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The Problem of the Crime Film

The crime film is the most enduringly popular of all Hollywood genres, the only kind of film that has never once been out of fashion since the dawn of the sound era seventy years ago. It is therefore surprising to discover that, at least as far as academic criticism is concerned, no such genre exists. Carlos Clarens's magisterial study *Crime Movies* (1980) begins by criticizing Robert Warshow's seminal essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" (1948) for its narrow definition of the gangster film, based on liberal social assumptions that "limited genres to one dimension apiece." Yet Clarens's definition of the crime film is equally delimited by its pointed exclusion of "psychological thriller[s]" like *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Laura* (1944), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) from its purview on the grounds that their characters are insufficiently emblematic of "the Criminal, the Law, and Society."[1] Larry Langman and Daniel Finn place themselves outside the debate over whether or not crime films include psychological thrillers by announcing in the Preface to their encyclopedic reference, *A Guide to American Crime Films of the Forties and Fifties:* "The American crime film does not belong to any genre. . . . Instead, it embodies many genres."[2] But their attempt to rise above the problem of classification merely indicates how deeply entrenched that problem is.

None of this academic quibbling has prevented crime films from retaining their popularity, or even from entering universities as the object of closer scrutiny. But subgenres of the crime film, like the gangster film of the 1930s and the film noir of the 1940s, have been more often, and more successfully, theorized than the forbiddingly broad genre of the crime film itself – this genre that is not a genre, even

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though an enormous audience recognizes and enjoys it, and a substantial following is interested in analyzing it critically. The unabated popularity of mystery and detective fiction, the burgeoning of such recent literary subgenres as the serial-killer novel and the novel of legal intrigue, the efflorescence of true-crime books, and the well-publicized criminal trials that keep Court TV in business all attest to the American public's fascination with narratives of crime. The crime film therefore represents an enormously promising, but hitherto neglected, focus for a genre approach to cultural studies.

To the question of whether the crime film is a genre or an umbrella term for a collection of diverse genres like the gangster film, the detective film, and the police film must be added another question: What does it matter? After all, what difference does it make whether the film noir is a genre or a subheading of a broader genre? To anyone but a few scholars of genre studies, these questions might seem inconsequential to the widespread understanding and enjoyment of crime films.

It is exactly this understanding and enjoyment, though, that are at issue in the definition of any genre. Raymond Bellour has pointed out that viewers for Hollywood musicals like *Gigi* (1958) are able to put aside their general expectation that each scene will advance the plot because of their familiarity with the more specific convention of musicals that successive scenes often present lyrical, tonal, or meditative "rhymes" instead, so that a scene of Gigi explaining how she feels troubled and baffled by love is logically followed by a scene in which Gaston professes similar feelings, even if there is no causal link between the two.[3] On a more practical level, it is viewers' familiarity with the conventions of the musical that prevents them from cringing in bewilderment or distaste when the story stops dead so that Fred Astaire can dance or Elvis Presley can sing. Learning the generic rules of musicals does not necessarily allow viewers to enjoy them more, but it does allow them to predict more accurately whether they are likely to enjoy them at all. It is therefore a matter of some importance to many viewers whether or not films like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Aladdin* (1992) are categorized as musicals, for their feelings about musicals are likely to influence how much they will enjoy such films, or whether they are likely to watch them in the first place. This is not to say that only viewers who like musicals will like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Aladdin.* Both films, in fact, are well-known for appealing to many viewers who do not ordinarily watch musicals; but appreciative viewers who recog-

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nize either film as a musical are more likely to be receptive to other films that resemble them, confirming the importance of genre in accurately predicting their enjoyment.

In the same way, asking whether films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) are westerns, even if different viewers answer the question differently, acknowledges the ways each film's affinities to the western – its similarities in mise-en-scène, action, and moral problems to those of the western – places them in a context that helps to sharpen and illuminate them. A familiarity with John Wayne's outsized heroic persona in westerns like *Stagecoach* (1939) and *Fort Apache* (1948) deepens viewers' understanding of the more problematic but equally outsized heroes he plays in later westerns like *Red River* (1948), *The Searchers* (1956), and *The Shootist* (1976). In each case, the conventions of the western provide a context that may make Wayne's actions more ironic, tragic, or elegiac – certainly more richly nuanced and comprehensible.

