

A monochromatic blue-toned photograph of a man in a classic gangster outfit. He is wearing a dark fedora hat, a light-colored dress shirt, a dark pinstriped tie, and a dark trench coat with a wide collar. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a moody atmosphere. The background is dark and indistinct.

A COMPANION TO
**THE
GANGSTER
FILM**

EDITED BY
GEORGE S. LARKE-WALSH

WILEY Blackwell

A Companion to the Gangster Film

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George S. Larke-Walsh

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Introduction

George S. Larke-Walsh

Gangster films have consistently been one of America's most popular genres. In 1954, Robert Warshow calls their protagonists the logical development of the myth of the Westerner and suggests they "appeal to that side of us which refuses to believe in the normal possibilities of happiness and achievement" (454). Earlier, in 1946, Warshow had stated a gangster's "tragic flaw" as their refusal to accept limitations, thus arguing the inevitability of their downfall in every film. As such, gangsters are symbols of freedom and self-expression, but with a concurrent inability to control their impulses. Warshow's descriptions provide easily understood and pragmatic reasons for the gangster's appeal, and consequently these two analyses have dominated responses and writings about the gangster film ever since their mid-century publication. However, gangster films have always been about so much more than individual excesses of crime and violence or the protagonist's inevitable demise. As the study of cinema has developed and recognized the diversity of political and cultural ideologies at play in popular film, gangster narratives have been accepted as more complex than originally thought. Cinematic gangsters are often immigrants, or the dispossessed; they exist outside established political systems. Their actions often begin with bids for acceptance or simple survival, while their cultural identities are often distinct and shown as valuable. It is true that these values are corroded by the ensuing crime and violence, but it is the romance, or nostalgia for what the gangster initially stands for and then loses that underpins the appeal of the gangster in modern culture. In many ways, the gangster film is the most ideologically conservative of the classical Hollywood genres because it shows success to be a tenuous position, thus encouraging audiences to feel happier in their anonymity.

However, it also applauds the desire for success in the first place and often finds champions in the dispossessed. Gangsters are extreme examples of a universal impulse to fight against the limitations of one's social position, to beat the system at its own game by fair means or foul. Therefore, like all good genres, the gangster film is easily understood and digestible on a surface level, while also being complex and contradictory underneath. Gangster films are unique in comparison to other crime films, because they are not narratives about petty criminals, mentally disturbed serial killers, or individuals on a crime spree. They are narratives about organization, about loyalties and betrayals, and about success or failure; achievement is often measured simply through an individual's ability to survive their environment. Cinematic gangsters don't have lives outside of their profession; they don't have the ability to walk away from their criminal identities. In these ways, the gangster genre is much more than just a type of crime film.

Gangster films are also not unique to American culture; they appear in every film industry across the world. The Japanese Yakuza and the Chinese Triad organizations have dominated the Asian crime film. Many draw upon the myths of the samurai, or other wandering, mercenary warriors in their imagery, thus promoting the ideals of loyalty and self-sacrifice within the genre. Russian and other Eastern European gangster films have emerged in earnest since the fall of the Soviet empire, connecting organized crime with the rising influence of capitalist ideals and desires. The British gangster film tradition is derived from the mythologies surrounding working-class gangland bosses, and therefore class and domestic politics influence every aspect. British cinema is also often noted for its attention to realism, and this is reflected in most other central European industries as well. Italy is the original home of the myths of the mafia as a term to denote an organized criminal group. Therefore, it is one of the most interesting European players in the continued filmic presentation of those myths.

There are many books that champion the appeal of the genre and its structure in various moments in cinema history. There are a variety of texts that applaud the majesty of *The Godfather Trilogy*. This companion to the gangster film is one of the few to explore the popularity of gangster films across three major continents: the Americas, Europe, and Asia. It acknowledges the gangster genre as a global phenomenon and explores some of the reasons the genre remains so appealing to twenty-first-century audiences across so many countries.

