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# SHOTS IN THE MIRROR
## Crime Films and Society
Second Edition

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# Introduction
## CRIME FILMS AND SOCIETY

John Dillinger, . . . obsessed with movies, was shot by agents
after seeing *Manhattan Melodrama*, which featured Clark
Gable playing a character a lot like John Dillinger.
—Mark Costello

Crime films reflect our ideas about fundamental social, economic, and
political issues while, at the same time, they shape the ways we think
about these issues. When we look at the relationship between crime
films and society, we see a dynamic interplay of art and life. This book
examines that interplay from the multiple perspectives of film history
and technique, social history, criminal justice, and criminology.

Within this broad analytical framework, *Shots in the Mirror* argues
that crime movies, whether they portray cops, private eyes, courts,
prisons, or crime itself, have traditionally made two arguments at
once. On the one hand, they criticize some aspect of society—police
brutality, prison violence, legal barriers to justice, or the menace of
crime, often by encouraging viewers to identify with a "good" bad
guy who challenges the system. On the other hand, they enable us to
identify with a character who restores order at the end, even if that
means the punishment or death of the bad-guy hero. Thus, crime films
offer contradictory sorts of satisfaction: pride in our ability to think
critically and root for the character who challenges authority, ex-
poses injustice, champions the underdog; and pride in our maturity
for backing the restoration of the moral order, an overhaul that makes
further rebellion unnecessary. Most crime films from the earliest days
of cinema have offered this dual satisfaction, enabling us to dwell, if
only for an hour or two, in a state of happy hypocrisy.

This double movement characterized most crime films made before
1970. Since the 1970s, however, an alternative tradition has been de-
veloping that refuses the easy solutions of the past. Bleak and stern,
this alternative tradition of critical crime films rejects heroic fantasies
and happy endings to show us the confirmed delinquent's delight in
violence (*A Clockwork Orange* [1971]); the tawdriness that drives lives
in crime (*Mean Streets* [1973]); the circumstances that engender vigi-

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lantism (*Mystic River* [2003]); the threats that make it difficult for women to move freely in a city (*In the Cut* [2003]); and other failures of fairness and justice. No one is saved in these critical crime films; indeed, there may be no hero at all, or the apparent hero may be almost indistinguishable from the villain. While the perspective of this alternative tradition is unlikely to replace the easy satisfactions of more familiar crime films, it will continue to pose sharp challenges across the spectrum of crime film genres, probing deeply into the social realities of crime.

Even though film plays a central role in generating representations and understandings of crime, criminologists have traditionally ignored it, clinging to a narrow social science perspective that pays little attention to the interactions of crime and culture.[1] No one—within any field—has tried to explain the ongoing attraction of crime films, which have engrossed audiences since the earliest days of silent film, or to analyze the ways in which crime films construct our worlds, ideals, and norms of acceptable behavior. This book aims at understanding how crime films contribute to and reflect our ideas of crime and justice, good and evil, and at identifying the nature of their attraction. It also traces the history of crime films and identifies thematic undercurrents that have pulsed through them over time.

When this book first appeared, it stood alone as an attempt to analytically embrace the entire gamut of crime films; but now it has been joined by a second effort, Thomas Leitch's *Crime Films*.[2] As part of a series on genres in American cinema, Leitch's volume naturally emphasizes film studies, whereas *Shots in the Mirror* emphasizes what films say about crime, criminals, and criminal law. But Leitch, too, recognizes the double movement that enables viewers to identify first with the transgressor and then the avenger. Writing of this "contradictory double project," Leitch explains that "the central function of the crime film" is "to allow viewers to experience the vicarious thrills of criminal behavior while leaving them free to condemn this behavior, whoever is practicing it, as immoral."[3] He, too, concludes that one cannot perceive the double movement by focusing simply on one subtype such as the gangster or cop or prison film; only if one has a sense of the entire range of crime films will this pattern emerge.

While the overall topic of crime films was neglected until recently, the same was not true of its most popular subdivisions. There is now a significant body of commentary on cop, detective, gangster, and lawyer films, together with studies of film noir and the femme fatale.[4]

Moreover, a body of literature is emerging on psycho films, and Russell Campbell's *Marked Women* offers a thorough analysis of prostitutes and prostitution in cinema.[5] But if some subtypes of crime films have received considerable attention, others have gone almost unnoticed, leaving the field wide open to those interested in analyzing movies about criminal insanity, domestic violence, drug abuse and the drug trade, heists, political crime, sex crimes, stalking, surveillance, terrorism, vigilantism, and women in prison. As crime films come into their own as topics of study, and as scholars in various disciplines turn their attention in this direction, these and other understudied topics will become the focus of new books and articles.

