

CRIME and GANGSTER FILMS

• **Crime and Gangster Films** are developed around the sinister actions of criminals or gangsters, particularly bankrobbers, underworld figures, or ruthless hoodlums who operate outside the law, stealing and violently murdering their way through life. In the 1940s, a new type of crime thriller emerged, more dark and cynical - see the section on [film-noir](#) for further examples of crime films. Criminal and gangster films are often categorized as post-war [film noir](#) or [detective-mystery films](#) - because of underlying similarities between these cinematic forms.

Crime stories in this genre often highlight the life of a crime figure or a crime's victim(s). Or they glorify the rise and fall of a particular criminal(s), gang, bank robber, murderer or lawbreakers in personal power struggles or conflict with law and order figures, an underling or competitive colleague, or a rival gang. Headline-grabbing situations, real-life gangsters, or crime reports have often been used in crime films. Gangster/crime films are usually set in large, crowded cities, to provide a view of the secret world of the criminal: dark nightclubs or streets with lurid neon signs, fast cars, piles of cash, sleazy bars, contraband, seedy living quarters or rooming houses. Exotic locales for crimes often add an element of adventure and wealth. Writers dreamed up appropriate gangland jargon for the tales, such as "tommy guns" or "molls."

Film gangsters are usually materialistic, street-smart, immoral, megalomaniacal, and self-destructive. Rivalry with other criminals in gangster warfare is often a significant plot characteristic. Crime plots also include questions such as how the criminal will be apprehended by police, private eyes, special agents or lawful authorities, or mysteries such as who stole the valued object. They rise to power with a tough cruel facade while showing an ambitious desire for success and recognition, but underneath they can express sensitivity and gentleness.

Gangster films are morality tales: Horatio Alger or 'pursuit of the American Dream' success stories turned upside down in which criminals live in an inverted dream world of success and wealth. Often from poor immigrant families, gangster characters often fall prey to crime in the pursuit of wealth, status, and material possessions (clothes and cars), because all other "normal" avenues to the top are unavailable to them. Although they are doomed to failure and inevitable death (usually violent), criminals are sometimes portrayed as the victims of circumstance, because the stories are told from their point of view.

Early Gangster Films Until the Dawn of the Talkies:



Criminal/gangster films date back to the early days of film during the silent era. One of the first to mark the start of the gangster/crime genre was D. W. Griffith's **The Musketeers of Pig Alley** (1912) about organized crime. Raoul Walsh's first feature film, **The Regeneration** (1915) showcased violent lawlessness on the streets of New York (it was shot on location in NYC's Bowery District on the Lower East Side), and the rise of an Irish-American slum boy who grew up to become a gangster due to repressive social conditions in the environment. Even Edwin S. Porter's silent short western, [The Great Train Robbery](#) (1903) was a classic hold-up story.

Josef von Sternberg's gangland melodrama **Underworld** (1927) with George Raft and Clive Brook, often considered as the *first* modern gangster film, had many standard conventions of the crime film - and it was shot from the gangster's point of view. It won the Best Story Award for Ben Hecht - the *first* Oscar ever awarded for an original screenplay. [The first 'gangster' pulp had the same title, *Underworld*, a breeding ground for many crime thriller plots.] And Lewis Milestone's **The Racket** (1928), a Howard Hughes-produced film, concentrated on big-city corruption and a municipality controlled by the mob, and was banned in Chicago because of its negative depiction of the police.

The Gangster Film in the Era of the "Talking Picture":

It wasn't until the sound era and the 1930s that gangster films truly became an entertaining, popular way to attract viewers to the theatres, who were interested in the lawlessness and violence on-screen. The events of the Prohibition Era (until 1933) such as bootlegging and the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929, the existence of real-life gangsters (e.g., Al Capone) and the rise of contemporary organized crime and escalation of urban violence helped to encourage this genre. Many of the sensationalist plots of the early gangster films were taken from the day's newspaper headlines. The allied rackets of bootlegging,

gambling and prostitution brought these mobsters to folk hero status, and audiences during that time vicariously participated in the gangster's rise to power and wealth - on the big screen. They vicariously experienced the gangster's satisfaction with flaunting the system and feeling the thrill of violence. Movies flaunted the archetypal exploits of swaggering, cruel, wily, tough, and law-defying bootleggers and urban gangsters.

The talkies era accounted for the rise of crime films, because these films couldn't come to life without sound (machine gun fire, screeching brakes, screams, chases through city streets and squealing car tires). The perfection of sound technology and mobile cameras also aided their spread. The first "100% all-talking" picture and, of course, the *first* sound gangster film was **The Lights of New York (1928)** - it enhanced the urban crime dramas of the time with crackling dialogue and exciting sound effects of squealing getaway car tires and gunshots. Rouben Mamoulian's **City Streets (1931)** from a story penned by Dashiell Hammett was reportedly Al Capone's favorite film, starring Gary Cooper and Sylvia Sydney as two lovers trapped by gangland connections. And Tay Garnett's violent **Bad Company (1931)** was the *first* picture to feature the gangland massacre on St. Valentine's Day.

