CRIME FILMS

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Contents

List of Illustrations *page* xi

Acknowledgments xv

1 **The Problem of the Crime Film** 1

2 **Historical and Cultural Overview** 18

The Romance of the Silent Criminal, 20 • Tough Guys, 23 • The Crisis in Hollywood Crime, 29 • Criminal Culture and Mass Culture, 35 • The Establishment on Trial, 40 • Criminal Anxieties, Criminal Jokes, 44

3 **Critical Overview** 52

Theories of Crime Fiction, 54 • Hollywood Mythmaking, 56 • Genre versus Auteur, 58 • Thematic and Iconographic Analysis, 60 • Structuralism and Beyond, 63 • Feminist Critique, 69 • Demystifications, 72 • Personal Books and Reference Books, 75

4 ***Fury* and the Victim Film** 79

5 ***The Godfather* and the Gangster Film** 103

6 ***Double Indemnity* and the Film Noir** 126

7 ***Basic Instinct* and the Erotic Thriller** 146

8 ***Murder on the Orient Express, Blue Velvet,* and the Unofficial-Detective Film** 170

9 ***Chinatown* and the Private-Eye Film** 192

10 ***Bullitt* and the Police Film** 215

11 ***Reversal of Fortune* and the Lawyer Film** 241

12 *Fargo* and the Crime Comedy 265

13 Conclusion: What Good Are Crime Films? 289

Notes 309
Selected Bibliography 331
Filmography/Videography 341
Index 359

Illustrations

1. *Something Wild:* a crime film, or a screwball comedy gone wrong? 6
2. *The Silence of the Lambs:* A police film that is also a study of a monstrous criminal. 7
3. *Pulp Fiction:* A noir world of criminals like Jules Winnfield without the noir visual style. 11
4. *Scarface* (1932): The Depression-era audience's ambivalence toward an upwardly mobile fantasy. 25
5. *The Hound of the Baskervilles:* Nigel Bruce and Basil Rathbone as the best-loved Watson and Holmes of all. 29
6. *The Maltese Falcon:* Humphrey Bogart as the private-eye hero tainted with guilty knowledge. 31
7. *Bonnie and Clyde:* Using thirties iconography to attack sixties authority. 41
8. *My Cousin Vinny:* The antilawyer turned lawyer hero. 45
9. *Scarface* (1983): Marielito Tony Montana wasted by the drugs that mark his success. 46
10. *New Jack City:* An equal-opportunity drug culture. 47
11. *Beverly Hills Cop:* Eddie Murphy as anti-authoritarian authority figure. 49
12. *2 Days in the Valley:* Ironic crime comedy in the tradition of *Pulp Fiction.* 50
13. *Mildred Pierce:* The heroine both contrasted and identified with her villainous daughter. 59
14. *Out of the Past:* Antitraditional mise-en-scène expressing a grim, romantically stylized view of the world. 65
15. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946): Is the hero destroyed by the femme fatale, or by his own weakness? 71
16. *D.O.A.* (1987): The doomed hero gets a new lease on life. 81

17. *Death Wish 4: The Crackdown:* The victim turned avenger. 83
18. *The Fugitive:* Instead of simply escaping from the police, Dr. Richard Kimble must track down the real criminal. 85
19. *Falling Down:* The fascination of the sociopathic vigilante. 87
20. *Fury:* Joe Wilson is alone wherever he goes, even in this intense face-off with a girl in a nightclub, cut from the ending of the completed film. 99
21. *Fury:* His brother Tom is taken aback by the vindictive satisfaction Joe Wilson takes in cinematic evidence against the mob, in another scene cut from the film. 101
22. *GoodFellas:* "Keep your mouth shut, and don't rat on your friends." 105
23. *Boyz N the Hood:* Gang loyalties based on childhood friendships. 107
24. *Natural Born Killers:* The enduring need to explain why people become criminals. 109
25. *The Godfather:* A crime boss at once generous, judicious, and unapologetically criminal. 119
26. *The Godfather:* Michael's first marriage as an abortive attempt at happiness. 122
27. *The Godfather:* Michael rejects Satan on behalf of the godson whose father he is about to have killed. 123
28. *Murder, My Sweet:* The visual style of film noir coupled with a parboiled detective story. 131
29. *Double Indemnity:* The femme fatale and her victim. 135
30. *Double Indemnity:* Walter admires the fetishistic anklet worn by Phyllis. 137
31. *Double Indemnity:* The hero trapped by his knowledge of his guilty double. 139
32. *Body Heat:* Coexperiencing the betrayal of Ned by the femme fatale, Matty. 149
33. *Fatal Attraction:* Another weak hero trapped by his own passivity between his inamorata and his wife. 153
34. *Basic Instinct:* The frank sexuality of the heroine challenges the legitimacy of the police hero in and out of bed. 159
35. *Sea of Love:* Another compromised cop, another reckless affair. 161
36. *Basic Instinct:* An unequal twinship in which the woman wields the icepick. 163
37. *Bound:* Conspirators drawn together, for better or worse, by their similarities. 167
38. *Murder on the Orient Express:* The evocative sequence leading up to the train's departure. 177