The gap between film studies and criminology may eventually be bridged by cultural criminology, a new area of inquiry that aims at understanding how social groups perceive and create knowledge about crime.[6] Taking into consideration creative productions and emotional affects as well as illegal behaviors, cultural criminology approaches crime as a resource, one that generates media images of crime causation and control. Cultural criminology, in the words of two advocates, "attempts to make sense of a world in which the street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street."[7] Cultural criminology also emphasizes the attractions of transgression, the pleasures of the forbidden. In all these respects, it promises to expand and reinvigorate the territory of traditional criminology; but it is not yet well developed, and its advocates have as yet paid little attention to film. Should this situation change, cultural criminology is well positioned to encourage exchanges of ideas between film specialists and criminologists, fulfilling its promise to open up the study of "not only images but images of images, an infinite hall of mediated mirrors."[8] We might discover an entire Versailles of possibilities in which crime films and daily life endlessly reflect one another, framing sequences, receding into copies of one another, revealing ways in which our selves and movies interpenetrate. We would be better able to watch ourselves seeing—a purpose of this book as well.

Scholars' traditional reluctance to examine the topic of crime films in its entirety has no doubt stemmed from the sprawling and complex nature of the topic. Thousands of movies might be classified as crime films. How is one to get an analytical handle on this vast, amorphous material? Should we include films such as the *Beverly Hills Cop* series (1984, 1987, 1994), Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy* (1972), the *Naked Gun* series (1988, 1991, 1994), *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), and

*Ocean's Twelve* (2004) that pivot around crime but are predominantly comedies? What about *Shock Corridor* (1963), director Sam Fuller's story of a journalist hunting for the killer of a mental hospital patient, which is concerned more with madness than with crime (at the end, the journalist himself, disabled by electric shock treatments, goes crazy)? Should we toss the net so broadly as to include Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films (2003, 2004), even though their characters are closer to comic book superheroes than to the human protagonists of most crime films? These examples, which could be multiplied almost endlessly, illustrate a few of the conceptual problems in defining crime films.

## Defining Crime Films

The best way to skirt these conceptual pitfalls is to define crime movies as *films that focus primarily on crime and its consequences.* Crime films do not constitute a genre (a group of films with similar themes, settings, and characters) as Westerns and war films do. Rather, they constitute a *category* that encompasses a number of genres—caper films, detective movies, gangster films, cop and prison movies, courtroom dramas, and the many offerings for which there may be no better generic label than, simply, *crime stories.* Like the labels *dramas* and *romances, crime films* is an umbrella term that covers several smaller and more coherent groupings.

It can be useful to think of movie analysis in terms of variously sized boxes. The smallest boxes hold individual movies while the next size up holds series (such as Dirty Harry films or all movies directed by Alfred Hitchcock), and the next, works that share a subject (vigilante films, sex crime movies) or a recurrent character (the corrupt cop, the innocent on death row). Big boxes hold genres, such as Westerns or courtroom films. The biggest boxes of all hold thematic groupings of related genres; one of these is the "crime films" category, which at a minimum includes films about cops and detectives, types of crime (for example, heists) and types of criminals (for example, gangsters), criminal trials, and prisons.[9] But while these distinctions among series, genres, and thematic groupings can clarify relationships, what is ultimately important is not definitional labels but rather understanding the complex relations between film and society—the ways they reflect and influence one another. In the long run, then, how the boxes are labeled is less important than what

the analytical process reveals about film, culture, law, and society, and the boxes must remain open so that we can shift films around, juxtaposing and regrouping them to identify trends, detect previously unnoticed concerns, and discover new meanings. In chapter 3, for example, I shift a number of films into a genre-sized box labeled *psycho films* in order to see what that exercise reveals about the stock characters and legal themes of such movies. In other chapters I point to the growing fluidity of the traditional crime film genres (cop, courtroom, and prison movies), which are subdividing, recombining, and evolving to produce new configurations such as the *law film,* an outgrowth of the traditional courtroom drama.