Fritz Lang's Gangster Films: Dr. Mabuse



Another of the most influential post-war films that helped to launch the entire genre in the 1930s was German director Fritz Lang's **Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler (Parts I and II) (1922-1923)** - a two-part crime melodrama about an evil, criminal boss capable of disguise, conspiracy, and tremendous hypnotic powers.

Lang's mastermind character Mabuse was resurrected in his second sound feature, the crime thriller **The Testament of Dr. Mabuse (1933) (aka Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse)**, with the ruthless genius (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) running a crime ring while imprisoned, and a tenacious Scotland Yard detective (Otto Wernicke) in pursuit. The film was noted for a spectacular car chase scene, explosions, and murders. The government interpreted the film as subversive and having anti-Nazi sentiments - causing Lang to hurriedly leave Germany (he soon relocated in the US and ended up directing in Hollywood by 1936). Ironically, the legendary director's swan-song film (his first film made in Germany since 1933), **The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse (1960)**, spotlighted the same arch-criminal character.



Three Classic Gangster Stars and Warners' Early Gangster Films:

Warner Bros. was considered the gangster studio *par excellence*, and the star- triumvirate of Warners' gangster cycle, all actors who established and defined their careers in this genre, included:

1. Edward G. Robinson
2. James Cagney
3. Humphrey Bogart

Others who were early gangster stars included Paul Muni and George Raft.

Three great classic gangster films (among the first of the talkies) marked the genre's popular acceptance and started the wave of gangster films in the 1930s in the sound era. The lead role in each film (a gangster/criminal or bootleg racketeer of the Prohibition Era) was glorified, but each one ultimately met his doom in the final scenes of these films, due to censors' demands that they receive moral retribution for their crimes.

The first two films in the cycle were released almost simultaneously by Warner Bros.:

- (1) Mervyn LeRoy's **Little Caesar (1930)** starred Edward G. Robinson as a gritty, coarse and ruthless, petty Chicago killer named Caesar Enrico (or "Rico") Bandello (a flimsy disguise for a characterization of Al Capone), who experienced a rise to prominence and then a rapid downfall; Robinson was the *first* great gangster star



(2) William Wellman's [The Public Enemy \(1931\)](#) starred James Cagney (in his first film) as a cocky, fast-talking, nasty, and brutal criminal/bootlegger named Tom Powers - most memorable in a vicious scene at the breakfast table where the snarling gangster assaults his floozy moll girlfriend (Mae Clarke) by pressing a half grapefruit into her face. [Both are still in their pajamas, indicating that they spent the night together.] The startling finale included the door-to-door delivery of Cagney's mummy-wrapped corpse to his mother's house - the bandaged body falls through the front door. [The same stars were reunited in another Pre-Code quasi-gangster/comedy film, [Lady Killer \(1933\)](#) with Mae Clarke as Cagney's moll, and Cagney as the head of a New York crime ring who must relocate and hide out in Hollywood.]

(3) Howard Hawks' raw [Scarface: The Shame of a Nation \(1932\)](#), a Howard Hughes' produced film from UA starred Paul Muni as a power-mad, vicious, immature and beastly hood in Prohibition-Era Chicago (the characterization of Tony Camonte was loosely based on the brutal, murderous racketeer Al Capone). Other stars were George Raft (as his coin-flipping emotion-less, right-hand killer) and Ann Dvorak (as Tony's incestuous sister Cesca).



The ultra-violent, landmark film in the depiction of Italian-American immigrant gangsters included twenty-eight deaths, and the first use of a machine gun by a gangster. It was brought to the attention of the Hays Code for its unsympathetic portrayal of criminals, and there was an ensuing struggle over its release and content. The disturbing portrayal of irresponsible behavior by the gangsters almost encouraged its attractiveness. [In tribute over fifty years later, Brian de Palma remade the film with Al Pacino in the title role of [Scarface \(1983\)](#). Ironically, this film was also criticized as being too brutal.]

The Influence of the Hays Production Code on Gangster Films:

The coming of the Hays Production Code in the early 1930s spelled the end to glorifying the criminal, and approval of the ruthless methods and accompanying violence of the gangster lifestyle. The censorship codes of the day in the 1930s, notably the Hays Office, forced studios (particularly after 1934) to make moral pronouncements, present criminals as psychopaths, end the depiction of the gangster as a folk or 'tragic hero,' de-glorify crime, and emphasize that crime didn't pay. It also demanded minimal details shown for brutal crimes.

One way the studios quieted some of the protest and uproar over "America's shame" was to shift the emphasis from the criminal to the racket-busting federal agents, private detectives, or "good guys" on the other side of the law. In William Keighley's [G-Men \(1935\)](#), the best example of this new 'gangster-as-cop' sub-genre, screen tough guy James Cagney starred as a ruthless, revenge-seeking, impulsive, violent FBI agent to infiltrate criminal gangs on a crime spree in the Midwest. Although he was on the side of the law working undercover, he was just as cynical, brutal, and arrogant as he had been in his earliest gangster films.



