

Example running order

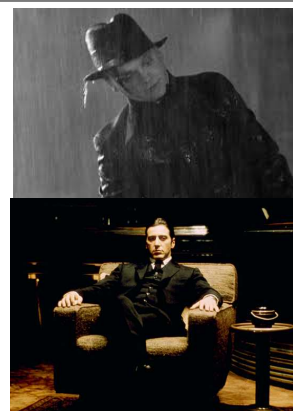
Topic - Evolution in the gangster film genre

Thesis, using French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss' binary or structuring oppositions to illustrate how the Gangster film developed as a mythic version of US 20th century history.

Preamble – In the Hollywood studio system, production, and the division of labour was organised by production units specialising in a single genre, and the big five studios tended not to infringe on each others generic territory, so MGM monopolise grand big budget musicals, universal the horror movie, Paramount expensive melodramas, and Warners, the Gangster movie, indeed to a greater extent the classic gangster movie had been an invention of Warner Brother studios, while there had been what Metz would describe as experimental iterations by Griffiths in 1912's "The Buccaneers of pig alley", the classic gangster movie found its form in the budgetary, constraints at Warners in the early 1930's only later did the constraints of the Production Code administration have an effect, but the essential style, themes, iconography and patterns of production of the gangster film were established at Warners in these years. This presentation will address how these came about, but the main focus will be how the gangster movie became an index of its age firstly through the classic period, and then in its revival, in the New Hollywood or the American New wave of the late 1960's and 70's.



The argument will adapt Levis-Strauss' structuring of narrative representations into binary oppositions to explore how the gangster and the criminal world is outside and separate from the world of conventional morality, this is revealed through representations of relationships of state and/or institutional authority to the gangster, which shifted, partially through institutional changes and partially through a change in the broader socio-cultural context of production.



Intro – if the western is the mythologising of US 19th century history, then the Gangster movie is the mythologising of US early 20th century history. In some respects the two genres are similar especially in the eulogising of rugged individualism. So where in the western Levi-Strauss' binary oppositions Structured around



ideas of Civilisation versus Wilderness provide a useful basis of analysis, a similar structure can be applied to the gangster film.

To explain if we look at the development of the western the oppositions provide a journey for the hero so in the classic western like "Stagecoach" (Dir John Ford US 1931) the Ringo Kid moves from association with the wilderness to integration into civilisation, in the transitional western like "The Searchers" (dir John Ford 1956 US) this is much more ambivalent, the (anti)hero emerges from the wilderness, but has understanding of 'civilisation', but cannot reintegrate himself into it, in the later iterations the hero may move in the opposite direction, ultimately rejecting 'civilisation'.



My affirmation is that the gangster movie relates to this, that in early classic versions like "The public enemy" (US 1931 dir Wyler), elements of state or institutional authority have little part to play in preventing the rise and ultimate demise of the individual anti-hero, so that in "The public enemy" (US 1931 dir Wyler) Tom Power's rise in crime is seldom accompanied by any iconography of conventional morality or state authority, the police are evident only once or twice in the film and are dismissed as corrupt or stupid, even Tom's demise, is not as punishment for his crimes, but at the hands of other gangsters, without police or other moral authority intervening. So Tom becomes an outsider from society (as a result of injustice, as felt by many who attended Warners cinemas) and remains an outsider through his rise, and his hubris and fall, this has mythic qualities and relates to the broader context of production.



The context of production is that Warners used newspaper stories as the original source material for their crime thrillers, and these early films (this one and Little Caesar 1931) were exploitation films under the guise of social conscience films, both open with lengthy title cards highlighting that what they're addressing is a social problem. The generic patterns of production were to recycle sets so that shot selections tended to be dominated by shots closer to the subject to hide cheaply dressed sets



and lighting was low key also to hide the recycling of sets. They also exploited footage produced by the montage unit, so that every gangster film features an elliptical montage sequence showing the rise of the gangster, indeed one can see shots from the montage in Public enemy repeated in the later film “The roaring twenties”



It was a gangster movie, RKO’s “Scarface” (US 1933 dir Howard Hawks) which brought the introduction of effective censorship in the American film industry.

This changed a number of aspects of the gangster film, but not its essential components, the glamorous anti hero, the economic shooting style and low key lighting, the elliptical narratives with the inclusion of montage sequences to trace the rise of the gangster



A good example of these changes and similarities would be Angels with dirty faces (US 1938 dir: Michael Curtiz).