39. *Murder on the Orient Express:* Stars as scenery. 179
40. *Death on the Nile:* Different stars, but the same shot – a return to the Agatha Christie period. 181
41. *Blue Velvet:* Jeffrey about to come out of the closet at knifepoint. 187
42. *Blue Velvet:* The nightmare logic behind the rape of Dorothy by Frank. 191
43. *Devil in a Blue Dress:* This shot is just about all that remains of the novel's interracial romance. 199
44. *Devil in a Blue Dress:* Easy is forced to depend on his volatile friend Mouse. 201
45. *Chinatown:* A hero who does nothing but watch. 204
46. *Chinatown:* The glacial Evelyn Mulwray as the hero first sees her. 205
47. *Chinatown:* The disfigured nose of Gittes marks his vulnerability and rationalizes his suspicions of treacherous women. 207
48. *Chinatown:* The desperate Evelyn Mulwray as the hero last sees her, with Katherine Cross. 211
49. *The Untouchables:* Police power trumped by the greater power of Al Capone's bodyguards. 219
50. *L.A. Confidential:* An ill-assorted police team that has not yet begun to work as a team. 220
51. *Se7en:* Police officers led on by the criminal they are pursuing. 221
52. *Tightrope:* Wes Block, a cop whose demonstration of handcuffs to Beryl Thibodeaux hints at sexual tastes that are as kinky as those of the criminal he is chasing. 223
53. *Heat:* A historic pairing of Al Pacino and Robert de Niro as a cop and his equally obsessive criminal double. 224
54. *Cop Land:* Sylvester Stallone as a paunchy Everyman. 225
55. *Lethal Weapon 3:* Comic conflict between oil-and-water cops. 227
56. *Donnie Brasco:* The undercover cop and his unwitting mob mentor. 229
57. *Bullitt:* The athletic hero chases his ostensible enemy through the hospital. 237
58. *Bullitt:* The self-contained hero confronts his real enemy, the hypocritical prosecutor, at the airport. 239
59. *The Devil's Advocate:* A lawyer hero literally in league with the Devil. 243
60. *The Verdict:* Shirt-sleeved Frank Galvin takes on the Boston Goliath Edward J. Concannon before Judge Hoyle. 246

61. *A Few Good Men:* Lt. Kaffee fights with everyone, even allies like Lt. Cmdr. Galloway. 247
62. *The Firm:* Cruise again, as a lawyer hero who has not even passed the bar exam. 253
63. *Presumed Innocent:* Harrison Ford as a lawyer hero no more or less innocent than anyone else. 255
64. *Reversal of Fortune:* A flashback shows the brittle charm of the von Bülows' courtship. 259
65. *Reversal of Fortune:* The intense physicality of the lawyer hero. 260
66. R*eversal of Fortune:* Dershowitz's patrician client looks more like a lawyer than he does. 261
67. *Married to the Mob:* The embattled Mafia widow and her ineffectual police suitor. 267
68. *Analyze This:* the iconic mob boss and his unwilling psychiatrist. 269
69. *Raising Arizona:* The inept kidnappers welcome home the baby they have snatched. 277
70. *Barton Fink:* The writer hero is blocked, but not the Coen brothers, in their breakthrough film. 278
71. *Fargo:* Indoors, the emotional temperature of the opening scene between Jerry and the thugs he wants to hire is no warmer. 279
72. *Fargo:* The incorrigible shark and the hopeless loser. 281
73. *Fargo:* Marge Gunderson – good-humored earth-mother or unimaginative dolt? 286
74. *The Big Lebowski:* A naïf sucked into a world of kidnapping, bowling, and impossible dreams come true. 287
75. *A Perfect World:* Escaped convict Butch Haynes, a killer whose rapport with lonely Phillip Perry brings out his gentler side. 293
76. *Wall Street:* Michael Douglas as the king of white-collar crime. 298–9
77. *Cape Fear* (1991): Robert de Niro's downscale sociopathology. 300
78. *To Die For:* Nicole Kidman's upscale psychopathology. 301
79. *Traffic:* Catherine Zeta-Jones as one more victim who turns criminal to survive. 307