Using the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com), I calculated the number of crime films in existence (excluding those made for television), ending up with a figure of more than ten thousand. The sobering realization that I would need to watch four movies a day for seven years to see all of the world's crime films (by which time, of course, more would have appeared) forced me to impose limits on the subject matter of this book. After chapter 1, I usually steer clear of crime film comedies; throughout, I avoid courtroom films that deal with civil rather than criminal cases and films whose main goal is historical, even when that history involves crimes and punishments (the 1996 version of *The Crucible,* for example). I also keep my distance from Westerns (nearly all of which could also be classified as crime films, but only by muddying the conceptual waters), war movies, and sci-fis. With a few exceptions, I ignore crime films made for television on the grounds that made-for-TV films are shaped by different considerations of audience, artistic aspiration, duration, and financing than feature movies. While the boundaries that historically have divided film and television are crumbling, running the two together makes it impossible to discover what is distinctive about the meanings and social roles of feature-length crime movies.[10]

Within my self-imposed constraints, I developed four criteria for choosing which crime films, among the thousands of remaining possibilities, to emphasize in this book. First, I weighed critical reputation and audience reception. Second, I considered the degree to which a film says something significant about the relationship between crime and society or has shaped understandings of that relationship. For example, I treat the big-three gangster movies of the early 1930s (*Little Caesar* [1931], *Public Enemy* [1931], and *Scarface* [1932]) as well as *The Godfather* (1972) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994)—all films that

take a cogent and forceful stand on the social origins of crime—and also *The Bad Seed* (1956), a movie that, in contrast, claims that criminality is hereditary and hence impervious to social influences. Third, I assessed a film's significance to film history (either in technical, critical, or filmic terms, or in terms of subject, script, and sensibility), which led me to include D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), one of the earliest gangster movies, and *Dirty Harry* (1971), one of the first highly successful cop films and the trigger for a national controversy about police brutality. Considerations of significance also led me to include, in this edition, films made outside of the United States that have strongly influenced the direction of American crime films. Fourth and finally, I chose movies that provide useful points of entry for discussing crime films' implications for the politics of everyday life, particularly for constructions of human value on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality.

These criteria enable me to discuss the best and most substantive crime films and avoid the worst and most trivial, the endless stream of ephemera about cop buddies and babes in prison. However, because I have an interest in breadth as well as depth of coverage, I include lesser films in my lists of examples.[11] Overall, I deal in one way or another with well over four hundred crime movies, discussing about a third of them in some depth.

## Crime Films, Ideology, and Culture

While some scholars have taken a positivist approach, investigating whether movie representations of crime and justice processes are accurate,[12] my approach is different. Instead of comparing crime films to social realities and measuring the gap between them, I conceive their relationship as dialectical, a two-way street: Crime films draw from and in turn shape social thought about crime and its players. My approach is less concerned with the realism of representations than with their ideological messages, by which I mean the assumptions about the nature of reality embedded in film narratives and imagery.

As an illustration, consider the imagery of *Thelma and Louise* (1991) after the two women embark on their crime spree. Time and again director Ridley Scott frames the women against huge expanses of blue sky, mountain ranges, and open country. Filling the screen and dominating these magnificent backdrops, Thelma and Louise gain an aura of significance and elemental power. Moreover, because moviegoers

associate this type of framing with the traditional Western (in which an admiring camera looks up at the horse and rider, framing them against wide-open spaces) and with the male buddy film, the two women take on associations of perfect friendship, independence, purity, and force. These meanings, deriving from the nature of film and our responses to it, form some of the ideological messages of *Thelma and Louise*, messages that are buried deeply in the imagery and narrative line and cannot be disengaged from them.[13]

My view of ideology is close to that of film theorist Ann Kaplan, who uses the term *ideology* to refer not to the "beliefs people consciously hold but to the myths that a society lives by, as if these myths referred to some natural, unproblematic 'reality.'"[14] *Myths* in this context is not pejorative but merely a descriptive term for the fundamental notions that people hold (usually without much conscious thought) about how the world is structured, what is valuable and unworthy, who is good and who is bad, and which kinds of actions are wrong or right. We cannot negotiate the world or get through a day without drawing on the myths, attitudes, beliefs, convictions, and assumptions that constitute ideology.[15] *Thelma and Louise* explicitly illustrates this meaning of ideology by showing how Thelma (played by Geena Davis) abandons traditional notions about ideal womanhood (act harebrained, stand by your man) in favor of the convictions that Louise (played by Susan Sarandon) holds about the value of freedom and independence. As this example also illustrates, ideology is in a constant state of flux. In the process of encountering the world, we absorb new narratives and mental pictures that may encourage shifts in our fundamental myths and assumptions. Much as Thelma goes through encounters with men that encourage her to change her attitudes toward heterosexual romance, so too (albeit with less drama) do moviegoers experience cinematic narratives and imagery that may challenge their attitudes about crime and criminals.

