

OBSCENE, INDECENT,

IMMORAL, AND OFFENSIVE

100+ Years of Censored, Banned,
and Controversial Films

STEPHEN TROPIANO



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CHAPTER 4

Guns, Gangs, and Random Acts of Ultra-Violence

In the silent era, the cinematic treatment of crime and criminals was a major point of contention for those who believed there was a direct cause-and-effect link between the depiction of murder, rape, and violence and real crimes committed by real people in the real world. They were particularly concerned about the negative effects of screen violence on impressionable youth, who were supposedly prone to imitate the bad behavior they might witness in a dark movie theatre one sunny Saturday afternoon.

Consequently, when the Production Code was drafted in 1930, it explicitly prohibited the portrayal of criminals as sympathetic or heroic and crime films from serving as “how-to manuals” for wannabe law-breakers (“And now, ladies and gentlemen, here’s how to blow up a train . . .”). The MPPDA believed these restrictions were necessary due to the growing popularity of a genre that introduced audiences to the crime-ridden underworld of the American movie gangster.

**LITTLE CAESAR (1931), THE PUBLIC ENEMY (1931),
AND SCARFACE: THE SHAME OF THE NATION (1932):
GANGLAND, ILLINOIS**

On September 28, 1928, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* featured a front-page story entitled “Well, Pupils, Tell Us What Is a *Racket*?” After explaining how the word *racket* had only until recently taken on a whole new meaning in certain circles, the article answers the question posed by the

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title in the form of a definition, which at the time could not be found in the pages of *Webster's International Dictionary*:

Racket: An apparently legitimate enterprise carried on by a habitual criminal or criminals who extort money from respectable citizens by means of intimidation, bombing, or murder.

But *racket* was only one in a litany of gangster-inspired words that were splattered across the front page of Chicago newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s. In the same month as the *Tribune* article, syndicated journalist James P. Kirby began an eight-part series about the birth and growth of *racketeering*, which he claimed was America's "new big business," with annual profits in Chicago alone totaling between \$50 and \$70 million (a lot of *dough* in 1928!) His first article offered readers a rundown of the latest gangster slang, such as *racketeer*, *mob*, *mobster*, *muscling* (as in *muscling in* on another's *racket*), and *muscleman* (the guy who does the *heavy work*, a.k.a. a *hitman*). It also included an artist's rendering of the city's most powerful mobster—"The Beer Baron of Chicago"—"Scarface" Al Capone.

During the Prohibition Era, Americans were fascinated by the headline-making exploits of Capone, Hymie Weiss, Bugs Moran, and other Chicago mobsters as they battled for control of the city's illegal liquor and beer trade. But gangsters were not the only ones breaking the law. Corruption in Chicago's City Hall was not a well-kept secret, starting with the city's crooked mayor, William "Big Bill" Thompson, who was elected to two consecutive terms (1915–23) and an additional four more years (1927–31) thanks to a generous campaign contribution from Capone. Thompson vowed to clean up Chicago, yet organized crime thrived under his watch. According to statistics released in the fall of 1928 by the Illinois Association for Criminal Justice, 215 murders related to beer-running privileges, racketeering, and election disputes were committed over a two-year period—without a single conviction for a gangland murder.

One year later, on St. Valentine's Day, the Chicago mob wars were front-page news when five members of George "Bugs" Moran's gang, along with two others, were machine-gunned to death, execution style, by Capone's men in a North Side garage. Still, despite the blood, car-

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nage, and negative publicity, mobsters did perform a “public service” by supplying nontotalers with beer and bootleg gin and an out-of-the-way place (a speakeasy) where they could enjoy a glass (or twelve).

“Mobspak” was also all the rage in Hollywood in a cycle of gangster films produced between 1927 and 1933, a six-year period that coincided with the film industry’s transition to sound. A silent shootout between the cops and a gangster armed with a Tommy gun left plenty to the audience’s imagination. But it was the addition of sound, namely the urban slang spoken by tough-talking gangsters and dramatic sound effects (machine-gun fire, police sirens, shouts and screams, city noises, etc.) that brought an added sense of realism and brutality to the genre.

Newspaper stories were the primary source material for silent and early sound gangster films, so when the characters and plotlines hit too close to home, the studios ran into problems with state and local censorship boards. In *The Racket* (1928), based on Bartlett Cormack’s successful stage play, an honest Chicago police captain (Thomas Meighan) pursues public enemy #1 Nick Scarsi (Louis Wolheim), who has the mayor on his payroll. The censor boards in Philadelphia and New York did not appreciate director Lewis Milestone’s realistic depiction of Chicago’s underworld and demanded that the film’s violent moments be cut, along with any inferences that Chicago’s judges and politicians were in bed with the mob. Cormack’s play, which “named names” (including Mayor Thompson), had already been banned by the Illinois State Attorney’s Office, while Chicago’s film censor board, under the jurisdiction of the police, prevented *The Racket* from being shown in the city dubbed “Gangland.”

Film historians generally agree the gangster genre was established in the early 1930s with the release of three films by Warner Brothers: *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*. All three films trace the rise and tragic fall of their title characters, who are born to poor immigrant parents, but refuse to allow their low social status prevent them from fulfilling the “American Dream.” Through racketeering and bootlegging, they attain wealth and power, yet it is their unyielding hunger for control that also eventually leads to their downfall. In the end, the gangster meets his maker with some help from either a rival gang or the police as part of their ongoing effort to maintain order in the urban jungle.

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At a time when the country was in the throes of the Great Depression, movie audiences lived vicariously through the dirty dealings of *Caesar's Rico* (Edward G. Robinson), *Enemy's* Tom Powers (James Cagney), and *Scarface's* Tony Camonte (Paul Muni). Critics of the genre believed gangster films were harmful because unlike the other testosterone-driven genres, such as the detective film and the Western, they focused on the "bad guys." Since the first "General Principle" of the Production Code prohibited the audience's sympathy being thrown "to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil, or sin," gangster films also featured law enforcement officers (the police or FBI) who served as the voice of morality and were on hand to ensure justice was being served.

