

# the role of media in any society essay sample

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



On a surface level, genre theory can be seen as a means of “ the division of the world of literature into types and naming those types” (Robert Allen). These divisions in the realm of media cater for numerous factors such as audience expectation and commercial viability. Richard Jameson encapsulates the familiarity that accompanies media genre when he states that “ name one of the classic bedrock genres - western, comedy ... gangster, science fiction - and even the most casual movie goer will come up with a mental image, partly visual, partly conceptual”. Although genre can be used in this style of compartmentalization and preconception as a template for directors, on a deeper level, genre is a means of exploration of themes generated by the current society within which it is created. Braudy states “ genre is a powerful interplay of repetition and renewal” and it is this cunning interplay that allows media genres to reflect and reinforce the dominant ideas of society back towards the audience that generates them. As Waslow points out, the gangster genre explores audiences “ untraveled fantasies of molent upward mobility”. As it’s a genre, there are many characteristics present throughout virtually every gangster film that takes into account the audiences preconceptions. These include the rise and the fall of the gangster, levels of violence and to an extent, the pursuit of the American Dream. The nature of these characteristics however, are altered and warped by directors in order to portray certain themes and ideas that better illustrate the zeitgeist of society. A variety of gangster films can be observed to be doing this; G-Men (1935), The Departed (2006, Scarface (both 1932 and 1983). Each of these visual texts play the role of feeding the

pertinent issues and worries present within a society back to that particular audience.

The 1930s was a very conservative era for American society. Following the First World War and experiencing the Great Depression left the majority of their society pining for stability and safety, which translated into a return to conservative wholesome values. It was this this that sparked the creation and later introduction of the Hays Code to the film industry. For the gangster genre, this meant a heavy restriction upon not only what levels of violence and criminal acts could be displayed, but also on the levels of morality and the virtues that could be depicted to the audience. The film *G-Men* (1935) is a classic example of the Gangster genre being affected by the social anxieties of the time, as seen through the installment of the Hays Code. Traditionally, the Gangster film romanticized the gangster and followed his (gangsters were rarely female historically) rise and fall in the pursuit of wealth, power and general success (the American Dream essentially).

In “*G-Men*”, due to the guidelines of morality set in place by the Hays Code, the focus becomes heavily fixated upon the noble struggle of the virtuous detectives against the scummy, undesirable criminals. The characteristic rise and fall of the gangster is still observed, but it is seen through the lens of the detective throughout. For a time that needed stability and right wing morality, “*G-Men*” catered accordingly. Also, “*G-Men*” was consumed with the laws surrounding prohibition. As this was the major criminal issue during the 30s, it made perfect sense to have this be one of the central offenses on which the *G-Men* (Government-Men) cracked down upon. This exemplifies

how media genre is heavily influenced by, and therefore reflects the pertinent societal issues of the day.

2006 came during a time of notable social anxiety and paranoia. Following numerous scandals surrounding the infamous Bush Administration, people felt incredibly insecure and untrusting of their government, which was supposed to be incorruptible and in full service of the American public's interests. This was not the case, however, and this was conveyed back to society in the gangster film "The Departed" (2006). The main theme explored in this film is that of mistrust and uncertainty. The film starts by tracing the upbringing of the two central characters who both train to be part of the American Policing System, but both are seen to essentially be double agents, with one successfully becoming a state trooper who is immediately sent deeply undercover, and the other becoming a detective who is secretly crooked and protecting the main gangster of the film.

There are numerous plot twists throughout creating a sense of uncertainty for the audience, as well as many instances of "cat and mouse" between the two lead characters generating a heightened sense of paranoia for the viewer. The film's conclusion is predicated by almost all leading characters being killed by each other, all without their true motives and identities fully revealed or established. This encapsulates the zeitgeist at this time; no one is trustable, and no one is who they appear to be. This was the American public's attitude toward the Bush Administration, which is effectively fed back to them through the Gangster genre.

A very revealing story, in regard to how the Gangster genre reinforces the dominant ideas of it's society, is that of the Scarface films, the original being made in 1932 and then remade in 1983. Both films follow a relatively similar plotline, but a number of key aspects are altered in order to cater for the audience of the time. The original is centered around a young Italian immigrant making his way and following the American Dream. Made in 1932, it avoided some of the impact of the Hays Code (implemented fully in 1934) and therefore had some more morally questionable content. For instance, the lead character is romanticized, depicted as a loveable, charming and devilish criminal. He is ruthless and harsh at times, but this façade is established early on. He rises to the top through illegal alcohol trade but is eventually gunned down by law enforcers. The violence of the film is somewhat low key for a contemporary viewer, but during the 30s, especially with the Hays Code in mind, some scenes would have been considered graphic. Coming out of the roaring 20s, a film concerned with the American Dream would have appealed to many: rising to the top and reaching a life of luxury despite economic depression.

Alongside this is the much-illegal trade of alcohol during prohibition and the issue of mass immigration, many coming from Italy. The 1932 Scarface convincingly effected the societal concerns at the time, catering for the fantasies of the audience as well as adhering to characteristics of the genre. In contrast to this is the 1983 Scarface, this also fulfills it's role of showing the ideas of it's society, but was made with many alterations to effectively do so. It was a hyper violent film, truly living out audience fantasies, and had updated plot points in order to be relevant and relatable for the 80s

audience. The main criminal trade was drugs, with both the sale and consumption of drugs being a major theme. Instead of the anti-hero being from Italy, he is from Cuba, singling the shift of immigration concerns from one nation to another. The subtle attractions to what was essentially the same story emphasizes how media and its genres specifically cater to the zeitgeist of the time in which it was created, whether the audience is fully aware of it or not.

Although genre is designed to meet audience expectation on one level, providing economic viability and assurance, it also reflects ideas of the time through the changes made throughout the different eras. As Redwood states “ whilst genre is about prediction and repetition, it is also about innovation and renewal”, and it is this innovation that allows genre to mould itself around the concerns and fixations of the time, creating a relevant and revealing product. Unfortunately for the gangster genre, it appears its time in the movie making industry might be up due to globalization, sequelisation and the explosion of transmedia platforms. Stand alone films that are unlikely to be appealing to a world-wide audience are liable to sink out of existence in today’s Asia focused, commercially fixated film industry environment. That being said, media genres such as the gangster are incredibly effective in the role of reinforcing and reflecting the dominant ideas present within their given society, as proven throughout different eras by “ G-Men” (1935), The Departed (2006), Scarface (1932 and 1983). As the times change, genres maintain a versatile template, able to be medalled convincingly around the societal concerns of any given era.