The (1993)
Peyton Place (1957)
Physical Evidence (1989)

- Pillow Talk* (1959)
Place in the Sun, A (1951)
Player, The (1992)
Point of No Return (1993)
Police Academy series (1984 and following)
Postman Always Rings Twice, The (1946)
Postman Always Rings Twice, The (1981)
Presumed Innocent (1990)
Primal Fear (1996)
Prince of the City (1981)
Prizzi's Honor (1985)
Professional, The (1994)
Psycho (1960)
Public Enemy (1931)
Pulp Fiction (1994)
- Q & A (1990)
- Rainmaker, The* (1997)
Raisin in the Sun, A (1961)
Rashomon (1951)
Rear Window (1954)
Red River (1948)
Red Rock West (1993)
Regeneration (1915)
Reservoir Dogs (1992)
Reversal of Fortune (1990)
Riot (1969)
Riot in Cellblock II (1954)
River's Edge (1987)
RoboCop (1987)
Rocky (1976)
Romeo Is Bleeding (1993)
Rookie, The (1990)
Rope (1948)
Rosewood (1996)
- Scarecrow* (1973)
Scarface (1932)
Scarface (1983)
Scarlet Street (1945)
Sea of Love (1989)
Selena (1996)
Sergeant Rutledge (1960)
- Serpico* (1973)
Set It Off (1996)
Seven (1995)
Seven Year Itch, The (1955)
Shaft (1971)
Shaft in Africa (1973)
Shaft's Big Score (1972)
Shanghai Triad (1995)
Shawshank Redemption, The (1994)
Shoah (1985)
Shock Corridor (1963)
Shoot the Piano Player (1960)
Shoot to Kill (1988)
Short Eyes (1979)
Show Them No Mercy (1935)
Silence of the Lambs (1991)
Silkwood (1983)
Simple Plan, A (1998)
Sister My Sister (1994)
Slammer Girls (1987)
Sleepers (1996)
Some Like It Hot (1959)
Sound of Music, The (1965)
South Central (1992)
Spanish Prisoner, The (1998)
Spellbound (1946)
Spy Who Came In from the Cold, The (1965)
Star Chamber, The (1983)
State of Grace (1990)
Story of Women, The (1988)
Straight Time (1978)
Stranger on the Third Floor (1940)
Strangers on a Train (1951)
Straw Dogs (1972)
Sudden Fear (1952)
Sudden Impact (1983)
Sunrise (1927)
Sunset Boulevard (1950)
Superfly (1972)
Surviving Picasso (1996)
Suspect (1987)
Swoon (1991)
- Taxi Driver* (1976)
Ten to Midnight (1983)
Terminator, The (1984)

- Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The series*
 (1974 and following)
Thelma and Louise (1991)
They Made Me a Criminal (1939)
They Won't Believe Me (1947)
Thin Blue Line, The (1988)
Through the Wire (1990)
Thunderbolt and Lightfoot (1974)
Time to Kill, A (1996)
Titicut Follies (1967)
To Die For (1995)
To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)
To Catch a Thief (1955)
To Live and Die in L.A. (1985)
Touch of Evil (1958)
Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948)
Trial, The (1963)
Trial by Jury (1994)
True Believer (1989)
True Romance (1993)
Twilight (1998)
- Underneath, The* (1995)
Underworld (1927)
Unknown, The (1927)
Unlawful Entry (1992)
Untouchables, The (1987)
- Verdict, The* (1982)
Vertigo (1958)
- Wag the Dog* (1997)
Weeds (1987)
Whipping Boss, The (1922)
White Heat (1949)
Wild Bunch, The (1969)
Witness (1985)
Witness for the Prosecution (1957)
Wrong Man, The (1956)
- You Can't Get Away With It* (1936)
Young Mr. Lincoln (1939)
Young Philadelphians, The (1959)

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Index

Films mentioned in the text as mere examples are not indexed. In most cases, references to actors and directors are also omitted. References to illustrations are italicized.

