

# Audience position to the gangster film

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



“ Why has audience positioning towards Gangster films and their main characters Changed throughout the evolution of film? ” “ The crime ? Im is the most enduringly popular of all Hollywood genres, the only kind of ? Im that has never once been out of fashion since the dawn of the sound era seventy years ago. ”-Thomas Leitch The central theme of the gangster film has always revolved around law and order and essentially boils down to the Criminal institutions fighting one another or fighting a corrupt authority.

Movies such as ‘ The Godfather’, ‘ Goodfellas’ and ‘ Public enemies’ follow the same plot of organised crime. That is what the films are about, seeing as though the central characters operate under their own premise of law, the narratives involve their relationship with the authorities and agencies of law enforcement while the plots are usually structured around the process by which they are brought to justice. But throughout the evolution of the gangster genre is a central argument reflecting a fundamental difference in audience stance towards the gangster hero.

This plays on an Active audience theory as the audience take in the information they are given and pick sides. The contrast of audience opinion is displayed in a variety of different ways. In the film The Godfather, Sterling Hayden (Captain McCluskey) is the official figure, he is quickly revealed to be very brutal and corrupt, being a key person on the Tattaglia's payroll. When some enforcers of the Corleonefamilyprotect Don Vito Corleone, McCluskey has them taken away. Michael arrives soon after and realizes this.

Soon after, while Michael is guarding the entrance of the hospital with Enzo the baker, McCluskey and his guys drive up and harrass the two, ordering that they be taken in. When the officer refuses, McCluskey hits Michael

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across the face, badly bruising his face and breaking his jaw. Gangster movies frequently demonstrate that society's official institutions are as corrupt as the criminals they oppose (politicians in *The Untouchables*, multi-national corporations in *Scarface*. this positions the audience on the side of the gangsters in the film and against the authoritative figure. Gangster films dictate audience positioning by setting the Gangsters in the role of the hero in Propp's Character theory and the official figures as the villains, an example of this being used is. " The dynamic of every crime film focuses on the relationship between three sets of characters: the perpetrator, the victim and the avenger, but typically gangster narratives seek to undermine and blur the boundaries between the typological figures. "-Thomas Leitch.

This quote from Thomas Leicht perfectly illustrates how the narratives of Gangster movies dictate audience positioning by " blurring the boundaries" between the institutions of the characters. A dominant and largely widespread basis on which Hollywood's depiction of the underworld is fabricated is the domineering moral view that crime does not pay this may have resulted from early fears of audience reception through out-dated theories such as the hypodermic needle theory in which producers and political figures feared that an audience seeing a life of crime pay would be tempted to stray into the life of organised crime.

An example of an early gangster film that shows a ' Crime doesn't pay' attitude is *Little Caesar* 1931. The main charecters, Caesar Enrico " Rico" Bandello and Joe Massara follow different paths with Rico following a life of crime and Joe, against Rico's persuasion, follows a life without crime. Ultimately Joe lives the better life with Rico ending up dead and alone.

Modern films such as 'Lawless' 2012 follow a the opposite narrative with crime paying out at the end of the film with the three Bondurant brothers- Forrest, Howard and Jack ultimately beating a corrupt authority and saving their money from their bootlegging and settling down to family life although the film still shows that maybe the payoff of crime is not worth it as the consequences for their actions does result in the near death of Forrest Bondurant (Tom Hardy) on two occasions along with injuries sustained by all three brothers and the death of Cricket Pate (Dane DeHanne).

Narratives such as these can now exist as the hypodermic needle theory is now recognised as invalid after " the research movement, led by Paul Lazarsfeld and Herta Herzog, that would disprove the magic bullet or hypodermic needle theory, as Hadley Cantril managed to show that reactions to the broadcast were, in fact, diverse, and were largely determined by situational and attitudinal attributes of the listeners. Showing that audiences do not just absorb the information they see on screen, such as in the BoBo doll experiment, but rather actively receive the information and choose between a Dominant, negotiated or oppositional reading of the film, this invalidation of the hypodermic needle theory would add greatly to the rise of the gangster film as films were no longer limited to the " crime does not pay" narrative set by state censors. This assessment provides the moral foundation to the ' rise and fall' narrative that is the central theme for numerous gangster movies.

But it is a view that has frequently been respected, reluctantly, and at critical points in the development of the gangster film, only after external intervention. Particularly in that subset of the gangster film that focuses on

the Prohibition era, audiences' positioning echoes that of society more generally: 'law-abiding' members of the community started to associate with the gangster who has become a preferred supplier. The 2012 film "Lawless" is a good example of this with the Bondurant Brothers being more respected and idolised than the authorities.

These contrasts in audience opinion spread further to the gangsters' own attitude toward the law and its enforcement. Although in various gangster movies the gang leader is, himself, a basis of law enforcement inside a closed gangster society (Don Coreleon-Marlon Brando The Godfather), a dominant theme running through much of the sub-genre explores the gangsters' desire for acceptance in the straight and official world, particularly in those films which locate gangster activity within immigrant communities.

Although the gangster film dates back to the early days of the silent era, it wasn't until the advent of sound that the genre fully came into its own, when real-life gangsters like Al Capone were at the height of their own notoriety the public thirsted for seeing charismatic criminals on screen. Because of the relentless violence and unmerciful nature of the central characters, the gangster film helped to form Hollywood's Production Code, which meant that no criminal deeds went without repercussions, even though it was obvious that this was untrue in the real world.