Still, during the peak of its popularity, the genre faced harsh criticism from some lawmakers, justices, journalists, and social scientists, who were convinced gangster films were turning America's youth into juvenile delinquents. As in the nickelodeon era when moral reformers waged a battle to close theatres due to the so-called harmful effects of moving pictures on young people, newspapers once again ran stories about gun-toting kids and teenagers who were negatively influenced by big-screen gangsters. In 1931, two eighteen-year-olds charged with second-degree robbery admitted they were inspired by gangster films to try the "easy money racket" for themselves. Before sending them to a reformatory, the presiding judge had some harsh words for the film industry:

The moving picture industry is complaining about poor business, but it only has itself to blame. Gangster and sex pictures, which seem to predominate, are killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. No responsible parent cares to take children to these pictures. Maybe some day the industry will again become respectable; but until then it will not be a financial success.

One tragic incident that launched a formal campaign against the genre and Hollywood occurred on June 23, 1931, in Montclair, New Jersey. While sixteen-year-old Harold Gamble was describing a scene from a gangster film to twelve-year-old Winslow Elliot, he pulled out an automatic pistol from his hip pocket. The gun accidentally went off, killing Elliot. Local and neighboring community leaders were outraged

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and demanded gangster films be banned from local theatres. The mayor of East Orange, New Jersey, Charles H. Martens, sent a protest letter to Will Hays, who pointed out in his reply that a “system of self-regulation is shown on many screens in the words ‘Crime does not pay.’” Hays also added that “unanimous scientific judgment” accepts gangster films as a deterrent to crime and the real culprit was the gangster himself, not the *gangster film*.

Mayor Martens was not alone in voicing his objections. Italian-American organizations, such as the NYC Federation of Italian-American County Democratic Organizations and *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, objected to gangster films because of their negative portrayal of Italian Americans. The Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association also adopted a resolution urging Hollywood to stop making films that “glorify the lives of gangsters, gunmen and racketeers.”

The influence of crime films on youth was addressed in a four-year study (1928–32) commissioned by the Motion Picture Research Council. The “Payne Fund Studies,” so named after its benefactor, the Payne Study and Experiment Fund, examined theatre attendance, the content of films, and the effects of motion pictures on children’s behavior, attitudes, emotions, and sleep patterns. The results were published in nine volumes and summarized by Henry James Forman in his controversial bestseller *Our Movie Made Children* (1933). An indictment of motion pictures for their negative effects on children, Forman’s opus makes up for the Payne Fund Study’s lack of scientific evidence with hyperbole and inflammatory statements directly linking juvenile crime with motion pictures. The author claims that in addition to teaching juvenile delinquents specific criminal methods and techniques (e.g., how to open a safe, jimmy a door or window, pick a pocket), they propel spectators toward criminal behavior by stimulating their confidence and “desires for ease, luxury, easy money as obtainable through criminal or illegitimate enterprise.” In November of 1933, representatives of the Motion Picture Research Council appeared before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Crime Control to present their evidence. Testifying on behalf of the film industry, MPPDA secretary Carl E. Miliken disputed the validity of the Payne Studies, which he charged had employed improper research techniques, such as asking young subjects leading questions when collecting their data.

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While the harmful effects of violence and crime films on kids were being studied, filmmakers and the studios were engaged in battles of their own with the state censors and the MPPDA's Studio Relations Committee (SRC) over the gangster genre. According to historian Stephen Prince, the crackdown on gangster films was due in part to the "increase in ferocity and vividness" of their violent content. Prince considers *Little Caesar* the least violent of the triumvirate, yet he points out that the Pennsylvania censors demanded cuts in not only the scenes with gunfire, but those in which characters brandish weapons, even if they are never used. However, the same restrictions did not apply to the police, who, for example, use a Tommy gun in the climactic shootout in *Little Caesar* (at the end of which Rico utters the famous line, "Mother of Mercy! Is this the end of Rico?")

By comparison, *The Public Enemy* is more "realistic" in terms of violence and its depiction of the underworld milieu, which, according to the opening title card, was the aim of the filmmakers:

It is the ambition of the authors of *The Public Enemy* to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal. While the story of *The Public Enemy* is essentially a true story, all names and characters appearing herein, are purely fictional.

What gives *The Public Enemy* its realistic edge is the added psychological dimension to the character of Tom Powers, who has a serious sadistic streak and seems to enjoy tormenting his victims, including his former mentor, Putty Nose (Murray Kinnell). Amidst the beer and bullets, the plot of *Enemy* also focuses on Tom's relationship with his family, who, at the end of the film, find it in their hearts to welcome him back into their home. Unfortunately, a rival gang gets to him first, and in the film's disturbing climax, his corpse is left at his family's doorstep. The closing title brings the film's message home: "'The Public Enemy' is not a man, nor is it a character—it is a problem that sooner or later WE, the public, must solve." In his report on the film, a member of the SRC praised it for showing "very clearly the effect gangster life has upon his immediate family" and believed the concluding title crawl was provocative and had "educational value."