- 10 Rillington Place* 39
- 12 Angry Men* 31, 43, 98
 - cinematography of 102
 - 1997 television remake of 169
- 187 3, 62, 168
- Above the Law* 78
- absurdist films 40–42, 88–89, 114 n. 26
- Accused, The* 39, 97
 - depiction of female attorney in 107
 - as a disguised Western 149
 - as a film about victimization 173
 - story type in 145
- Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* 132, 133, 134
- alternative tradition 3–4, 164 n. 44, 173
 - and cop movies 89–90
 - defined 11–12, 14 n. 13, 177–78
 - future of 177–79
 - origins of 35
 - and prison films 130–32
 - protagonists of 89–90, 159–62
 - significance to future of crime films 178–79
- American Buffalo* 12, 177
- American Me* 11, 124, 127, 160
 - as an alternative-tradition film 131–32
 - prison as metaphor in 122
 - violent post-production history of 139 n. 26
- Anatomy of a Murder* 102, 104
- And Justice for All* 106
- Angels with Dirty Faces* 123, 128, 138 n. 11, 145
- antiheroes 37–38, 159, 164 n. 41
- Armageddon* 170
- Armstrong, Gillian 139 n. 24
- Asphalt Jungle, The* 12, 29, 44–45 n. 20, 58, 143
- Attica, New York, prison riot 121
- babes-behind-bars films 120, 125, 135–36, 137 n. 5, 138 n. 10
- Bad Boys* 124, 127
- Bad Day at Black Rock* 73, 167
- Bad Lieutenant* 12, 63, 89, 161–62, 178
- Bad Seed, The* 6–7, 51, 61
- Badlands* 52, 159, 178
 - as predecessor of the serial killer film 39
 - theory of crime in 52, 56, 70 n. 7
- Basic Instinct* 63
- Basquiat* 171
- Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* 101
- Big Heat, The* 73, 77
- Big House, The* 21, 117–18, 120, 121, 123
- Big Sleep, The* (1946) 22, 24–25
- Big Sleep, The* (1978) 45 n. 25
- biological theories of crime in movies 50–51, 173
- Birdman of Alcatraz* 118, 127

- Black Marble, The* 78
Black Widow 169
 blaxploitation films 77, 90 n. 12,
 168, 179 n. 6
Blood Simple 40, 48
Blow Out 12
Blue Steel 78
Blue Velvet 40
Body Heat 62
Bonnie and Clyde
 causes of crime in 49, 63
 cinematography of 158–59
 construction of heroes in 155–59
 gender relations in 34
 mythic dimensions of 157–59
 organization of value conflicts in
 157–59
 presaged by *Gun Crazy* 28
 reasons for success of 34, 155–59
 significance in crime film industry
 34
 as start of late-1960s revival of
 crime films 32, 34
 use of color in 158–59
Boogie Nights 29, 178
Boomerang 171
Born to Kill 50
Bound 143, 169
Boyz N the Hood 61, 168
 on causes of crime 49, 54
 and story type 146
 and violence at release of 66–67
 Brosnan, Pierce 9
Brother's Keeper 95, 97
Brubaker 36, 119, 122, 127, 139
 n. 20
 buddy figure in 138 n. 12
 buddy films 7–8, 124–26, 138 n. 12,
 14
Bulletproof Heart 48

