



Joe Queenan's guide to crime clichés

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Al Pacino in Scarface (1983). Photograph: Ronald Grant Archive

Most of the essential, indispensable clichés in films about crime – the police are as bad as the gangsters, just try to find an LA cop who's not on the take – were established many, many years ago, and films that ignore them rarely succeed at the box office. It's perfectly all right to add new clichés – feet seen descending from a car in a dark alley, protracted barfing when a mutilated corpse is found, wisecracking female assassins – but the old clichés must be honoured.

For starters, gangster films almost always showcase tough guys off the hardscrabble streets of blighted metropolises who turn to a life of crime because a) it is the only way to get ahead; b) they were wronged by the authorities at a young age; c) they realise that Credit Suisse and Bank of America almost never hire people from their ethnic background, so they might as well become leg-breakers.

In gangster movies, there is always an amorphous code of behaviour, be it omertà or honour among thieves or let's keep it in the family. Even though the code is vaguely defined, it cannot be violated. It is the deviation from the code of omertà that usually sets in motion a gangster's ruin. That and the insidious influence of the rat.

Crime movies almost always have a rat, and sometimes several. The rat can be an undercover cop, a member of the gang, or even the gang leader himself. Rod Steiger was a superb rat in *On the Waterfront*. Johnny Depp makes an excellent rat in *Donnie Brasco*. Sean Penn is a culturally conflicted rat in *State of Grace*. Matt Damon, Leonardo DiCaprio and Jack Nicholson all play rats in *The Departed*. Hong Kong crime movies like *Infernal Affairs* are filled with rats. Which might be why *The Departed* was based on *Infernal Affairs*. One thing that makes *The Departed* so memorable is that Nicholson and Damon, rats both, cannot figure out

who the other rat (DiCaprio) in the gang is, even though there are only about four thugs in Nicholson's crew, and even though they all know DiCaprio used to be a state trooper. That is another integral feature of gangster movies: gangsters have a hard time identifying the rat in the crew, even though the rat is always the newest and best-looking member of the gang, and never seems to belong to the same ethnic group as everyone else in the gang.

In movies dealing with crime, gangsters like to promenade around the old neighborhood, dispensing favours and advice, often consuming small amounts of fruit or nuts as they do so. They never pay for what they eat. This is the only genre where the principals don't mind being pedestrians. Film gangsters despise other ethnic groups, who do horrible things they would never do. Gangster movies often include a scene in a restaurant or nightclub where somebody says the wrong thing to the wrong guy and later regrets it. Oddly, thugs marked for death frequently get into cars and taxis, even though bitter experience should have warned them that a killer is hiding in the back seat or crouched down next to the cabbie.

In crime movies, there is usually one straight arrow whom the gangsters respect because he is not completely crooked like them. This tradition started with *Angels With Dirty Faces* and continues straight through *On the Waterfront* and *A Bronx Tale*. There is usually a scene involving espresso. Rock'n'roll gangster movies like *Layer Cake* usually involve small-time criminals who get out of their depth when they cross big-time criminals. The cast usually includes a black hood – who is the single scariest person in the movie – and some despicable Russians. The films have an immense amount of cheeky voiceover. More conventional American gangster movies may contain a scene where somebody wears a wire but then tears it off because he just can't stand it. There is often a doctor willing to do emergency surgery for a price, and some kind of chemist. These people wear glasses, and are revolting. There is also a scene where a boyfriend who gets beaten up because he mistreated a sister/moll/ex-girlfriend, a scene involving a baseball bat, and a scene requiring at least one meathook. Amazingly, cement shoes are rarely seen onscreen in gangster films, Billy Bathgate being the one obvious exception.

The crime genre must also be looked at from the perspective of the cops. For a crime film to work, there must be a wizened, cynical cop who is close to retirement and has seen it all. There must be a young cop who just got married, and who will almost certainly die. There must be a full-dress funeral service, preferably in the rain. There must be a black cop who always serves as the peacemaker in the locker room. There must be a black female judge. There must be a hard-drinking female cop who is raising a child named Tommy all by herself. This child is invariably a weenie who will never grow up to be a cop. There must be a whore with a heart of gold and an ambitious district attorney who releases a bestial serial killer on a ridiculous technicality, and the whole police force wonders: "Why even bother?" There must be a nasty chap from Internal Affairs who is convinced the hero is dirty. There must be a dour bartender who signals: "In the back" with his head but otherwise does not speak. There must be a woman who begs her husband to give up undercover work because it's dangerous and he's missing birthday parties and he's starting to resemble the people he's supposed to be bringing to justice. There must be a scene where a bunch of bland men in suits enter police headquarters, flash their cheesy little badges and say, "FBI. We'll take over from here." There must be a scene where an honest cop storms in and tells his commanding officer that such-and-such a person is a dirty cop and Yaphet Kotto or some other long-suffering African-American actor fires back, "You're off the reservation, McGuire. I want your badge on my desk by the end of the day!"

Finally, gangster movies would not be gangster movies without the crucial scene in the hospital where a good-looking young cop comes on duty to replace the cop who is guarding an important witness, and then turns out to be a hit man. Not once are these cops ever asked for ID. It is a cliché, it is an old cliché, and it is a beloved cliché. It is my personal favourite.

The classic clichéd crime movie: Scarface

Brian De Palma's *Scarface* is the most joyously cliché-ridden gangster movie ever made. It involves despised immigrants coming to America seeking a better life. It depicts the wheel of fate coming full circle: poverty, near-disaster, glamour, wealth, death. It has ingenious methods of torture. It has cocaine. It has slutty women. It has fabulous accents. It has slutty women with fabulous accents. It has thugs conducting business in nightclubs where it is hard to hear what the other thugs are saying but they conduct business anyway. It has the new kid on the block who is such a psychopath that he scares off all the other psychopaths. It has mysterious drug dealers from South America who you don't want to get on the wrong side of because they are so mysterious no one knows what they will do next but it won't be pretty. Most of all, it has the classic moment when the conscience-stricken villain shows a moment of weakness and refuses to carry off an important hit because it requires killing children. You just can't kill children if you're any kind of self-respecting gangster. It would violate the gangster code.