



The Gangster Film

The Gangster genre was born in the silent era but came into its own with sound, highlighting squealing tires, sirens, and gunfire.

The term “gangster” referred to politicians in the 1890s. After the turn of the century it denoted criminals.

The first talkie gangster film was *The Lights of New York* in 1928.

With the onset of the Great Depression, bank closings, and people out of work and going hungry—Americans came to trust the system less. The gangster sometimes became the “tragic hero.” Prohibition was a great way to make money, along with gambling and other illegal activities. So gangsters made good money, dressed nicely, and led what looked to be glamorous lives. Audiences were somewhat fascinated by them and, in a time where it was such a struggle just to survive, perhaps it was also a great genre for escaping reality, which makes sense.

The early gangster films followed the history of crime in the United States. Since the fascination factor was built-in with this genre, and with real-life criminals who were in the newspapers, when stories broke studios jumped on them. Gangsters like Baby Face Nelson and Al Capone handed us some great plots with their escapades. Many of the top films were biographical, straightforward portrayals of gangsters taken from newspaper headlines. *Little Caesar* in 1931 was one of the most popular.

Hays Code (1933)—The Hays Production Code was created to instill American family values back into movies and to set a decency standard. Part of this code stated there would be no sympathy for gangsters or common criminals. The gangster film adhered to this rule but many times the censors had a problem with it because the punishment for the bad guy usually came in the last reel in an exciting shootout or perhaps he’d go out in a blaze of glory. He was usually successful and a big shot until the end, but he could not go unpunished. But in the filmmakers’ defense, isn’t it much more fun to see a big ending with an exciting showdown?!

The first film to go deeper into WHY the gangster commits crimes was *Public Enemy* (1931) with James Cagney.

The characters start as mischievous kids who work for mobsters much like the 1993 Robert De Niro film *A Bronx Tale*. The kids grow up around gangsters and run small errands for them or just watch them; it’s all they know and they don’t have any other opportunities. There are always great stories based on how or why he becomes a

gangster, but that theme evolved as the genre grew and gave us more in-depth ideas about the world and life of a gangster.

1949's *White Heat* starred James (Jimmy) Cagney as Cody Jarrett, a psychotic killer whose violence knew no bounds. Here, we dealt with a psychological dimension and what drove Jarrett. A big part of his character was based on his relationship with his mother and her propensity for criticism and violence. We start to have a better understanding of the deranged and mother-fixated Cody as we see their interaction. While his behavior is indefensible, it's more about the audience having a clearer understanding of his mindset. What made this movie so spectacular and popular with audiences was the ending. Jarrett finally dies in a Hiroshima-style explosion in a showdown with the police at an oil refinery where they've chased him down. It was very dramatic and everyone talked about it! By the time he blows up with his famous line: "Made it Ma! Top of the world!!", things had really gotten dicey.

Jarrett is at an all-time crazy, gunning down his partner who's trying to surrender and laughing as the police shoot at him high in the steel towers of the refinery. Cagney does an amazing job playing Jarrett as an intelligent but twisted guy who can't get his mother's approval but dies trying.

And we should give Jimmy Cagney more credit here, because what's really interesting about him is that he was one of the biggest stars in Hollywood in multiple genres. People loved him as the classic gangster but he also became a big star in another genre you probably wouldn't relate to him. Are you ready? The musical. James Cagney was a fantastic musical performer and could sing and dance like nobody's business. One of his most famous roles was playing composer George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. He sang, played piano, and tapped-danced his way through the film and people loved it. Was that Cody Jarrett who just tapped through the scene? Yes! And another note . . . he had a great reputation for being very well-respected and liked by all who worked with him.

When you think about the various locations of mob activity, what places come to mind? Chicago, New York, Las Vegas, Miami, and Boston perhaps? Remember, the genre started out with characters who had a good dose of cynicism. This, in turn, related to the cynicism that was a result of the Depression, with people thinking the system wasn't really working; it's an interesting reflection. But let's not get carried away. I don't mean to say middle America was running out to rob banks or running liquor because they were frustrated, but there was a mindset that prepared the audience for the gangster genre and that's important to note. People may not have thought his behavior was okay, but the gangster had a certain appeal he may not have had if the timing had been different.

THE GANGSTER GENRE AND WARNER BROTHERS

Warner Brothers was known as the Gangster film producer, though they did all types of films. They had the three top stars under contract: James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, and Edward G. Robinson. This kind of talent at one studio? You couldn't miss doing Gangster! And Bogart and Edward G. Robinson were also power-hitters in dramas and made many Oscar-winning films in their careers. *Casablanca*, *Key Largo*, and *The African Queen*, anyone?