1

The Problem of the Crime Film

The crime film is the most enduringly popular of all Hollywood genres, the only kind of film that has never once been out of fashion since the dawn of the sound era seventy years ago. It is therefore surprising to discover that, at least as far as academic criticism is concerned, no such genre exists. Carlos Clarens's magisterial study *Crime Movies* (1980) begins by criticizing Robert Warshow's seminal essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" (1948) for its narrow definition of the gangster film, based on liberal social assumptions that "limited genres to one dimension apiece." Yet Clarens's definition of the crime film is equally delimited by its pointed exclusion of "psychological thriller[s]" like *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Laura* (1944), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) from its purview on the grounds that their characters are insufficiently emblematic of "the Criminal, the Law, and Society."[1] Larry Langman and Daniel Finn place themselves outside the debate over whether or not crime films include psychological thrillers by announcing in the Preface to their encyclopedic reference*, A Guide to American Crime Films of the Forties and Fifties:* "The American crime film does not belong to any genre. . . . Instead, it embodies many genres."[2] But their attempt to rise above the problem of classification merely indicates how deeply entrenched that problem is.

None of this academic quibbling has prevented crime films from retaining their popularity, or even from entering universities as the object of closer scrutiny. But subgenres of the crime film, like the gangster film of the 1930s and the film noir of the 1940s, have been more often, and more successfully, theorized than the forbiddingly broad genre of the crime film itself – this genre that is not a genre, even though an enormous audience recognizes and enjoys it, and a substantial following is interested in analyzing it critically. The unabated popularity of mystery and detective fiction, the burgeoning of such recent literary subgenres as the serial-killer novel and the novel of legal intrigue, the efflorescence of true-crime books, and the well-publicized criminal trials that keep Court TV in business all attest to the American public's fascination with narratives of crime. The crime film therefore represents an enormously promising, but hitherto neglected, focus for a genre approach to cultural studies.

To the question of whether the crime film is a genre or an umbrella term for a collection of diverse genres like the gangster film, the detective film, and the police film must be added another question: What does it matter? After all, what difference does it make whether the film noir is a genre or a subheading of a broader genre? To anyone but a few scholars of genre studies, these questions might seem inconsequential to the widespread understanding and enjoyment of crime films.

It is exactly this understanding and enjoyment, though, that are at issue in the definition of any genre. Raymond Bellour has pointed out that viewers for Hollywood musicals like *Gigi* (1958) are able to put aside their general expectation that each scene will advance the plot because of their familiarity with the more specific convention of musicals that successive scenes often present lyrical, tonal, or meditative "rhymes" instead, so that a scene of Gigi explaining how she feels troubled and baffled by love is logically followed by a scene in which Gaston professes similar feelings, even if there is no causal link between the two.[3] On a more practical level, it is viewers' familiarity with the conventions of the musical that prevents them from cringing in bewilderment or distaste when the story stops dead so that Fred Astaire can dance or Elvis Presley can sing. Learning the generic rules of musicals does not necessarily allow viewers to enjoy them more, but it does allow them to predict more accurately whether they are likely to enjoy them at all. It is therefore a matter of some importance to many viewers whether or not films like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Aladdin* (1992) are categorized as musicals, for their feelings about musicals are likely to influence how much they will enjoy such films, or whether they are likely to watch them in the first place. This is not to say that only viewers who like musicals will like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Aladdin.* Both films, in fact, are well-known for appealing to many viewers who do not ordinarily watch musicals; but appreciative viewers who recognize either film as a musical are more likely to be receptive to other films that resemble them, confirming the importance of genre in accurately predicting their enjoyment.

In the same way, asking whether films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) are westerns, even if different viewers answer the question differently, acknowledges the ways each film's affinities to the western – its similarities in mise-en-scène, action, and moral problems to those of the western – places them in a context that helps to sharpen and illuminate them. A familiarity with John Wayne's outsized heroic persona in westerns like *Stagecoach* (1939) and *Fort Apache* (1948) deepens viewers' understanding of the more problematic but equally outsized heroes he plays in later westerns like *Red River* (1948), *The Searchers* (1956), and *The Shootist* (1976). In each case, the conventions of the western provide a context that may make Wayne's actions more ironic, tragic, or elegiac – certainly more richly nuanced and comprehensible.

Viewers use many contexts, smaller or larger than established genres like the western, to interpret conventions of action and performance. Most viewers watching *Stagecoach,* for example, assume that Wayne's character, the Ringo Kid, will survive his climactic shootout with the Plummer family, even though he is outmanned and outgunned, because the survival of characters played by John Wayne is statistically an excellent bet and because the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative films[4] like *Stagecoach* make it more likely that Ringo will proceed to a rousingly heroic climax rather than survive a hazardous attack by Geronimo's braves only to be shot down on his arrival in Lordsburg. Even more fundamentally, most viewers assume that a climactic shootout will take place in the streets of Lordsburg because the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative predicate the resolution of the leading announced conflicts and an economy of representation that requires each person traveling in the stagecoach to fulfill the promise of his character and reveal his true nature. But all these expectations are generic, based as they are on a knowledge of the wider, though by no means universal, genre of classical Hollywood narrative within which the western occupies a place that gives its own conventions their special potency.

