Preface

A large percentage of feature films are genre films. Filmmakers do not normally proceed without an awareness of the kind of film their time and money is being used to create. The decision they arrive at becomes a basic controlling factor for the film. Viewers use genres to help themselves determine the kind of evening they would prefer to spend at the movies. Critics use genre as a method of organization, as a term and a concept that serves their discourse and allows for particular kinds of discoveries. Since genre considerations figure so importantly in the production and the viewing of so many films, the direction for critical thought that genre supplies is central to the attempt at understanding them.

Criticism of film genres has largely been concerned with systematizing what most filmgoers haphazardly discern, with placing and classifying films on the evidence of descriptive definition. This is of course necessary, but both classification and description are open to dispute, despite claims to objectivity. More to the point, however, is that thinking about film genres should go beyond stressing their repetitive iconographical, situational, and narrative elements. Genres persist, change, and overlap, and we must ask questions about both their persistence and their evolution. If they persist, they must be useful, but useful for what? Observation must be incorporated into argument, into theory and interpretation. We must ponder the *meaning* of genres.

In dealing with the American gangster/crime film, I have posed myself this question: what does the genre do that can't be done as

well elsewhere? This seems to me the large question necessary to genre definition. What does the framework of any particular genre allow the expression of? I think, also, that we are well aware that the bare bones of generic description do not adequately account for the complexities of any given film, that infinite qualifications as to how generic elements function are required before our perception and experience of the film can proceed toward a criticism capable of exploring the film's value, meaning, and impact. Resemblances are often enough superficial and/or merely serviceable. It goes without saying that a genre critic is obliged to see a great number of films before attempting discriminations of kind, likeness, similarity. However, it is not enough to see a sufficient number of films. The critic is also obliged to think them through, if only to make classification, and designation of patterns and qualities, reasonably accurate.[1] Even genre criticism that is predicated upon an intellectual grasp of a distinct and distinguishable *body* of work must ultimately rise to the challenge of understanding specific works, not only because a film addresses us in its totality but also to ensure the flexibility and credibility of its generalizations.

The gangster/crime genre is an involved system of family relationships. Specific films tend to violate, extend, adapt, and sometimes dismiss the conventions that in part color and motor them even as they are evoked and put into play. Paring down the complexity of the genre is no solution, whatever the advantage to critical convenience and efficiency. A theory of the genre that does it justice should be capable of elucidating its most complex manifestations as they occur in individual films. Whatever general ideas and implications can be drawn from the films of the genre, they must be shown to emerge from the films themselves. My discussion, therefore, centers on key, representative films, from which theory is derived and developed. Undertaking theory and close analysis in conjunction will, I hope, prevent theory from limiting and misrepresenting the films and advance criticism of the genre toward a complex consideration of works in relation to their informing structures, an activity it has been reluctant to perform.

Genres are cultural metaphors and psychic mirrors. We don't know of what until we study the films that comprise them. In vary-

ing degrees, each film genre offers an account of the life we lead, wish to lead, or ought to lead. To study a sequence of films that use similar frameworks allows us to think about the utility and potential of those frameworks. The sequence should be chronological so that changes may be perceived in their proper relation to social/historical factors and advances in the medium itself and, more fundamentally, because films must be understood as standing in a line of influence. There remains the problem of which films belong in which genres. We all make hurried, though generally pretty reliable distinctions—we know, more or less, what musicals, westerns, gangster films, soap operas, horror films, and war films are. (Comedy is notoriously amorphous and is not really a genre at all but a sensibility, a way of looking at the world.) In the five years or so that I have applied concentrated (as opposed to random) thought to the gangster/crime film, several writers have charted out some possibilities, and there seems to be a general consensus as to the outer limits of what films can be included. I stand indebted to all those writers—Lawrence Alloway, John Baxter, John Gabree, Stuart Kaminsky, and Colin McArthur, in particular—for their thoughts on the matter, although my personal sense of the continuity of the genre approximates Baxter's and McArthur's most closely. That is to say, my view of the genre is rather a wide one; it embraces a great many films. In terms of their purpose, and their visual-iconic organization, the genre includes not only those works obviously concerned with the character and fate of the gangster hero but also certain *films noirs, policiers,* juvenile delinquent films, private eye films, and syndicate films.