Viewers use many contexts, smaller or larger than established genres like the western, to interpret conventions of action and performance. Most viewers watching *Stagecoach,* for example, assume that Wayne's character, the Ringo Kid, will survive his climactic shootout with the Plummer family, even though he is outmanned and outgunned, because the survival of characters played by John Wayne is statistically an excellent bet and because the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative films[4] like *Stagecoach* make it more likely that Ringo will proceed to a rousingly heroic climax rather than survive a hazardous attack by Geronimo's braves only to be shot down on his arrival in Lordsburg. Even more fundamentally, most viewers assume that a climactic shootout will take place in the streets of Lordsburg because the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative predicate the resolution of the leading announced conflicts and an economy of representation that requires each person traveling in the stagecoach to fulfill the promise of his character and reveal his true nature. But all these expectations are generic, based as they are on a knowledge of the wider, though by no means universal, genre of classical Hollywood narrative within which the western occupies a place that gives its own conventions their special potency.

Because viewers understand and enjoy movies largely through their knowledge of the generic conventions, the question of whether gangster films have enough in common with whodunits and erotic thrillers to constitute a single genre of crime films is important to many more

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people than just film scholars. Even viewers who think they are interpreting Brian De Palma's remake of *Scarface* (1983) exclusively in light of the conventions of the gangster genre – or, more narrowly, in light of its departures from Howard Hawks's 1932 film of the same title – may well be seeing it in the context of the broader genre of the crime film. The example of *Stagecoach* suggests that genres characteristically nest in one another, the most sharply focused (the John Wayne western, for instance) drawing their powers from their specific transformations and adaptations of the conventions of broader genres like the western or still broader genres like the classical Hollywood narrative. Although viewers are most likely to be consciously aware of the narrowest genres, the broader genres that are operating simultaneously are equally, though less visibly, influential in directing their responses. Because every genre is a subgenre of a wider genre from whose contexts its own conventions take their meaning, it makes sense to think of the gangster film as both a genre on its own terms and a subgenre of the crime film.

If a genre can be as specific as the John Wayne western or as general as the well-made Hollywood narrative, then it is clearly possible to defend the crime film as a genre simply by installing it at a level of generality somewhere between the gangster film and the classical Hollywood narrative. But such a solution would prove nothing at all; it would merely introduce still another category to a field already crisscrossed with genre markers. The aim of this book is therefore not simply to introduce a new generic category of the crime film but to explain how such a category has already been operating to inform viewers' understanding and enjoyment of such apparently diverse genres as the gangster film, the film noir, and the crime comedy.

Establishing the crime film as a genre as rich as those of the western or the horror film – or, for that matter, the gangster film or the film noir – raises the problems involved in defining any genre. Genre theorists have long recognized this as a chicken-and-egg problem. If a genre like the western can be defined only in terms of its members, but the members can be recognized as such only by viewers who are already familiar with the genre, how can viewers recognize any genre without already having seen every film arguably within its boundaries?[5] The short answer to this question is that they can't; hence the disagreements that inevitably arise over whether *The Wizard of Oz* is to count as a musical by viewers who have different ideas about what a musical is. A contrary answer is that they can, despite the lack of theoret-

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ical justification. Even if theorists were to demonstrate that the western was a logically indefensible category, nonspecialist viewers would go on referring to it because it is so useful and, except at its boundaries, so easily recognized. Most people can recognize their friends more easily than they can describe them because different skills are involved in recognition and description, so that even Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's oft-ridiculed pronouncement that he couldn't define pornography, but "I know it when I see it," makes sense.[6]

Recognizing genre conventions is clearly a developmental process. Few children understand the conventions of Hollywood westerns, but most adults do. Adults have gradually picked up the conventions through exposure to particular examples of the genre, because their understanding of the genre and of particular examples of it have been mutually reinforcing. When revisionist westerns like *Duel in the Sun* (1946) or *Unforgiven* (1992) appear, they are either dismissed as nonwesterns or antiwesterns, sharpening the genre's definition through their exclusion, or they succeed in redefining the whole notion of the western by exploring new possibilities implicit in the genre. The mutability of generic conventions makes it clear that genres are best thought of as contexts that evolve in both personal and social history, the contingent results of ongoing transactions between viewers and movies, rather than eternally fixed and mutually exclusive categories.[7]