Ideology relates to power. The myths, attitudes, and assumptions that we live by influence what can be said and what modes of expression can be used. What is not said is easily as important, ideologically, as what is said. Before films began portraying African American police officers, it was more difficult to picture them, and so long as African American cops were portrayed as compliant second fiddles (as they are, for instance, in *Magnum Force* [1973], one of the Dirty Harry movies), it was difficult to picture them as heroes. Not until we began to find black leads such as Morgan Freeman in *Seven* (1995)

and Denzel Washington in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) and *The Bone Collector* (1999) did African American men achieve full Eastwoodian stature as heroic sleuths.[16] Earlier, through absence or marginalization, they were denied access to a form of power. Thus, movies mold ideology by what they fail to show as well as by the narratives they do present, and part of my aim in this book is to point out the ideological significance of missing representations and silences. This is a way of examining how movies reflect and produce power.

The relationship of crime films to ideology, to other aspects of thought, and to actual behavior is illuminated by work in the sociology of culture.[17] In the mid-1980s, sociologists began rejecting the traditional view of culture as a body of beliefs, customs, goals, values, and institutions accepted fairly uniformly by all members of a group, instead adopting a view of culture as a repository or "tool kit," what sociologist Paul DiMaggio terms "a grab-bag of odds and ends: a pastiche of mediated representations, a repertoire of techniques."[18] This new view anticipates that individuals and groups will interpret movies differently, that interpretations will vary over time, and that viewers will carry away from films different bits of cultural information. (The view fits well with actual reactions to films: One person may love the Al Pacino remake of *Scarface* [1983] for its operatic extravagance and another hate it for its violence while a second-generation audience, attuned to hip-hop and drug cultures, turns it into a cult favorite.) Although the new sociology of culture does not discuss films directly, it implies that movies provide fragments of culture and that culture is to be found both in individual viewers' heads and in the larger collective consciousness. It further suggests that we use these cultural fragments selectively, picking out some to construct what sociologist Ann Swidler calls "strategies of action."[19] (It is in these strategies of action that we find the link between culture and behavior; I return to this link in chapter 2, when I discuss the much-debated issue of whether movies cause crime.) Relying on Swidler and others who work in the area, we can, then, conclude that crime films are a cultural resource available to all of us, including criminals who derive from them information about "being" criminal. We can understand why gangster John Dillinger was obsessed with gangster movies.

Sociologists and psychologists have studied how people organize the bits of culture in their heads. Much of this work is speculative, but according to the evidence currently available, it seems that the fragments of cultural information in our minds form themselves into

schemata or templates that we then draw on in the form of assumptions, social norms, principles, and so on, using them as handy guides to behavior so we do not have to think through every action from the start every time. Schemata then aggregate into even larger mental structures—ideologies (including assumptions about the nature of heroes), paradigms, logics, and narratives of the self (perhaps including the self as bank robber). In sum, movies are a source of cultural information, most of which simply rattles around in our heads waiting to be called upon, but some of which feeds into our ideologies and other mental schemata. The schemata in turn interact with the external world, where we encounter new cultural phenomena (including new movies) that then feed back into our schemata, usually reinforcing but sometimes disconfirming them.

## Crime Films and Pleasure

Their serious implications notwithstanding, crime films have a nearly endless capacity to confer pleasure. Aside from the subset of critical, countertraditional movies, crime films provide escapes from daily life, opportunities to solve mysteries, chances to identify with powerful and competent heroes, and occasions to ponder moral choices without in fact having to make them. Their predictable plots and stock characters, far from disappointing audiences, deliver the pleasure of variations on the familiar. They enable us to identify with the bad guys and be cooler than cool without paying a price. In addition, most mainstream crime films reassure us that our society and system of criminal justice are salvageable despite their many failings.