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The backlash against violence in films, gangster movies in particular, continued to gain ground. In the summer of 1931, the entire genre was banned from movie theatres in Syracuse, New York, and Worcester, Massachusetts. In Evanston, Illinois, the chief of police forbade “all underworld pictures” to be shown when a group of boys cheered during a gangster film. Meanwhile, back in Hollywood, producer Howard Hughes was ready to put his film version of Armitage Trail’s novel *Scarface* into production. The film chronicles the career of Tony “Scarface” Camonte (Paul Muni), an ambitious and violent gangster based on Capone who seizes control of Chicago’s bootlegging operations by killing off his rivals. Overly protective of his sister, Cesca (Ann Dvorak), Tony ruins her chance at happiness when he kills his right-hand man, Guino (George Raft), after discovering they have been sleeping together. But what Tony didn’t know is that the couple tied the knot while he was out of town. In the climactic scene, a crazed Scarface and Cesca are holed up in his apartment by the police, who open fire. Cesca is shot and killed. When tear gas is thrown into the apartment, Scarface comes out crying and begging for his life. When he tries to make a run for it, the police riddle his body with bullets.

When Colonel Jason Joy, head of the Studio Relations Committee (the precursor to the PCA), reviewed the script, he was concerned that Scarface was being portrayed as a “home-loving man, good to his mother, and protecting his sister” and was glorified in the film’s ending “when he deliberately walks into the police gunfire.” In his notes on the script, Joy reminded Hughes’s production team about the current backlash against the genre:

In all my nine years of experience in our industry, no “cycle” has been criticized so severely and with such apparent feeling as is the cycle of crime pictures. Despite the fact that two or three of the more recent gang pictures have achieved more than average returns at the box office, I have been told emphatically by censors, chiefs of police, newspaper editors, exhibitors and leaders among the citizenry that there is a vast growing resentment against the continued production and exhibition of this type of picture.

Upon viewing footage of the film, Colonel Joy advised Hughes that state and local censors would prevent *Scarface* from playing in about

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50 percent of the theatres in the country. Consequently, some major changes had to be made before the film could receive the MPPDA's approval. First, to appease the censors and make it clear the filmmakers did not intend to glorify the title character, the phrase "The Shame of the Nation" was added to the title. The film also took a strong position on gun control by blaming the federal government for failing to keep guns off the streets. With the approval of the MPPDA, two scenes were added to deliver an antigun message, which also, unfortunately, grinds the narrative to a screeching halt. In the first scene, the chief of detectives denounces the "morons in this country" who think gangsters are "colorful characters" and "demagogues" when innocent children are getting killed in the crossfire. The second scene involves a newspaper editor, Garston (Purnell Pratt), and a group of concerned citizens, who accuse the press of "glorifying the gangster" and blame the police for not controlling the violence. Garston fires back and tells them (and the audience) that it's up to them as American citizens to pressure the federal government to pass antigun laws, even "if we have to have martial law to do it!"

In his report to Will Hays, Colonel Joy was enthusiastic over the film's antigun position because it was "the direction in which many minds are going today." He also believed the new scenes give the film

a right to live in spite of the prevalent, panicky opposition to gangster themes. That idea is simply this: As long as the gangster has access to guns, either pistols or machine guns, he is a bold, bad-man, menacing society and mocking at law and decency, but once robbed of his guns he is a yellow rat who will crawl into his hole.

The rise in gun violence during Prohibition led to the passing of the 1934 National Firearms Act, which imposed a tax on the transfer and manufacturing of Title II weapons, including the gangster's gun of choice, the M1928 Thompson Submachine Gun.

But the most contentious issue was the film's ending, which the PCA insisted must be altered in order to negate the character's heroism. In the alternate ending, which would be included at the time of the film's release, Scarface turns into a quivering coward when he is caught and taken away by the police. He stands before a judge, is sentenced to

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death by hanging, and is executed. After he is captured, Scarface is never again shown because a stand-in was used for Muni, who was reportedly not available. Scarface's absence and the fact that the audience doesn't see or hear the character during his sentencing or as he is climbs up the stairs to the gallows diminishes what the censors were trying to achieve in having moviegoers witness a legal system that assures Americans that crime does indeed not pay.

In the end, the Hollywood gangsters of the 1930s were defeated not by the cops or the courts, but by the censors. The morality police over at the PCA lowered the boom on the gangster genre in 1934, which led to the adoption in 1938 of "Special Regulations on Crime in Motion Pictures" (see appendix I). The remnants of the gangster genre could be seen in a series of Warner Brothers crime dramas, such as *"G" Men* (1935), *Bullets or Ballots* (1936), and *San Quentin* (1937), in which Robinson and Cagney graduated to playing reformed gangsters or law enforcement agents. Thanks to the PCA, American moviegoers were on the right side of the law and their morals were, at least for the time being, out of the line of fire.

BLACKBOARD JUNGLE (1955): "A SHOCKING STORY OF TODAY'S HIGH SCHOOL HOODLUMS"

In 1953, a U.S. Senate subcommittee was formed to investigate the causes of juvenile delinquency in America and to assess the effectiveness of current laws designed to combat what the public was told had become a national epidemic. Statistically, juvenile crime was on the rise in post-World War II America, but as historian James Gilbert suggests, the increase may have been due to the lack of a uniform definition of juvenile delinquency by the FBI and state and local law enforcement agencies. For example, whether an underage teen caught drinking and/or breaking curfew was branded a "JD" depended on the state and county where he or she lived.

The hearings held by the subcommittee investigated the possible reasons why some kids go bad. The negative effects of comic books, specifically horror and crime comics with titles such as *Crime Patrol*, *The Vault of Horror*, and *Crypt of Terror*, were the subject of a 1955

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subcommittee report. Based on the conflicting testimonies of experts, the subcommittee concluded it was unlikely that the reading of crime and horror comics would lead to delinquency in a well-adjusted and normally law-abiding child. However, the report did recommend that additional research needed to be done to determine the effects of comics on emotionally disturbed children.