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, The 19, 55
Caged Heat 120, 137 n. 4
Caine Mutiny, The 97, 105
Call Northside 777 96, 101, 136
Cape Fear (1961) 43, 54–55, 172
Cape Fear (1991) 43, 54–55

 caper films 58, 143, 174–75
 Capone, Al 155, 160
Casablanca 22
Casino 43
 censorship 27, 33, 35
Chan Is Missing 168
 Chicago School of Criminology
 48–49
Chinatown 12, 35, 36, 177
 on causes of crime 60
 as predecessor of absurdist films
 40
Client, The 108
Clockwork Orange, A 3, 14, 35, 160,
 173, 178
Coffy 150
Compulsion 64, 95, 97, 104
Coogan's Bluff 74
Cool Hand Luke 36, 118–19, 122,
 138 n. 12
 Christ-theme in 123–24
 as a disguised Western 149
 exclusion of women from 125
 stock scenes in 121
 voyeurism in 126, 138 n. 15
 cop films
 absurdist 88–89
 factors affecting development of
 71–75
 heroes of 75–76
 in late 1960s 32, 36
 and masculinities 79–88
 and race 83–85, 87–88
 and story types 145
 themes of 71
 and transformation of Western
 hero 75–76
 types of 77–79
 See also police officers, film images
 of
Copland 78, 145, 149
Copycat 78
 copycat crimes 65–66
 courtroom films
 attitudes toward law in 97–99,
 102–5, 107–9
 cinematic characteristics of 102

- concern with general social ills in
 31–32, 108
 definitions of justice in 31
 depletion of 105–9, 176
 evolution of toward “law films”
 93, 109, 176
 experimental period in develop-
 ment of 99–102
 heroic tradition in 102–5
 hiatus in production of 105–6
 justice and injustice figures in
 94, 101, 103, 107
 of the 1990s 108–9
 and relationships to historical trials
 95
 resolutions of 94–95
 significance of trial scene in 94
 story types in 144, 145
 themes of 93–99, 108–9
 traditional definition of 93
See also law noirs; women-lawyer
 films
- crime films
 on causes of crime 35
 of crime 47–48, 61–65
 definition of 5–6
 of heroism 141, 166
 ideal for portraying causes of crime
 47
 and ideology 7–9, 15, 102, 117,
 126, 153–54, 177
 of the 1930s 19–23
 of the 1980s and 1990s 38–43
 and pleasure 9–11, 141, 166, 179
 (*see also* double movement of
 traditional crime films)
 quiescence and revival of 29–38
 See also absurdist films; noirs;
 political crime films; silent
 crime films; *and names of*
 specific genres and films
- Criminal Code, The* 118, 131, 155
 critical crime films. *See* alternative
 tradition
- Cruising* 77, 90 n. 13
Cry Freedom 39
 Curtiz, Michael 22, 26
- Dead Man Walking* 127, 132, 133,
 134
Deep Cover 78
Deep Impact 170
Defenseless 108
Defiant Ones, The 126
Deliverance 51
Desperate Hours, The 29
 detective films 36, 176
Devil in a Blue Dress 8–9, 29, 168
 gender and race in 84–85, 87–88
 inversions of noir traditions in
 84–85, 87–88
- Dirty Harry* 74
 character of Harry Callahan
 36–37, 45 n. 26, 75, 76, 86, 148
 politics of 37, 49
 reasons for success of 74–75, 76
 significance of 7, 36
 sociopolitical context of 74–75
- Dirty Harry* series 75–76, 90 n. 8
 See also *Dirty Harry; Magnum*
 Force; Sudden Impact
- documentaries 95, 97, 132–34
Dog Day Afternoon 43, 59, 63
Dolores Claiborne 63, 144, 173
Donnie Brasco 3, 146, 180 n. 16
Double Indemnity 25, 26, 60, 81
 double movement of traditional crime
 films 3, 165–66, 177
 in courtroom films 102, 109–10
 in *Escape from Alcatraz* 10–11
 in prison films 117, 128, 130,
 and value structure 153–54
- Dr. Mabuse* 19
Dragnet 73–74
- Each Dawn I Die* 118, 119, 121
Enforcer, The 78
 environmental theories of crime in
 movies 51–54
- Escape From Alcatraz* 10–11, 120,
 127, 131
 creation of introductory scene in
 162 n. 8
 homosexual subtext of 126
 evil woman 55, 62