A police detective (Edward G. Robinson in an against-type role) goes undercover and joins a NYC racket in [Bullets or Ballots \(1936\)](#), and in Anatole Litvak's [The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse \(1938\)](#), Robinson portrayed a brainy crime specialist who joined Rocks Valentine's gang (led by Humphrey Bogart) and soon was masterminding heists. Robinson also starred as a college law professor - and special prosecutor who pursues justice in [I Am the Law \(1938\)](#). Anthony Mann's [T-Men \(1947\)](#) explored the similarities between Treasury Department agents and the counterfeiting criminals they pursued, and emphasized how villains were caught by semi-documentary style crime detection procedures (lineups, fingerprinting analysis, lab work, etc.).



Another developing 'Cain-and-Abel' sub-genre emphasized that crime didn't pay, in films such as [Manhattan Melodrama \(1934\)](#) with childhood friends William Powell and Clark Gable choosing two diametrically opposed lifestyles - prosecuting attorney and gambler/racketeer, and [Angels With Dirty Faces \(1938\)](#) with two young slum kids, James Cagney and Pat O'Brien, following two different paths - a criminal lifestyle (that was idolized by the Dead End Kids on New York's lower East Side) and the priesthood. In



the electrifying finale, Cagney was taken on a long walk to his execution. William Wyler's gangster melodrama **Dead End (1937)** portrayed the efforts of New York slum dweller (Sylvia Sydney) to keep her gang member brother Tommy (Billy Halop, one of the Dead End Kids) from emulating gangster Humphrey Bogart. The adolescent gang actors (veterans of the Broadway version of *Dead End*) were introduced in this film and later evolved into the East Side Kids and The Bowery Boys.

Warner Bros. Stars - Cagney and Bogart:

Warner Bros. found itself in the late 1930s with three tremendous talents - James Cagney, director Raoul Walsh, and a new actor named Humphrey Bogart. Bogart was catapulted to fame by playing escaped killer Duke Mantee in **The Petrified Forest (1936)**. In various combinations, this trio made three memorable gangster films:

- the realistic, documentary-style, historical saga and chronicling of the Prohibition Era in Raoul Walsh's **The Roaring Twenties (1939)** - with Cagney and Bogart in remarkable roles as bootlegging gangster rivals; it was the last great gangster film before the arrival of *film noir* in the early 1940s; it ended with Cagney's memorable and tragic death scene (evoking Michelangelo's *Pieta*) on snowy church steps
- the dramatic cult classic **They Drive By Night (1940)**
- Bogart in his first starring role as a more sympathetic character - a newly-released, aging criminal Roy "Mad Dog" Earle who fell in love with an innocent lame girl (Ida Lupino) in **High Sierra (1941)**



Bogart's most famous starring roles were in *film noir-ish* masterpieces as a private detective fighting crime, first as hard-boiled Sam Spade in John Huston's ★ **The Maltese Falcon (1941)**, a faithful adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's "B" novel and the first in a string of marvelous film noirs and crime films in the 40s. And then as Philip Marlowe, another investigative detective (derived from Raymond Chandler's novel) in Howard Hawks' complex film ★ **The Big Sleep (1946)**, starring opposite Lauren Bacall. Bogart and Bacall were once again paired in John Huston's memorable crime drama set in the Florida Keys, **Key Largo (1948)** with Edward G. Robinson resurrecting his iconic gangster image as the infamous Johnny Rocco.

Prison Films - A Subgenre:

Other highly dramatic films in the crime genre are actually a subgenre - the prison crime film. These are focused on the regimented setting for criminals - the prison and life behind bars. Prison films have portrayed the tremendous impact prison life has on prisoners as well as on wardens and guards. They are often populated by vindictive wardens, innocent men wrongly imprisoned, or stool-pigeons. Themes have also included methods of evasion, attempts to escape or prove innocence, social consciousness and concern about the prison system, and the death-row experience.



One of the earliest prison films was the much-imitated, melodramatic **The Big House (1930)** with Wallace Beery as the prison's top con-man. Mervyn LeRoy's **I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang (1932)** was another early landmark film with Paul Muni in a nominated role as an innocent man sentenced twice to a chain-gang in the South - a victim of society's brutal, degrading criminal system. The film indicted the prison system (and cruel chain-gang treatment). RKO beat LeRoy's film to the theatres by a few months, with director Rowland Brown's **Hell's Highway (1932)**, another pre-Code film that depicted the horrible treatment of prisoners (wearing uniforms with bullseyes on their backs) in a Southern locale, and opening with the self-strangulation suicide of prisoner Joe Carter (John Arledge) in a sweatbox. The film's hero Frank "Duke" Ellis (Richard Dix) later becomes involved in a prison riot that led to his death in the film's original ending.

In **Each Dawn I Die (1938)**, Cagney starred as a reporter who was framed for murder by gangsters and sent to prison, where he was befriended by inmate gang boss (George Raft). Jules Dassin's **Brute Force (1947)** starred Burt Lancaster (in his third film) as an inmate in Westgate Penitentiary under the harsh rule of a sadistic warden - still, he planned an escape to be with his critically-ill girlfriend (Ann Blyth).