Most movies offer the joy of escape; crime films offer the ancillary joy of watching others suffer. "People just love seeing other people in jeopardy," actor Pierce Brosnan observes. "It is the same fascination as driving by road accidents. You swear you are not going to be one of those people who look, but you look anyway."[20] (One of my students made the same point by explaining that she enjoys crime movies because "for two hours I can watch someone else struggle.") Moreover, crime films are often inspirational in their portrayal of underdog characters who triumph against all odds. They offer access to places few of us visit in person, such as drug factories, the inner sanctums of mafia chieftains, and the tops of hurtling trains. Good crime films evoke these worlds in terms so vivid, gripping, and emotionally compelling that we identify with their characters even when

Figure 1. Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) carries viewers into the minds of the victim and the killer simultaneously, even while chiding us for our sado-masochism. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

we know that the stories are in large part fantasies. Opening a window on exotica, crime films enable viewers to become voyeurs, secret observers of the personal and even intimate lives of characters very different from themselves. That the shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) is the most famous single scene in crime film history probably has something to do with what it shows: a naked woman being stabbed to death.[21]

Crime films also offer opportunities to participate virtuously in the pursuit of justice, often at the side of a charismatic and capable hero. Not only can we decipher baffling clues; we can also identify

with someone who is unusually intelligent, self-possessed, and successful. Characters such as Mike Hammer (*Kiss Me Deadly* [1955]), Clarice Starling (*Silence of the Lambs* [1991]), and William Somerset (*Seven*) are determined and effective in their tasks, pursuing difficult goals without hesitation—and with astounding success. Viewers enjoy identifying with such protagonists and with the attractive stars who portray them. They also enjoy identifying with less heroic characters such as J.D., the sleazy seducer played by Brad Pitt in *Thelma and Louise,* who so gratifyingly torments Thelma's boorish husband, and with the adept young con artist played by Leonardo Di Caprio in *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), who eludes the FBI for years.

A key source of crime films' enduring attraction (and again, for the moment I am setting aside critical crime films) lies in the way they provide a cultural space for the expression of resistance to authority. While most people support social control of some sort, crime films have carved out a piece of emotional territory where it is acceptable to entertain antagonism toward the criminal justice system, the state, and other institutions of power and to feel, for ninety minutes or so, like a heroic rebel. Crime films' antiauthority messages, however, are conveyed through moral, narrative, and cinematic frameworks that constrain or even counter the critique. Thus, while crime films are often subversive, they also promote systems of social control by making these seem normal, unproblematic, or even useful. Crime films condemn institutions of power such as prisons but at the same time reinforce them. As cultural theorist bell hooks notes, a "film may have incredibly revolutionary standpoints merged with conservative ones. This mingling of standpoints is often what makes it hard for audiences to critically 'read' the overall filmic narrative."[22] Simultaneously radical and conservative, crime films can appeal to nearly everyone. They enable us to regress to the level of two-year-olds, identifying with characters who defy authorities, and at the next moment to recognize, with a touch of self-congratulation for our maturity, the need for discipline.

*Escape from Alcatraz,* a 1979 film starring Clint Eastwood, provides an example of this double movement. Through various rhetorical devices, the movie encourages us to sympathize with the prisoners and hope that their escape plot succeeds. An evil warden and associate warden reinforce this sympathy on the level of character and narrative, and camera work that dwells on miles of cells, pipes, and other apparatus of containment visually reinforces viewer antagonism toward social control.

At the same time, however, *Escape from Alcatraz* offers no criticism of the prison system as a whole. There is nothing extremist here that might offend or incite. The prisoners' pain is blamed on specific, sadistic officials, not incarceration itself. (In fact, *Escape from Alcatraz* includes a couple of "good" officers to show that the system is not all bad.) No class differences divide the convicts, whose camaraderie is disturbed only by Wolf, the stock prison rapist. Nor are there profound problems in race relations at this Alcatraz, where few people of color are imprisoned in any case and the black leader almost immediately bonds with Eastwood's character. The film reduces racial tensions to banter in which the central white and black prisoners call each other "boy"—affectionately. Pleasure here includes escape into a world of simple morality and intense friendship. It also includes the cost-free thrill of identifying with a revolt against authority that frees the good guys, embarrasses the nasty warden, and leaves the status quo undisturbed.