- Execution Protocol, The* 132–33
Executioner's Song, The 127, 128, 171
Eye of God 164 n. 44, 173
- Face/Off* 169, 172
Falling Down 63, 78
 hero type in 147
 organization of value conflicts in 152
 story types in 146
Farewell, My Lovely 25
Fargo 40, 41, 42, 88–89, 169
Fatal Attraction 68
 femmes fatales 24–25, 28
 Ferrara, Abel 161, 178
Few Good Men, A 97
 gender in 108
 story type in 146
 films noirs. *See* law noirs; neo-noirs; noirs
French Connection, The 37, 76
Funeral, The 178
Fury 19, 22, 100–101
- G-Men* 72
 gang and ghetto films 39, 54
 gangster films
 on causes of crime 54
 and images of cops in 72
 of 1930s 20–21
 of 1940s–1960s 22–23
 resolution of value conflicts in 154
 revival of in late 1960s 32
 silent 17–18
 story type in 146
 studies of 4
 gender, crime films' construction of 79–88, 124, 128
 See also babes-behind-bars films; women-lawyer films
 German expressionism 18–19, 23, 37, 55, 56
Ghosts of Mississippi 95
Godfather, The 6, 23, 35, 72
Godfather, The, Part 2 35
Godfather, The series 146, 147, 176
Goodfellas 43, 53–54, 146
Great Train Robbery, The 17
Grifters, The 12, 60, 62, 141, 160
Guilty as Sin 109
Gun Crazy 11, 27–29, 28, 41, 178
 on causes of crime 56
 compared with *Badlands* and *Thelma and Louise* 55
- Hawaii Five-O* 73–74
 Hawks, Howard 22, 24, 26, 127–28
Heat 78
Heavenly Creatures 171
 heroes 148–51
 missing 164 n. 44
 official 147, 159
 outlaw 147, 150, 159, 176
 outsider 149
 women as 169–70
 See also antiheroes; nonheroes
High Sierra 22
 Hill, Anita 68
 Hitchcock, Alfred 23, 30–31, 64–65, 101, 136, 143
 Hoover, J. Edgar 20, 72
House of Games 58
 Huston, John 22, 24
- I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* 21, 22, 48, 121, 127
I Want to Live! 96, 128, 129, 136
 basis in actuality 95, 105, 127, 139 n. 20
 central character 124, 149
 ideology in crime films. *See* crime films, and ideology
In Cold Blood 128, 171
In the Company of Men 180 n. 17
In the Line of Fire 167
In the Name of the Father 95, 96, 109, 121, 149
Informers, The 22
Inherit the Wind 98, 102, 104
Innocent Man, An 63, 127
 insanity defense, depictions of 97
 “integrated” films 83, 168