Even given this transactional, evolutionary concept of genres, there will always be debates about films on the margins of any particular genre, since many viewers believe, for example, that *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) feels more like a musical than *Fun in Acapulco* (1963). Some fifteen years ago, Rick Altman proposed a distinction between syntactic and semantic definitions of genre to account for the phenomenon of musicals that have many of the generic markers of musicals (a recognized musical star like Elvis Presley sings several numbers) but not others (*Fun in Acapulco* does not explore the thematic relationships between performance and sincerity, public and private life, that are central to musicals like *Singin' in the Rain*).[8] More recently, Altman has suggested "a semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to genre" to incorporate into his grammar of textual markers a more systematic awareness of the multiple users and uses even the simplest films find.[9]

It is no wonder that Altman has expanded his earlier theory in the light of the many films marked by conflicting, often shifting generic allegiances. Most westerns from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to *Unforgiven* are organized around stories of crime and punishment;

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1. *Something Wild:* a crime film, or a screwball comedy gone wrong? (Ray Liotta, Melanie Griffith)

yet few viewers have called them crime films. If *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) is to be counted as film noir because of its confining mise-en-scène, its trapped hero, and its use of a fatalistic flashback, should *Citizen Kane* (1941) be counted as noir too? Is *Something Wild* (1986) [Fig. 1] a crime film or a screwball comedy gone wrong? Critics have often coined nonce terms like "superwestern" and "neo-noir" to describe films that transform or combine elements from different genres, but these terms raise as many problems as they solve. If *Outland* (1981) is an outer-space western – *High Noon* (1952) in space – is *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), John Carpenter's homage to *Rio Bravo* (1959), an inner-city western?

This problem of cross-generic allegiances persists even within the crime film.[10] Is *The Thin Man* (1934) a private-eye story or a crime comedy? Is *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) a hard-boiled detective story or a film noir? *The Usual Suspects* (1995) combines elements of the gangster film and the whodunit; how is it to be classified? What to make of police films that are also studies of criminals, like *The Untouchables* (1987) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) [Fig. 2]? And what about

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2. *The Silence of the Lambs:* A police film that is also a study of a monstrous criminal. (Anthony Hopkins)

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White Heat (1949), which combines a gangster hero, a film-noir heroine, an undercover cop, and an extended prison sequence that borrows the conventions of many another prison film? These problems are not solved by using the genre of the crime film to dissolve all distinctions among its long-recognized subgenres; nor are they solved by declaring one subgenre the categorical victor and ignoring the claims of others. It makes sense, in such a work of classification as the bibliography to Barry Grant's *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*, to exclude gangster films from the crime-film genre on the grounds that "that group of films is clearly defined to the extent that it can be understood as comprising a distinct and separate genre."[11] But the distinctiveness of the gangster film's conventions cannot support an argument for any essential distinction between gangster films and crime films, because there is no reason to assume that distinctive genres are parallel and mutually exclusive. The caper film, for example, has its own distinctive generic rules, but those rules do not prevent it from being widely recognized as a subgenre of an even more well-established genre, the gangster film, whose gangsters have been assembled in caper films on an ad hoc basis for a particular job.

Instead of attempting to construct genres that are mutually exclusive, it would be more judicious to agree with Janet Staiger that "Hollywood films have never been pure instances of genres,"[12] from D. W. Griffith's combination of historical epic, war movie, domestic melodrama, and racial propaganda in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to George Lucas's revitalization of science fiction in *Star Wars* (1977) by recycling the story of Akira Kurosawa's samurai comedy-drama *The Hidden Fortress* (*Kakushi toride no san akunin,* 1958), itself based largely on the conventions of the Hollywood western.

The multiple generic allegiances of most films, however, are obscured by the fact that some such allegiances have historically overridden others. Any story presented in animated form, from the musical romance *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) to the epic *Lord of the Rings* (1978), will automatically be classified as a cartoon because the animated cartoon is a stronger genre than the genres of romance and epic. Virtually any story with a setting in nineteenth-century western America will be classified as a western, because the claims of the western override the claims of competing genres. Films like *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976) and *Hoop Dreams* (1994) are commonly classified together as documentaries rather than distinguished in terms of their subject matter. In the same way, films like *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *The*

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Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad! (1988) are classified as parodies rather than as members of the various genres whose conventions they mock, because their parodic intent trumps their affinities with the specific genres they are sending up.