Prison pictures have been revived from time to time, notably **The Defiant Ones (1958)** about two escaped convicts from a rural South chain gang - one black and one white, **The Birdman of Alcatraz (1962)** - a film about bird-expert convict

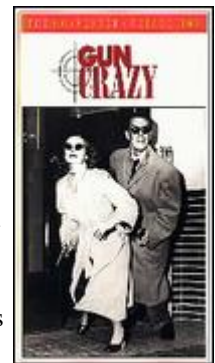
Robert Stroud, [Cool Hand Luke \(1967\)](#) - documenting prison conditions on a southern chain gang and Paul Newman's "failure to communicate" with the warden, or the suspenseful [Escape from Alcatraz \(1979\)](#), a tense re-enactment of an authentic prison-escape from "The Rock."

Veteran director Don Siegel, serving as mentor for actor Clint Eastwood as the incorrigible prisoner (their fifth film together) returned to his genre roots, having earlier directed the classic, realistic prison film, [Riot in Cell Block 11 \(1954\)](#) with Neville Brand. Franklin Schaffner's semi-fictional [Papillon \(1973\)](#) was about the infamous French penal colony on Devil's Island and prisoner Henri 'Papillon' (butterfly) Charriere (Steve McQueen) who made repeated attempts to escape, and was twice forced into solitary confinement as punishment, but eventually succeeded by riding the 7th wave in a series to take him out to sea. McQueen co-starred with Dustin Hoffman as convicted counterfeiter Louis Dega with thick Coke-bottle glasses. Alan Parker's visceral [Midnight Express \(1974\)](#) captured the real horror of five years of incarceration in a Turkish prison for Brad Davis (as Billy Hayes) for his attempt to smuggle two kilos of hash out of the country. The inventive prison film [The Shawshank Redemption \(1994\)](#) was a tale of a convicted and life-imprisoned bank VP who creatively engineered his escape after 19 years of careful preparation. Tim Robbins' [Dead Man Walking \(1996\)](#) examined the issue of capital punishment in its story of a death-row killer (Sean Penn).

Great Gangster-Crime Films Around Mid-Century: Merging with [Film-Noir](#)

As stated earlier, as the decade of the 40s and the post-war period emerged, crime films became darker, more brutal, violent, and cynical -- many crime/gangster films were actually film noirs. After World War II, gangsters were often businessmen who represented large and corrupt corporations (often anonymous). The first film to illustrate changes in the character of gangsters after WWII was Byron Haskin's [I Walk Alone \(1948\)](#). Burt Lancaster took the role of Frankie Madison, an ex-con who faced a changed world and a double-cross by his partner after his release from 14 years in prison. He learned that Noll 'Dink' Turner (Kirk Douglas) was now a pseudo-legitimate and respectable, high-flying Manhattan night-club owner/racketeer, unwilling to share in bootlegging profits from an earlier promise (Turner: "This is big business. We deal with banks, lawyers, and a Dunn and Bradstreet rating. The world's spun right past you, Frank.")

Memorable gangster characters included Alan Ladd as a cold, solitary, professional killer in the *film-noirish* [This Gun For Hire \(1942\)](#), and James Cagney as a violent, psychopathic, mother-fixated, bad-guy killer in the extremely violent [White Heat \(1949\)](#), marking the actor's return to gangster films after a full decade. The superb B cult movie [Gun Crazy \(1949\)](#) featured a gun-loving couple on a violent murder spree. The beautiful star Gene Tierney became a ruthless, greedy killer of her husband's paraplegic brother (Darryl Hickman), by luring him out onto a lake and causing his drowning, in John Stahl's melodramatic [Leave Her to Heaven \(1945\)](#). Fritz Lang's spy film [Cloak and Dagger \(1946\)](#) was memorable for its long, brutal fist-fight sequence between physics Professor - turned - American spy (Gary Cooper) and an enemy agent. [This scene was imitated in an excruciating death struggle in Hitchcock's [Torn Curtain \(1966\)](#), when world-famous scientist Paul Newman fought in a farmhouse kitchen with a Soviet villain and slowly asphyxiated the man in a gas oven.]



Crime dramas of gun-crazed killers, daring or troubled protagonists, or real-life criminals were commonplace, often with endearing, charismatic characters that evoked the earlier, 30s style gangster films. Director Roger Corman's [Machine Gun Kelly \(1958\)](#) offered a view of the notorious bank robber (Charles Bronson), as did the character portrait of [Al Capone \(1959\)](#) starring Rod Steiger as the prohibition-era Chicago gangster. Budd Boetticher's [The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond \(1960\)](#) was about legendary bootleg trafficker Legs Diamond, and Joseph Newman's [King of the Roaring 20s \(1961\)](#) told the story of New York's infamous 20s gambler/bookie Arnold Rothstein (David Janssen) who fixed the 1919 World Series. Roger Corman's gangster epic [The St. Valentine's Day Massacre \(1967\)](#) provided an account of the battle for Chicago's bootleg business between Al Capone and Bugs Moran. Corman's trashy gangster film [Bloody Mama \(1969\)](#) starred Shelley Winters as Ma Barker, the first of his series of 'Mama' movies. And John Milius' debut film [Dillinger \(1973\)](#) colorfully captured the life story of bank robber John Dillinger and other notorious criminals.