Finally, crime films are pleasurable because they provide unfamiliar and challenging material for "self-talk": our inner conversations with our selves, imagined others, and even generalized others.[23] Nearly everyone conducts such inner dialogues—evaluating experiences, projecting plans, formulating ideals, and telling annoying people how to improve. Self-talk enables us to interpret the world and develop our meaning systems; it plays a crucial role in the construction of personal identity and in bridging the gap between our selves and our social situations. Yet many of us find little fresh material for self-talk in our daily routines; wearying of our usual conversations, we sometimes turn to movies. Crime films in particular offer stimulating materials—ethical dilemmas, dubious role models, opportunities to debate tempting but illegal courses of action. Also pleasurable is the speed with which that material arrives: At the start of an unfamiliar film, everything is new and must be decoded from scratch. Our self-talk goes into overdrive as we hurry to figure out who the hero is and where danger lies, experiencing exhilaration without the slightest exertion.

## Critical Crime Films and the Alternative Tradition

In recent decades, some innovative filmmakers have broken with crime films' tradition of safe critique and sanitized rebellion, developing a critical alternative of alienated, angry (or at least cynical) movies that

subject viewers to harsh realities and refuse to flatter either their characters or their audiences. For instance, the same year that *Escape from Alcatraz* was released, there appeared another prison movie, *On the Yard* (1979), that flew in the face of prison film tradition. The most appealing character is killed in the middle of the movie—for a cigarette debt—and forgotten. Although inmates team up for mutual support, there are no heroic friendships between buddies, and prisoner factions openly war for control of the yard. More recently, *American Me* (1992), a movie about the Mexican Mafia, again broke with prison film formulas. Made by Hispanic director Edward James Olmos, *American Me* paints an unrelievedly bleak picture of Hispanic culture disintegrating under the twin pressures of American mores and the Mexican Mafia's criminal activities. Children commit murder, personal relationships founder, and the leader dies ignominiously in his cell.

Retrospectively, we can identify the progenitors, of this line of critical crime films. One of the first was Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), the story of a child sex murderer; although "M" is captured in the end, Lang leaves open the question of whether a man so mentally ill and so driven by his obsessions should be brought to justice. *M* has no hero, and its ending, while resolving the story on the level of plot, offers no resolution to the movie's legal or moral dilemmas. The roots of critical crime films also lie in the tradition of films noirs, the brooding mysteries and urban crime movies of the 1940s and 1950s that take corruption for granted, assuming that brutality and criminality are part of the human condition.[24] More specifically, critical crime films can trace their ancestry to director Joseph H. Lewis's noir classic *Gun Crazy* (1949), a tragic, haunting tale of a very-much-in-love couple who aspire to little more than bourgeois comfort but are brought down by their fixation with firearms—and willingness to use them. The critical success of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), describing a rape and murder from four different points of view, encouraged other filmmakers to think more deeply about the ambiguities and complexities of crime, and to reach for, instead of slick endings, the indeterminacy of daily life. Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960), too, has protagonists but no heroes, and its ending raises more questions than it answers. Yet another progenitor of the critical strain within crime films was Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), which, its syrupy interludes notwithstanding, insists on the evil in human nature and demonstrates an unashamed fascination with torn flesh and spraying blood.

Figure 2. Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) shows a young gangster (Jean-Paul Belmondo) scripting his own life with material he has picked up from movies. Its disinterest in moralizing about crime marked a radical break with Hollywood's traditions. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

The critical tradition took shape with the appearance of such films as Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets,* an iconoclastic probe of the harshness of criminal life; Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), in which the detective hero is stymied by the incestuous bad guy; Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), in which the main character may be a Christ figure or a crazy assassin (or both, or neither); and Sidney Lumet's *The Offence* (1973), a little-known but powerful study of similarities between a worn-down police detective and the sex criminal he is hunting. Director Stephen Frears made another of these dark crime films, *The Grifters* (1990), a movie that again uses incest to mark the corruption of the criminal heart. In one of director Abel Ferrara's contributions to the line, *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), the lead character (played by Harvey Keitel) is a cop who has spiraled so far downward into a filthy world of alcoholism and drug addiction that he is even rude to Jesus, who comes down from the cross to save him. Other films of this type include *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *The Conversation* (1974), *Blow Out*

(1981), *State of Grace* (1990), *American Buffalo* (1995), *Kids* (1995), *Normal Life* (1996), *Trainspotting* (1996), *Thin Blue Line* (1988), *Open Doors* (1990), *Let Him Have It* (1991), *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), and *Mystic River.*

