

A monochromatic blue-toned photograph of a man wearing a fedora and a trench coat, with a striped tie visible. The image serves as the background for the book cover.

A COMPANION TO
**THE
GANGSTER
FILM**

EDITED BY
GEORGE S. LARKE-WALSH

WILEY Blackwell

A Companion to the Gangster Film

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George S. Larke-Walsh

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This edition first published 2019

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Registered Office(s)

John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

Editorial Office

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Name: Larke-Walsh, George S., 1965– editor.

Title: A companion to the gangster film / edited by George S. Larke-Walsh.

Description: Hoboken, NJ : John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018009794 (print) | LCCN 2018029387 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119041733 (pdf) | ISBN 9781119041740 (epub) | ISBN 9781119041665 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Gangster films–History and criticism.

Classification: LCC PN1995.9.G3 (ebook) | LCC PN1995.9.G3 C66 2019 (print) | DDC 791.43/6556–dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018009794>

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Image: © Stokkete/Shutterstock

Set in 10.5/13pt MinionPro by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the contributors for their time, effort, and scholarly expertise. Their work on this project has reminded me of the rich and varied nature of genre studies and its importance within the history of cinema. My thanks go as well to the Department of Media Arts at the University of North Texas. I could not have completed this book without all the support from my colleagues and staff there. Special thanks go to my old friends and colleagues Elayne Chaplin and Mel Gibson for their tireless support, which has meant so much to me over the years. I also wish to acknowledge the dedicated work from my research assistants, Stephanie Oliver, Bill Meeker, and Shaylynn Lesinski, who all provided invaluable editorial assistance along the way and Myriam Chihab for her expertise as a translator. I cannot thank them all enough for their support and knowledgeable insights. As always, this book is dedicated to my daughter, Jessica. I hope she will see that as well as hard work, there is also a great deal of satisfaction and joy involved when you get to contribute to a field of study you love.

Introduction

George S. Larke-Walsh

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Early Cinema

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

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

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

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

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

Cinema and History

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Post-War Narratives

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

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

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

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

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

Gender Identities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

film has reflected anxieties about specific masculine identities over the past century. In my book about Italian-American gangster films, I noted how

The Mafia group is a place where masculinity can be explored, expressed and asserted because it can be positioned as both 'like us' and 'not like us'. The notion of 'other' and 'like us' characters in the Mafia group allow the group to be both distanced from the contemporary viewer (further distanced by the fact these are Italian-Americans, Mafia, of a past era), whilst at the same time playing out the contemporary contradictions, or difficulties of a society which is still male-dominated, but where masculinity has lost its sense of certainty in its own rightness and immutability. (Larke-Walsh, 2010, 161)

The distancing of the character from the audience, I still argue, is central to their power as critical figures. Pillard's chapter, discussed earlier, notes how post-war French gangster films present an idealized and lost male identity. Similarly, Lioudmila Federova's discussion of post-Soviet gangster films reveals their nostalgia for Soviet concepts of law and order, a stability that allows men to know who they are and their place in society. She suggests the freedoms of new Russia bring a great deal of prosperity and ability to adapt for criminals, but they also feature an absence of limits. Thus, the acquisition of wealth takes place in an arena of greater violence and less order, or predictability. Hence, the gangster films of the 1990s and early 2000s are ultra-violent, aspirational films, but with an underlying tone of despair at modern times and a yearning for the criminal heroes of the past, whose morality now appears as a welcome virtue. As with all gangster films, these films rely on audiences feeling sympathy for the central heroes even though they are also distanced from them by criminality, history, or race. Federova argues that gangster films of the 1990s encourage sympathy by providing a realist expose of Russian existence through an attention to everyday struggles and the suffering of ordinary people. While the film narrative is mainly focused on gangster excesses, the connection to real times and places is central to understanding character motivation. The yearning for strong heroes, criminal or not, emerges from a desire to heal the wounds of Russian identity. In consequence, many gangster heroes of this period are either older men, who reflect lost Soviet ideals, or younger, isolated heroes, such as Danila Bagrov (Sergey Bodrov) in *Brother* (1997) and *Brother 2* (2000). Danila appears on screen as a wandering war veteran and thus carries with him the aura of both violence and overt patriotism. He takes over his brother's role as a mob hitman, but more than this, he does so as a representation of self-containment and certainty, for he is not only convinced of his role as a gangster, but also as a national hero.

Aspects of self-belief also feature in images of the assassin as noted by Fran Mason. Assassins hold a particular fascination as characters that are certain of their role in criminal society. However, in Mason's film examples, the assassins that initially appear to be self-sufficient beings, separated from the obligations or social entanglements of other gang members, soon find the paths toward their inevitable demise

prove otherwise. Mason's chapter, while placed in the Americas section of the book, truly embraces the transnational quality of this collection by focusing on films from the Europe, Asia, and the United States, including *Le Samourai* (1967), *The Killer* (1989), and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999). The unique character qualities of gangster assassins place them in a liminal space neither inside nor outside the organization. The freedom this space affords is compounded by their lack of belonging (assassins are often expendable operatives in a criminal organization). In consequence, assassins are often portrayed as haunted figures, and their own inevitable demise is prefigured in every action they take.

Gangster identities on the margins are also a feature of Paul Elliott's exploration of gay gangsters in British cinema. His study begins with the post-war spiv discussed earlier in Granell's chapter. His focus is not on class or realism, though Elliott argues for the marginal character of the gay gangster as the essence of British gangland. He suggests that while their character is often displayed through acts of psychopathy, violence, and vulnerability, they have proved to be the standard bearer for the genre's development through their unabashed decadence, hyper-masculinity, and self-sufficiency. He notes how performativity is central to the gangster character both on and off screen and is therefore a perfect arena for excessive or extreme behavior that can easily include queer, or camp. His analysis focuses on films such as *Appointment with Crime* (1946), *Villian* (1971), and *Empire State* (1987). While homosexual gangsters are often labeled absurd, perverted, or vulnerable, they are nonetheless an accepted, integral part of the gangster milieu in British cinema. Sadly, Elliott notes how such unabashed displays of have recently been replaced in British cinema by a newer lighter, more self-referential, and laddish presentation of the criminal gang. Films since *Lock, Stock and Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998) have been determinedly heterosexual and pushed the gay gangster out of view. It is evident that such a shift deprives audiences of the cultural depth and gender diversity previously found in the British criminal group.

Tom Ryall's chapter leads on from this moment to discuss the impact of Guy Ritchie's films on the development of the genre in Britain since the millennium. He charts its continued popularity through a very detailed exploration of film cycles, styles, and performers. While the new laddish themes appear fixed, the genre remains vibrant. Ryall notes the diversity in topics and styles ranging from street gangs to more traditional underworld organizations. There are three main strands of post-millennium British gangster film: the light-hearted self-referential capers exemplified by Guy Ritchie; serious character-driven underworld narratives; and youth-oriented films focused on small-time villains and drug culture. While many films include passing references to real events and characters, the mythology of British gangland life remains the main driving force. The British gangster film is alive and well in the millennium, although, as Ryall notes, it rarely gains the acclaim it perhaps deserves from mainstream film critics. However, while films may be ignored, it could be argued that the recent critical success of the television series *Peaky Blinders* (Stephen Knight, 2013–present) is testimony to the continued cultural value of a distinctively British gangster narrative.