Motion pictures, particularly those with excessive violence and sex, were also the subject of hearings conducted by the subcommittee's cochair, Senator Estes Kefauver (D-Tenn.), who traveled to the West Coast in June of 1955 to hear testimony from studio executives. One recent release Kefauver sharply criticized was MGM's *Blackboard Jungle*. Based on a bestseller by Evan Hunter, *Blackboard* is the story of an idealistic high school teacher named Richard Dadier (Glenn Ford), who accepts a job at an all-male vocational school in the inner city and has trouble controlling his class of delinquents, who only take orders from their ringleader, Artie West (Vic Morrow). Dadier believes the methods used by the other teachers, who are either too strict or too liberal, are ineffective. So he employs a "divide and conquer" strategy and develops a strong rapport with his brightest student, Greg Miller (Sidney Poitier), in hope he will challenge Artie's authority and lead the class against him.

MGM anticipated the film would be controversial, which is why *Blackboard Jungle* opens with a statement explaining the filmmakers' intentions:

We, in the United States, are fortunate to have a school system that is a tribute to our communities and to our faith in American youth.

Today we are concerned with juvenile delinquency—the cause—and its effects. We are especially concerned when this delinquency boils over into our schools.

The scenes and incidents depicted here are fictional. However, we believe that public awareness is a first step toward a remedy for any problem. It is in this spirit and with this faith *Blackboard Jungle* is produced.

MGM's vice president in charge of production, Dore Schary, publicly defended the film to Kefauver, explaining, "We knew it would

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be controversial from the story, but with the increasing vandalism being reported in schools we thought that the picture would represent a dramatic report to the people. We are not frightened or intimidated by criticism of the picture." Senator Kefauver proceeded to question Schary about a recent news story in which a group of schoolgirls in Nashville admitted to setting a barn on fire after seeing *Blackboard Jungle*. Unaware of the incident, Schary responded, "There's no fire in the picture. They can't pin that on us." Although the executives who testified in the hearings admitted some of their films had perhaps gone too far in regards to violence and brutality, they would not concede to the suggestion that there was any link between the movies and the reported rise in teenage delinquency.

Unlike the majority of films about juvenile delinquents released in 1955 (mostly low-budget B-movies such as *Mad at the World*, *Teen-Age Crime Wave*, *Teenage Devil Dolls*, etc.) and in the years that followed, *Blackboard Jungle* is not an exploitation film. Writer/director Richard Brooks establishes with the opening crawl that his film is intended as a "message picture" about troubled teenagers living in the big city. Violence or, more precisely, the *threat* of violence that hangs over the adults in the film is presented—at least by 1955 Hollywood standards—as "real." There are three scenes in the film in which the adults are victims of teenage violence: the attempted rape of a female teacher, Lois Hammond (Margaret Hayes); the robbery of a newspaper delivery truck; and the violent beating of Dadier and another teacher in the street by their own students. When the Production Code Administration received the script in August of 1954, it approved the basic story, but found these three scenes unacceptable. It considered the assault of Miss Hammond unsuitable "for inclusion in that type of entertainment envisioned as being acceptable for general patronage" and the "brutality and violence" in the other two scenes to be "particularly spectacular and dramatized in unacceptable length and detail." The subsequent memos encouraged the studio to tone down these scenes, particularly the attack of Miss Hammond, which the filmmakers were directed to handle with "extreme care to avoid offensive sex-suggestiveness" so as not to "suggest an attempted rape, but rather that the boy is merely attempting to kiss the woman." (There is no doubt what occurs in the final film is an attempted rape.)

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The Production Code Administration approved *Blackboard Jungle*. Pennsylvania's censorship board did so as well, but a provision was added to the contract that accompanied their seal:

In the face of complete opposition on the part of officials of the Public and Parochial School Systems, the City Police, the Clergy, the Crime Prevention Association, and the Council of Churches, and because of certain legal limitations, we reluctantly issued a Seal of Approval of the film *Blackboard Jungle*.

We call your attention to the Certification of Approval which carries "THE BOARD RESERVES THE RIGHT TO REVOKE THIS CERTIFICATION," and we advise that we will invoke this right if any instance directly connected to this film is reported.

Censor boards banned the film in Memphis and Atlanta, where the movie was declared "immoral, obscene, and licentious." Objections were also raised over Dadier's desegregated class, which included a mixture of Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Asian students, and the casting of an African American actor, Sidney Poitier, as the film's young hero. The film was also denounced by educators and prompted surprise inspections on two occasions of the Bronx Vocational High School, where Hunter briefly worked as a substitute and which served as the inspiration for his novel (inspectors reportedly gave the school glowing reviews). The Legion of Decency assigned the film a B rating, remarking that "its treatment contains morally objectionable elements (brutality, violence, disrespect for lawful authority) and tends to negate any constructive conclusion."

In the fall of 1955, *Blackboard Jungle* was at the center of an international scandal when the film was allegedly withdrawn from exhibition at the Venice Film Festival due to objections raised by the U.S. ambassador to Italy, Clare Boothe Luce. A playwright (*The Women*) and former Congresswoman (R-CT), Luce reportedly believed the film cast the American education system in an unfavorable light. In what he regarded as an act of "flagrant political censorship," Dore Schary was outraged that Mrs. Luce would "impose her personal authority" to prevent the film from being screened. Arthur Loew, President of Loews

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International, which distributed the film, filed a formal complaint with the Secretary of State charging that Luce used her position to get the film withdrawn. The State Department denied that Luce had anything to do with the film being removed from the festival program, yet admitted she refused to attend a planned screening because she believed the film was not in the best interest of the United States. Still, *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther said the entire incident smacked “suspiciously of federal censorship” and, ironically, piqued everyone’s curiosity about the film. Crowther called *Blackboard Jungle* “the toughest, hardest hitting social drama the screen has had in years,” yet he questioned if the filmmakers, even if they were sincere in their intentions to increase public awareness, exaggerated “the details” of some of the problems plaguing American schools. For him, such an act was “irresponsible and fraught with peril. . . . Certainly juvenile delinquency is a problem today. But it will not help to have it misrepresented and sensationalized.”