Critical crime films have none of the high spirits or good humor we find in movies such as *Goodfellas* (1990), *Natural Born Killers, Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Fargo* (1996). Sardonic and even grim in tone, many of them are suffused with bitterness. They are not defined by their lack of happy endings, for crime films since silent film days have killed off or otherwise punished their protagonists. Instead, the crucial differences lie in their lack of a traditional, admirable hero and in their recognition of the inevitability of confusion, crime, and suffering. The bad lieutenant may be saved by Jesus, but neither he himself nor anyone else can rescue him from depravity. Michael Douglas's D-Fens, the lead character in *Falling Down* (1993), can never do anything but fall under the weight of his rage against a world in which middle-class, white-male earnestness reaps no rewards. In *Ghost Dog* (1999), director Jim Jarmusch's philosophical meditation on the inevitability of death, a contract killer (Forest Whitaker) who has adopted the ancient rules for Samurai warriors dances toward his fate.

These critical movies comprise but a small minority of all crime films, and given their scorn for comforting messages, they are likely to remain a minority. Nonetheless, their refusals to pander to popular taste do pose sharp ideological challenges to crime film traditions. While mainstream crime films continue to offer the pleasure of rebellion within safe constraints, this subgroup insists on the impossibility of heroism and the certainty of injustice.

This book's chapters are organized around themes and genres that have been pivotal in the development of crime films and have conveyed particular sets of ideas relating to crime and society. Chapter 1 deals specifically with the history of crime films and the emergence of various genres. It is less concerned with ideology than with how, over time, movies have interacted with the social contexts in which they were produced. Chapter 2 examines what crime films have to say, sociologically and ideologically, about the causes of crime. It also examines the much-debated issue of whether media representations of violence cause crime, arguing that crime films do not lead to crime but rather make available narratives about crime and criminality that viewers then incorporate into their beliefs about how the world works.

Chapter 3, which is entirely new to this edition, examines types of violent crime films, drawing distinctions among slashers, serial killer movies, and psycho cinema and arguing that works in the latter category carry a strong conservative subtext about the need for law.

The next three chapters deal with specific genres within the crime films category. Chapter 4 concentrates on cop and detective films, tracing their evolution, discussing their obsessive preoccupation with ideal masculinity, and examining new directions in which they are heading. Chapter 5, on lawyer and law films, argues that of all traditional crime film genres, the courtroom drama has been least successful in addressing current concerns. As a result, courtroom dramas, with their lawyer heroes, are being supplanted by a new type of film that is deeply concerned with law but ignores lawyers and courtrooms. Chapter 6 investigates key themes in traditional prison films and discusses the critical prison movies, recent documentaries, and self-reflexive films that are trying to turn this genre in new directions, albeit with mixed success. Chapter 7 focuses on crime films' tendency to portray criminals as heroes, proposing answers to questions about why crime films valorize criminals, how they make criminals seem heroic, and how they reconcile their message of criminal heroism with cultural assumptions about the wrongness of crime. The book concludes with another entirely new chapter, chapter 8, which discusses a subset of critical crime films: recent films of moral ambiguity, particularly those that deal with sex crimes.

*Notes*

1. For an exception to this rule and example of the kind of work I have in mind, see Tzanelli, Yar, and O'Brien 2005. These authors write:

   > Popular crime discourses and the "re-dramatization" of crime are real in their effects and effective in their circulation of frameworks for making sense of crime and deviance. But, much more than this, they are effective in situating criminal activity at the intersection of wider discourses on family, gender, success and failure, role-legitimacy, morality and much more. Specific dramatizations . . . certainly draw upon popular ideologies and understandings about crime and criminals, but they also provide specific contextual inflections of those frameworks. (114)

   I hope for more work that, like this study, will open up both criminology and cinema studies to explorations of the ways in which crime and culture interpenetrate.
2. Leitch 2002.

3. Leitch 2002: 16, 306.

4. For example: Chase 2002; Clarens 1997; Doane 1991; Hannsberry 1998; Kaplan 1998; King 1999; Krutnik 1991; Mason 2003; McCarty 1993a, 2004; Munby 1999; Naremore 1995–96; and Telotte 1989. Many other examples appear in the notes to the following chapters.