Contemporary Iconography and Mythology

As with any genre, it is evident that certain imagery is synonymous with the gangster film. Gangsters in the Western hemisphere are often identified by their penchant for well-tailored suits, their connection to guns, and dark industrial surroundings. We feel we can easily identify a gangster from his profile, gestures, and location. Similar arguments can be made for gangsters worldwide, but as Se Young Kim points out in his chapter on South Korean cinema, there is a particular focus on the body and its movement that is distinctive to Asian cinema. He argues the stunt coordinator, Jung Doo-hong, has influenced the visual iconography of the South Korean gangster film to the extent that he is the architect of a recognized style, a style that allows gangster imagery to traverse genre boundaries. To this end, his chapter focuses on the most modern and broadest concept of gangster identity (*kkangpae*) in a wide variety of films from Im Kwon-taek's *The General's Son* (1990) and *Friend* (2001) through Seung-wan Ryoo's *City of Violence* (2006) and beyond. The combination of martial arts moves and weaponry such as knives and baseball bats in carefully choreographed ultra-violent sequences gives the *kkangpae* character a unique and visceral quality that values body movement and strength. This imagery and its presence in many films beyond the gangster genre has meant that the figure of the *kkangpae* is a unique symbol and has played a key role in establishing the international success of New Korean Cinema.

While the American gangster film has very few connections to martial arts, favoring guns instead, it does have a similar obsession with violence and its effect on the body. Audiences recognize a gangster film from the inclusion of certain costumes and violent sequences. For instance, the use of particular iconography as a structuring principle for audience recognition and engagement is central to Hollywood gangster film production in the early 1990s, most notably *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Reservoir Dogs* (1994). Karine Hildenbrand's chapter explores the tendency of these films to rely on an audience's awareness of classic genre conventions in order to create a basic schema that is then deconstructed, or played to excess. She argues that as the conventions are so well known, the films rely on the implications of myths, moods, and visual tones to create their worlds. Narrative fragmentation makes each film a puzzle solved mainly through an attention to known genre conventions. Thus, at first glance the films have an air of depthless pastiche. However, she notes that each film borrows these tropes in order to re-present them as a contemporary commentary on the demise of the American dream. Any attempt to assert heroism or loyalty is shown as an illusion. These characters are the ultimate examples of individualism, and the narrative fragmentation accentuates their cultural and psychological isolation. In short, the gangster of the 1990s is an image of failure, betrayal, and disunity. The films, as a mini-corpus, appeal to the consumerist excesses of modern America through their indulgence in violent set pieces of killing and torture. Such isolation and indulgence reveals the contradictions at the heart of the genre and American national identity.

Stephen Gaunson's chapter also focuses on modern American cinema and its relationship to its own and wider history. He explores the intersection between American history and mythology in the gangster biographical film. He focuses on the recent production, *Public Enemies* (2015), in order to explore if it is useful to define a film's cultural value in terms of its attention to historical fact. The gangster film and indeed American cinema as a whole has had a long and turbulent relationship with the label "based on a true story." A variety of films have been made that refer to the story of John Dillinger from the 1930s, and each has exaggerated or denied various aspects in order to satisfy a narrative, casting, or contemporary social requirement. Gaunson notes how many films offer a playful integration of actual news footage and fictional insertions to show an attention to period detail, but with a very clear assertion of cinematic awareness. Dillinger was a criminal celebrity image in his own lifetime, and as such, cinematic portrayals often focus on the likelihood of him watching himself on screen. Just like Bonnie and Clyde, the Dillinger myth is born from the interaction between the media presentation of them as "social outlaws" and the reality of their lives and deaths. Thus, many films travel a blurry path of recognizing and exploiting this imagery. The casting of Johnny Depp in Michael Mann's *Public Enemies* has an obvious influence on the presentation of Dillinger as a romantic gentleman bandit. Gaunson argues that such casting can be excused as a justifiable aspect of the Dillinger myth. In the end, all fiction films are an embodiment of the cinema industry and the desire to provide visual pleasure and appeal to audiences. Within the confines of genre and historical accuracy, all Dillinger films are playing any connections they may have to the truth.

Within this discussion of mythology and cultural value, my own chapter focuses on the influence of *The Godfather* films on other national cinemas. While genre films are always likely to resemble each other at some level, I argue that *The Godfather* has a presence in multiple media and across so many cultures that it has become a distinctive discourse that is recognizable and valued. Iconography and mythology are the leading principles of any genre over time. The gangster film has evolved to such an extent that costume, gestures, locations, actions, or narrative structure can no longer define its parameters. Instead, we are faced with the more ephemeral pursuit of mood, tone, emotions, or single moments to explain the gangster character or narrative when we see it in films such as *Nayakan* (1987), *China White* (1989), or *Election* (2005). A single gesture or speech style within an otherwise innocuous situation may remind us of Vito Corleone (*The Godfather*), Jef Costello (*Le Samurais*), Mark (*A Better Tomorrow*), or indeed a myriad of other gangster individuals. Cinema is global, and any genre film reflects that fact.

Gangster and Politics

Gangster films throughout cinema history have often suggested that organized crime and politics are intricately connected. From Vito Corleone's pocket full of senators (*The Godfather*) to the political influence of the Camorra in *Gomorra* (2008),

the special relationship between mafia figures and government offices manifests itself across the entire history of cinema. While not all films make explicit reference to these relationships, most of the chapters in this collection identify the socio-political climates to which films often refer and their consequent effect on narrative themes. For instance, the modernization of Turkey is the focus of Hülya Önal's chapter as she explains the dual influences of Eastern and Western culture on Turkish society as a whole. The development of the gangster character in cinema parallels the wider political and cultural shifts taking place. From the 1940s mythical tales of rural bandits fighting government authority in *Efe Aşkı* (*The Love of the Efe* (*Hector*)) (1948), to the 1990s criminal businessmen whose relationship to government appears mutually cooperative in *Eşkiya* (*The Bandit*) (1996), the gangster character has developed in line with Turkey's entry into the Western neoliberalist political landscape. Önal notes how the central character trait of the rowdy bully dominates Turkish culture to the extent that, criminal or hero, the figure is applauded as a mythical hero within Turkish identity. As such, it is not surprising that the character appears as both a gangster and a politician. The desire for strong leaders, especially in a country still struggling to find its place in world politics, is a defining element of national pride and is thus reflected in its cinema.

In contrast, Vicente Ortega's chapter explores the links between political corruption and transnational organized crime as presented in Spanish cinema. There are no mythical anti-heroes in these films; instead, films chart the human cost of institutional corruption, profiteering, and international drug smuggling. Focusing on two films, *La caja 507/Box 507* (2002) and *El Niño/The Kid* (2014), Ortega argues for the potentiality of the realist crime thriller to act as a critique of the pervasive political corruption in modern transnational business practice. These films have none of the romanticism of some aspects of the gangster genre; instead, like Italy's *Gomorrah* (2008), they suggest gangsters and the government officials that collude with them as morally degraded. Incidences of murder, fraud, and bribery are mixed with sexual and psychological deviance in an attempt to preclude audience sympathies. While *La caja 507* is a more stringent denunciation and more realist than the mainstream *El Niño*, both films highlight the fact that individual stories can only shine a tiny spotlight on such a global activity, an activity that is continually allowed to flourish in political landscapes that value laissez faire business practices above basic human decency.

Gangster films, with their focus on corruption and greed, can be viewed as critiques of capitalism and the hypocrisy of local and national politics. Kelvin Ke Jinde's chapter on post-millennium Hong Kong film suggests gangsters sit uneasily between the traditional values of Confucian ethics and values and the more modern values of free market capitalism, individualism, and greed. He focuses on Johnnie To's *Election* (2005) and *Election 2* (2006) as examples of these changes and conflicts. The loyalties and social order of the brotherhood are slowly and steadily undermined by the stronger forces defined by a neo-capitalist world. The socio-political hierarchy of triad brotherhood is portrayed as a lost world, nostalgic but naïve, wherein individuals sacrificed their own desires for the good of the whole. In modern Hong Kong,

wealth and the status it brings are the most dominant values society understands. Ke Jinde notes how, unlike American films, where politics is shown as corrupted by organized crime, Hong Kong films suggest corrupting influences work the opposite way. Political forces manipulate and destabilize the criminal gang by preying upon their desire for legitimacy in the business market. He notes how the state tolerates triad organizations as long as their activities do not create wider social disharmony. However, in turn, the triad is dependent on this toleration in order to continue their business. Thus, triad leaders must collaborate with state officials and consequently run the risk of becoming no more than their puppets. Ke Jinde offers the *Election* films as well as the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002, 2003, 2003) as examples of the intricate connections between criminal and state coercion.