Arthur Penn's landmark film ★ [Bonnie and Clyde \(1967\)](#) set new screen standards for violence, although it was accompanied by blue-grass music and slapstick-style robberies. The film's graphic, slow-motion finale startled audiences after a lyrical, down-home view of two criminals - fun-loving, misfit outlaws. And John Boorman's stylistic [Point Blank \(1967\)](#) starred Lee Marvin as Walker, a double-crossed criminal on the path of revenge to collect \$93,000 due to him ("Somebody's gotta pay").

Organized Crime-Gangster Films:



In the 50s, gangsterism was portrayed with organized crime organizations (the Mob) taking over, accompanied by tense action, realistic settings, rich characterizations, and a view of society as sick, immoral and corrupt. Abraham Polonsky's lyrical debut film [Force of Evil \(1948\)](#) demonstrated the doomed and needless fate of the older brother of slick, corrupted Wall Street mob lawyer Joe Morse

(John Garfield) who had sold out to the mob and became indebted to the criminal syndicate for life. In Fritz Lang's classic crime *film noir* [The Big Heat \(1953\)](#), Glenn Ford played a vengeful homicide detective (after his wife was killed in a car bombing) in pursuit of a big crime operation and its crime lord to clean up the corruption with the aid of a gangster's moll (Gloria Grahame). Its most violent scene included the face scalding and disfigurement of a heavy's (Lee Marvin) girlfriend with a pot of coffee.

A gritty, grim view of New York's waterfront racketeering and corrupt union bosses was portrayed in the violently raw, documentary-style film titled ★ [On the Waterfront \(1954\)](#), starring Marlon Brando as ex-fighter Terry Malloy and Rod Steiger as Malloy's brother and the union boss' crooked lawyer. In an effective, classic film noir American crime film titled [The Big Combo \(1955\)](#), a gangster's ex-girlfriend helped half-crazed cop Cornel Wilde break a syndicated crime organization led by Richard Conte.

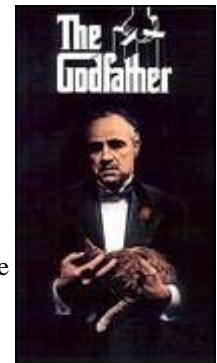
The Caper Film - Another Subgenre:

The caper film was another subgenre of the crime film that developed in the 1950s - John Huston's [The Asphalt Jungle \(1950\)](#) was a superb film-noirish example of the 'heist' picture, depicting a gang of assorted criminals conducting a carefully-planned jewel robbery caper. A fatally-wounded gang member Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden) dies after returning to his father's Kentucky horse ranch in the film's lyrical ending. In Stanley Kubrick's dark, sharp-edged [The Killing \(1956\)](#), Sterling Hayden led a group of criminals in a precisely-timed rip off of a racetrack. In both cases, things went awry with disastrous results. After a bank job in Sam Peckinpah's [The Getaway \(1972\)](#), Steve McQueen and Ali McGraw were chased across Texas toward the Mexican border. In Don Siegel's [Charley Varrick \(1973\)](#), Walter Matthau found himself on the run from hitman Joe Don Baker after robbing a bank with mob-laundered funds.



Coppola's Epic Crime Films:

Eventually, two of the most successful gangland 'Mafia' films ever made appeared in the 1970s with Francis Ford Coppola's direction of Mario Puzo's best-selling novel, ★ [The Godfather \(1972\)](#), and ★ [The Godfather, Part II \(1974\)](#). Both were epic sagas of a violent, treacherous, and tightly-knit crime family superstructure from Sicily that had settled in New York and had become as powerful as government and big business. Returning war veteran/son Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) had to loyally follow in his father's criminal path, without questioning its legitimacy.



Both contained a number of brutal death scenes, including Sonny Corleone's (James Caan) flurry-of-bullets death at a toll booth in the first. The stunning Part II sequel was the *first* sequel ever to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. Rarely before, in [New York Confidential \(1954\)](#), had the 'Mafia' been featured in a main-stream film. The third and final installment in the trilogy was [The Godfather, Part III \(1990\)](#), again featuring stars Al Pacino, Diane Keaton, and Talia Shire. (In addition to his brilliant roles in *The Godfather* pictures, actor Al Pacino also starred in other crime classics, including [Serpico \(1973\)](#), [Dog Day Afternoon \(1975\)](#) - a film with an award-winning screenplay, Brian De Palma's bloody remake of [Scarface \(1983\)](#) with the defiant Cuban gangster dying in the film's explosive finale with his guns blazing, and [Carlito's Way \(1993\)](#).)

Scorsese's Crime Trilogy and Other Films:



Director Martin Scorsese also explored the theme of family ties being torn apart by unpredictable violence, in a world of losers, loners, outsiders and low-lives. His intense films regularly starred actor Robert De Niro. Scorsese's so-called 'crime trilogy' included two mob pictures in the 1990s. The first film in the trilogy was [Mean Streets \(1973\)](#) - the one that established Scorsese's reputation. It was about the lives of aspiring, small-time crooks in the Little Italy section of New York.