The film critic operates under some disadvantages. He must depend too often on memory, he does not have a vast body of knowledge to support him, existing methodologies offer only minimal entry into the subject, and the complex factors of moviemaking are inhospitable to critical security. (A picture may be proverbially worth a thousand words, but our ability to read it, taken for granted, remains practically and theoretically underdeveloped in an icon-dominated culture.) Everything in a film is there because somebody wanted it there, although it is often hard to know why or even who that somebody was. There is far too much in any single film for a

critic to discover on his own; moreover, some factors operate invisibly, and the critic may simply be blind to yet others. Movie "magic" is the result of the effective combination of numerous elements, and critical pursuit of these combinations is quite frustrating. An art director might have an idea about this or that, which may end up only half realized in the finished film, or even inverted. Meanings are never stable. No filmmaker can ever be certain that what he intends is what is communicated, and movies come and go so fast that there is little time or opportunity to arrive at a knowledgeable consensus. And then, watching movies is one thing, writing about them another. We are too quick, too self-protective in arranging experience into abstractions. Films have been both damned and praised because of the emotional force of their images, their immediate, nonverbal impact.

Given how movies work, the call to demystify them is at once romantic, impertinent, and necessary. Criticism has not progressed very far in accounting for how we are "spellbound in darkness," for how movies exert their control. Even at mundane, nonphilosophical levels, we operate in a half-light. We have no means to describe long-term rhythms, for example, nor are we clear about such simple matters as what establishing shots "establish" or what is signified by camera movements from the periphery of a location to the center—as in the conclusion of the *The Line-Up*—or vice versa. Moreover, modern scientific and aesthetic theory points to the delusory nature of objective systems, and films themselves are beginning to work with the assumption that it is impossible to define anything as distinct from our perception of it[2] (what the Cubists incorporated into their paintings over six decades ago). This obviously puts into question the idea of critical "proof."

Assuming that criticism cannot hope to "prove" anything, it is still a formal and refined version of a natural human tendency to be curious about the works of art one has been affected by, and, to be manageable, criticism must, to some extent, be reductive. One cannot hope to say everything one feels and knows about a subject all at once, in one book. Nor can one risk being despotically conclusive about so young a field of inquiry and practice as film. No one critic can be the measure of any film, and certainly not of a cycle of

films. The elucidation of films must proceed on as many fronts as possible, but in a measured, cautious, tentative, provisional way. The closing of any subject is always premature, and the desire that would have it so always pernicious. There isn't any aspect of film that doesn't require further opening up. Given the vast amount of work to be done, the following chapters may best be regarded as only a beginning. If the book is successful, it will provoke other critics to take up where I have left off.

Film criticism is in a primitive stage because we know very little about film—very little about the intricacies of intent and reception for any given film. It is in a primitive stage because the medium itself makes evident the obsolescence of our critical language. The history of film theory is a catalog of conflicting intellectual misadventures, and there is no secure and shared sense about when film criticism is actually talking about its subject matter and when not. In general, a relaxed, intelligent speculation that takes its time and weighs changes in the medium and new information into its consideration has not been the rule. Rather, there has been a rage for order, a hurry to nail things down, an urgent, sometimes desperate invasion of other disciplines for their methodologies. We must, before we make dubious alignments to any critical or scholarly system, patiently discuss with each other and inform each other of what we have seen on the screen and provide different kinds of ordered presentations of the thoughts our experience has induced. In writing and thinking about film, we must be content to make slow, small, and partial gains. We must proceed using what we know, but with a healthy awareness also of all that we don't know.

I have voiced these (perhaps unnecessary) admonitions to ensure that these pages not be misunderstood in spirit. A pessimism about critical language—and the nature of the film medium gives it plenty of fuel—may on occasion seek to overcompensate by aggression and assertion. The same may be said for one's enthusiasm—which film also can provoke to excess. If I err in either direction, it is not from a wish to compel authority but to compel attention to the importance of the subject, to make the reader want to see or resee the films and think about them so that he or she, in turn, may provide new ways by which a viewer's receptivity to the

medium and its works can be increased. One dilemma of film criticism is that the immediacy of films is often too matter-of-factly put aside in the interests of manageability. One's discontent with the detachment that accompanies any orderly critical investigation may, however, be tempered by the belief that there is a genuine, if limited, relation between our preconceptual, quirky, individualized apprehension of films and the reasoned discourse we apply to them.