James Fenwick's chapter focuses on the era prior to Ke Jinde's analysis in order to discuss the modernization of China and handover of Hong Kong as reflected in the work of film producer Tsui Hark. Fenwick argues that Hark's influence on such films as John Woo's seminal gangster films, *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) and *The Killer* (1989), is so profound that he deserves more recognition for his role in creating the visual style and political themes that have influenced modern gangster films in Hong Kong and far beyond. Drawing from tropes of the American Western, Hark has created individual gangsters and/or cops as modern urban outlaws, socially isolated, but steeped in Hong Kong's consumerist ideology. Working in opposition to the surrounding political environment, these gangster/cop heroes fight to retain the principles of their cultural identity in the face of invading forces, both physical and existential. In the decade leading up to the official handover of Hong Kong from a British colony to a Chinese state, Hark's nightmarish visions of an island in psychological disarray is depicted again and again through the violence enacted by gangsters and law enforcement alike. Fenwick argues that Hark's Hong Kong gangster films reflect the paranoia and distrust of this period, the identity crisis that dominated the entire territory and the desire for a hero determined enough to face down the multiple forces that threatened his existence. While the political nature of these films is well known, Hark's influence as an architect of this imagery has been ignored. Fenwick's chapter remedies that fact and connects gangster narratives, identity politics, and history.

Lastly, Luca Peretti's chapter on mafia, mobility, and capitalism in Italian cinema of the 1960s is a study that delves into the heart of mafia mythology and transnational politics. The re-emergence of public discourse about the mafia in Italy during the early 1960s echoes the Senate committee hearings and associated literature occurring in the United States at the same time. It was an era of discovery and debate about the structure and strength of organized crime in the West, and it was marked by a new interest in the gangster within Italian cinema. Peretti focuses on five very different films that all use the figure of the gangster to address certain issues pertinent to Italian society at that time: *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), *Mafioso* (1962), *Un Uomo da bruciare* (*A Man for Burning*, 1962), *Lo Sgarro* (1962), and *I Due mafiosi* (*Two Mafiamen*, 1964). He argues that these depictions set the tone for future films and rely heavily on a mix of neorealism, comedy, and borrowed tropes from

American genres, such as the Western as well as the gangster film. The intricacies of the mafia problem are shown as unfathomable for outside eyes (including perhaps the filmmakers themselves). Loyalties and beliefs are distinct to geographical areas and situations, but the reach of the mafia is truly transnational. It would appear that at the heart of all mafia mythology are the many contradictions of its existence, and Italian cinema of this period shows this in practice. Peretti's analysis presents these mid-century films as a crucial turning point for the depiction of the gangster on screen from a relatively small-time hood or outlaw to a player within a well-established global enterprise, a truly transnational figure.

History, politics, gender identity, and mythology all contribute to the image of the gangster we recognize in cinema. From the Americas through Europe to Asia this overview of the chapters has shown how this collection brings together scholarship from across the globe to celebrate and examine the gangster film throughout cinema history. The chapters offer a tapestry of interconnected themes and aesthetics and prove how varied and influential the gangster genre has become. As in any collection, it has many gaps. The list of topics I would have liked to see is easily as long as the list there is here. To acknowledge the gaps is to assert that the genre deserves more scholarship, and so I hope this collection will inspire its readers to consider contributing to that. The intention in this collection is to provide insights into lesser-known films, or to consider new political, historical, or geographical connections in order to more fully appreciate the scope and value of the gangster genre. Like many genres, the gangster film is often dismissed as a simplistic set of tropes perhaps overly focused on gratuitous spectacles of violence and self-indulgent, self-serving rebellion. The gangster often reflects all that we feel is wrong with the modern world and so is a difficult figure to applaud or defend. However, the gangster remains an audaciously attractive figure. We may sometimes feel it necessary apologize for loving the gangster so much as we do, but we cannot seem to stop.

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Part I

The Americas

Mary Pickford Meets the Mafia

Amy E. Borden

The Mafia, the mob, the Black Hand; these names periodically occur in catalog descriptions and publicity for a handful of nickelodeon and transitional-era American silent films that we may consider precursors to the American gangster cycle that began in earnest in the 1930s. The US origins of the Mafia-linked gangster film are traced to Wallace McCutcheon's *The Black Hand: The Story of a Recent Occurrence in the Italian Quarter of New York* (1906, American Mutoscope & Biograph). In this one-reeler, a butcher's daughter is lured and kidnapped by members of a criminal plot that is conspicuously marked by a nativist depiction of Italian immigrants as near-illiterate criminals. As seen in McCutcheon's revenge short, early Mafia-themed films are marked by a featured kidnap- or extortion-plot perpetrated by members of the Black Hand, a loosely organized immigrant-Italian underground criminal society. These films depict the police and conscientious citizens as cooperative partners with the relatively well-off victimized parents – often wealthy business owners or members of the middle class – whose children are unwittingly placed in peril by their parent's economic success. Set in Italian immigrant communities, the earliest films about the Italian Mafia purport to depict the danger this population faced from the criminal elements within. This creates a distinction between the hard-working residents of these neighborhoods and the louche element that threatens their assimilation to an American work ethic by drawing them back into an “Old World” mode of vengeance and criminality.

One can perhaps make the argument that it is in the 1930s that cinema's classic gangster tropes solidify, but these are still influenced by prior cycles. In the introduction to their anthology *Mob Culture*, Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnett, and Peter Stanfield critique an understanding of the gangster genre as it has codified around

Robert Warshow's analysis, criticizing its attempt to construct generic archetypes from a limited, 1930s-heavy, data set of films. They claim that Warshow's work, which they argue provides much of the basis for the genre analysis performed with gangster films, ignores the "production and consumption context[s]," including popular pre-1930s film cycles. Their work proposes a reconsideration of a canonical conception of genre criticism within film studies due to its basis in a select and limited number of films that are evaluated based on a few shared features of subject and structure. They argue against this approach by emphasizing how it "reifies a particular cycle of films that were closely connected to the particular socioeconomic content of the early-1930s" (2005, 2). The consequences of this is the effacement of other film cycles prior to this period as well as an erasure of the conditions that contributed to the characteristics of the gangster genre manifest in the 1930s. In effect, their work advocates for the importance of film cycles as more responsive registers of social and cultural change. Before the organized criminal undergrounds featured in Josef von Sternberg's 1927 classic *Underworld* and other Hollywood-produced gangster films of the late-1920s and 1930s, nickelodeon and transitional-era depictions of the underworld are less at home with Feathers and Bull and more likely to be featured amid small-time, storefront criminal gangs who inhabit a liminal space between New York's urban, Italian immigrant neighborhoods and the so-called Sicilian old country.