- Internal Affairs* 77, 86–87
internationalization of casting and production 169
- Jackie Brown* 70 n. 12, 167, 169
James Bond series 90 n. 3
Jagged Edge, The
absurdist element in 114 n. 26
on causes of crime 55
depiction of female attorney in 106–7
trial scene in 96
JFK 95
Judgment at Nuremberg 63, 95, 98, 102, 103
Juror, The 96
- Kael, Pauline 36, 90 n. 7
Kalin, Tom 29, 43, 136
See also Swoon
Kids 12
Killers, The 55, 143
Killing, The 59, 70 n. 12, 143
Killing Zoe 162 n. 7
King of New York 178
Kiss Me Deadly 29
compared with *Dirty Harry* 82–83
homage to, in *Pulp Fiction* 42
psychopathic women in 55
race and ethnicity in 83–84
story type in 142
traditional masculinity in 79–81
Kiss of Death 55, 127, 138 n. 12
Kiss of the Spider Woman 36, 39, 126, 131
Knock on Any Door 43, 69 n. 1, 101, 102
Kubrick, Stanley 59, 143
- L.A. Confidential* 29, 78–79, 142
Lady from Shanghai 60, 81, 99, 101
Lang, Fritz 18, 19, 22, 23, 101, 176
Last Dance, The 128
Last Detail, The 122, 138 n. 12
Last Mile, The 124, 128, 131
Last Seduction, The 147
- law noirs 101–2, 110
Leopold, Nathan 30, 64–65, 136, 137
Let 'Em Have It 72
Letter, The 96, 99, 101
Little Caesar 6, 20, 48–49
Lock Up 123, 126, 128
Loeb, Richard 30, 64–65, 136, 137
Lombroso, Cesare 50–51, 70 n. 9
Long Goodbye, The 36
Love Is the Devil 171
Lumet, Sidney 43, 59, 63, 77, 102, 109
on film marketing 174
- M* 19, 39, 55, 57, 176
Madigan 90 n. 5
Magnum Force 8
camera work of 82
character of Harry Callahan in 75, 81–83, 91 n. 21
compared with *Dirty Harry* 37, 75
constructions of deviant sexuality in 57, 91 n. 22
images of women in 82
masculinity in 81–83
race in 83–84
See also Dirty Harry
Maltese Falcon, The 22, 24–25, 26
on causes of crime 60
masculinities in 81
and story type 142
Man with the Golden Arm, The 29
and break with censorship 33–34
Manhattan Melodrama 100, 147, 152
Marked Woman 22, 94, 97
masculinities
construction of by cop films 79–90
nontraditional images of 85–88
and race 83–85, 87–88
traditional images of 79–83
Mean Streets 12, 43, 150, 178
on causes of crime 53, 55, 70 n. 8
Menace II Society 54
Mi Vida Loca 168

- Midnight Cowboy* 5
- Midnight Express* 120, 127, 138 n. 12
- Morris, Errol 43, 132
- Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America 33
- Motion Picture Production Code 33
- Mrs. Soffel* 119, 120, 124, 127, 139 n. 24
- Muni, Paul 20, 21, 50, 160
- Murder in the First* 96, 118, 119, 120, 122, 127
- exclusion of women from 125
- and story type 145
- Murder, My Sweet* 50, 81
- Murnau, F. W. 18, 19
- Musketeers of Pig Alley, The* 7, 17
- Music Box, The* 6
- My Family* 168
- narratives 68–69
- See also* story types
- Natural Born Killers* 6, 40, 41, 137
- on causes of crime 49
- script of 41
- and self-reflexivity 135–36
- as spoof on babes-behind-bars films 135–36
- and Stateville prison setting 127, 139 n. 19
- and story type 146
- Neanderthal Man, The* 50
- neo-noirs 78–79, 84–85
- New Jack City* 78, 147, 168, 176
- New York Asian-American International Film Festival 179
- Night Falls on Manhattan* 43, 77
- Night of the Hunter* 57, 142–43
- No Way Out* 38
- noirs
- attributes of 23–26
- on causes of crime 48, 60
- gender relationships in 24–25
- heroes of 73, 89, 148
- images of masculinity in 81
- influence of 29
- after 1945 26–29
- origins of 23–24
- and origins of alternative tradition crime films 11
- and race 83–85
- See also* law noirs; neo-noirs
- nonheroes 159–62
- Normal Life* 12, 60
- North by Northwest* 143
- Nosferatu* 55
- nudity 86
- Olmos, Edward James 131, 139 n. 20
- On the Yard* 11, 130, 164 n. 44
- One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* 137–38 n. 6
- Onion Field, The* 69 n. 1, 77, 106
- Out of Sight* 168–69, 175
- Outbreak* 171
- Ox-Bow Incident, The* 97–98, 102, 164 n. 44
- Papillon* 123, 125, 127, 138 nn. 8, 12
- Paradine Case, The* 94, 98, 101
- Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* 13 n. 5, 95
- paranoia films 174
- Paris Is Burning* 132
- Pelican Brief, The* 108
- Penn, Arthur 155, 158, 163–64 n. 35
- Physical Evidence* 107
- Place in the Sun, A* 26, 32, 105
- on causes of crime 58
- lack of justice figure in 94
- and story type 146
- Player, The* 14 n. 13, 177
- Point of No Return* 78, 128, 169
- police officers, film images of 72–73
- political crime films 38–39
- popular culture, role of crime films in 47, 165–66
- population, U.S. 167, 168
- Postman Always Rings Twice, The* (1946) 101