Blackboard Jungle is perhaps best remembered for its theme song, “Rock Around the Clock,” performed by Bill Haley and the Comets over the film’s opening title sequence. The song, written by Max C. Freedman and Jimmy DeKnight (a pseudonym for James E. Myers), was first recorded by Sonny Dae and His Knights, but it was not until Haley’s 1954 version was used on the film’s soundtrack that it held the #1 spot on the Billboard Chart for seven weeks (July 9–August 20, 1955). After receiving national airplay (the first for a rock song), “Rock Around the Clock” became the bestselling single to date. An expression of teenage defiance and rebellion against authority, coupled with its link to a film about juvenile delinquency, “Rock Around the Clock” was adopted by teenagers around the world as their official anthem.

BONNIE AND CLYDE (1967): “THEY’RE YOUNG. THEY’RE IN LOVE. THEY ROB BANKS.”

On May 23, 1934, twenty-five-year-old Clyde Barrow and his female companion, twenty-three-year-old Bonnie Parker, were ambushed by Texas Rangers and shot to death while the couple was traveling outside the small town of Gibsland, Louisiana. During their two-year crime spree, Barrow and his gang robbed banks, stores, and filling stations,

killing a total of thirteen people along the way, eight of whom were policemen or guards.

Thirty-three years after their deaths, director Arthur Penn and actor/producer Warren Beatty finally gave Bonnie and Clyde the same big-screen treatment Hollywood had already bestowed on most of the A-list gangsters of the 1920s and 1930s. But anyone familiar with the couple's criminal record (few people were before the film's release) or feeling nostalgic for the Warner Bros. gangster films of the early '30s, was probably wondering what exactly the filmmakers were going for by portraying the duo as a pair of young, reckless (and at times sympathetic) free spirits. As the film's advertising tagline states, "They're young. They're in love. They rob banks." (A variation on the tagline substituted the line "They rob banks" with "and they kill people.")

When *Bonnie and Clyde* opened the 1967 Montreal Film Festival, the audience went wild—with the exception of one prominent film critic. Apparently the *New York Times*'s Bosley Crowther was expecting to see a gangster film in the same vein as *Little Caesar* and *Scarface*, but instead he saw (in his words) a "wild, jazzy farce melodrama" that "amusedly and sympathetically recounts the bank-robbing degradations" of Barrow and Parker. One week later, Crowther wrote a scathing review in which he berated the filmmakers for turning the lives of two cold-blooded killers into a "cheap piece of bald-face slapstick . . . loaded with farcical hold-ups, [and] screaming chases in stolen getaway cars that have the antique appearance and speeded up movement of the clumsy vehicles of the Keystone Cops." While he was not impressed by Beatty's portrayal of Clyde ("clowning broadly as the killer") and Faye Dunaway's Bonnie ("squirming grossly as his thrill-seeking sex-starved mole"), it was the "blending of farce and brutal killings" that he found "as pointless as it is lacking in taste, since it makes no valid commentary upon the already travestied truth."

Crowther's reviews sparked a national debate among critics, who were divided over the film. Like Crowther, many critics accused the filmmakers of glorifying the couple's violent, criminal lifestyle. *Time* magazine accused Beatty and Penn of reducing Bonnie and Clyde's story to a "strange and purposeless mingling of fact and claptrap that teeters easily on the brink of burlesque." In his review for *Films in Review*, Page Cook dismissed the film as "incompetently written, acted, directed and

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produced” and accused the filmmakers of promoting the idea that “sociopathology is art.” *Newsweek*’s Joe Morgenstern initially panned the film, calling it “a squalid shoot ‘em-up for the moron trade.” But then he did something rare for a critic—he retracted his own review. His second review starts with an apology: “I am sorry to say I consider that review grossly unfair and regrettably inaccurate. I am sorrier to say that I wrote it.” Although he still believed the film’s “gore goes too far,” he acknowledged the value of the film’s violent content: “But art can certainly reflect life, clarify and improve life; and since most of humanity teeters on the edge of violence every day, there is no earthly reason why art should not turn violence to its own good ends, showing us what we do and why.”

The critics who praised the film “read” *Bonnie and Clyde* “as a commentary on the rebellious spirit of today’s youth and the prevalence of violence in contemporary society.” While all the conventions and iconography (Tommy guns, hideouts, cars, etc.) of the ’30s gangster are there, Bonnie and Clyde seem more like ’60s renegades than ’30s outlaws. They wage war on the “establishment,” namely the banks and the law, yet, in a Robin Hood-esque gesture, show their sympathy toward the poor and downtrodden by never taking their money during a holdup. In their original treatment for the film, screenwriters Robert Benton and David Newman conceived the world of Bonnie and Clyde as a reflection of American life in the late 1960s:

This is a movie about criminals only incidentally. Crime in the ’30s was the strange, the exotic, the different. This is a movie about two people, lovers, movers, and operators. They’re “hung up,” like many people are today. They moved in odd, unpredictable ways which can be viewed, with an existential eye, as classic. . . . They are not Crooks. They are people, and this film is, in many ways, about what’s going on now.

If *Bonnie and Clyde* had a critical cheerleader, it was the *New Yorker*’s Pauline Kael, who reveled in the “contemporary feeling” emanating from the “most excitingly American movie since *The Manchurian Candidate*,” which “brings into the almost frightening public world of movies things that people have been feeling and saying and writing about.” Kael

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compared the film to the gangster movies and crime dramas of the 1930s and 1940s (like Nicholas Ray's *They Live By Night* [1937]) to illustrate how the film deviates from the classical Hollywood mode, particularly in terms of its lack of a "secure basis for identification" for the audience, who "are made to feel but are not told how to feel." Kael's point is certainly a valid one. In classical gangster films, we identify with the "bad guy," who lives in a black-and-white, Manichaeian world of good vs. evil. While morality dictates that Tommy Powers and Scarface must be eliminated in the end, there is a cloud of moral ambiguity that hovers over *Bonnie and Clyde*. The film's humor and stylization, particularly early in the film, gives us a window of time to identify with the couple, pledge our allegiance to them, and accept their values. But in the second half of the film, those values are called into question as the film's tone changes from comical to serious and people start to get shot and killed.