One such film is the Mary and Jack Pickford multi-reel drama *Poor Little Peppina* (1916, Famous Players-Lasky/Paramount, Sidney Olcott), in which Mary plays the titular Peppina and Jack plays Beppo, who both believe to be Peppina's brother. In fact, Peppina, *née* Lois, is the kidnapped child of the Torrens family, an affluent American couple who left Italy's Sicilian coast fifteen years ago, after their infant daughter was kidnapped from their home and presumed killed. Lois is very much alive, but she is unaware of her identity because she was raised as Peppina, the daughter of an Italian peasant family. Lois/Peppina's circulation between families marks the removal and transformation of a wealthy American child to that of an Italian peasant in a reversal of the assimilationist tendencies often seen in Black Hand-plotted short films such as McCutcheon's. Although there is nothing in that film that iconographically marks the butcher and his family as Italian immigrants, the fact that the film was staged and plotted using the well-reported and illustrated (March 1906) Miano child kidnapping as its model places its action within New York's Italian immigrant community, which Grieveson has shown was "widely regarded as presenting a racial and civic dissonance with American society" (2005, 37). As represented in early American film, the Black Hand and their chosen intracommunity victims communicate the danger and extent of this dissonance.

The first scenes in *Poor Little Peppina* emphasize the presence of the Mafia. The film's story borrows from what, by 1916, would be familiar Black-Hand themes and iconography: the kidnapping of a child, a criminal conspiracy, and the escape of the criminals from prison. In the version of the film that survives, its second title card introduces the audience to "Franzoli Soldo, a Mafia chief, under the guise of a butler..." (*Poor Little Peppina* Title Card, 1916). Performed by Antonio Maiori using

a silent-cinema acting style Giorgio Bertellini understands to “reveal a character’s national and racial identity,” Soldo is a stereotypical portrayal of Italianness that is all hot temper and abundant hand gestures (2010, 208). In addition to its intertitles and title cards, press descriptions also explicitly tie the film’s story and themes to the Mafia. Multiple reviews, such as this one published when the film opened, describe how the first scenes of the film turn on the presence of the Mafia.

The opening scenes show the incidents that occurred 15 years prior to the time Miss Pickford makes her appearance as Peppina. A wealthy American family by the name of Torrens, [sic] reside at their beautiful Italian villa. The family comprises Mr. and Mrs. Torrens and their daughter, Lois, a child about two years of age. The Torrens’ butler, an Italian and member of the Mafia, likes to sample the wine cellar of his employer, with the result that he is reported to the master by another of the servants. The butler is discharged and swears vengeance. (Hollywood Museum Collection)

Soldo avenges the loss of his position by murdering the informant who reported his theft. After being captured, he is tried and convicted of the murder. With “the aid of the Mafia,” embodied by his associate Villato, who is also, as a title card emphasizes, “a member of the Mafia,” Soldo makes a dramatic escape – is there any other kind during this era? His need for vengeance drives him back to the Torrens’ villa. Once there, he breaks in to steal their youngest child. Leaving the area by small boat, Soldo and Villato deliver Lois to Soldo’s relatives: Dominica, his wife Biana, and their son Beppo. The intertitle explains the terms of the gift: “Take this child and raise her as your own. If you tell anyone about her, you will answer to the Mafia” (*Poor Little Peppina* Title Cards, 1916). Afterward, Soldo escapes to New York’s Little Italy with Villato, where, in true Pickford fashion, seventeen years later they will again meet young Lois/Peppina. Only this time she will be disguised as a teenage boy to ensure a safe Atlantic crossing and her resettlement in New York’s Little Italy after she flees the Sicilian coast.

I’ve quoted the film’s reviews and intertitles at length to demonstrate how the Mafia is significantly and repeatedly referred to in the film’s story, in the intertitle and title card explanations and advancement of its plot, and in the publicity that surrounded its release. *Poor Little Peppina* does not simply use the basic conventions of a Black-Hand plot; it embeds those conventions within a more sophisticated narrative that focuses on the grown Peppina’s movement from her Italian home to New York’s Lower East Side, where she will re-encounter Soldo and Villato on her way to unknowingly reuniting with her birth family. This chapter asks, then, what happens when Mary Pickford meets the Mafia? Bearing in mind Pickford’s enormous celebrity at the time of the film’s release, I will consider how her star image interacts with Black-Hand cycle conventions in the film’s story and its publicity. How do the burgeoning conventions of Mafia-themed films bend or reinforce themselves when cast alongside Pickford? To answer this question, I build on Grieveson’s work about the ethnic and cultural immigration contexts found in silent era gangster films. He embeds Black-Hand- and Mafia-themed films in a cultural and social

discourse about urban criminality that positioned Italian immigrants as racialized others. Grieveson sees how “accounts of Black-Hand ... gangs connected criminality directly to immigration and racial difference and articulated a growing sense of organized crime in cities shadowing civil society” (2005, 21). I wish to isolate Black-Hand- and Mafia-themed films to understand how their depiction of race and immigration is affected by an association with Mary Pickford. *Poor Little Peppina* – a film that required her to both outwit the Mafia and cut off her famous curls – features a mash-up of successful American silent film themes which has the effect of both differentiating the film as a Mary Pickford feature and allowing it to chase a growing audience for racial melodramas that Bertellini has argued uses the liminal space of the tenement to claim “liberty and self-determination” for racialized Italian women denied such gains back home. For Bertellini, the result of gaining such liberty is the ability to reinvent oneself; to become, as he quotes from the title of the 1918 film starring George Beban, the famous portrayer of Italian-American immigrants: *One More American* (2010, 234).

Peppina and its cultural and social discourse creates a film that in practice Americanizes depictions of Italian women by suggesting that it is an identity that may be adopted and shed at will. What better way to Americanize than to be portrayed by Pickford, an actress who, although Canadian by birth, came to personify an all-American sense of self-transformation, savvy capitalism, and patriotism? By highlighting the publicity that surrounded Pickford prior to *Poor Little Peppina*’s release as well as the publicity about the film distributed and prompted by Famous Players, this chapter will show how Pickford as Peppina harnesses rhetoric about silent era Black-Hand and Mafia tropes to indirectly position immigrant-Italian women as extensions of Pickford’s All-American persona. Part of the work of this chapter is to examine how Pickford’s film trades on the popular myth of the Black Hand and draws from its silent era cycle conventions while incorporating them into a more complex narrative concerning the Mafia.

After 1908, Black-Hand films were released at least yearly in the United States until the mid-1920s. For a complete list, see the section “Filmography” at the end of this chapter. While not ubiquitous enough to be considered a genre – film cycles are “small, nuanced groupings of films that are not transhistorical and often operate within one or two seasons” – cinematic Black-Hand- and Italian Mafia-themed films were prompted by popular mass-media reports of Black-Hand kidnappings preceding and during the late-nickelodeon and transitional eras (Grieveson 2005, 3–4). The two terms are used interchangeably in descriptions of these films, although Black Hand is used much more often as this was the term adopted and frequently used by the popular press. *Poor Little Peppina* is infrequently highlighted in studies of silent cinema’s representations of gangsters and Mafia members. The fact that the film is a Pickford vehicle, or that it is part of the Black-Hand cycle that had reached its popular peak in the years after the infamous March 1909 Josef Petrosino assassination, may explain why *Peppina* has not been closely examined under the assumption that it is one of the same that came before, albeit one starring the most popular screen performer of the time.

