Gangster Films (Early film – mid 1950s)

Early Depictions and Genre Conventions

Used for fictional works telling a crime story concentrating on the lawbreaker, utilizing his point of view, often portraying and glorifying his rise and fall. The criminal may be either an individual or part of a gang; their rivalry with other criminals is as significant to them as their concern about police apprehension. Gangsters are often excessively ambitious, materialistic, street-wise, and immoral, and suffer from megalomania and various complexes that help lead to their destruction; they fail to understand that they are living an inversion of the American Dream (dream of wealth and success), and are doomed to failure.

Film gangsters are usually materialistic, street-smart, immoral, meglo-maniacal, and self-destructive. Rivalry with other criminals in gangster warfare is often a significant plot characteristic. Crime plots also include questions such as how the criminal will be apprehended by police, private eyes, special agents or lawful authorities, or mysteries such as who stole the valued object. They rise to power with a tough cruel facade while showing an ambitious desire for success and recognition, but underneath they can express sensitivity and gentleness.

Gangster films are often morality tales: Horatio Alger or 'pursuit of the American Dream' success stories turned upside down in which criminals live in an inverted dream world of success and wealth. Often from poor immigrant families, gangster characters often fall prey to crime in the pursuit of wealth, status, and material possessions (clothes and cars), because all other "normal" avenues to the top are unavailable to them. Although they are doomed to failure and inevitable death (usually violent), criminals are sometimes portrayed as the victims of circumstance, because the stories are told from their point of view.

Criminal/gangster films are one of the most enduring and popular film genres. They date back to the early days of film during the silent era. In fact, even Edwin S. Porter's silent short western *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) has often considered a classic hold-up story and chase film - a movie about crime. One of the first films to officially mark the start of the gangster/crime genre was D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) about organized crime. It wasn't the first gangster movie ever made, but it was the first significant gangster film that has survived. Outdoor scenes were shot in the gangland territory of NYC's Lower East Side with its slum tenements, and cast members included possible gang members. The story was about a poor, virtuous, and vulnerable Little Lady (Lillian Gish) who was threatened, victimized and terrorized by Snapper Kid (Elmer Booth) - the gangster leader of a gang known as the Musketeers.

The Gangster Film in the Era of the "Talking Picture"

It wasn't until the sound era and the 1930s, however, that gangster films truly became an entertaining, popular way to attract viewers to the theatres, who were interested in the lawlessness and violence on-screen. The events of the Prohibition Era (until 1933) such as bootlegging and the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929, the existence of real-life gangsters (e.g., Al Capone, John Dillinger, "Pretty Boy" Floyd, "Baby Face" Nelson) and the rise of contemporary organized crime and escalation of urban violence helped to encourage this genre. On the other side were law-enforcing "G-Men" (or "government men") led by the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover.

Three Classic Early Gangster Films from Warner Bros:

Warner Bros. was considered the gangster studio *par excellence*, and the star- triumvirate of Warners' gangster cycle, all actors who established and defined their careers as tough-guys in this genre, included Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, and Humphrey Bogart. Little Caesar (1930), Public Enemy (1931), Scarface (1932) were three of the first gangster films released by WB.

The Influence of the Hays Production Code on Gangster Films:

The coming of the **Hays Production Code** in the early 1930s spelled the end to glorifying the criminal, and approval of the ruthless methods and accompanying violence of the gangster lifestyle. The censorship codes of the day in the 1930s, notably the Hays Office, forced studios (particularly after 1934) to make moral pronouncements, present criminals as psychopaths, end the depiction of the gangster as a folk or 'tragic hero,' de-glorify crime, and emphasize that crime didn't pay. It also demanded minimal details shown during brutal crimes.

One way the studios quieted some of the protest and uproar over "America's shame" was to shift the emphasis from the criminal to the racket-busting federal agents, private detectives, or "good guys" on the other side of the law. In William Keighley's *G-Men* **(1935)**, the best example of this new 'gangster-as-cop' sub-genre, screen tough guy James Cagney starred as a ruthless, revenge-seeking, impulsive, violent FBI agent to infiltrate criminal gangs on a crime spree in the Midwest. Although he was on the side of the law working undercover, he was just as cynical, brutal, and arrogant as he had been in his earliest gangster films.

As the decade of the 40s and the post-war period emerged, crime films became darker, more brutal, violent, and cynical - many crime/gangster films were actually film noirs (a style or genre of cinematographic film marked by a mood of pessimism, fatalism, and menace. The term was originally applied (by a group of French critics) to American thriller or detective films made in the period 1944–54 and to the work of directors such as Orson Welles, Fritz Lang, and Billy Wilder)

Subgenres of the Gangster Film

Pschological Crime Thrillers

Courtroom

Organized Crime Gangster Films

Heist Films

Cop/ Detective Films

Prison Films