Although the book is structured geographically, there are some common themes that occur across all three sections, such as production histories and reception, gender race and sexuality, mafia mythologies, and politics. Furthermore, all the chapters are aware of the transnational influence of genre, and so many discuss films from more than one continent. This aspect of the book is designed to remind readers that no national cinema develops in isolation and that cinema is a truly global popular art form. The gangster film has developed across many different countries throughout cinema history. As Ron Wilson notes, "the gangster film, unlike other film genres – such as the Western, the action-adventure film, the

science fiction film, and others – is the only genre whose nomenclature is centered on an individual, rather than a concept” (2015, 3). This means that, as a global genre, the gangster film literally has many faces; it has a variety of narrative structures, character types, and settings. From assassins to politicians, street guys to made men, outlaws to company men and women, a vast array of individuals exist in the cinematic gangster universe. This level of variety is, on the one hand, an indication of the richness and significance of the genre, especially in terms of identity politics. However, this variety also indicates the elasticity of the genre’s structural and thematic boundaries. Sometimes it feels as though certain films are accepted as part of the gangster genre primarily because they are marketed, or reviewed as such. Their connection to the genre stems from a certain mood, or thematic allusion to gangsters rather than an attention to a specific setting, single character type, or narrative structure. The genre has a lot of structural freedoms, but it is “the gangster as an individual [that is] central to the genre and its significance” (3). Such is the variability of a cinematic genre that has existed for a hundred years and developed across the globe.

The chapters in this collection do not devote all their time to assessing the boundaries of the genre, or even if boundaries should exist. Instead, they focus on the significance of various character types. From Fran Mason’s exploration of the gangster assassin to Ana Granell’s focus on the post-war spiv, Imruh Bakari’s rude bwoys and Dons, or Dominique Liao’s loyal middle men, these gangsters are all career criminals navigating their own particular times and places. This flexible approach to genre is necessary simply because it acknowledges the fact that genre identification is an arbitrary and often contradictory process. As argued in Geraghty and Jancovich (2008), “a text may be defined one way within the process of production, in which a particular cultural industry has its own generic understanding of texts, and yet be marketed or exhibited in relation to a different genre” (4). The ever-changing discourses that surround the labeling of films within particular genres are fascinating, but ultimately reductive if it is the sole focus for arguing the merit of a particular film. The creation of value-based canons is a natural tendency in discussions of film, and I have argued for the cultural value of *The Godfather* as a significant factor in defining the gangster genre since the 1970s. My contention is that key films, such as *The Godfather*, act as common reference points in both formal and informal discussions of the gangster genre. However, this is not meant to argue that *The Godfather* dictates the boundaries of the genre. I merely believe the film is a key text because of the significant impact it has had on so many areas of pop culture worldwide. *The Godfather*, if you will, is cinematic shorthand for mafia. Any allusion to the film has an instant connection to popular understandings of organized crime; it is “an offer we can’t refuse.” Indeed, there is no need for you to have watched the film to know this imagery or recognize its cultural value. Therefore, this collection does often identify key texts or distinctive periods of gangster film production and highlight their significance, not only at the time of production, but also across time periods and national cinemas. One of the hopes

of this collection is that it may call attention to the interconnected nature of global cinema history. No national cinema exists in isolation, and therefore films speak to each other across time and space, creating a sense of shared experiences. Some films speak louder than others and patterns of influence can be identified, but these all add to the fascinating complexity of gangster identities; they do not isolate or create specific genre boundaries.

Early Cinema

The earliest cinema is discussed in the first section of the book focused on mainland North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Both Amy Borden and Ron Wilson discuss the periods prior to the classical gangster cycle of the 1930s. Borden focuses on the nickelodeon and transitional-era depictions of the criminal underworld, whereas Wilson looks at the development of sound in the late 1920s. Both chapters seek to address the social concerns that surrounded early cinema production and the hegemonic foundations of genre iconography prior to the commonly cited definitive films: *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Little Caesar* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932).

Assimilation narratives were a staple of film production in the early years of cinema. The film industry used its easy access to immigrant communities to provide education on American values and citizenship. It was not unusual for films to clearly define their perceived differences between ignorant “old country” ways and the progressive, more refined American way to behave and prosper. The classic example, *Making An American Citizen* (1912, dir. Alice Guy), made it clear that some of the brutish behavior that may have been acceptable in some parts of Europe was not welcome in the United States. Although not all films were this heavy-handed in their propaganda, it was evident that films created a clear demarcation between the American hero/heroine of the film and the immigrant villains, or fools. Exaggerated gestures, emotional outbursts of poor English on the intertitles and brutish behavior encouraged audiences to believe in assimilation as the best way to prosper. Furthermore, popular crime films showed again and again that assimilation might save you from the ignorant beliefs and violence that held sway in the ‘old country’. The popularity of the “Black Hand” cycle of films produced from 1908 until the mid-1920s did just that by conflating the behavior of the Sicilian mafia and the Neapolitan Camorra under the general term “Black Hand” to highlight the perils of importing ignorant and/or criminal values into America. Borden’s chapter explores this cycle of films and then focuses on Mary Pickford’s film, *Poor Little Peppina* (1916), as a slumming masquerade that emphasizes her star persona as America’s sweetheart. The demarcation between Pickford, the epitome of American innocent beauty, and the brutality of the Black Hand in both Italy and America emphasizes the need for immigrants to cast off their connections to the old world. This era of early cinema helped to introduce the very basic visuals of