Nationwide press characterizing the Mafia as a Sicilian criminal phenomenon accelerated after the 1890 killing of New Orleans police chief David Hennessy, who had been investigating crimes involving Italian immigrants (Bertellini, 186). In the decades following, widespread reports of Southern Italian criminal syndicates captured the nation's imagination. Beginning with a November 1909 *Variety* ad, the term Mafia appears in motion picture magazines and entertainment publications to characterize Italian immigrant performers and to describe what had previously been and continued to be identified as Black-Hand storylines. The first review I found to use the term is for a stage show that features "a 'wop' song *King of the Mafia*" at Poli's in Hartford, Connecticut. The same issue includes a capsule review that describes a "Mafia gentleman" appearing at the Haymarket in Chicago. The review uses the terms Mafia and Black Hand interchangeably. Concurrent to the re-introduction of the term Mafia, most likely a result of the nationwide attention captured by the Petrosino assassination after his announced intention to break the New York arm of the Sicilian Mafia, New York-based producers released multiple one and two reel films that explicitly refer to or feature depictions of the Black Hand. These followed and were modeled on depictions of the group in the popular press as an American iteration of the Sicilian Mafia and the Neapolitan *Camorra*. Bertellini ascribes the adoption of the term "Black Hand (*La mano nera*)" to a fall 1903 *New York Herald* article's use of the term to describe crimes reportedly committed by gangs of Italian immigrants. Between 1903 and 1908, press headlines across the country adopted the term Black Hand, replacing "earlier mentions of the Mafia and *Camorra*" (187). Predating the group's cinematic appearance, one of the first widely reported New York Black Hand trials occurred in September 1903. Wealthy dock contractor Nicole Cappiellais was blackmailed by five so-called agents of the Black Hand. The writer of the story published about the case in New York's *Evening World* described the court-room proceedings of the blackmail trial by emphasizing how the "Black Hand agents glared viciously" at a witness as the man "sneered" back at the five men. The article concludes with a memorable history lesson and description of the mayhem caused by the Mafia, which in this case is differentiated from the Black Hand.

'The Society of the Bad Blood,' known also under the generic name of Mafia, [which] is not unknown in this country, nor in New York, where it has perpetrated many murders; but this is the first time that the 'Black Hand' has been seen here. The latter has but one purpose—extortion. The alternative is death 'The Order of the Black Hand' was first heard of in 1825 in Naples, where it was formed among the prisoners then in the castle of the famous Neapolitan capital. The symbol and the name of the order was that of Picciotto di Sgarro, the high executioner of the *Camorra*, who was dreaded, and the mere mention of whose name made people cross themselves and little children cry.

The New York press takes cold pleasure in describing the crimes and terror purportedly caused by "an arm of the 'Order of the Black Hand'" as it "stretched across the sea to strike" from "out of Calabria" (*Evening World* 1903, 5). In this story, we find what will become the hallmarks of cinematic Black-Hand tales: Southern Italian

criminals, an Italian immigrant blackmailed, the threatening of American institutions, and a police capture maintaining that law and order has been restored, at least for the moment.

Films about the Black Hand only increased after Petrosino's assassination. After 1909, the entertainment press interchangeably used the terms Mafia and Black Hand. The latter often, but not exclusively, referred to kidnap and blackmail plots – often with a bomb threat. The former referred to Italian immigrant criminal conspiracies of all types, but was also most prevalent as a modifier or synonym for Black Hand. In July 1908, two years after McCutcheon's short, the Kleine Optical Co. imported and distributed a large package of French-produced fiction titles including Urban-Eclipse's production *The Organ-Grinder's Daughter*. The encapsulation of the film was published by *Moving Picture World* in August of the same year. It describes an involved plot that includes several elements that will also appear in later films in the Black-Hand cycle. These include a kidnapped child, a ransom note, and the father's profession as an organ-grinder, which reoccurs later in the cycle in *The Organ Grinder* (1912, Kalem) and *The Organ Grinder's Ward* (Oct. 1912, Reliance). It's unlikely this film was chosen deliberately for its subject matter. It was part of a package deal, yet it is the second of a cycle of films that will feature Black-Hand or Mafia-themes.

Throughout this period, popular press reports increasingly dramatized the extortion, kidnappings, and bombings assigned to the Black Hand with elaborate graphic representations in newspapers and national magazines. Many of these stories concern Lieutenant Petrosino, the then head of the New York Police Department unit devoted to investigating crime in the Italian community.¹ In an effort to fight both perceived and actual Mafia and Black-Hand intrusion into New York's immigrant neighborhoods, New York City Police Commissioner Theodore Bingham sent Petrosino, who himself had immigrated from Padula, to Palermo to coordinate a two-sided campaign against the Palermo Mafia and its American counterpart. While the visit was supposed to be a secret, it was all over the New York papers. *The Sun* published the first story on February 20th, after which more papers followed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Petrosino was shot dead upon arrival.² Films about the Black Hand only increased after his assassination.

In January 1909, nickelodeons could book the Great Northern Film Company's release of its 720-foot *Mafia*. That same month, Kalem, a production company founded by, among others, George Kleine of the Kleine Optical Co., which distributed *The Organ-Grinder's Daughter*, released *The Detectives of the Italian Bureau*, the fourth film to explicitly feature the Black Hand. In December 1909, Biograph released *An Awful Moment*, which was described in exhibitor magazine *The Nickelodeon* as a "drama based upon the operations of the Black Hand." While an incomplete version of the film survives, this description trades on an association with Black-Hand plots that is unclear from its published description. *An Awful Moment* is a thriller in which an unnamed woman avenges her male companion's jail sentence by staging a rather spectacular Christmas morning murder attempt on the sentencing judge's wife. With the judge and his wife's child asleep in the background,

the avenging woman breaks into the parlor and sets a shotgun found wrapped under the family Christmas tree to fire at the judge's wife, who had already been incapacitated by the woman. When the judge enters the room, interrupting the murder plot, he and the woman fight until she is subdued.

Both the male and female criminals in *An Awful Moment* are performed as an emphatically gesticulating duo whose costumes racialize each as so-called authentic, poor, Southern-European immigrants. Joanne Ruvoli, Anne Friedberg, and others have demonstrated how between 1908 and 1913, D.W. Griffith shot a cycle of single-reel films for Biograph in which "twisted handlebar mustaches, wide-brimmed peasant hats, embroidered skirts, straw-bottomed bottles of wine, stiletto knives, crucifixes, and portraits of St. Anthony ... proliferate and mark Sicilian and Italian ethnicity" (Ruvoli 2009, 59). The above-described stereotypical traits of Italian immigrants and references to a Sicilian or Italian Mafia in the context of Italian representation are influenced by both popular-press accounts that draw from published eugenic studies and immigration reports that purport to explain the behavior of "Sicilians as 'excitable, superstitious, and revengeful'" (qtd. in Ruth 1996, 13).³ Illustrating this, the immigrant woman in *An Awful Moment* is armed with a dagger, a common Black-Hand prop, when she breaks into the judge's home. The use of the term Black Hand to describe this film shows us that the presence of vengeance, a dagger, and so-called authentic immigrant depictions are all that is needed for the public to see the workings of the Black Hand. By the end of the 1909 season, the cycle's conventions were so well known from popular-press descriptions of similar stories that film catalogs, exhibitor organs, and advertisements only need describe a film as having a "Black-Hand plot" for exhibitors and audiences to know what to expect of the narrative. *The Organ Grinder* (1912, Kalem), for example, is described in *The Nickelodeon* as "a drama based upon the operations of the Black Hand and presenting ingenious as well as thrilling situations."

These stories ranged in length from one-reel, fifteen-minute films to what we would now consider feature length. Regardless of length, many of these were advertised and sold as features. When we consider the sheer number of films produced annually during the silent era, a single film a year within a cycle or a concentration of sixteen annually, as we see in the Black-Hand cycle's highpoint year of 1914, is not necessarily significant. However, Black-Hand-themed films and their motifs were popular enough as a stand-alone cycle during the nickelodeon era for their conventions to appear as familiar elements within other plots. As much as Black-Hand stories were the central attraction of films that dramatized Italian immigrant assimilation, they were also used as part of both comedic and dramatic mistaken-identity plots, kidnapping stories, farces, and as minor plot devices used to tie urban criminality back to the racialized Italian immigrant. In his compilation of silent-era American film cycles, Larry Langman finds that "by the 1920s, the Black Hand films all but disappeared from the American screen, replaced by general crime films" (1998, 76). Rather than "replaced," we are better served by thinking of this cycle as either one which was absorbed into other conventions or one which had its conventions dispersed enough that they began to be insertable plot and style

points able to trade on audience familiarity: insert extortion note marked by a dagger here or a group of mustachioed men at a bar there.