Because viewers understand and enjoy movies largely through their knowledge of the generic conventions, the question of whether gangster films have enough in common with whodunits and erotic thrillers to constitute a single genre of crime films is important to many more people than just film scholars. Even viewers who think they are interpreting Brian De Palma's remake of *Scarface* (1983) exclusively in light of the conventions of the gangster genre – or, more narrowly, in light of its departures from Howard Hawks's 1932 film of the same title – may well be seeing it in the context of the broader genre of the crime film. The example of *Stagecoach* suggests that genres characteristically nest in one another, the most sharply focused (the John Wayne western, for instance) drawing their powers from their specific transformations and adaptations of the conventions of broader genres like the western or still broader genres like the classical Hollywood narrative. Although viewers are most likely to be consciously aware of the narrowest genres, the broader genres that are operating simultaneously are equally, though less visibly, influential in directing their responses. Because every genre is a subgenre of a wider genre from whose contexts its own conventions take their meaning, it makes sense to think of the gangster film as both a genre on its own terms and a subgenre of the crime film.

If a genre can be as specific as the John Wayne western or as general as the well-made Hollywood narrative, then it is clearly possible to defend the crime film as a genre simply by installing it at a level of generality somewhere between the gangster film and the classical Hollywood narrative. But such a solution would prove nothing at all; it would merely introduce still another category to a field already crisscrossed with genre markers. The aim of this book is therefore not simply to introduce a new generic category of the crime film but to explain how such a category has already been operating to inform viewers' understanding and enjoyment of such apparently diverse genres as the gangster film, the film noir, and the crime comedy.

Establishing the crime film as a genre as rich as those of the western or the horror film – or, for that matter, the gangster film or the film noir – raises the problems involved in defining any genre. Genre theorists have long recognized this as a chicken-and-egg problem. If a genre like the western can be defined only in terms of its members, but the members can be recognized as such only by viewers who are already familiar with the genre, how can viewers recognize any genre without already having seen every film arguably within its boundaries?[5] The short answer to this question is that they can't; hence the disagreements that inevitably arise over whether *The Wizard of Oz* is to count as a musical by viewers who have different ideas about what a musical is. A contrary answer is that they can, despite the lack of theoretical justification. Even if theorists were to demonstrate that the western was a logically indefensible category, nonspecialist viewers would go on referring to it because it is so useful and, except at its boundaries, so easily recognized. Most people can recognize their friends more easily than they can describe them because different skills are involved in recognition and description, so that even Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's oft-ridiculed pronouncement that he couldn't define pornography, but "I know it when I see it," makes sense.[6]

Recognizing genre conventions is clearly a developmental process. Few children understand the conventions of Hollywood westerns, but most adults do. Adults have gradually picked up the conventions through exposure to particular examples of the genre, because their understanding of the genre and of particular examples of it have been mutually reinforcing. When revisionist westerns like *Duel in the Sun* (1946) or *Unforgiven* (1992) appear, they are either dismissed as nonwesterns or antiwesterns, sharpening the genre's definition through their exclusion, or they succeed in redefining the whole notion of the western by exploring new possibilities implicit in the genre. The mutability of generic conventions makes it clear that genres are best thought of as contexts that evolve in both personal and social history, the contingent results of ongoing transactions between viewers and movies, rather than eternally fixed and mutually exclusive categories.[7]

Even given this transactional, evolutionary concept of genres, there will always be debates about films on the margins of any particular genre, since many viewers believe, for example, that *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) feels more like a musical than *Fun in Acapulco* (1963). Some fifteen years ago, Rick Altman proposed a distinction between syntactic and semantic definitions of genre to account for the phenomenon of musicals that have many of the generic markers of musicals (a recognized musical star like Elvis Presley sings several numbers) but not others (*Fun in Acapulco* does not explore the thematic relationships between performance and sincerity, public and private life, that are central to musicals like *Singin' in the Rain*).[8] More recently, Altman has suggested "a semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to genre" to incorporate into his grammar of textual markers a more systematic awareness of the multiple users and uses even the simplest films find.[9]

It is no wonder that Altman has expanded his earlier theory in the light of the many films marked by conflicting, often shifting generic allegiances. Most westerns from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to *Unforgiven* are organized around stories of crime and punishment;

1. *Something Wild:* a crime film, or a screwball comedy gone wrong? (Ray Liotta, Melanie Griffith)

yet few viewers have called them crime films. If *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) is to be counted as film noir because of its confining mise-en-scène, its trapped hero, and its use of a fatalistic flashback, should *Citizen Kane* (1941) be counted as noir too? Is *Something Wild* (1986) [Fig. 1] a crime film or a screwball comedy gone wrong? Critics have often coined nonce terms like "superwestern" and "neo-noir" to describe films that transform or combine elements from different genres, but these terms raise as many problems as they solve. If *Outland* (1981) is an outer-space western – *High Noon* (1952) in space – is *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), John Carpenter's homage to *Rio Bravo* (1959), an inner-city western?