Kael also recognized the film's stylistic link to European art cinema, particularly the films of the French New Wave (François Truffaut was Beatty's first choice for director). What Kael could not have known is that *Bonnie and Clyde* would usher in a new wave of American moviemaking known today as "New Hollywood Cinema." Beginning in the late 1960s, a new generation of directors, film-school educated and heavily influenced by *auteurs* like Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Ingmar Bergman, infused American cinema with their own personal style and an "art film" sensibility. The list of "New Hollywood" filmmakers and films included such notable directors as Mike Nichols (*The Graduate* [1967], *Carnal Knowledge* [1971]); Martin Scorsese (*Mean Streets* [1973], *Taxi Driver* [1976]); Alan J. Pakula (*Klute* [1971], *The Parallax View* [1974]); and Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather* [1972], *The Conversation* [1974]).

Four months after panning the film, *Time* magazine featured Beatty and Dunaway on the cover (December 8, 1967) as part of their cover story on "The Shock of Freedom in Films." *Time* was now calling *Bonnie and Clyde* a "watershed picture" that signaled "a new style, a new trend" in the tradition of such American classics as *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Stagecoach* (1939), and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952).

One aspect of *Bonnie and Clyde* that most critics—both pro and con—addressed is the rapid shift in the film's tone from comical to serious.

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Bonnie and Clyde's crime spree begins with a series of mishaps that call into question any notion that Clyde Barrow was some kind of criminal mastermind. The first bank Clyde tries to rob is literally empty, except for one lone teller who tells him the bank bailed three weeks ago (so Clyde makes the teller go outside and explain it to Bonnie, who bursts into laughter). When he tries to hold up a general store, he barely makes it out alive when a butcher comes after him with a meat cleaver. For their next job, C. W. Moss (Michael J. Pollard), a new addition to their team, is the duo's designated driver. Bonnie and Clyde hold up a bank and run out to their car, only to discover dimwitted C. W. has decided to park it. When a bank teller jumps on the car's riding board, Clyde shoots him point blank in the face. It's a disturbing, jarring moment because nothing prepares the audience for the radical shift in tone from comical to serious.

Bonnie and Clyde is best remembered for its harrowing climax, in which the couple is ambushed along a country road (the scene is historically accurate—over one thousand rounds were fired before the duo could even draw their guns). Penn shot the fifty-four-second montage sequence consisting of fifty-one shots using four cameras, each operating at a different speed (normal speed and varying rates of slow motion). The realism of an otherwise stylized sequence is enhanced by the blood we see pouring out of their bodies as they are riddled with bullets, an illusion created by squibs, small plastics bags containing red dye. As Stephen Prince observes, the sequence privileges the “mechanics of violent death . . . rather than the inner, emotional or psychological consequences of violent trauma.” In an interview at the time of the film's release, Arthur Penn admitted he was not really concerned with the violent content while directing the film, adding that “the trouble with the violence in most films is that it is not violent enough. A war film that doesn't show the real horrors of war—bodies being torn apart and arms being shot off—really glorifies war.”

Crowther's negative reviews and the critics' responses, both positive and negative, were a mixed blessing for the filmmakers. At the time of the film's release, Warner Brothers-Seven Arts did not have much faith in the film. As the studio's publicity executive Joe Hyams recalled, “they didn't understand the movie. On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the biggest culture shock for Warners, that might have been the

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end of it.” After the initial reviews, the film was pulled from circulation, but the debate among the critics continued and the film received endorsements from critics like the *Village Voice*’s Andrew Sarris and the *New Yorker*’s Penelope Gilliat, who quipped the film “could look like a celebration of gangsters only to a man with a head full of head shavings” (guess which critic’s head she was referring to?).

Bonnie and Clyde was nominated for ten Academy Awards, including nods for Best Picture and the five principal actors, and won two—for Estelle Parsons for supporting actress and cinematographer Burnett Guffey, who had won back in 1953 for *From Here to Eternity*. Although costume designer Theadora Van Runkle lost to John Truscott for *Camelot* (1967), her designs ushered in a revival of men’s double-breasted suits and, for women, the maxiskirt and berets (also known as the “Bonnie beret”). In January of 1968, Ms. Dunaway was featured in a *Life* magazine photo spread entitled “Fashion That Rocked the World” wearing outfits from Bonnie’s closet.

In terms of the younger generation, one wonders if they were capable of looking past the fashions, the Tommy guns, and Beatty and Dunaway’s movie-star looks to really understand the film. In March of 1968, five teenagers thought it would be fun to go into the Westport Bank and Trust Company in Westport, Connecticut wearing *Bonnie and Clyde*–inspired outfits and create a disturbance. A half-dozen officers armed with shotguns and revolvers arrived on the scene and lined the youths up against the wall before bringing them down to headquarters. An editorial in the *Bridgeport Post* did not blame the incident on the youngsters or even the film, but interpreted the stunt as “another indication that *Bonnie and Clyde* is a misunderstood and misused movie” due to the “nonsense” surrounding the film, namely the “promotion and publicity,” which opened the door for interpretation.