Even as the cycle was producing multiple, similarly dramatized features a year, there were a range of actions and elements of *mise-en-scène* that indicated a Black-Hand film. Starting with, perhaps, the most obvious example, the image of a black hand was often accompanied by drawn images of daggers and skulls and crossbones alongside misspelled English-language words to communicate the criminal's inferior intellectual abilities. A by-product of this effect is that the cycle's *mise-en-scène* often duplicates symbols and representations as a visual shorthand to the audience. It is the stylized nature of these elements that makes them so memorable and allows them to play as well in the dramatic crime films, which were the most-produced subjects of the cycle, as in comedies. Comedies begin including Black-Hand elements in 1909 with the release of *Trailing the Black Hand* produced by the French company Lux and imported by New York's Atlas distribution company. In fact, a great many of the Black-Hand comedies were imported from France. *The Moving Picture World* from March 1912 includes what must be the best title of the cycle: *A Midget Sherlock Holmes* (Mar. 1912, Pathé), in which a young boy adopts a bearded disguise to outwit the Black Hand's extortion threat.

In 1911, *Mutt and Jeff and the Black Hand* was released by Nestor as part of the popular Mutt and Jeff series of animated films. Complete with stiletto knives, a note, and extortion threat, the film uses an absurd mistaken-identity plot. The Black Handers briefly confuse Mutt and Jeff for Mariangelo and Francesca Pinozzi, fruit cart owners they have threatened, who have fled to safety fearing for their lives. The October 7, 1911 issue of *The Moving Picture News* describes how Mutt and Jeff are conscripted into the gang after the initial confusion "with the aid of numerous stilletos acting as accelerators." And then, of course, there is the decision to blow up the police station, "because the police have been overactive of late," leading to Jeff's exoneration when the police chief recognizes his old friend. Like the earlier and more dramatic Black-Hand films, we see a resolution restoring law and order – even if Mutt has been left to languish in a dungeon-like cell – as well as the elements of *mise-en-scène*, such as the note and the knives, that iconographically mark the cycle. When the Thanhouser Company released *The Amateur Detectives* in December 1914, comedic uses of Black-Hand elements had become unremarkable. In the same month, *Moving Picture World* described the film as "another one of the familiar black hand comedies in which the girl and hero alarm the household with mystical symbols and then turn detectives and earn the reward."

Mafia-themed films developed during the transitional era (1908–1917) as the themes and traits of the Black-Hand cycle were incorporated into more complex plots. We can see this in the five-reel *Children of the Night* (1921), in which a shipping clerk's dream-world alter ego brushes up against a secret criminal society styled after the Black Hand. After approximately 1916, most references to the Black Hand or the Mafia are embedded in plots about bootlegging or general urban criminality. This makes sense because before American film tropes coalesced into recognizable narrative-based genres during the classical era, film narratives liberally borrowed

conventions, character depictions, and tropes from one another, as we've seen in the way Black-Hand elements appear in a range of plots. Besides seeing the consolidation of the companies that would form the major and minor studios of the 1920s, the years between 1908 and 1917 also saw American filmmaking undergo a fundamental transformation from an attractions-based mode of address, as seen in popular genres such as the chase and trick films, in which effects were elevated above plot and character, to a form described by film historian André Gaudreault as one featuring narrative integration. In his well-known essay about the cinema of attractions, Tom Gunning explains that this mode of address constructs its spectator by "making use of both fictional and nonfictional attractions, its energy moves toward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative" (1990, 59). As part of this change, the Black Hand is rarely the narrative focus as stories became more involved along with the transition to lengthier films. Instead, it is often seen in flashbacks or relegated to subplots often disconnected from an overt connection to Italian immigration.

While *Poor Little Peppina* is driven by its version of a Black-Hand plot, it is first and foremost a Mary Pickford vehicle. When the film was released on March 2, 1916, Pickford was the most famous actress in the United States, if not the world. After making nine features over the course of two seasons, she was nicknamed America's Sweetheart in 1914 by powerful theater owner David Grauman – father to Sid, who famously established Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles. The following year, renowned theater impresario David Belasco, for whom Pickford worked before she began her transition to motion pictures in 1909, named her the Queen of the Movies in an essay published in *Photoplay*. Two years after Grauman reportedly nicknamed her, Famous Players began advertising Pickford's pictures with ad copy that described her as "America's Sweetheart." Introducing another origin story for Pickford's moniker, Eileen Whitfield includes Famous Players' B. P. Schulberg's explanation for the phrase in her biography of the icon. Schulberg wrote publicity and scenarios for the company, including the popular earlier Pickford feature *Tess of the Storm Country* (1914). Whitfield describes how Schulberg "was standing in front of a theater one day watching people buy tickets to see Mary in one of the early movies I wrote for her when a middle-aged couple stopped in front of a display of stills from the picture. 'There she is,' the husband said. 'My little sweetheart'... 'She's not just your little sweetheart, she's everybody's sweetheart,' his wife said. It rang a bell." Whitfield makes the point that Schulberg's memory of the origin of the nickname shows that "Pickford's image was created by the public, and augmented by publicity" (1997, 133). The public took to the name and adopted it over the course of Pickford's career, adapting it to be Our Mary and continuing to augment the publicity machine of Zuckor's young studio.

Beloved as Little Mary, Our Mary, and America's Sweetheart on screen, Pickford signed a contract renegotiation with Adolph Zukor to form the Famous Players-Mary Pickford Company Inc weeks prior to *Peppina*'s release. She was the first star of her time to own one half of her own production company, even if she was described as a "dainty picture favorite" in her adoring press (Hollywood Museum Collection). A review of the film's New York's Broadway theater debut reported that

in addition to the formation of the new corporation, “*Poor Little Peppina*, by Kate Jordan ... is the first seven-reel release in which [Pickford] has appeared.” In 1916, a seven-reel film marked significant investment on the part of both production and distribution companies. Film historian Michael Quinn explains that during the later American transitional era, feature films – those more than two reels in length and advertised as an individual product – had become commonplace enough that distributors and producers sought to differentiate their features by promoting each film’s uniqueness (2001, 38). For *Peppina*, this included its seven-reel preliminary release before a more widely distributed five-reel version. In the months leading up to its release, Famous Players placed multiple ads in *Motion Picture World* announcing its seven-reel release and urging exhibitors to contact their exchanges early to secure a print for extended bookings, even though the company had reportedly “supplied all exchanges with additional prints.” The LaSalle Theater in Chicago booked the film for a three-week run, which was at that point its longest booking for a Famous Players’ title. Even considering the aggrandizing nature of marketing, the film was clearly well-publicized and a hit. It played well into the fall season.

The reappearance of a Black-Hand plot and the film’s primary focus on Pickford rather than on Saldo and Villato could account for *Poor Little Peppina*’s elision in a canon of the cinematic Mafia. Yet, Pickford’s on-screen presence is also not written about very much in critical silent film scholarship. Whitfield’s biography, *The Woman Who Made Hollywood*, and Kevin Brownlow’s 1999 pictorial reassessment of Pickford, created from former Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences photography curator Robert Cushman’s extensive collection of Pickford papers and ephemera, are the two most recent and extensive works on Pickford. Yes, her massive popularity is noted in histories of the American silent era, as is her role managing her own incredibly successful career, which includes being one of the four founders of United Artists in 1919 along with D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and Pickford’s then-husband Douglas Fairbanks. (Chaplin famously nicknamed her “Bank of America’s Sweetheart,” a play on words that she hated.) However, her film roles and on-screen personas are rarely considered. Gaylyn Studlar is the exception to this lack of attention. She argues that Pickford personified ideals of Victorian femininity in a nostalgic appeal to adult men raised during that era. Studlar reads Pickford as an embodiment of a “child-woman” (2002, 350).