- attitude toward law in 99
- causes of crime in 58–59, 94
- lack of justice and injustice figures in 94
- masculinity in 81
- and meaning of title 58–59
- Postman Always Rings Twice, The* (1981) 99
- Prejean, Sister Helen 134
- President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice 71, 74
- Presumed Innocent* 97, 107–8, 144, 149
- Primal Fear* 97, 108
- Prince of the City* 43, 77, 78
- prison films
 - and alternative tradition 130–32
 - attractions of 123–28
 - and claims of authenticity 127–28
 - exclusion of women from 125, 138 n. 9, 139 n. 24
 - execution scenes in 128
 - future of 137
 - gender in 124, 126, 128, 138 nn. 9, 10
 - homophobia in 125
 - homosexual subtexts of 125–26, 138 n. 14
 - ideology in 117, 126
 - mythic elements of 126–27
 - and new documentaries 132–34
 - of 1930s 21–22
 - recent developments in 129–37
 - relationships of to historical prisoners and prisons 120–21, 127, 139 n. 20
 - revival of, in late 1960s 32, 36
 - silent 117, 121, 138 n. 9
 - stock characters of 117–20
 - stock plots of 120–21
 - stock scenes in 121
 - stock themes in 121–23
 - story types of 144, 145
 - trend toward self-reflexivity 134–37
 - and voyeurism 126, 138 n. 15
 - See also* babes-behind-bars films
 - prison rape scenes 63
 - Prison Stories: Women on the Inside* 139 n. 24
 - Professional, The* 169
 - Psycho* 30–31, 61
 - on causes of crime 56–57
 - influence of on subsequent crime films 30, 138 n. 15
 - as predecessor of the serial killer film 39
 - psychological explanations of crime in movies 54–57
 - psychopaths 55–57
 - Public Enemy* 6, 20, 21, 48–49, 154
 - Pulp Fiction* 40, 41–42, 48
 - Q & A 12, 43, 60, 63, 77
 - on human nature 89
 - race 83–85, 87–88, 167–69
 - Rainmaker, The* 97
 - rational choice explanations of crime in movies 58–59
 - Rear Window* 142
 - Red Rock West* 169
 - Regeneration* 17–18, 44 n. 6
 - Reservoir Dogs* 40, 41–42, 55, 88, 143
 - Reversal of Fortune* 97
 - Riot* 120–21, 122, 127, 168
 - Riot in Cellblock 11* 122, 127, 131
 - River's Edge* 48, 63
 - RoboCop* 79, 85–86, 145
 - Romeo Is Bleeding* 12, 60–61, 63, 77–78, 89
 - Rope* 30, 64–65, 136, 140 n. 31
 - Santa Fe, New Mexico, prison riot 121
 - Scarface* (1932) 6, 20, 22
 - on causes of crime 48–49, 50
 - censorship of 33
 - compared with 1983 version 160