organized crime as an imported problem under the banners of kidnap, extortion, and revenge. These narratives are valuable because, although they lack the sympathies toward gangster behavior that developed by the late 1920s, they emphasize the power of organized crime to control lives and assert its influence across different cultures.

The development of sound obviously added more nuance to the development of the gangster character on screen. Wilson's chapter on the earliest sound films describes the establishment of a form of anti-language that sets the gangster apart from ordinary society. This anti-language highlights the gangster's role as a rebel against authority and the establishment; a role treated with more sympathy now that America found itself in the middle of the unpopular and authoritarian era of prohibition. Just like the "Black Hand" films, these later films retain a connection to real-life crime, often showing how their narratives are ripped straight from newspaper headlines. However, this time the gangsters are more likely to be applauded for their antics. One of the important developments to note here is the submersion of base ethnic gestures and vocabulary into a more urbane, middle-class demeanor. The language of this gangster, emphasized for the first time on screen, is no longer the bad English of the European immigrant, but an American language born in its own urban streets. The specific immigrant nature of organized crime has now been dissolved into a more American image of rebellion and individualism. Reviews of these early films show that, while the film's hero often mends his ways by film end, the film's main attractions occur in the more rebellious sequences, such as bar shoot-outs, or prison fights. Thus, from a mix of immigrant assimilation and rebel narratives, the American gangster is born.

Although Borden and Wilson's chapters are the only ones to focus entirely on early cinema, all of the chapters contextualize their studies within both cinema history and wider socio-cultural interests. Elayne Chaplin provides a history of the Yakuza film from its inception in silent cinema through to its decline in the 1990s economic downturn in order to contextualize her study of masculinities. Similarly, Hülya Önal analyzes how the myths of Turkish outlaws merged with modernization stories to create the political image of gangsters and the mafia seen in today's Turkish cinema. How and when the image of the gangster emerges within a particular culture is crucial to understanding its wider influence, and so the links between cinema and history are at the core of this collection. The chapters have been structured geographically in the table of contents to enable readers to navigate the vast array of topics in logical groupings. However, in order to promote the interconnected nature of global cinema history, this introduction will continue its overview by grouping the chapters under specific themes rather than simply the order they appear in the book. In doing so, the hope is to draw attention to patterns of film production, themes, and aesthetics. Readers can easily navigate the book geographically, but through this introduction they can also follow the threads of global connections and influences.

Cinema and History

Every fiction film reflects the place and time of its production, but the gangster film has a special relationship to the “here and now.” Jonathan Munby, in his study of the gangster from early American cinema through to the Cold War, states:

Unlike other central national myths, such as the cowboy and the Western outlaw, the gangster never allows an escape from the problems of the here and now. He is not so much about the past or an alternative landscape as he is about the inescapable truths of the urban present. (1999, 2)

The genre may not be necessarily concerned with recounting historical fact, but it does provide a commentary on the beliefs and anxieties of a nation at particular times. Thus, it is always necessary to recognize the period in which a film is produced in order to gain a better understanding of its structure and themes. John Petty’s chapter on the Production-Code-era gangster provides a detailed exploration of the genre’s development from the 1930s to the 1960s and how its adaptations mirror the social concerns of the times. While the gangster film per se disappeared in response to the new strict censorship rules, the gangster character remained. He appeared in comedies, cop thrillers, war films, noir thrillers, bio-pics, and heist films. Such adaptability exists, of course, because in the end the genre is about the individual more than about a specific set of events or locations. For instance, Petty’s analysis argues for *Casablanca* (1945) to be recognized as successfully utilizing the gangster genre format and the film’s hero, Rick (Humphrey Bogart), as a development of the gangster character. He suggests the genre evolved to become American culture’s way of examining those in society, such as dissidents or rebels, who refuse to toe the line. In certain circumstances, not toeing the line might be viewed as an admirable act for wartime characters such as Rick. Thus, over these middle decades, the American gangster’s ability to exist across so many genres resulted in an increasing complexity of character. At heart, the gangster is a representative of the archetypal American *individual*, self-assured, aspirational, and brave, but also capable of great cruelty and self-destruction. By the end of the Production Code era, the gangster was fully embedded in American culture, instantly recognizable, but also full of exciting contradictions.