Throughout the evolution of film as the Code was ignored by grittier and more realistic films, the gangster movie was an always popular genre that gave rise to some of cinema's greatest stars and directors i. e. Marlon Brando and Francis Ford Coppola. When gangster movies first started being

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produced in the 1920's, audiences were attracted to crime and gangster films because of the way these films were shot, and the images they saw on screen. Audiences started to enjoy these Gangster movies because of the reality they offered about the corrupt political and authoritative figures of the time (prohibition era).

The organised crime, violence, and drug use in gangster films made the audience more aware of the government and authorities' attitude towards the three main problems of organized crime, violence and drug use of the prohibition era. This is one of the main reasons crime and gangster films have continued to remain popular. Organised crime and gangster films have continued help to fill societies need for reality. By using violent male characters and romantic female characters, two main stereotypes of gangster films, both sexes are attracted to this genre of film.

Films like Bonnie and Clyde and The Godfather represented a gangster character that was no longer a savage, relentless criminal, rather, a gangster that had become humanized. A study into this genre shift explored earlier film representations and the more classical view of the gangster as a monster such as in the 1932 Scarface, while DePalmas Scarface presents the gangster Tony Montana (Al Pachino) is a psychopathic murderer but through certain scenes in the audience is positioned on the side of Tony.

An example of this is the scene where Tony is carrying out a hit on a journalist with a hitman. They are to blow his car up with the explosives in front of the United Nations building, but are surprised to see the man's wife and two daughters enter the car with him at his hotel. Tony, now extremely reluctant to continue with the hit, becomes increasingly agitated with the

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hitman, who refuses to deviate from Sosa's orders, until Tony completely snaps.

In a cocaine-induced rage, he murders the hitman, who was supposed to kill the journalist, screaming at his dead body deliriously. This scene, although portraying Tony as drugged up and about to execute a murder, shows Tony's conscience and still shows a salvageable character which positions the audience on his side through a negotiated reading of the scene. The audience of this scene broadly accept the preferred reading but use prior scenes in the film to reach the positioning on the character Tony Montana .

A study of the plot, setting, characters, themes, motifs, and props found in both films present a different view of the gangster . Many gangster films have remained popular and still continue to gather audiences due to them achieving a cult status such as the 1932 film Scarface The plot of the crime and gangster movie has not tended to deviated from the same standard plot throughout the evolution of film: the male character is striving to live the American dream and he does so by getting involved in illegal and often violent activities.

This plot leads to the common theme in gangster films which is a male character who wants to live the American dream and that the only way to do so is to become involved in organised crime and becomes deceitful. He begins to lie, steal and kill in order to make money, which is the fuel for their dream. While he is living this lifestyle he falls in love with the female character that is good and wants the male to get out of the illegal mess he is in. He promises her he will, after he does one last job.

This last job he does will either land him in jail or in a coffin. Examples of these plots and characters can be seen in movies such as Donnie Brasco. The early 1930s produced many of the iconic classics like Little Caesar and Scarface (1932) that became the template for other gangster films that followed, usually a poor immigrant who in a pursuit of the American dream and has a quick rise to the top through becoming involved with organised crime, only to fall prey to an even faster fall that ends in a violent death. See paragraph above) although gangster films did suffer shortly after Little Caesar's release in 1932 as public opinion turned sharply against the gangster genre with vast influence from state censors and "moral guardians" who thought the films unfit to be seen. Newspaper smear campaigns against the gangster genre were launched and even the extremely popular magazine 'variety' stated that "the major industry quit gangster themes because the public just tired of them".

Not until the application of the Production code administration did the Gangster genre effectively die out in the 1930's, although the public opinion had been turned against the gangster genre through popular culture, the justice department who believed that the genre "encouraged general disrespect for police and a lenient attitude towards thugs" still maintained that the genre opened with an exculpatory preface and closed with a crime-does-not-pay warning.

Few critics paid attention to the crime genre before the 1970's critics were more interested in films that were the very antithesis of the crime film. The crime genre suffered neglect against the westerns which enjoyed renaissance on the big screen. The low budgets of the early crime films



resulted in the absence of Technicolor where westerns like “Shane” 1953 continued to be popular.

Not until Alfred Hitchcock gained predominance in the suspense genre which resulted in academic critics paying attention to the crime genre which ultimately resulted in the resurgence of the gangster genre into the public eye. Crime and gangster films will continue to be produced as audiences want a film that gives them a sense of reality. This is an example of Blulmer and Katz's uses and gratification theory. Since people tend to feel that government officials are corrupt these films will most likely continue to show corrupt law officers and government officials, who are deceiving and lying to the public.

Gangster films have become and will remain iconic because they offer audiences escapism and show an audience a glorified life of gangster who are presented as being charismatic characters that the audience like to imagine they could be. The grandeur that is presented in the characters' life also makes the audience believe that maybe crime does pay, but the gangster genre will continue to remain popular down to one of the most basic sides of human nature, greed.

As corporate capitalism promoted consumerism the gap between the classes widened, Americans became infatuated with the gangster whose stylish dress and expensive cars yet humble origins defied the boundaries separating social class. As long as a gangster film presents a life of grandeur audiences will use them as a source of escapism. Leitch, Thomas, *Crime Films* (CUP, Cambridge, 2002) ----- [ 1 ].

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