This problem of cross-generic allegiances persists even within the crime film.[10] Is *The Thin Man* (1934) a private-eye story or a crime comedy? Is *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) a hard-boiled detective story or a film noir? *The Usual Suspects* (1995) combines elements of the gangster film and the whodunit; how is it to be classified? What to make of police films that are also studies of criminals, like *The Untouchables* (1987) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) [Fig. 2]? And what about

2. *The Silence of the Lambs:* A police film that is also a study of a monstrous criminal. (Anthony Hopkins)

White Heat (1949), which combines a gangster hero, a film-noir heroine, an undercover cop, and an extended prison sequence that borrows the conventions of many another prison film? These problems are not solved by using the genre of the crime film to dissolve all distinctions among its long-recognized subgenres; nor are they solved by declaring one subgenre the categorical victor and ignoring the claims of others. It makes sense, in such a work of classification as the bibliography to Barry Grant's *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*, to exclude gangster films from the crime-film genre on the grounds that "that group of films is clearly defined to the extent that it can be understood as comprising a distinct and separate genre."[11] But the distinctiveness of the gangster film's conventions cannot support an argument for any essential distinction between gangster films and crime films, because there is no reason to assume that distinctive genres are parallel and mutually exclusive. The caper film, for example, has its own distinctive generic rules, but those rules do not prevent it from being widely recognized as a subgenre of an even more well-established genre, the gangster film, whose gangsters have been assembled in caper films on an ad hoc basis for a particular job.

Instead of attempting to construct genres that are mutually exclusive, it would be more judicious to agree with Janet Staiger that "Hollywood films have never been pure instances of genres,"[12] from D. W. Griffith's combination of historical epic, war movie, domestic melodrama, and racial propaganda in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to George Lucas's revitalization of science fiction in *Star Wars* (1977) by recycling the story of Akira Kurosawa's samurai comedy-drama *The Hidden Fortress* (*Kakushi toride no san akunin,* 1958), itself based largely on the conventions of the Hollywood western.

The multiple generic allegiances of most films, however, are obscured by the fact that some such allegiances have historically overridden others. Any story presented in animated form, from the musical romance *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) to the epic *Lord of the Rings* (1978), will automatically be classified as a cartoon because the animated cartoon is a stronger genre than the genres of romance and epic. Virtually any story with a setting in nineteenth-century western America will be classified as a western, because the claims of the western override the claims of competing genres. Films like *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976) and *Hoop Dreams* (1994) are commonly classified together as documentaries rather than distinguished in terms of their subject matter. In the same way, films like *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *The*

Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad! (1988) are classified as parodies rather than as members of the various genres whose conventions they mock, because their parodic intent trumps their affinities with the specific genres they are sending up.

What makes a genre strong? The example of the cartoon, the strongest of all popular genres, suggests that the most powerful generic claims are based on mise-en-scène. Crime-and-punishment tales like *Winchester 73* (1950) and *Rancho Notorious* (1952) are classified as westerns rather than crime films because their setting takes precedence over their story. Any movie set in outer space, from *Buck Rogers* (1939) to *Alien* (1979), becomes a science-fiction movie. The reason that film noir is such a strong genre, or subgenre, despite the lack of any clear consensus about what sort of stories it tells, is the powerfully homogeneous sense of visual style that unites such diverse noirs as *The Killers* (1946), *Force of Evil* (1948), and *The Big Combo* (1955).

Almost equally powerful as a generic marker is intent.[13] Any movie whose stated aim is to entertain children will be classified as a children's film or a family film, whatever its plot or characters or setting – unless, of course, it is animated, in which case it will be classified as a cartoon. Comedy, which seeks to make viewers laugh; horror, which seeks to make them scream; documentary, which seeks to inform them about some real-life situation; and parody, which seeks to make fun of other genres – all these are such strong genres that critics have long categorized *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944) and *Married to the Mob* (1988), for example, as comedies about crime, rather than crime films with some laughs; and reviewers who saw *Mars Attacks!* (1996) as more imitation than parody unanimously dismissed the film as a failed parody rather than a successful imitation because they agreed that a parody's first duty is to be funny rather than faithful to its sources.