5. Campbell (forthcoming). For the literature on psycho movies, see chapter 3.

6. On cultural criminology, see Ferrell and Sanders 1995, Presdee 2000, and Ferrell, Hayward, Morrison, and Presdee 2004. Law-and-film scholars have gone further in theorizing and bridging the gap between legal studies and film studies than have cultural criminologists in making connections between criminology and cinema studies; see, especially, Robson 2005 and the examples cited in chapter 5, this volume.

7. Hayward and Young 2004: 259.

8. Ferrell and Sanders 1995:14, as quoted and cited in Hayward and Young 2004: 268.

9. Readers who prefer more sophisticated terminology should think of my "boxes" as "frames." On the concepts of frames and frame analysis, and ways in which these concepts relate to media constructions of reality, see Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson 1992.

10. There is a separate literature on television crime dramas; see, for example, Doyle 2003, Rapping 2003, and Sumser 1996.

11. Indeed, I have a strong interest in breadth of coverage, for methodological reasons. Like others with a sociological background, I prefer either to study every example of a phenomenon or to sample systematically from all the examples. One of the best genre studies in the crime films area, Neal King's *Heroes in Hard Times* (1999), is admirable for its saturation coverage. King bases his conclusions on every one of the 193 cop action films produced in the United States and released internationally, in theaters, between 1980 and 1997; as a result, we can be confident that his conclusions are not based on anomalous selections. Generic film studies often proceed more selectively, examining a few outstanding examples, a method that enables authors to avoid boring films but also means that their conclusions are not generalizable.

For this book, I surveyed the genres and subgenres of crimes films by viewing all the well-known films in each category and also some peripherals to determine the category's parameters (typical characters and action, standard meaning, and significant variations). Thus, my generalizations are based on a range of examples. In no case are they based on an entire universe of relevant films—an undertaking that would have been impossible due to the great number of possibilities. However, my generalizations are testable, and I did test them—by viewing new examples (either recent releases or older films that I had not previously seen) to determine whether my generalizations held up. I am confident that over the next few years, as more dissertations appear on crime films, an agreed-upon methodology will evolve for systematically studying such works.

12. See, for example, Bergman and Asimow 1996, Gutterman 2002, and Harding 2005. In contrast, and for examples of the constructionist approach that

I adopt here, see Dyer 1997, 2002; Surette 1998; and Ruth 1996, the latter a study of the "invention" of the gangster that is "concerned with the meanings rather than the facts of crime" (1).

13. For more on the ideological meanings of *Thelma and Louise*, see Spelman and Minow 1992.

14. Kaplan 1983: 12–13.

15. See Silbey 1998.

16. For earlier approximations, see Richard Roundtree's popular *Shaft* films (*Shaft* [1971], *Shaft's Big Score* [1972], *Shaft in Africa* [1973]), about the adventures of a black private eye.

17. This paragraph and the next are based mainly on DiMaggio 1997 and Swidler 1986. Also see Callero 1994, Morgan and Schwalbe 1990, and Swidler and Arditi 1994.

18. Swidler 1986 (the article that contributed the term "tool kit"); DiMaggio 1997: 267.

19. Swidler 1986.

20. Koltnow 1997: D8.

21. Lyng's 2004 work on risk-taking and the erotics of crime does not deal directly with film but is certainly relevant to the type of pleasure some people take in scenes of violence, especially violence against women. Also relevant is a remark attributed to director Quentin Tarantino, who, when asked about sadomasochism in films, is said to have explained, "I'm the 'S,' you [the viewer] are the 'M.'"

22. hooks 1996: 3.

23. On inner conversations, see Archer 2003, Lawrence and Valsiner 2003.

24. In fact, what I call the alternative tradition of critical crime films is close to what Telotte, in *Voices in the Dark*, calls "the *noir* spirit" (3), noting that "*film noir* can designate a field of deviation that mirrors the problems of modern America in particular and modern man in general" (1989: 12, emphasis original). Telotte contrasts the dark voice of noir with the "classical film narrative" or "conventional voice," "characterized by a seemingly objective point of view, adherence to a cause-effect logic, use of goal-oriented characters to direct our attention and elicit our sympathies, and a progression toward narrative closure" (3). I use the terms *Hollywood movies* and *traditional crime films* to indicate the body of work that critical crime films react against. A contrast similar to the one I am drawing here can also be found in Robert Altman's film *The Player* (1992), which revolves around the tension between "happy endings" and "reality." Altman resolves the tension with an ironic happy ending.