You're probably very familiar with a few more contemporary versions like *The Godfather* (1972, 1974, 1990), *Oceans 11, 12, 13* (2001, 2004, 2007), and *Prizzi's Honor* (1985). *GoodFellas*, *Bonnie & Clyde*, *A Bronx Tale*, *Scarface*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Casino*, *Snatch*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Road to Perdition* are also among the greats of the genre, along with many other terrific gangster stories.

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A Bronx Tale 1993

Director: Robert De Niro

Cast:

Lorenzo—Robert De Niro
Sonny—Chazz Palminteri
Calogeno (9)—Francis Capra
Calogeno (17)—Lillo Brancato
Jane—Taral Hicks

A Bronx Tale was written for the stage by Chazz Palminteri who also plays Sonny the gangster. It's autobiographical for Palminteri and the story is told from his perspective as a kid named Calogeno from age nine and throughout his growing up.

The editing is outstanding with musical transitions that take us from heavy to lighter moments, assist in telling the story, and just give us a feeling of the time, the environment/location, and the characters. Sinatra, Dean Martin, and others tell us of another time and there's even an interesting placement of a Jimi Hendrix song. Terrific.

The movie is a relationship movie and that's what makes it special in this genre. It's not just a shoot-em-up gangster movie; it has loads of heart and Sonny is an incredible character. It's amazing to think these characters were based on real people in Palminteri's young life.

The film revolves around two pieces of advice given to a boy in the Bronx by his father and a gangster. He is loved by both men but their roles in his life could not be farther apart, or so it seems. In the end, you wonder if they weren't closer together.

Lorenzo (Calogeno's father): "Nothing is worse than wasted talent."

Sonny: "... Nobody really cares, kid."

The year is 1960 and we're in the Bronx, New York. There is violence, but only to show the lifestyle and neighborhood Calogeno lives in. The script is full off-bombs, but it's not gratuitous, and that's why it works. The characters are so real and the plot takes place mostly in an Italian Catholic neighborhood, where the worst thing you can be is a "rat." So the language is strong and realistic, and the script is wonderful. But get ready for language.

It's hard to protect children in this environment and the "values" system is almost impossible to enforce with what goes on. The kids see the gangsters making money, driving nice cars, dressing well, and looking as if they're part of one big family that takes care of each other. Calogeno ("C") is nine years old, sitting on the front stoop in his Italian-American neighborhood, and witnesses a crime. Should he tell the cops who did it? There are two key factors for him: "I'm not a rat" and as he later asks Sonny: "Would you rather be feared or loved?"

As much as Sonny wants to be involved in C's life and gets attached to him, that's the last thing his father, Lorenzo wants. De Niro, as Lorenzo, knows this kind of help is not what he wants for his son and that Sonny's street smarts and life's philosophy are bad for Calogeno. That's where the struggle begins for all of them.

Interwoven into the plot is the violence surrounding racial tension, as African Americans begin to move into the neighborhood and the local kids become violent. This is a progression of what goes on in the neighborhood with the gangsters and how the kids are being taught to be bigoted by their parents, with the exception of Calogeno. There are racial slurs here to stay true to the story and though they're tough to listen to, they do make sense, given the time and location. They still bother me to hear and I've seen this film probably thirty times. But again . . . it's the time and place we're in and it was a reality.

De Niro's directing debut is wonderful. He knows when to use humor and when to concentrate on Palminteri's lonely, complex character. Let's reiterate again how much music and the specific songs that are used contribute to the film as a whole. One of De Niro's abilities is to make a big moment out of a small set-up. Watch the locked car door sequence.

The film is very character driven and though they're both interlocked over this young boy, Lorenzo and Sonny have more in common than they know and Sonny actually teaches Calogeno some important lessons in life. Lorenzo is a hard-working bus driver who loves his son and hopes to teach him the best way to live his life without any wrong turns and with the values his parents have given him remaining intact.

Lorenzo: "If you want to see a hero, look at the guy who gets up and goes to work to support his family. Nothing is more tragic than wasted talent."

Sonny: "You cannot live your life based on what other people think you should do. Nobody really cares."

Palminteri should be given kudos for his extraordinary writing, which includes a great voice-over by Calogeno. As the writer, Palminteri develops wonderful, realistic characters (Coffee Cake, Jimmy Whispers) to give the gangsters a little vulnerability. They all have their place in the business, and peer pressure is present, even in this circle of violence and power. Calogeno is in conflict with the two men he cares about deeply and respects in different ways for different reasons.

This is the story of a boy and two men who love him unconditionally, which is the key to unlocking this story. It's a treat and a wonderful tribute to the relationships that helped shape a young boy's life. Enjoy.