Weaker genres are based on typological situations (boy meets girl, ordinary characters get into ridiculous scrapes), characters (zombies, monsters, oversexed high-school students, attorneys), or presentational features (the story is periodically interrupted or advanced by dance numbers). Such genres are most likely to be overridden by stronger genres whose claims conflict with theirs. Thus *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) is a comedy rather than a monster movie, and the transsexual science-fiction horror parody *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), however it is categorized, is rarely described as a musical. When Brian Henderson argued that *The Searchers*'s story of rescuers attempting to save a victim who did not want to be saved actually crossed the boundaries of the western to constitute "an American dilemma," in films as different as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Hardcore* (1979), his premise did not have the effect of establishing a new genre of unwelcome-rescue films because the common story he described did not have the power to override the conflicting generic allegiances of the examples he cited.[14] The disaster genre that flourished early in the 1970s (*Airport*, 1970; *The Poseidon Adventure*, 1972; *Earthquake*, 1974; *The Towering Inferno*, 1974) shows that small numbers do not necessarily make a genre weak; but the disaster genre is easily overridden by the conventions of the parody, as in *Airplane!* (1980), or the action blockbuster, as in *Jaws* (1975), originally marketed as a disaster movie until it was recognized as inaugurating a far more profitable, hence stronger, genre.

Lacking the box-office potential of such recent blockbusters as *Independence Day* (1996) and *Titanic* (1997), most genres can best display their strength by articulating the central problems that endow their stock characters and situations and spectacles with power and meaning. Even apparently unproblematic genres like the musical and the cartoon can be seen as organized around problems based on their distinctive presentational features. Musical performers like Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Judy Garland typically act out rituals dramatizing the complex relationship between realism and artifice, sincerity and performance, both while they are performing their song-and-dance numbers and in their characters' more private moments. Their films use production numbers to raise questions about public and private identities and the dynamics of self-presentation, particularly within the ritualistic context of romantic courtship. Similarly, just as cartoons are defined pictorially by a tension between the highly stylized two-dimensional space in which they are drawn and the more realistic third dimension they imply, they are defined thematically by the tension between the requirements of realism (empathetic coming-of-age rituals for Disney heroes from Pinocchio to Simba) and magic (from the constant transformations of shapes and animated objects typical of all Disney cartoons to the playful self-reflexiveness of Warner Bros.' *Duck Amuck,* 1953).

No matter how it is defined, the crime film will never be as strong a genre as the cartoon, the horror film, or the parody. It lacks both the instantly recognizable mise-en-scène of the animated film (or even the compellingly stylized visuals of the film noir) and the singleness of intent of the horror film or the parody. But the crime film is a stronger

3. *Pulp Fiction:* A noir world of criminals like Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) without the noir visual style.

genre than theorists of subgenres like the gangster film and the film noir have acknowledged. In fact, it is a stronger genre than the criminal subgenres that have commanded more attention, not only because its scope is by definition broader than theirs, but because the problem it addresses as a genre, the problem that defines it as a genre, places the film noir and the gangster film in a more sharply illuminating context by showing that each of those is part of a coherent larger project.

The defining problem of the crime film is best approached through the specific problems involved in establishing it as a genre. Should the crime film be defined in terms of its subject, its effect, or its visual style? Many crime films adopt the visual conventions of film noir (low-key, high-contrast lighting, unbalanced compositions, night-for-night exterior shooting), but others do not. If the noir visual style is a defining feature of the crime film, how are color films like *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) [Fig. 3] to be categorized?

If the noir visual style seems to produce too narrow a definition of the crime film, its characteristic subject, crime, and its frequently sought effect, suspense,[15] are impossibly broad. Both crime and suspense have an important role in a very great number of movies. *The English Patient* (1996) presents several important crimes, from robbery to murder, and a detective figure in David Caravaggio (Willem Dafoe); do those elements make it a crime film? Every classical Hollywood narrative depends on some disruption of the social order for its conflict, and an enormous number of social disruptions (e.g., the fire in *The Towering Inferno*, which is started by the illegal installation of substandard wiring) are rooted in crimes. It would surely be impractical to call every film in which a crime produces the central dramatic situation a crime film. The touchstone of suspense is even more hopelessly vague, since suspense might be called a defining feature of the well-made Hollywood narrative. Even Jane Austen adaptations from *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) to *Emma* (1996) depend on the suspense generated by the questions of who will marry whom, and how the anticipated happy ending can be compassed. How can the crime film be distinguished from the broader category of the classical Hollywood narrative, and how useful is such a vaguely defined genre likely to be?