So what remains the same is the smart talking and glamorous gangster, but what changes is his nature as an outsider, and his motivations for inclusion in conventional society, In Angels with dirty faces the young anti-hero is jailed for a petty crime at an early age to protect a friend, the film clings to the social problem ethos of the earlier films in that his friend becomes a catholic priest while Rocky becomes a more successful criminal because of his poor background and lack of opportunities for anything else. In this film the institutional of state authority are more central to the outcomes, Rocky dies at the hands of the state. However the relationship between the gangster/outsider and society are far more concrete than mere iconography or plot. On his release Rocky befriends a groups of youngsters who are also enrolled in a social project of his pal to set them on the straight and narrow. He distracts them from this, but in the cineatography one can discern how he is more integrated with the group. They are attracted to his easy charm, so the central conflict in the film is between the glamour of the gangster life and the more difficult choices of conventional morality this is also Rocky’s choice and the blocking reveals the similarities between the experienced Rocky and his potential apprentices The gangster/outsider and society, so that the ways the representations are constructed is a



little more ambiguous than the public enemy, but the film still highlights the binary oppositions of outsider and society, but the main outcome of the film is that the anti-hero makes a moral choice in the final scene, to save the youngsters from becoming outsiders, and is thus integrated with conventional morality.

The broader context of this film is that it was made five years after the introduction of the production code seal, under pressure from Catholic bishops in the mid-west, which is where Warners had the majority of their cinema chains, thus we're offered the representation conventional authority and morality as Roman Catholic.



So my thesis, that the gangster film developed through the representation of crime and the criminal as outside conventional society, in the Public Enemy to ultimately remain outside, and without redemption, but in "Angels with Dirty faces" to find redemption by choosing to make a conventionally moral choice for society's good. Our third film, turns this opposition on its head so that the conventional society offered to the audience is the world of the criminal, and it is conventional morality that is represented as abherent.

The godfather is both innovative and conventional as a gangster film. Its narrative arc is still the rise of the gangster, it still contains a montage to represent this, but its scope is far grander than the earlier classic iterations from the 1930's. It opens with a wedding scene, indeed this establishes a new convention in the gangster film, which also reveals the bonds of family and loyalty which were absent from the earlier films, however, this provides an early confrontation of conventional society and the world of the gangster, The opening of the film offers the world of Vito Corleone, the mobster boss, but cuts to Michael his son costumed in USArmy uniform, an index of conventional life, with his girl friend Kaye.



The film traces Michael's move from the world of conventional morality to the darker world of family loyalty over faith in conventional institutions (as the opening lines illustrate). That conventional morality is marginalised in tis story is crucial, mid way through the film, When

Michael has fled to Sicily Kay visits the Corleone family house, which has become a fortress, the Palette and blocking here illustrate just how marginal Kay as the moral centre of the film is, she arrives in a yellow cab, she is costumed in a vivid red coat, every other character in the scene is dressed in grey and black, all of the other cars are black, Kay stands as the outsider here.



The final scene of the film confirms this conflict and the final integration of Michael into the world of the gangster. Kay has confronted Michael about the sequence of murders which have permitted his elevation to criminal boss, he lies to her, and she leaves the room, the audience see her look back towards Michael in his office through an open door as subordinates pay tribute to him, this cuts to a slight tighter framed eyeline match, where we see one of the subordinates close the door on Kaye (and the audience).



This is an extraordinary powerful scene which one of them which uses a motif from John Ford's "The searchers" to make its point, in the mythology Ford created about the pioneer west the nation is represented by Family and belonging, domestic spaces represented civilisation, while exteriors were spaces for outsiders, uncivilised wilderness occupied by native north Americans. This conforms to the pattern of binary oppositions; civilisation versus wilderness which is evident throughout The Searchers, the still illustrates Ethan Edwards standing on the threshold of Martha's homestead in stasis, stuck between the wilderness and civilisation, only to remain in the wilderness, but we the audience look out towards him from the interior, we are integrated into the family of civilisation, we belong.



So how does this apply to the Godfather, Kaye looks into a family space, but she is excluded from her husband, from the family. It then cuts back to Kaye for the final shot, her face reveals her realisation.

If we explore this further, the moral centre of the film is left an outsider, as is the audience through sharing the eyeline match. So the movement of the gangster has turned around completely from being an outsider from society to being the society and excluding conventional morality.



Why should this be the case, well if one considers the socio-cultural context during the time of production, the US Government was conducting itself illegally in bombing Cambodia and with little moral compass in the execution of the Viet nam war,. The killing of protesting students at Kent state university in 1971, while The Godfather was in production is an unambiguous criminal act on the part of a state institution, so that the criminal world of the gangster as represented in the godfather could be seen as an actual view of US institutions where conventional morality was excluded as Kaye, and the audience are at the end of the film.