The connections between European and American cinema and the impacts of comedy on the development of the genre are evidenced in John Petty’s discussion, and Ryan Calabretta-Sajder echoes these findings in his chapter on Italian and Italian-American cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. He examines the comedy heist films and the meta-documentary realist films of the late 1950s and early 1960s in both Italy and America as crucial examples of the development of the genre and the continued formation of a gangster mythology. He argues that the everyday struggles of a post-war existence, especially in Italy, create audience sympathies for the gangster character, who, albeit by criminal means, is only trying to survive. In a film such as *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958), the comedic tone means that the heist itself

and most of the events leading up to it are doomed to failure, but the process allows for a close examination of the structure of the gang as well as their individual choices in the face of adversity. Morality is noted as a more crucial element for gaining audience sympathy in American cinema, while in Italian it is far less important. Thus, while American cinema's *Ocean's Eleven* (1960) is practically the same narrative as *Big Deal on Madonna Street*, the characterizations are significantly different in that the American narrative has a clearer set of motivating factors. In both films, though, the planning and execution of elaborate heists are shown as enjoyable capers, and while both gangs fail to keep their ill-gotten gains, neither gang is officially brought to justice. Similarly, Calabretta-Sajder argues that meta-documentary style of gangster films in the same period also helped to develop the mythology of the gangster for cinema audiences. He focuses on *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962) and *Al Capone* (1959) and their attention to the realities of gangster activity. These films, he argues, show the brutal reality of life in the mafia, and, thus, like the comedies, encourage audiences to reconsider the gangster's role in society. Finally, two transnational films that focus on the movement of gangster activity between Italy and America, *Mafioso* (1962), a comedy, and *Black Hand* (1950), a realist film, focus on the transnational reach of gangster activity and the inability of individuals to escape. Calabretta-Sajder's chapter suggests this period of filmmaking as highly influential for the gangster in both Italy and America. The diversity of these films, as also shown in Petty's discussion, reveals the significance of gangster characters within mid-century cinema.

Diversity is at the center of Philip Swanson's analysis of the gangster film in Latin America, for he notes how the many different cultural identities involved are often merged into an "othering" pan-Latinization by Hollywood films that quite obviously denies the specificity of each country's character. His chapter unpacks the stereotypes and charts the development of the gangster figure from early prototypes of the urban gangster in the forms of the *compadritos* or *guapos* of Buenos Aires, as celebrated by Jorge Luis Borges, through subsequent films of pre-Revolutionary Cuba to the late-twentieth-century films that emerged following the decline of military dictatorships. He notes how the gangster genre proper emerged in the wake of the crisis of neoliberalism and when migration became a key factor in the portrayal of gang culture, especially in the Hispanic United States. Focusing on a vast array of films, Swanson's chapter provides crucial insights into the diversity of Hispanic American films. While Latin American identity is most often portrayed as the exotic other in Hollywood films, the Latin gangster remains an ambiguous character in both arenas. Swanson notes that throughout cinema history, the "Latin" gangster remains a problematic figure, unbiddable yet dogged by fate, dangerous but glamorous, alluring yet irredeemably "other."

Imruh Bakari's discussion of the history of the Jamaican gangster film highlights a very similar relationship with American culture. In similar ways to Latin America, the Caribbean is both part of and separated from America. The relationship is complex, but crucial to an understanding of how its own identity has developed. While the gangster film is relatively recent, emerging in Perry Henzell's *The Harder They*

Come (1973) and remains a sparse collection of films in contrast to other national cinemas, its films are rich in character. Their themes follow the aspirational model of the American gangster film and often include in this a desire to escape the limitations of island life. The Jamaican gangster is a rebel that struggles to find his place, or perhaps confine his aspirations to the island's post-colonial political and social spaces. Bakari's chapter explores the role of the traditional outlaw character type, the post-colonial youth, or "rude bwoy" character and the influence of musical styles such as ska, rock steady, and reggae in creating a distinctively Jamaican gangster identity. Local politics and inter-gang rivalry feature heavily in the late 1990s and post-millennium films. Jamaican gangsters, like all the gangsters in cinema history, are products of their environment. A desire to escape, to succeed on their own terms is a prevailing theme. The history of both Latin American and Jamaican gangster films reveals problematic heroes that do much to reveal both areas' valuable, but contentious relationships to the United States.