The other two films - both with the same scriptwriter Nicholas Pileggi - were [GoodFellas \(1990\)](#) - adapted from *Wiseguy*, which followed thirty years in the lethally-violent criminal careers of rising mobsters and was based on the life of actual ex-mobster Henry Hill. And Scorsese's [Casino \(1995\)](#) examined a Mafia criminal dynasty making its presence known in a brutal takeover of a gaudy, neon-lit 1960s-70s Las Vegas. He also directed the exceptional ★ [Taxi Driver \(1976\)](#), ★ [Raging Bull \(1980\)](#), and DeNiro in a remake of [Cape Fear \(1991\)](#). Scorsese's recent bloody epic [Gangs of New York \(2002\)](#) showed the rampant, lawless street warfare of 19th century New York's lower Manhattan Five Points.

Recent Crime Films:

Other 1970s films showed the untiring, violent and abusive counter tactics of detectives fighting



crime including William Friedkin's [The French Connection \(1971\)](#), with two narcotics detectives (Gene Hackman as Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle and Roy Scheider as Buddy Russo) facing an international narcotics smuggling ring. [Two semi-sequels or follow-up films also emphasized tough and violent police tactics: director Phil D'Antoni's [The Seven-Ups \(1973\)](#), with Scheider in the lead role as a tough NYC police department investigator, and [Badge 373 \(1973\)](#), with Robert Duvall as an avenging cop.] Director John Frankenheimer's official sequel [French Connection II \(1975\)](#) resumed the tracking of drug dealers in Marseilles by Doyle.

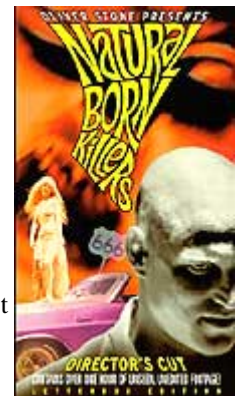
The first of Clint Eastwood's series as law-and-order maverick Detective "Dirty" Harry Callahan with an oversized Magnum was [Dirty Harry \(1971\)](#), directed by Don Siegel. The popular, but controversial film spawned four sequels with its star sometimes directing/producing:

- [Dirty Harry \(1971\)](#)
- [Magnum Force \(1973\)](#)
- [The Enforcer \(1976\)](#)
- [Sudden Impact \(1983\)](#)
- [The Dead Pool \(1988\)](#)

In the 1990s, Eastwood starred in a slightly-different kind of crime film - [In the Line of Fire \(1993\)](#) as an aging Secret Service agent trailing a presidential assassin.

Quentin Tarantino's Films:

In the early 90s, young screenwriter Quentin Tarantino made his debut film as writer and director. He turned toward directing his own scripts set in the unusual, volatile world of the criminal element. His own directorial debut for a feature film, after having others direct his scripts for [True Romance \(1993\)](#) and [Natural Born Killers \(1994\)](#), was for the ultra-violent crime thriller [Reservoir Dogs \(1992\)](#) - in which six thieving strangers were assembled to conduct a diamond heist that unraveled rapidly in the aftermath. Afterwards, he perfected his mix of humor and ultra-violence in the popular, critically-acclaimed film [Pulp Fiction \(1994\)](#), a complex interweaving of three crime stories.



'Serial Killers' in Films:

It may be argued that the best genre match for 'serial killer' films is the [horror genre](#) or [thriller films](#) category, but they could also be categorized within this area of crime films. Early horror films (including the *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* cycles), various pieces of Gothic literature and accounts of real-life killers have all been sources of inspiration for these films. They are noted as cinematic productions that feature a psychopathic, mass murderer/killer (not known as a 'serial killer' until the 1980s) on a homicidal spree. Within the last decade or two, most horror films with a mass murderer have deteriorated into slasher films or erotic dramas/mysteries, characterized by random killings by a maniacal individual. The most effective and best 'serial killer' films are listed below, in chronological order:

- Fritz Lang's [M \(1931\)](#), the *first* true serial killer film about Franz Berkert (Peter Lorre), inspired by 'Vampir von Düsseldorf' (the vampire of Düsseldorf) child murderer, Peter Kürten
- Hitchcock's classic [Shadow of a Doubt \(1943\)](#), with Joseph Cotten as Uncle Charlie (the Merry Widow Murderer)
- [Bluebeard \(1944\)](#), with John Carradine as Gaston, the infamous turn-of-the-century women strangler in Paris
- director Ida Lupino's noir [The Hitch-Hiker \(1953\)](#), about a sadistic, mass murderer hitchhiker Emmett Myers (William Talman), based on a real-life, cold-blooded killer (in Daniel Mainwaring's script) who was eventually executed in San Quentin
- Michael Powell's controversial [Peeping Tom \(1960\)](#), about a disturbed, unstable filmmaker Mark Lewis (Karl Heinz Boehm)
- [Psycho \(1960\)](#), based on the infamous murders of the 1950s by real-life Wisconsin psychotic serial killer Edward Gein, whose murderous character also inspired the mother-obsessed farmer in [Deranged \(1974\)](#), the Leatherface character in [The Texas Chainsaw Massacre \(1974\)](#), and serial killer Jame Gumb ("Buffalo Bill") in [The Silence of the Lambs \(1991\)](#) (see below)
- [The Boston Strangler \(1968\)](#), with Tony Curtis as the title character Albert DeSalvo, a confessed sex offender/murderer of women in the early 1960s
- [10 Rillington Place \(1971\)](#), based on the true story of fiendish serial killer and necrophiliac John Christie (played by Richard Attenborough) in London in the early 50s