She represented a dangerously attractive female whose masquerade of childishness appealed to adult men raised in the late Victorian period. Those men might find her enticing innocence a comforting alternative to the models of sexual subjectivity offered by the flapper and the new woman. On the other hand, Pickford’s many child-woman heroines also could serve an identificatory function for women and girls who might read her as a comforting ‘asexual’ figure of freedom whose youth released her from the demands—including the sexual demands—of adult femininity. (2002, 361)

The repetition of her performance as a child, even after she aged past what we would now see as believable, alongside her kinetic and melodramatic acting style creates a

body of incredibly popular films. These were often adapted from popular late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century literary works about children. Studlar argues that during Pickford's transition to features, "her screen persona grew even younger, until she was for all intents and purposes, a child impersonator in such films as *The Foundling* (1916), *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (1917), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1917), and 1917's *A Little Princess*" (2002, 351). While she doesn't include Peppina among these films and performances, that may be because as Peppina Pickford is cast as a late adolescent of marrying age – she flees Italy to avoid an arranged marriage – so she is not playing a juvenile as young as her characters in those features. However, her adoption of various guises in the film allows her to play younger than herself and her character for much of the film.

At seven reels, *Peppina* was the longest film Pickford had appeared in at that point in her career. As such, it provided her fans with an unprecedented opportunity to watch their favorite actress in what was repeatedly advertised as her "first Italian characterization," which the tagline for the film emphasized in its description of Pickford "in an unusual characterization" as Peppina. The film's advertising, and the reviews and articles that followed included an emphasis on the film as an opportunity to experience a form of racial voyeurism. It reportedly broke box office records on its opening day at the Broadway Theater, and the police were called to manage the crowds. The *Motion Picture World* review of the film in its March 11, 1916 issue describes it as "an artistic incident of immense importance," and the "greatest of Mary Pickford's efforts." The film's story adapts the Black-Hand kidnapping plot to endanger Pickford, inciting her to repeatedly disguise herself in what were, by this point in her career, relatively familiar characterizations. In 1916, Pickford was most identified with her rags-to-riches portrayals in which she often depicted a "penniless waif ... claimed by wealthy, far away parents" (Whitfield 1997, 151). Her ability to play female adolescents, even when disguised, as she often was, as a boy, and her public's desire to see such roles, contributed to her massive popularity with fans and critics alike. Whitfield understands Pickford's fame in this period to be fueled by the public's "passion for the existence of 'Little Mary,' a creature of exquisite sensibilities," thereby arguing for how Pickford's persona transcends her on-screen performances. Reviews for her first Famous Players' hit, *Hearts Adrift* (1914), included poems and rapturous pronouncements. This one, published in the *New York Review*, is written as if Mary herself were commenting on her screen persona: "I move, like, a Fairy of Childhood's Wonderland, across the white screen of the Universe. The very azure skies are not too far reaching for my silent dream ... I am the wistful, butterfly-like, elusive quality of supreme Innocence as I peer out at you, night following night, with my big, round, tender eyes" (Whitfield 1997, 127).

In May 1918, *Motion Picture News* describes how "the 'typical' Pickford picture shows her in rags and curls, in situations both humorous and dramatic." Written two years after *Peppina* was released, this description easily applies to the film and draws attention to the way its coverage in the press emphasized its inclusion of Pickford's "unusual" and "novel characterizations." During the film, she works in a Sicilian vineyard as Peppina, is a stowaway disguised as a boy, a bootblack, an employee of

an opium den, a messenger boy, and, “finally, the restored millionaire’s daughter who comes into her own,” a point *Motion Picture World* makes in its capsule summation published in February 1916. The multiple personas Pickford adopts are not unusual for a Pickford film. Her appeal lay in the way she could inhabit multiple identities in the course of a story while always staying true to the upward arc of prosperity and fairness that marked the egalitarian, democratic fantasy of her films. Consider *Peppina*: the film begins by establishing Peppina as Lois; immediately the performance of Italianness is filtered through the knowledge that Peppina is Lois is Mary Pickford, who personifies a form of American film stardom. The “liberty and self-determination” Bertellini assigns to racial melodramas may be equally applied to many of Pickford films. These include films in which she is explicitly cast in a racial melodrama, as in *Madam Butterfly* (1915, Famous Players), and her more common characterization as a strongly drawn, confident adolescent who was often on her own. In this mode, a Pickford character was often disguised as an adolescent boy to gain access to forbidden places or to escape danger – she both appeared in drag as Little Lord Fauntleroy and as her own mother in the 1921 film – or as an urchin soon to discover a prosperous family.

A letter to the editor in the November 1916 issue of *Motion Picture Magazine* testifies how Pickford’s “gold en-curled, tiny ‘Little Mary’” appearance on screen and in fan magazines does not indicate a lack of versatility. “Who could forget,” the writer points out, “her stolid Indian stoicism in *Little Pal*? Her mute, repressed pathos in *Madame Butterfly*? Her excitable, gestureful [sic], Italianness in *Peppina*?” Surely, we can’t escape the obviousness of these as examples of films in which crude racializations are realized. What I am interested in here is how Pickford’s persona allows for her to play racialized roles. Bertellini briefly writes about Pickford’s *Poor Little Peppina* performance to highlight how it and the film perpetuate stereotypical depictions of Italy and Italians during the silent era. Certainly, her performance as Peppina is marked by a more than liberal use of hand gestures and costuming that immediately contextualizes her as an Italian peasant in the first scenes in which we see her. This quickly communicates her status and her character via her dress and actions. Pickford is introduced with a title and credit at the nine-minute mark that advances the story by over ten years: “Years have gone past. Unaware of her American parentage, Lois has grown up as Peppina.” Dressed in a long, patterned, cotton skirt, her hair tied back – framed at mid-ground in a wide, mid-shot that irises in and out – she is washing clothes in a rural stream. At this point in the Black-Hand cycle, and considering the numerous depictions of Italian immigrants and nationals during Griffith’s Biograph heyday, Pickford has a well-marked blueprint for her performance. Used also by Maiori as Soldo, this style allows Pickford to quickly communicate that Peppina is as Italian as her wider “adopted” family, privileging her cultural upbringing over her birthplace and heredity.

These descriptions, as well as those used for the Black-Hand cycle, should be understood within the context of the influx of European immigration into the Lower East Side of New York City. *Poor Little Peppina* is no exception to this and, in fact, traded on the popular-press reader’s interest in New York tenements and the

perceived criminality of an Italian underground to market the film. Numerous advertisements ran before the film opened that were aimed at fans and exhibitors alike. As part of the film's publicity, *Motion Picture Magazine* published "Little Mary in Little Italy" in October 1916, six months after the film opened.

At last, through crooked streets, Mary Pickford and her friends came along to the abode of Giuseppe and Maria. The door being so low they had to stoop when they entered the room, which Guiseppe proudly called their 'parlor.' It was almost a cubby-hole, but neat and clean as wax. A home-made [sic] rag carpet covered the floor, and while the walls were decorated with large crayon portraits in gilt frames of Giuseppe's noble ancestry, it was simple, cool and inviting. 'Where is Maria?' asked Mary Pickford of Giuseppe, who watched with pride as his guests glanced around and praised the comfort and cleanliness. 'Maka da spaghatt,' he replied seriously; 'da verra best in da contree.'"