Post-War Narratives

Births, rebirths, or just significant cycles of gangster films occur again and again through out cinema history. All of the chapters in this collection recognize an important era of filmmaking and its historical significance. It is evident that the gangster often re-emerges after a period of significant political or social unrest. Post-war America and Europe is a particularly rich era for study. However, for Asian cinema, it is the 1980s and beyond that provides the richest examples of the gangster film. Dominique Liao's chapter on post-martial law Taiwanese films focuses on the 1990s and beyond as the gangster's most significant era. After centuries of colonization, Taiwan's newfound independence promised many freedoms, but with so many generations torn between their Chinese and/or Japanese cultural connections, independence left them with many unresolved feelings of loss or alienation. Taiwan alternative cinema in the 1990s and 2000s wished to explore some of the traumas involved in the redevelopment of a specifically Taiwanese identity and explored ideologically pertinent, but difficult issues of cultural assimilation, poverty, crime, and individual aspirations using the gangster film. Two films by Hou Hsiao-hsien dominate this cinema landscape: *A City of Sadness* (1989) introduces the topic, and *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1997) develops the themes further. Both of these films reflect life under the mid-century rule of the Chinese Kuomintang regime, known as the KMT. While only the first film is actually set in the KMT era, both films are full of political and social references to repression and subjugation. Liao suggests that Taiwanese gangster films are based on the same aspirations as American gangster films, but whereas the American gangster individual often tastes at least a brief moment of success, the Taiwanese example does not. The films are much more about loyalties and self-sacrifice than an individual rise and fall. These middle-men gangsters are pawns in the larger system of criminal and political co-dependence. Liao's chapter shows how the gangster film can provide a vehicle to explore the lives

of the underprivileged and otherwise ignored peoples on the margins of society. The gangsters of this period can be said to represent the voices of, not only the criminal class, but also many other Taiwanese individuals who struggle to be heard. It is a clear example of how the gangster narrative can be fulfilled in social political realist filmmaking. This style is more often evident in specific eras of Asian and European filmmaking than in the United States, but the influence of American cinema in specifically post-war European films is a rich area for analysis.

Ana Rodriguez Granell's study of post-World War II gangster films in the United Kingdom offers insight into American influences and the ability of social realist films to "rock the boat" of accepted cultural discourses. British cinema of the post-war period has long been championed for its attention to social realism and its quality adaptations of literary classics. However, both of these styles centered on promoting very particular images of British values and ideals. Films that did not question these values and ideals, or especially if they echoed American styles or themes, were either ignored or derided. The immediate post-war cycle of spiv films are a great example of character-driven films that challenge the dominant discourses of the time. A spiv is a small-time criminal operating in the black market – an understandable, but culturally embarrassing aspect of wartime rationing. While most cultural discourses of the time (discourses that arguably still dominate the national memory) wish to emphasize the stoical and community-driven character of wartime Britain, the spiv provides an uncomfortable counterpoint. Heavily influenced by American noir films, the spiv film involves army deserters, or bored veterans frustrated with the lack of opportunities in war-ravaged Britain. They are not portrayed as political heroes, but as irreverent anti-heroes that dare to try and live well (albeit for a limited period) in an environment defined by self-sacrifice. *Waterloo Road* (1944) and *They Made Me a Fugitive* (1947) are key texts in this cycle of films. *Brighton Rock* (1948) is probably the most well known and showcases the influence of American culture on Britain's youth. The spiv film is a taste of individualism in a cinema dominated by collectivist ideals. They were derided at the time of release for their unflattering, or maybe just non-romanticized portrayals of working-class environments, but it can be argued their anti-heroes spoke to an aspect of British identity that strained to accept the government's call for everyone to "carry on regardless."