- Scarface* (1983) 160–61, 178
Scarlet Street 19, 101
 Scorsese, Martin 33, 43
 and alternative tradition 178
 on causes of crime 53–54, 70
 n. 8
 and reinvention of gangsters 176
Sea of Love 78, 142
 “segregated” films 83, 168
Selena 168
 serial killer films 39–40
Serpico 37, 43, 76, 77, 149
Set It Off 66–69
Seven 9, 55, 85
Shaft series 77, 168
Shawshank Redemption, The 36, 63, 120
 exclusion of women from 125
 homosexual subtext of 126
 and ideal masculinity 124
 and prison film tradition 119, 135
Shoah 132
Shock Corridor 5
Shoot to Kill 78, 85
Short Eyes 63, 130–31
Show Them No Mercy 72
 Siegel, Don 36, 74, 143
Silence of the Lambs 61, 70 n. 11, 87
 deviant sexuality in 57, 91 n. 28
 effects of on job aspirations of
 young women 66
 silent films
 current interest in 175
 European 18–19
 origins of 16–17
 about prison life 117, 121, 138
 n. 9
 in Progressive Era 16–17
Silkwood 38, 171
Simple Plan, A 3, 48, 63, 175
Sister My Sister 171
Slammer Girls 120
Sleepers 124–25, 127, 138 n. 11, 145
Spanish Prisoner, The 175
Star Chamber, The 96, 106, 149
State of Grace 62, 89
 story types 141–46
 action narratives 146, 163 n. 25, 167
 bildungsroman 146
 capers 143
 chronicles of criminal careers 146
 disguised Western 142, 144
 justice violated/justice restored 144
 mystery and detective stories 142
 revenge and vigilante narratives 145, 163 n. 12
 thrillers 142–43, 162 n. 6
Straight Time 35
Stranger on the Third Floor 101
Strangers on a Train 30
Straw Dogs 35, 37, 54, 69 n. 3
Sudden Impact 145, 149
Sunrise 19
Superfly 168
Surviving Picasso 171
Suspect 107
Swoon 65, 136–37, 140 n. 31
 Tarantino, Quentin 29, 41–42, 88
Taxi Driver 37–38, 43, 159
 on causes of crime 53
 and John Hinckley Jr. 66–67
 organization of value conflicts in 152
 presaged by *Gun Crazy* 29
 story types in 145
Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The series 50–51
Thelma and Louise 7–8, 43, 169
 on causes of crime 56, 63
 and hero type 150
 and story type 145
They Made Me a Criminal 54
They Won't Believe Me 31–32, 97, 101
Thin Blue Line, The 43, 132, 133
Through the Wire 132
Time to Kill, A 98
Titicut Follies 132

- To Die For* 171
To Kill a Mockingbird 32, 95, 100, 104
 attitude toward law in 98
 cinematography of 102
 as a disguised Western 149
 heroic lawyer in 102
To Live and Die in L.A. 12, 62, 89
Touch of Evil 178
Trial by Jury 96
True Believer 96, 98
 true-crime films 171–73
 See also courtroom films, and relationships to historical trials;
 prison films, relationships of to historical prisoners and prisons
True Romance 40, 41–42
Twilight 78, 167

Underneath, The 175
Unlawful Entry 78

 value conflicts in crime films 151–54, 157–59
Verdict, The 6
 victimization as topic of crime films 173–74
 violence as an effect of media 65–69

Wag the Dog 70 n. 27
 Warner Bros. 22–23
 Warshow, Robert 18, 149, 150, 154
Weeds 127, 135, 138 n. 12
 Weine, Robert 18, 19
 Welles, Orson 23, 26, 101
 in *Compulsion* 64, 104
 and *Touch of Evil* 178
Whipping Boss, The 121
White Heat 55, 70 n. 9, 150, 152
Why We Watch 69
 Wickersham Report 20
Wild Bunch, The 6, 11–12, 37, 150
 influence of on cop movies 148
 as predecessor of absurdist films 40
 Wilder, Billy 23, 25, 26, 103
Witness for the Prosecution 102–3, 144
 women as heroes. See heroes, women as
 Women Against Pornography 66
 women-lawyer films 106–7, 108–9
 Wood, Robin 123, 125, 126
Wrong Man, The 94, 101
 Wyler, William 22, 23, 101

You Can't Get Away with It 72
Young Mr. Lincoln 98, 100, 101, 102
Young Philadelphians, The 94, 104