- [Dirty Harry \(1971\)](#), with Clint Eastwood as Harry Callahan in pursuit of Scorpio (Andy Robinson), modeled after California's real-life Zodiac serial killer in the late 60s
- Hitchcock's black-humored **Frenzy (1972)**, about a Necktie Murderer - presumably based on the Thames Nude Murderer (a.k.a. Jack the Stripper) who killed at least six prostitutes in the early 1960s
- Terrence Malick's [Badlands \(1973\)](#), based on the spree killings and exploits of Charles Starkweather and Caril-Ann Fugate in the late 50s, starring Sissy Spacek as Holly and Martin Sheen as misfit Kit; based on the book by Michael Newton
- John Carpenter's classic horror/slasher 'serial killer' masterpiece, [Halloween \(1978\)](#), with masked killer Michael Myers
- **Cruising (1980)**, with Al Pacino as an undercover detective in pursuit of a gay-bar serial killer; it was controversial and criticized for its depiction of homosexual men as sexual deviants
- **The Hitcher (1986)**, with John Ryder (Rutger Hauer) as a traveling serial killer taunting cross-country driver Jim Halsey (C. Thomas Howell)
- **Cop (1987)**, probably the first film to actually use the term 'serial killer', with investigative cop James Woods
- Michael Mann's **Manhunter (1986)**, the first in a 'trilogy' based on Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter novels, with Brian Cox as Dr. Hannibal 'The Cannibal' Lecter and William Petersen as FBI serial killer expert Will Graham
- **Sea of Love (1989)**, with Al Pacino as an alcoholic cop (in pursuit of a serial killer who murdered victims while listening to Phil Phillips' 1959 45 rpm classic) and Ellen Barkin as his sexy blonde suspect
- the disturbing **Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1990)**, based on famed, pathological convicted serial killer Henry Lee Lucas (played by Michael Rooker), who ended up on death row in Texas
- the made-for-TV **To Catch a Killer (1991)**, about Illinois serial killer John Wayne Gacy who murdered 33 teenage boys and buried their bodies beneath his house
- Jonathan Demme's Best Picture, [The Silence of the Lambs \(1991\)](#), with cannibalistic Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins); sequeled as Ridley Scott's **Hannibal (2001)**; the serial killer Buffalo Bill in the film was loosely based on the exploits of a remarkable trio of real-life serial killers (Ed Gein, Ted Bundy and Gary Heidnik)
- **Jennifer 8 (1992)**, with cop Andy Garcia in pursuit of a killer in N. California who specialized in killing blind women
- **Kalifornia (1993)**, with Brad Pitt as a white-trash, ex-con serial killer named Early Grayce and his girlfriend Adele Corners (Juliette Lewis)
- Oliver Stone's controversial **Natural Born Killers (1994)**, a road-trip serial killer film with the murderous duo Mickey and Mallory Knox (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis)
- John Waters' black comedy **Serial Mom (1994)**, with a suburban housewife/mother Beverly Sutphin (Kathleen Turner) as a killer
- **Citizen X (1995)**, with Stephen Rea and Donald Sutherland in dogged pursuit of brutal, prolific Russian serial killer Andrei Chikatilo who murdered and ate children
- **Copycat (1995)**, featured a 'copycat' serial killer who traumatized and terrorized serial killer expert Sigourney Weaver
- director David Fincher's **Se7en (1995)**, with Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt searching for a diabolical serial killer known as John Doe (Kevin Spacey) who staged seven ghastly murders to represent the Bible's Seven Deadly Sins (gluttony, greed, sloth, envy, wrath, pride and lust)
- director Philip Noyce's **The Bone Collector (1999)**, with Denzel Washington as a hospital-bound serial killer sleuth, and Angelina Jolie as his assistant policewoman
- director/writer Spike Lee's **Summer of Sam (1999)**, about New York City's first serial killer (David Berkowitz) in the 70s, a vicious murderer dubbed 'Son of Sam'
- the sensationalistic **American Psycho (2000)**, the screen adaptation of Brett Easton Ellis' book, with Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) as a self-absorbed, emotionless Wall Street financier - and serial murderer; reviled Canadian serial killer Paul Bernardo (and accomplice/wife Karla Homolka, who were dubbed the Ken and Barbie killers) claimed that Ellis' novel inspired his own murder spree
- Sean Penn's **The Pledge (2001)**, with Jack Nicholson as a retired cop in relentless pursuit of a killer
- **Red Dragon (2002)**, with Anthony Hopkins reprising his role as Hannibal; the film's title was based on the title of Thomas Harris' original novel about the character
- **Monster (2003)**, with Best Actress-winning Charlize Theron as prostitute-turned-serial killer Aileen Wuornos, who was eventually executed in Florida after being convicted of six murders
- **Suspect Zero (2004)**, featured an ex-FBI agent named Benjamin O'Ryan (Ben Kingsley) obsessed with hunting down and killing serial killers on his own

Selection of Greatest Crime and Gangster Films:

Greatest Early Crime and Gangster Films:

The Musketeers of Pig Alley (1912)
The Regeneration (1915)
Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler (1922-23)
Underworld (1927)
The Lights of New York (1928)
The Racket (1928)
The Big House (1930)
[Little Caesar \(1930\)](#)
Bad Company (1931)
M (1931, Ger.)
[The Public Enemy \(1931\)](#)
[I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang \(1932\)](#)
[Scarface: The Shame of the Nation \(1932\)](#)
The Testament of Dr. Mabuse (1933)
Manhattan Melodrama (1934)
The Petrified Forest (1934)
G-Men (1935)
Bullets or Ballots (1936)
The Petrified Forest (1936)
Dead End (1937)
Marked Woman (1937)
[Angels With Dirty Faces \(1938\)](#)
Each Dawn I Die (1939)
[The Roaring Twenties \(1939\)](#)
They Drive by Night (1940)
High Sierra (1941)
The Glass Key (1942)
This Gun for Hire (1942)
★ [Double Indemnity \(1944\)](#)
Detour (1945)
Dillinger (1945)
★ [The Big Sleep \(1946\)](#)
[The Killers \(1946\)](#)
[The Postman Always Rings Twice \(1946\)](#)
Brute Force (1947)
Kiss of Death (1947)
★ [Out of the Past \(1947\)](#)
T-Men (1947)
Force of Evil (1948)
Key Largo (1948)
Raw Deal (1948)
[Gun Crazy \(1949\)](#)
They Live By Night (1949)
[White Heat \(1949\)](#)
[The Asphalt Jungle \(1950\)](#)
The Enforcer (1951)
The Lavender Hill Mob (1951, UK)
Strangers on a Train (1951)
[The Big Heat \(1953\)](#)
★ [On the Waterfront \(1954\)](#)
The Big Combo (1955)
Rififi (1955)
The Killing (1956)
[The Defiant Ones \(1958\)](#)
★ [Touch of Evil \(1958\)](#)
Al Capone (1959)
Anatomy of a Murder (1959)
The FBI Story (1959)

Recent Crime and Gangster Films:

Cape Fear (1961)
Underworld USA (1961)
The Birdman of Alcatraz (1962)
★ [Bonnie and Clyde \(1967\)](#)
[Cool Hand Luke \(1967\)](#)
In Cold Blood (1967)
[In the Heat of the Night \(1967\)](#)
Point Blank (1967)
Wait Until Dark (1967)
The Brotherhood (1968)
Bullitt (1968)
The Detective (1968)
The Thomas Crown Affair (1968)
The Italian Job (1969)
[Dirty Harry \(1971\)](#)
[The French Connection \(1971\)](#)
Get Carter (1971)
Shaft (1971)
★ [The Godfather \(1972\)](#)
The Hot Rock (1972)
Shaft's Big Score! (1972)
[Badlands \(1973\)](#)
Dillinger (1973)
Mean Streets (1973)
Serpico (1973)
The Seven-Ups (1973)
Shaft in Africa (1973)
The Stone Killer (1973)
Walking Tall (1973) and sequels
Death Wish (1974)
★ [The Godfather, Part II \(1974\)](#)
Thieves Like Us (1974)
Dog Day Afternoon (1975)
French Connection II (1975)
Assault on Precinct 13 (1976)
Deadly Hero (1976)
★ [Taxi Driver \(1976\)](#)
Boulevard Nights (1979)
Hardcore (1979)
The Warriors (1979)
The Long Good Friday (1980)
★ [Raging Bull \(1980\)](#)
Fort Apache: The Bronx (1981)
Nighthawks (1981)
Prince of the City (1981)
Death Wish 2 (1982)
48 Hrs. (1982)
Blood Simple (1983)
Scarface (1983)
The Star Chamber (1983)
[Sudden Impact \(1983\)](#)
Once Upon a Time in America (1984)
Prizzi's Honor (1985)
Witness (1985)
Manhunter (1986)
Lethal Weapon (1987) and sequels
The Untouchables (1987)
Things Change (1988)
Dick Tracy (1990)
The Godfather, Part III (1990)
[GoodFellas \(1990\)](#)
Miller's Crossing (1990)
Q & A (1990)
Bugsy (1991)
Cape Fear (1991)

JFK (1991)
New Jack City (1991)
One Good Cop (1991)
[The Silence of the Lambs \(1991\)](#)
[Basic Instinct \(1992\)](#)
Hoffa (1992)
Reservoir Dogs (1992)
A Bronx Tale (1993)
Carlito's Way (1993)
In the Line of Fire (1993)
Heavenly Creatures (1994, NZ)
Natural Born Killers (1994)
The Professional (Fr.) (1994)
Pulp Fiction (1994)
[The Shawshank Redemption \(1994\)](#)
Casino (1995)
Clockers (1995)
Heat (1995)
Se7en (1995)
The Usual Suspects (1995)
Bound (1996)
[Fargo \(1996\)](#)
Donnie Brasco (1997)
Jackie Brown (1997)
L. A. Confidential (1997)
The Big Lebowski (1998)
Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (1998)
Out of Sight (1998)
A Simple Plan (1998)
The Thomas Crown Affair (1999)
Traffic (2000)
The Departed (2006)