Similarly, the post-World War II gangster film in France spoke to aspects of European cultural identity in flux during this period. Thomas Pillard's chapter on the patriarchal figure in 1950s French gangster films reminds us how much the visual tone of post-war French films is influenced by pre-war Hollywood gangster films. The iconography of classical American film is incorporated into a distinctively French milieu in films such as *Hands Off the Loot* (1954), *Rififi* (1955), and *Bob the Gambler* (1956). However, whereas American influences in British cinema provide a rebellion against tradition, the influence on French film is decidedly nostalgic. These French gangsters are anachronistic; they yearn for past glories and are thus doomed to fail in the post-war "new world" order. They are aged men clinging to outdated ideals and aspirations. Youth are viewed as ignorant and irresponsible, for they have not witnessed what these men have witnessed and cannot begin to

understand the depth of their experience. French gangster films of this period are plagued by regret and are thus truly tragic, but their influence on later films in both America and Europe is undeniable. Hence, even by this point in cinema history, we can see how the gangster is a truly global – if sometimes world-weary – character influenced by all the cinemas in which the genre has taken hold.

Gender Identities

So far the gangster under discussion has been male. He exists on the margins of society as an immigrant, or a rebel, but he strives for power and success. As the genre developed, the complex nature of gangster identity could no longer be defined by a simple rise and fall narrative, nor could it necessarily confine itself to a purely male environment. Two chapters on Japanese cinema explore the competing images of the Yakuza: first as the traditional all-male environment and second as an arena for gender diversity. Loyalty and self-sacrifice are emblematic of Japanese Yakuza service, as detailed in Elayne Chaplin's chapter. Here the Yakuza gangster is both rebellious and conformist in that he operates within the criminal margins of society, but is part of an organization that has long-established codes of conduct. A Yakuza has his membership literally imprinted on his skin in the form of elaborate tattoos and when put to the test he will always remain loyal to the organization no matter the cost. As such, these characters are not symbols of excessive individualism, but complex studies of what it means to dedicate your life to a cause or belief system. Chaplin's exploration of the rich and varied history of the Yakuza film focuses on the prevalence of self-sacrifice in its depictions of Japanese male identity. The Japanese gangster is dedicated to service, and his self-worth is intimately connected to his position in the organization. A life beyond the Yakuza is unthinkable.

Laura Treglia's complementary study of female gangsters in Japanese cinema suggests that the gender inversion involved in these films not only encourages a hybridization of genre conventions, but also allows many of the traditional mythologies to be critiqued, or parodied. However, she recognizes that at least initially some of the representations are quite limited. The conscious assertion by female Yakuza characters in the chivalry film of the 1960s to "act as men" is at odds with some of the aesthetics and narrative sequences in those films that emphasize her femininity. Such disruption exposes an inherent anxiety about gender difference in the genre and in wider Japanese culture. As such, these films place a woman in a lead role as Yakuza and open the door to acknowledging gender as a performance, but they still eventually reinforce the character's traditional gender identity. In contrast, the 1970s exploitation films, since labeled as "pinkie violence," allow (within the constraints of the exploitation format) for feminine traits to be used as a source of power, rather than subjugation. These eroticized, but powerful character types parody the sanctity of the Yakuza codes of honor and loyalty and have remained popular across many corresponding genres including martial art, assassin, and cyborg films. Treglia argues that, while it is evident the insertions of female

gangsters into film cycles in Japanese cinema are designed as novelties, they offer an interesting counterbalance to the overt sincerity of the traditional male narratives. They help to keep the Yakuza mythology alive while offering alternative spaces for audience engagement.