Perhaps a better testament to how the film spoke to the younger generation was a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* from Nancy Fisher, a teenager from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Fisher explained that she understood the real Bonnie and Clyde were “cold-hearted killers” and then goes on to describe how “Bonnie and Clyde fever” had taken over her high school and how she is playing Bonnie in the school assembly, but not the real Bonnie Parker, but Faye Dunaway as Bonnie Parker. “There will be posters of the Beatty and Dunaway Bon-

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nie and Clyde used in the assembly," she added, "to clearly define that we are portraying their styles and influence." Along with her letter, the *Times* published a photo of blonde-haired Miss Fisher wearing a beret and '30s style dress sitting Bonnie-Parker-style on a vintage car—and holding a shotgun.

***THE WILD BUNCH* (1969): "IF THEY MOVE, KILL 'EM."**

"If I'm so bloody that I drive people out of the theatres, then I've failed."
—Sam Peckinpah

When *The Wild Bunch* rode into theatres in the summer of 1969, director Sam Peckinpah was not a household name and his film seemed like just another old-fashioned shoot-'em-up Western. Even the film's stars—Hollywood veterans William Holden, Robert Ryan, and Ernest Borgnine—were holdovers from the studio era. There was no Dustin Hoffman or Warren Beatty or any of the young actors associated with the New Hollywood Cinema of the late 1960s. But any preconceived ideas audiences may have had going in to see *The Wild Bunch* were shattered in the film's first fifteen minutes.

In the opening sequence, a group of outlaws (the Bunch), posing as U.S. Cavalry soldiers, ride into San Rafael, a small Texas town. They intend to rob the railroad office, but their plan is thwarted by a group of bounty hunters waiting to ambush them. The shootout that erupts between the Bunch and the bounty hunters—the most violent and bloodiest to date in Hollywood history—stunned American audiences. Peckinpah literally transforms the streets of San Rafael into a battlefield with the townspeople, including the local Temperance Union, caught in the middle. Innocent men and women are among the casualties because, in Peckinpah's universe, no one is safe from the threat of violence and everyone, with the exception of children, is a potential victim (Peckinpah told a roomful of critics he was "constitutionally unable to show a child in jeopardy"). However, some children do witness the bloodbath while others are shown, in an allegorical moment, inflicting their own brand of violence on a scorpion by feeding it to an army of red ants.

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It's also fitting (and clearly meant to be an inside joke) that Peckinpah's directorial credit appears on the screen when the Bunch take over the railroad office in San Rafael and are holding the staff at gunpoint. At that moment, Pike Bishop (Holden), the head of the Bunch, matter-of-factly orders his fellow bandits, "If they move, kill 'em!" which, judging from *The Wild Bunch's* body count, seems to have been Peckinpah's watch-cry during the making of the film.

As in many Westerns of the post-World War II era, *The Wild Bunch* deviates from the classical Westerns of the 1930s and 1940s in which the hero (think John Wayne in *Stagecoach* [1939]) is a moral figure who serves as a social mediator between civilization, as represented by the Western town and its laws, and the uncivilized Western frontier. But audience demand for changes in the "classical Western formula" and the "sociopolitical realities" of postwar America redefined "the hero's motivation and mission." It was no longer viable that he would volunteer to clean up the town because it was the honorable or moral thing to do. So in the 1950s, the "professional Western" introduced moviegoers to a whole new breed of gunslingers who are "cynical, self-conscious, and even 'incorporated.'" But the real villains in *The Wild Bunch* are not the outlaws or the bounty hunters, but the oppressive, corrupt forces of corporate greed, progress, and power represented by the banks, the railroad company, and a fascist dictator-in-the-making—a sadistic Mexican general named Mapache (Emilio Fernández).

The bounty hunters who surprise the Bunch are being paid by the railroad company to kill Pike and his men. Like their intended victims, they have no regard for the law and are only interested in filling their own pockets (which they literally do after the San Rafael shootout when they start pillaging valuables off of still-warm corpses). Their leader, Deke Thornton (Ryan), is a convict with a personal investment in hunting down the Bunch. He must find them or get sent back to prison. Deke also used to ride with Pike until the law caught up with them. Pike managed to escape while Deke was sent to prison.

Like the bounty hunters, the Bunch are forced to become "guns for hire" when the robbery in San Rafael turns out to be a bust (the bags of money are filled with steel washers). Pike's dreams of early retirement are shattered, so he and his men agree to rob a train carrying guns and ammunition to the army of Mapache's nemesis, Pancho Villa. One of

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the Bunch, a Mexican named Angel (Jaime Sanchez), whose father was killed by Mapache, gives some of the weapons to the general's enemies. He is caught and brutally tortured by Mapache. Instead of simply walking away with their money (and perhaps to make up for abandoning Deke years ago), Pike and his men demonstrate their loyalty to one of their own by leading a suicidal assault on Mapache's army. In the end, the Bunch, Mapache, and his army are wiped out. Only Deke, who arrives after the show is over, survives.

The bloody climax between the Bunch and Mapache's soldiers, like the opening sequence, is excessive, chaotic, and visually stunning. As in *Bonnie and Clyde*, one device Peckinpah repeatedly and effectively uses for dramatic effect is slow motion, which *Time* magazine found to be particularly effective:

Using a combination of fast cutting and slow motion, Peckinpah creates scenes of uncontrolled frenzy in which the feeling of chaotic violence is almost overwhelming. Where the slow-motion murders in *Bonnie and Clyde* were balletic, similar scenes in *The Wild Bunch* have agonizing effect of prolonging the moment of impact, giving each death its own individual horror.

Newsweek's Joseph Morgenstern also appreciated Peckinpah's use of beauty "as a tool for irony. The towns that these men destroy sit green and soft on the land." In his review in the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby pointed out that the "choreographed brutality" of the violence is what makes it both horrible and beautiful:

Borrowing a device from *Bonnie and Clyde*, Peckinpah suddenly reduces the camera speed to slow motion, which at first heightens the horror of the mindless slaughter, and then—and this is what really carries horror—makes it beautiful, almost abstract, and finally into terrible parody.