The problem of defining the crime film is exacerbated by three problems implicit in its subject. John G. Cawelti has noted that popular narrative genres almost by definition package "the ultimate excitements of love and death" within the most reassuring generic formulas in order to appeal to both viewers' flight from ennui and their love of security.[16] In crime film, this paradox is linked to the question of crime's normalcy. By definition crime is an aberration, a disruption to the normal workings of society; yet crime films invariably treat crime as normal even as they observe the ways it undermines the social order. Gangsters do nothing all day long but smuggle or steal. Police officers pursue criminals for a living. Every single case a private eye like Philip Marlowe takes on turns criminal; every adaptation of a John Grisham novel of legal intrigue, even if the initial proceeding is a civil one, explodes in violence sooner or later. Crime films all profess to solve the criminal problems they present by means of a happy ending; yet the frequency of crime in such films suggests that the more general problems posed by crime will never be solved. Is criminal behavior in these films abnormal or all too normal?

The second problem cuts even deeper. In distinguishing between the heroes of thrillers, who "almost exclusively represent themselves," and the heroes of crime films, who "represent the Criminal, the Law, and Society," Carlos Clarens implies a distinction between crime as an isolated event (the province of the thriller) and crime as a metaphor for social unrest (the province of the crime film).[17] But how solid is this distinction? In Clarens's terms, the work of Alfred Hitchcock, the filmmaker most closely identified with crime, includes only thrillers rather than crime films; yet critics from Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol to Robert Corber have recognized that the criminal plots of all Hitchcock's films, from *The Lodger* (1926) to *Psycho* (1960), have obvious moral and social implications that range far beyond the plight of the characters themselves.[18] When is a cinematic crime a metaphor for an enduring moral dilemma or social upheaval or ideological critique, and when is a crime just a crime?

The third problem concerns what may seem like the most straightforward components of the crime film: its stock characters. Every crime story predicates three leading roles: the criminal who commits the crime, the victim who suffers it, and the avenger or detective who investigates it in the hope of bringing the criminal to justice and reestablishing the social order the crime has disrupted. The three roles could hardly be more clear-cut, yet they everywhere overlap and melt into each other. Gangsters like Vito Corleone are devoted family men concerned only to protect and provide for their loved ones. Victims like Paul Kersey, the bereaved hero of the *Death Wish* franchise (1974–94), turn vigilante in order to avenge their loved ones. Maverick cops like Harry Callahan, in *Dirty Harry* (1971) and its sequels *Magnum Force* (1973), *The Enforcer* (1976), *Sudden Impact* (1983), and *The Dead Pool* (1988), break the law in order to catch criminals they know are guilty. A critique of the justice system is obligatory in Hollywood movies about lawyers, police officers, or private eyes. When the hero is a good cop, he is set against an entire corrupt department, as in *Serpico* (1973), or ends up battling vigilante demons inside himself, as in *The Untouchables*. And Hollywood movies about victims who merely suffer, as opposed to taking arms against their oppressors, are virtually unheard of. Evidently crime films both believe and do not believe in the stock characters at their center; they seem determined to undermine and blur the boundaries of the typological figures that might otherwise stake their surest claim to the status of a single genre.

Although these problems might seem to present insuperable obstacles to the definition of the crime film, they are in fact at the heart of such a definition: for the crime film does not simply *embody* these problems; it is *about* them. Crime films present as their defining subject a crime culture that depends on normalizing the unspeakable, a place where crime is both shockingly disruptive and completely normal. Crime may have different metaphorical valences in different criminal subgenres – it can demonstrate the fragility of the social contract in thrillers about innocent men on the run, attack the economic principles of the establishment in gangster films, express philosophical despair in films noirs, test masculine professionalism in private-eye films – but it is always metaphorical. Every crime in every crime film represents a larger critique of the social or institutional order – either the film's critique or some character's. Finally, crime films dramatize not only the distinctive roles of criminal, victim, and avenger but also their interdependence and their interpenetration.

The problem at the heart of crime films, then, is their attempt to mediate between two logically contradictory projects. Like all popular genres, crime films work primarily by invoking and reinforcing a cherished, but not entirely convincing, series of social bromides: The road to hell is paved with good intentions, the law is above individuals, crime does not pay. Crime films need to reinforce these beliefs, just as viewers want to have them reinforced, in order to confirm the distinctiveness of the moral and legal categories that allow viewers to maintain their sense of social decorum and their own secure place in the social order as law-abiding citizens who know right from wrong, identify with the innocent, and wish to see the guilty punished. It is no surprise that the Hollywood film industry is eager to endorse these bromides, since the industry's continued success depends on the health of the capitalist economy. The moral certitudes on which the industry and its audience agree depend on a series of categorical distinctions among the roles of victim, who ought, according to Hollywood's official morality, to be their natural identification figure; the criminal, who ought by the same token to be the target of their fear and hatred; and the avenging detective, who ought to express the law in its purest yet most personal form.