What makes a genre strong? The example of the cartoon, the strongest of all popular genres, suggests that the most powerful generic claims are based on mise-en-scène. Crime-and-punishment tales like *Winchester 73* (1950) and *Rancho Notorious* (1952) are classified as westerns rather than crime films because their setting takes precedence over their story. Any movie set in outer space, from *Buck Rogers* (1939) to *Alien* (1979), becomes a science-fiction movie. The reason that film noir is such a strong genre, or subgenre, despite the lack of any clear consensus about what sort of stories it tells, is the powerfully homogeneous sense of visual style that unites such diverse noirs as *The Killers* (1946), *Force of Evil* (1948), and *The Big Combo* (1955).

Almost equally powerful as a generic marker is intent.[13] Any movie whose stated aim is to entertain children will be classified as a children's film or a family film, whatever its plot or characters or setting – unless, of course, it is animated, in which case it will be classified as a cartoon. Comedy, which seeks to make viewers laugh; horror, which seeks to make them scream; documentary, which seeks to inform them about some real-life situation; and parody, which seeks to make fun of other genres – all these are such strong genres that critics have long categorized *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944) and *Married to the Mob* (1988), for example, as comedies about crime, rather than crime films with some laughs; and reviewers who saw *Mars Attacks!* (1996) as more imitation than parody unanimously dismissed the film as a failed parody rather than a successful imitation because they agreed that a parody's first duty is to be funny rather than faithful to its sources.

Weaker genres are based on typological situations (boy meets girl, ordinary characters get into ridiculous scrapes), characters (zombies, monsters, oversexed high-school students, attorneys), or presentational features (the story is periodically interrupted or advanced by dance numbers). Such genres are most likely to be overridden by stronger genres whose claims conflict with theirs. Thus *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) is a comedy rather than a monster movie, and the transsexual science-fiction horror parody *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), however it is categorized, is rarely described as a musical. When Brian Henderson argued that *The Searchers*'s story of rescuers attempting to save a victim who did not want

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to be saved actually crossed the boundaries of the western to constitute "an American dilemma," in films as different as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Hardcore* (1979), his premise did not have the effect of establishing a new genre of unwelcome-rescue films because the common story he described did not have the power to override the conflicting generic allegiances of the examples he cited.[14] The disaster genre that flourished early in the 1970s (*Airport*, 1970; *The Poseidon Adventure*, 1972; *Earthquake*, 1974; *The Towering Inferno*, 1974) shows that small numbers do not necessarily make a genre weak; but the disaster genre is easily overridden by the conventions of the parody, as in *Airplane!* (1980), or the action blockbuster, as in *Jaws* (1975), originally marketed as a disaster movie until it was recognized as inaugurating a far more profitable, hence stronger, genre.

Lacking the box-office potential of such recent blockbusters as *Independence Day* (1996) and *Titanic* (1997), most genres can best display their strength by articulating the central problems that endow their stock characters and situations and spectacles with power and meaning. Even apparently unproblematic genres like the musical and the cartoon can be seen as organized around problems based on their distinctive presentational features. Musical performers like Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Judy Garland typically act out rituals dramatizing the complex relationship between realism and artifice, sincerity and performance, both while they are performing their song-and-dance numbers and in their characters' more private moments. Their films use production numbers to raise questions about public and private identities and the dynamics of self-presentation, particularly within the ritualistic context of romantic courtship. Similarly, just as cartoons are defined pictorially by a tension between the highly stylized two-dimensional space in which they are drawn and the more realistic third dimension they imply, they are defined thematically by the tension between the requirements of realism (empathetic coming-of-age rituals for Disney heroes from Pinocchio to Simba) and magic (from the constant transformations of shapes and animated objects typical of all Disney cartoons to the playful self-reflexiveness of Warner Bros.' *Duck Amuck,* 1953).

No matter how it is defined, the crime film will never be as strong a genre as the cartoon, the horror film, or the parody. It lacks both the instantly recognizable mise-en-scène of the animated film (or even the compellingly stylized visuals of the film noir) and the singleness of intent of the horror film or the parody. But the crime film is a stronger

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