The excessive violence did not go unnoticed by the MPAA, which, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, initially slapped the film with an X rating. Warner Brothers-Seven Arts subsequently cut and resubmit the film to the MPAA seven times before the X was reduced to an R. After

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the film was previewed, Peckinpah reportedly shortened the opening fight sequence to improve the pacing.

But the director tells a slightly different story. In a 1969 interview with Paul Schrader, Peckinpah said, "there was never danger of an X rating for violence. We had an R right from the beginning. I actually cut more than Warners requested. There were certain things Warners wanted cut, but I went farther. I had to make it play better."

The director's final cut of the movie was 145 minutes. The version that opened in theatres in June/early July and reviewed by the critics was 143 minutes, but if you went to see it in mid-July, the running time was 135 minutes. When Vincent Canby became aware that eight more minutes were cut out of the film, he telephoned producer Phil Feldman, who explained the cuts (or as he called them, the "lifts") were not in response to the negative response they received from some critics to the violence, but to accelerate the pace and shorten the running time so the theatres could add an extra screening. After seeing the second version of the film, Canby admitted one of the four cuts (a three-and-a-half minute sequence in which Pancho Villa's men attack Mapache's Mexican Federal Forces), did "ease the flow of the story," but the remaining changes altered the narrative, particularly the deletion of a flashback in which Deke and Pike are caught in an ambush in a bordello (we're told these men were friends, yet this is the only scene in which they appear together). Feldman claimed all of the cuts were made with the director's consent, but Peckinpah described the cuts as a "disaster" and stated in simple terms, "I do not agree with that in any way, shape, or form."

The British censors only required nine additional seconds to be cut, which was minor compared to the four and a half minutes demanded by the Canadian censors. Peckinpah traveled to Toronto to meet with O. J. Silverthorn, head of Canadian censorship, and convinced him to pass the film after cutting only twenty-four feet (a total of sixteen seconds). The film was subsequently banned in Alberta, where the censor said *The Wild Bunch's* "repugnant barbarism" and "extreme brutality . . . made *Fistful of Dollars* look like *Mary Poppins*."

While the censors may have failed to understand (or chose not to consider) the message the director was relaying through the excessiveness and visual stylization of violence, the critics generally understood

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that Peckinpah was using violence in the context of the Western genre to comment on violence and government corruption during the Vietnam era. "Peckinpah's argument, if I understand him," wrote the *Los Angeles Times*'s Charles Champlin, "is that violence is a primal instinct in each of us. . . . And he suggests, in his gory, dramatic terms, that we have not merely a capacity for violence but a joy in violence, a blood lust." At a press junket prior to the film's opening, Feldman, Peckinpah, Holden, and Borgnine fielded questions from critics, who not surprisingly focused mostly on the violence. Peckinpah chose to let the film speak for itself, though he did remark that he wanted "to emphasize the horror and agony violence provides. Violence is not a game." When asked why he did not make a film about Vietnam, Peckinpah replied, "The Western is a universal frame within which it is possible to comment on today."

A letter written to the *New York Times* is a testament to how *The Wild Bunch* succeeded in tapping into the younger generation's fears over the prevalence of violence in contemporary society. The author, nineteen-year-old Tracy Hotchner, who, over a decade later, would be one of four screenwriters of the Joan Crawford biopic, *Mommie Dearest* (1981), responded to Vincent Canby's reading of the film's violence:

At 19, I am a member of that generation which has grown up surrounded by violence. In television we have been continually exposed to programs devoted to gun and fist fights. The knowledge and threat of riots in the cities has been ever present. And the war in Vietnam has had prominence in newspapers and newscasts for as long as I can recall. It has often been asked what effect this violence will have on my generation, and it was not until I saw "The Wild Bunch" that I began to have some insight into the possible effects of relentless violence on the people who are exposed to it.

Hotchner then makes a connection between the onscreen violence and a fight that apparently broke out within the theatre, implying that the film had a direct effect on their behavior (apparently the fisticuffs started when a woman purposely blew smoke into the face of another spectator who had complained about her cigarette). More importantly, she disagrees with Canby's assertion that slow motion "makes

it [violence] beautiful, almost abstract, and finally into terrible parody." Instead, she found the violence to be all too real:

Not at any time do the staggering men with shot-off faces seen close up, nor men with blood gushing from their groin, nor women with shot up breasts seem a parody. The realism is nauseatingly maintained. . . . For most people there is *no* break in the realism, and thus the film is unbearable.

As Canby so rightfully explains in his reply, her revulsion to what she saw upon the screen was exactly the audience reaction Peckinpah was going for. The same can be said for the link Hotchner made between the violence happening onscreen and a few rows in front of her. While it is difficult to suggest that the violence in the film instigated what was happening in the theatre, the incident she witnessed certainly served the film's thematic exploration of violence by reinforcing that despite the expressive stylization, bullets and blood are indeed for real.

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971): "A LITTLE OF THE OLD ULTRA-VIOLENCE"

Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange* is a morality tale set in a dystopian society ruled by a repressive regime and overrun by nasty youths with an unquenchable thirst for "ultra-violence." The story's narrator, fifteen-year-old Alex, is the authoritarian leader of a gang, which converses in its own brand of slang (Nadsat, which sounds like a cross between Russian and British English). One night, after breaking into a house and terrorizing the female occupants, one of Alex's "droogies" (friends) turns on him. He is caught by the police and sent to prison, where, with some help from his cellmates, he beats another inmate to death. Alex is ordered to be a guinea pig for a form of aversion therapy, Ludovico's Technique, which is designed, through a combination of drugs and exposure to violent films, to trigger nausea when the subject is exposed to violence and hears the Ninth Symphony (last movement) of his favorite composer, Beethoven. The treatment's success results in his early release from prison, but once he is back in the