Alternative spaces for audience engagement are a relatively new phenomenon in Indian cinema as discussed by Sony Jalarajan Raj, Rohini Sreekmur, and Nithin Kalorth. Bollywood has traditionally been a conservative industry with strict conventions of gender, racial, and religious behavior on screen. However, within these conventions, the role of the antagonist, or villain, has often garnered as much critical acclaim and audience admiration as the hero. The gangster, while vanquished by the end, encourages the same levels of audience engagement and enjoyment as in Western cinemas, but arguably from a less complex characterization. The specific quality of mainstream Bollywood cinema to entertain audiences through visual spectacles of song, dance, and action sequences has a strong emphasis on the body as the site of audience engagement. Costume, hair (often including mustaches for the villain), gestures, and voice are straightforward symbols that identify character motivation and morality. Thus, films are less interested in the internal dilemmas, or development of key characters, but instead glory in the conflict caused by competing moralities, or the avenging hand of fate. With so much attention on convention and easy-to-identify character types, it is not surprising that the introduction of female outlaws and/or villains over recent decades has caused a great deal of disruption in the Bollywood universe. Arguably though, the Bollywood female gangster has added a level of social commentary to film narratives that can also be identified as beginning the shift in gender identity that is now more commonplace. A female gangster's motivation for crime was initially linked to social concerns of domestic violence or wider gender discrimination, the descent into crime a last resort to flee persecution or abuse. In recent years, the female gangster has evolved into a more complex, less virtuous character, but while audiences' initial reactions were mixed, it is evident that over time a female villain has been capable of attracting a similar level of admiration as their male counterparts. While modern Bollywood has now embraced many of the moral ambiguities of Hollywood cinema, wherein the contrast between hero and villain has been all but dissolved, the rise of the female gangster shows how even a conservative cinema can embrace controversial, complex identities and fold them into established genres.

While it is evident that much of Asian cinema declares female gangsters as novelties or parodic critiques of hyper-masculine concerns, European and American cinema has not fared much better, for it has also struggled to accept femininity in the genre. Isolde Vanhee's exploration into the French New Wave's influence on New Hollywood cinema centers on gender identity and the role of women in gangster films. A focus on youthful rebellion and counterculture themes and aesthetics means that many films of this period combine criminal activity with a coming-of-age narrative. A focus on friendship, love, and loyalties involve an increase in dialogue over action and such an interest in relationships results in more attention

on female characters. Thus, most films are less about the traditions or motivations for organized crime and more about the development of youthful criminal personae. Michel (*A Bout De Souffle*, 1960), Clyde (*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967), and Charlie (*Mean Streets*, 1973) are no seasoned gangsters, nor are they particularly aspirational. What connects each character is the perceived lack of direction, or ambition. They are criminal wanderers, searching for an identity and a function that will give their life and activities meaning. This lack of motivation, or social commentary in the films suggests a moral ambiguity that is the locus for Vanhee's analysis. Lost and alone, these new gangsters create artificial families through friends, while girlfriends provide the challenge of intellect and motivation for action. Often suggested as the original era of the self-conscious auteur, the French New Wave and New Hollywood in their separate ways have produced gangsters who wrestle with the dilemmas of their own existence. These new gangsters are not psychotic killers, or simple thugs; instead they voice concerns echoed in more refined society. Auteur cinema, with its attendant critical acclaim and world distribution, has meant the gangster is acknowledged worldwide, not just as tragic anti-hero, but also as a complex identity.

As stated earlier, it is the complexity of the gangster identity that allows it to appear in so many different guises. Not solely defined by gender or race, the gangster can appear in many different contexts. However, the character is almost always recognizable as a figure of rebellion or social unease and often acts as a representative for frustrations felt across wider society. Valerie Soe recognizes this function in her study of various types of Hong Kong cinema from 1986 to 2015. Straddling the decades before and after the official handover of Hong Kong to China, Soe analyzes the presentation of cultural identity through gangster activity in films. Starting with the triad role model film, *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), Soe goes on to analyze *A Moment of Romance* (1990), *Young and Dangerous* (1996), *Exiled* (2007), and *Two Thumbs Up* (2015). She argues that the disintegration of traditional Confucian values and ethics in these films mirror the unnerving shifts in identity experienced by Hong Kong residents during these turbulent decades. In Hong Kong cinema, where the war film is practically nonexistent, the violence and chaos of the gangster film is the closest related format for reflecting national conflict. In a freestyle refusal to adhere to genre boundaries, the Hong Kong gangster film indulges in romance narratives, musical interludes, comic strip intertitles, comedy routines, as well as excessive violence and the exaggeration of gangster stereotypes. Such spectacles reflect the chaos and uncertainty of the period and offer the gangster as a bricolage of competing influences – much like the experiences of Hong Kong national identity. While on the surface many of these films appear to be distractions from real life, their aesthetics and themes reflect not only auteur cinema, but also wider social conflicts and concerns. The variety of styles and tones once again shows the flexibility of gangster identity.

As is evident, the consideration of some aspect of gender identity is central for most of the chapters in this collection. This is hardly surprising considering the genre's focus on individuals. However, it is fascinating to see the ways the gangster