The gangster/crime film is difficult to write about, to hold in view as a unity, because it shifts gears so frequently. Perhaps a small army of film critics is ultimately what is required to come fully to terms with it. My study must inevitably fall short of raising *all* the issues and questions pertinent to an examination of the genre and obviously cannot conduct analyses of all its films. If what I have written will hasten badly needed studies of films like *The Big House, Quick Millions, The Secret Six, T-Men, Raw Deal, Criss-Cross, Brute Force, Machine-Gun Kelly, Angels with Dirty Faces, The Line-Up, Bloody Mama, Dillinger, The Roaring Twenties, Party Girl, The Enforcer, Mean Streets, He Walked by Night,* and many others, it will in large part have fulfilled its aim. Further insight into the genre is seriously hampered by the almost utter absence of responsible attention to films such as these. Whether the careful study of such films will produce evidence that confirms, alters, or negates the conceptual apparatus I provide remains to be seen.

The gangster/crime genre is of course not exclusive to film. Film does not exist in isolation from other media. My interest, though, is in following the drift of the genre in film, a large enough task for one book. To attempt to include, say, the hard-boiled school of fiction or the enormous number of crime comics in the discussion would be to complicate matters unduly and nearly double the length of the book. (Moreover, access to the relevant pulp fiction and comic books is by no means easy.) This material is complementary and would no doubt prove mutually illuminating, but it merits a separate inquiry. The protean, unruly nature of the genre, besides, is never more apparent than when we observe its treatment in various media. It conforms to both appropriate and necessary contexts of production, materials, audience, and morality.

Thus, to take one example for illustration, the depiction given of Pretty Boy Floyd as a brutal psychopath reveling in sadistic violence in the Fawcett Publications' 1948 comic book one-shot entitled *On the Spot* could not then have been the attitude adopted by a movie biography of Floyd. It would have been modified and softened considerably, the violence kept proportionately in balance with a characterization developed through social/personal relationships. Interestingly enough, the 1970 movie, *A Bullet for Pretty Boy,* and the 1974 made-for-TV movie, *Pretty Boy Floyd,* show the figure as a warmhearted, misunderstood boy forced reluctantly into crime. One cannot study the minutiae of these interrelationships idly or parenthetically. It is not from lack of interest that they are excluded from this book. To limit oneself to a perception of a genre as it evolves in one medium and cohabits with the mores, speech, feelings, and general concerns of a society through several decades of time is a necessary confinement if one hopes to get anything done at all.

In preparing the bibliography, I was surprised to find that so little has been written about so important a body of films and that individual films, especially, have been neglected to such a sad degree. Discounting a stray paragraph or sentence here and there, my writing is the only sustained work done on *The Public Enemy, High Sierra, Kiss of Death, Force of Evil, D.O.A., White Heat, 99 River Street,* and *The Brothers Rico.* Several of the other films I treat are represented by one sometimes inadequate essay apiece. The lack of critical acknowledgment of so many rich films helped determine my focus, but that still left me with the problem of which films could best serve as paradigms of the genre's range and achievement. The genre is, of course, more diversified than my small selection of films for analysis may unwittingly imply. Nonetheless, my choices followed from a desire to show the genre's variety and versatility in its curvy, bumpy route over half a century of time: A films and B films, films celebrated and films *maudit,* classic films that had to be written on and curiosities that otherwise seemed destined to a premature oblivion, each a serviceable index to the directions the genre was taking at the time of its release, and each proving substantial upon reviewing.

I'd like first to thank—if it can be done unfacetiously—the city of New York, whose many theaters and movie-saturated TV programming allowed for a youth (some would say) misspent gorging happily on these films and countless others. I'd also like to thank everyone who has done his bit to keep me honest on this subject: several of my English Department colleagues at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and mainly my students, who provided the interest, support, and intellectual challenges that made this study possible. Special thanks to Professor Charles Eidsvik for ideas on *D.O.A.* and to Les Perleman for spotting additional Christological references in *Kiss of Death.* To my wife Carol I owe many debts—intellectual and otherwise—that go beyond what words can say.