The article mentions how some of Mary's female costars wouldn't go to Guisippe's home in Little Italy for fear of microbes. But not Mary: "I knew I would learn and enjoy much because of this little adventure." And indeed, she did. The final paragraph of the story explains, "Mary Pickford tells that Maria has given her the recipe for making spaghetti. Little Mary says that when someday she had figured out the strange hieroglyphics she is going to publish it for housewives to try. Mary Pickford's own confession is that she cooks only the simplest things, which will not permit her to be the one to experiment" (Bastedo, 132). The reference to the "strange hieroglyphics" in which Maria has written her recipe recalls the Black-Hand's use of pictographs. More directly, it also builds from previous reports and on-screen inclusions of misspelled notes as part of the Black-Hand blackmail procedure. Certainly, Maria was not a member of the Black Hand. Rather, we can see here how a trait from the cycle, which had been fueled by real-life occurrences, is now being used in a likely press-department-created account of Little Mary's visit to New York's tenements.

Pickford's confession positions her outside of domestic spaces, perfectly fitting her star image and her dominant on-screen portrayals, in which she spent more time in rags than gowns. It disrupts any suggestion that Pickford's image included homemaker. In the claim to someday publish the recipe, Little Mary is asserted as the conduit between Maria, with her strange language, and the housewives of America. One can read this as an instance of cultural appropriation not unlike how the exaggerated performance style employed by Pickford during this era compressed and amplified aspects of Italian cultural life. This visit and her portrayal of Peppina as a young, nearly archetypal, yet, "Italian" Mary Pickford, depicts a process of Americanization that may address her audiences as a form of aspirational assimilation. A March 1916 illustrated photoplay story in *Motion Picture Magazine*, which often adapted film stories into short, magazine drama, features this description of Olcott and Jordan's *Poor Little Peppina*: a "pathetic, touching story of a rich girl who becomes a waif of the slums, featuring Mary Pickford." The feature is described in

the table of contents along with a making-of article about Theda Bera's *The Serpent*, and a photoplay story of an American heiress whose heart turns to stone in *Stronger Than Woman's Will*. A majority of the adapted film stories feature descriptions that highlight the adventures of the wealthy and aristocratic. Pickford's film offers viewers the pleasure of a slumming masquerade built on an American foundation. Her performance as Peppina embodies Bertellini's analysis that "for Italians assimilation was depicted as a challenging, but not impossible, process of moral domestication and adjustment that eventually transformed their class status and even their appearances" (2010, 203). This is a perfect description of what Pickford essentially does in the film.

At this point, we know the plot of *Poor Little Peppina*. So, how does Pickford as Peppina assimilate through moral domestication? Peppina flees her Italian home for New York to escape her betrothal to the village Padrone. Bernardo is a serial harasser who has negotiated for her hand in marriage by using his "land and money" to convince her father to agree to the union. The exchanges between the Padrone and Mary allow her to perform a version of her spirited, adolescent woman within a context that also highlights the limited agency granted Italian women in Italy. We know Mary/Lois to be disguised as Peppina, even if she herself does not. And with this knowledge the audience is given an American foundation to the Italian performance. The significant shift in class status this foundation represents and her subsequent appearance as a wealthy, young American is prompted when, with the help of Beppo, Peppina disguises herself as an adolescent boy to stowaway on an Atlantic crossing. While on the ship, an American, Hugh, finds the disguised Peppina and, taking pity on the "lad," pays his passage in steerage. There is a complicated connection between Peppina and Hugh, whose sister, an Italian countess by marriage who lived near Peppina's village, had previously taught the girl to speak English. She gave her money to be used for her flight from home as well as a card identifying her brother as a possible help in America, if Peppina ever found herself there. The card itself is important – a close-up of it allows the audience to learn her brother's name: Hugh Carroll. The film devotes an entire scene to Mary discovering she has lost it on her way to Naples to depart for New York. By meeting Hugh, Peppina returns to the family of her American benefactor and the class of her birth.

Parallel editing links Peppina's flight and what will greet her when she arrives in New York. Saldo and Villato have recently written Peppina's Italian parents to send her west so they may collect a reward for Lois Torrens' return to her parents. Borrowing an image from the Black-Hand cycle, Beppo replies for his illiterate parents in a note written in rough, standard English. It is notable that the letter sent from Saldo is clearly written in standard English. The mark of literacy is granted to men now residing and prospering in modern New York. This characterization continues a trend that is also present in both *The Detectives of the Italian Bureau* and *The Adventures of Lieutenant Petrosino* (1916). Each depicts a "splitting of the Italian community into two morally different groups" (Bertellini 2010, 195). For instance, in *The Black Hand* (1906), we see the criminals intoxicated in their hideout, but we only see the butcher and his wife in his place of business. Bertellini also finds this

dynamic in the cycle's later films: "Like several early American films about Italians, *The Adventures of Lieutenant Petrosino* manages to oppose two morally incompatible, but superficially fluid and interchangeable, models of Italianness. Petrosino may easily dress up as a shady Sicilian Mafioso, but the masquerade will not corrupt his moral character" (202). We see similar character traits and plot points in *Poor Little Peppina*: Saldo is dismissed and avenges himself because he was found drunk on the Torrens' wine; Beppo and Peppina's parents, although related to Saldo, are threatened with violence if they refuse to take in the child.

The men receive the family's reply that Peppina has run away. A short scene later Peppina is robbed by a stoker and brought to the now mustachioed Saldo and Vellato's Little Italy bar – a front for their counterfeit money operation. After this coincidental reunion with her kidnappers, she is pressured to work for the pair until she can escape their cruelty. The remainder of the film turns on the men's failure to both realize she is in drag in her male, adolescent disguise and that she is the very same young woman they are so desperate to locate. In the midsection of the film, Pickford performs several more scenes among street children, as she did with steer-age passengers while in disguise on the liner. This adds another one of her usual characterizations to this film built on the "unusual characterization" tagline. In her journey back to her parents, Lois/Peppina adopts other short-term jobs including as a messenger boy, a job during which she is arrested, her disguise is discovered, and she's sent to The Children's Society, where a title informs us "they'll change her clothes," reintroducing her to the audience as a young, American woman and highlighting the pleasure of disguise her drag performance afforded. Before that change occurs, however, Peppina tells the police about Saldo and Vellato's Lower-East side criminal enterprise. This prompts a raid that includes an abbreviated chase scene after which Vellato confesses to the Torrens' kidnapping fifteen years prior. The opening of the film's conclusion begins with a policeman's exclamation: "Why Chief! That's the Torrens' child."

The assimilation as Americanization the film presents echoes the way the Black-Hand cycle initially depicted a class division within the Italian immigrant community. Rather than Lt. Petrosino occupying domestic spaces that communicate his middle-class status, Pickford embodies the dynamic of the split of the Italian community within her Americanized star body's ability to contain and display multiple ethnic and gender identities. In true Pickford fashion, Lois is reunited three years later with Carroll – "the lover waiting in the wings," as Studlar suggests. He proposes and she accepts in fulfillment of the "expected formula for resolution" which should be anticipated at the close of many of Pickford's films" (2002, 364). Lois is uncovered and engaged in a reunion with her family and class of Americans. Rather than the split-Italian racializations discussed previously, at the end of the film Pickford presents a young Italian woman who assimilates by adopting shifting disguises on her way to achieving domestic assimilation via her marriage. As one reviewer assures her readers, at the end "*Poor Little Peppina* ... is no longer poor but as charmingly pretty as only 'Our Mary' can be in a stunning evening frock." The lesson here: you can always be a rich American.