

How the audience's expectations of the gangster genre



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Genre is a very important concept in film studies. A genre is a type of film.

Genre is very important because it helps us to compare similar films and see patterns and similarities between them. It also helps audiences by classifying films, giving them a list of what they can expect to see in a film of that genre. Genre can be classified as Narrative Structure, Iconography, Themes and Sound. The audience's expectations of the genre can also be split into these categories. Narrative Structure, in a gangster film the audience expects to see a linear narrative structure, with the story going in chronological order.

Gangster films may have many themes but the main theme expected of the genre is the rise and fall of the main character, generally the "don". The fall of this character is normally due to their greed for money or their hotheaded pride. In a gangster film the audience expect to see guns, big cars, smart suits, sepia panelled homes and rundown diners and bars. We expect to hear a diegetic 1950's/1960's soundtrack. Genre is also dynamic, it changes with time.

This is demonstrated well in the gangster genre by Reservoir dogs, this is generally considered as a gangster film but has a very non-linear narrative structure. Goodfellas meets most of the audience's expectations of the gangster genre but also continues advancing the genre. Through its frequent and graphic use of violence it titillates the audience, and it was probably the most violent gangster film when it was released. The violence in the extract is stronger and more graphic than would previously have been allowed in films, especially those of the studio era, when the gangster genre was

originally at its most popular, but filmmakers was heavily restricted by the Hayes code. In all other ways however the film does fulfil the audience's expectations of its genre, it has a simple linear structure, it has themes of hot-headed pride and violence which combined with other events causes the fall of the main character, however the central character is not the "don" as in previous gangster films such as "The Godfather". Iconography, in this aspect Goodfellas is quite conventional, in this way reminding you what genre the film belongs to.

In the extract we see everything we would expect with big cars with white walled tyres, smart suits, a tacky rundown bar and a gun. Women can almost be seen as icons in the gangster genre, something carried around by the men as status symbols, but in no way ever allowed to know anything about "business". We see this in the extract with Tommy bringing his lady friend to the bar but making sure she is well out of the way before "whacking" Billy. This is a major event in the film as this moment of hot-headed pride is what eventually causes the downfall of Tommy. The audience's reaction to this extract is to be shocked by the violence and by the fact that Tommy has killed a "made" man.

We see the tension build up as Billy mocks Tommy and we detect how this will inevitably lead to both men's deaths, we see when Tommy leaves that he plans to return to kill Billy, and once Billy is dead we sense that Tommy's eventual death is inevitable. As the central characters, Jimmy, Tommy and Henry are all present for this event and affected by it. When Tommy dies they lose their chance to have a made man amongst them, therefore this event leads to the downfall of all the central characters as the group no

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longer has a made man amongst them they have to turn to drugs to earn them money and feed their greed. The scene opens showing the exterior of the bar with large cars with whitewall tyres outside, we hear diegetic 1950's or 60's music from an old jukebox as the camera pans around the bar showing each of the characters involved in the scene in turn.

Distance and tension between Billy and Jimmy and Henry is immediately set up by the distance between them along the bar and by Billy's comment about them being Irish. Then Tommy enters and the tension increases as Tommy initially ignores Billy and then when Billy starts talking about Tommy's Childhood Tommy tells him to stop " bustin' my balls". Billy does not like this and comes back at Tommy referring to his childhood by telling him to go get his shoeshine box. This clearly incenses Tommy, but he restrains himself " I don't do that any more Billy, I've grown up since then". The tension then seems to die down until Billy says " now fuck off an get your shine box ".

Tommy reacts very violently to this trying to attack Billy, Henry and Jimmy know this is not good and restrain Tommy. Tommy then leaves but tells Jimmy to keep Billy at the bar. When Tommy returns later he approaches Billy unnoticed and pistol-whips him on the back of the head, Jimmy then restrains Billy as Tommy unleashes a barage of punches upon him. At the same time Henry goes to lock the door, and when he returns Billy is on the floor with Tommy above him punching him viciously in the face and Jimmy kicking him in the same area.

We see blood on Tommy and see Tommy going to shoot Billy in the head, however Jimmy kicks the gun out of the way, it will only make a mess and Billy looks dead already. They then go to remove the body and the extract finishes. This scene fulfils the audiences expectations of the gangster genre, and also rejuvenates the genre with its use of violence. It is an important scene within the film being at the time when the central characters are at their most powerful but also setting up the downfall of the central characters.

The audience see Tommy and Jimmy as more violent due to this scene although we already know they are dangerous.