The Usual Suspects 1995

Director: Bryan Singer

Cast:

Verbal Kint—Kevin Spacey
Keaton—Gabriel Byrne
Fenster—Benicio Del Toro
McMcanus—Stephen Baldwin
Dave Kujan (Koo-Yan)—Chazz Palminteri
Hockney—Kevin Pollack
Kobayashi—Pete Postlethwaite
Edie Finneran—Suzy Amis

Oscar for Best Screenplay: Christopher McQuarrie

Oscar for Best Supporting Actor: Kevin Spacey

All you have to do is take a look at this cast and you'll know just how great the film is going to be. This is an ensemble gangster film where violence, language and betrayal are at an all-time high but not gratuitous. You'll notice, too that Agent Kujan is played by Chazz Palminteri from *A Bronx Tale*.

Who is Keyser Soze? That is the question which surrounds the film. The mere mention of his name ignites a level of fear in all those involved in the story, particularly those who whisper it, too afraid to say it out loud. This tremendous fear only adds to the mystery. It's a very clever and intricate plot twist with a dynamic cast. Keyser Soze is based on John List, a man who killed his family and disappeared for 17 years.

Kevin Spacey is the club-footed con man, Verbal, who recounts everything through a film noir-style flashback. It centers around the tale of the mysterious Hungarian mobster (Keyser Soze) to investigator Chazz Palminteri. Spacey is in a group of thieves with Byrne, Baldwin, Del Toro, and Pollack. They're plotting to steal a large shipment of cocaine worth a tremendous amount of money with a tremendous amount of risk. Spacey's character is a cripple who has a weakness about him, yet he is arrogant when Kujan talks about the deal he's cut with the District Attorney. He knows he's the weak link and what the others think of him. He also shows an uncanny ability to tell a story as the only survivor of the explosion and yet he seems to be weak in character as he talks about what happened. He's quick to sell people out and during questioning becomes almost whiny; he's not a hardened criminal but happens to hang around with a group of them.

The ending is the surprise everyone talked about after the film's release; some people were confused, some thrilled and some felt manipulated, but everyone talked about it. Many people had a tough time following the plot and it became known as a film you had to see more than once. As a viewer, you are not intended to understand everything about the flashback so while confusion may set in, ultimately you get a fantastic surprise. Turnabout is fair play and Singer has fun with that concept.

An explosion takes place in San Pedro, California at the docks. Special Agent Kujan wants to know the why, what and how of the explosion. It's a big deal for the department and they need to solve it, especially when the name Keyser Soze surfaces. Kujan wants this guy and he wants him now. He knows Soze will disappear like smoke at any time and that will be that.

After reading the film noir lecture you'll notice certain noir elements like the location (San Pedro harbor at night), parking garages, a dark, isolated beach, and white hot light during questioning. Each location plays a big part in the mystery and suspense, particularly the night shots on the docks. Lots of bad stuff goes down there in the dark.

The older film noirs were in black and white of course. Here we see color instead but with an interesting element. The color red is everywhere and can symbolize danger, violence, victory, and more. There's really no hero to root for save Keaton who wants to find the better part of himself and wants out of the criminal game. It's not to say you don't like the other guys; they're actually funny and smart in certain ways, they have qualities you wouldn't expect and they show a certain vulnerability despite their violent tendencies.

One of the funniest scenes is when Bryan Singer has the ensemble come in to the line-up to be identified. Now the actors as a group got into a laughing spell and couldn't stop. So while the scene was written seriously, Singer decided to use the take where the actors were laughing and just having fun with each other. I think he knew they weren't going to get a serious take for a while even though he was working with pros. They each have to say a line that was said at the crime scene and of course, it becomes funnier and funnier as they each say it with their own style and humor. He used the funniest take and it's a fun scene to watch.

Special Agent Kujan has a list of "the usual suspects" which is a line in *Casablanca* when Louie says "Round up the usual suspects."

Now in a film where you have action, fantastic ensemble acting and great film noir style, how do you bring the whole story together in a closing scene worthy of the set up? The last scene is a great unraveling of the plot where Verbal Kint gets to tell Agent Kujan his story and explains step by step how things fall apart and how everything went down. With this scene comes one of the best lines written for a film:

"The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."
Verbal Kint to Agent Kujan: "I got to make like I was notorious."

An ensemble cast film is much tougher to direct; you must find the strength in each actor so they can bring their strongest performance into each scene and contribute equally to the film. And you have to know that each actor has great lines and feels they have a shot at both drama and laughs, so the script has to reflect that and so does the directing. Singer does a superb job with the entire film and it shows.