Viewers for crime films know that these three figures – the innocent victim, the menacing criminal, the detective who incarnates the law – never exist in such pure incarnations, not only because of the requirements of realism and narrative complexity but because they would be utterly uninteresting. The ritual triumph of avenging heroes over criminals is compelling only as ritual; to succeed as narrative, it requires complications and surprises in the conception of the leading roles and their relationships. The fascination of crime films arises precisely from the ways they test the limits of their moral categories, engaging and revealing contradictions in the audience's fantasies of identification by mixing elements from these three different positions, the primary colors of crime films that never occur in isolation. Although crime films typically move toward endings that confirm the moral absolutes incarnated in each of their three primary figures, an equally important function crime films share is to call these primary figures, and the moral absolutes that inspire them, into question by making a case for the heroic or pathetic status of the criminal, questioning the moral authority of the justice system, or presenting innocent characters who seem guilty or guilty characters who seem innocent. Even when the endings of crime films endorse a reassuringly absolutist view of crime and punishment, the middle of such films puts absolutist categories like *hero, authority, innocent, guilty, victim, criminal,* and *avenger* into play, engaging the doubts and reservations about these labels that make them fit subjects for mass entertainment as well as moral debate, and so raising questions that the most emphatically absolutist endings can never entirely resolve.

Crime films always depend on their audience's ambivalence about crime. The master criminal is immoral but glamorous, the maverick police officer is breaking the law in order to catch the criminals, the victim is helpless to take any action except capturing or killing the criminal. It is therefore inevitable that they both insist on the distinctions among criminals, crime solvers, and victims, and that their obsessive focus is on the fluid and troubling boundaries among these categories. Crime films are about the continual breakdown and reestablishment of the borders among criminals, crime solvers, and victims. This paradox is at the heart of all crime films.

Crime films operate by mediating between two powerful but blankly contradictory articles of faith: that the social order that every crime challenges is ultimately well-defined, stable, and justified in consigning different people to the mutually exclusive roles of lawbreakers, law enforcers, and the victims who are the audience's natural identification figures; and that every audience member is not only a potential victim but a potential avenger and a potential criminal under the skin. The audience's ambivalence toward both these premises, and the shifting identifications crime films therefore urge among the fictional roles of lawbreaker, law enforcer, and victim, are the defining feature of the genre, and the feature that indicates the place each variety of crime film has within the larger genre.

Hence the genre of crime films includes all films that focus on any of the three parties to a crime – criminal, victim, avenger – while exploring that party's links to the other two. What defines the genre, however, is not these three typological figures any more than a distinctive plot or visual style, but a pair of contradictory narrative projects: to valorize the distinctions among these three roles in order to affirm the social, moral, or institutional order threatened by crime, and to explore the relations among the three roles in order to mount a critique that challenges that order. This contradictory double project, which has often been obscured by the predominance of subgenres like the gangster film and the film noir over the crime film, underlies the ambivalence of all the crime film's subgenres, including several this book will not consider in detail. White-collar crime films like *Wall Street* (1987) explore the paranoid hypothesis that American capitalism is at its heart criminal; caper films like *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) present a criminal culture more admirable in its honor and professionalism than the official culture it subverts; prison films from *Brute Force* (1947) to *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) explore the nature of legal and moral guilt in order to consider how individual humanity can survive the dehumanizing rituals of the prison system.

One final apparent omission deserves fuller mention because, as Carlos Clarens has acknowledged, it goes to the heart of the crime film's definition: the thriller. The crime film has much in common with the thriller; but following Charles Derry's brief definition of the thriller as "films in the shadow of Alfred Hitchcock"[19] reveals that the thriller is not, as Clarens argues, a parallel alternative to the crime film but a subset of it. Although every crime film postulates the same three pivotal figures, different figures predominate in different criminal subgenres. The criminal is most prominent in gangster films and films noirs; the avenging crime solver in detective films, police films, and lawyer films; and the victim in the man-on-the-run films of which Hitchcock made such a specialty. In a larger sense, however, all of Hitchcock's films are about victims. The types of crime films Hitchcock never essayed – films about professional criminals, about ordinary people sucked into committing crimes, about heroic agents of the justice system – make up a virtual catalog of the types of films about criminals and avengers. Despite Hitchcock's bromide, "The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture,"[20] he never makes a criminal the hero of a film without recasting that criminal, from Alice White in *Blackmail* (1929) to Marnie Edgar in *Marnie* (1964), as a victim. Hitchcock's distaste for the police is even more well-known; he regards legal authorities of any sort with suspicion and fear. His abiding interest therefore remains with innocent people who are unjustly suspected of crimes (*North by Northwest,* 1959), or who must confront criminals without any help from the authorities (*Shadow of a Doubt*), or who turn detective in order to clear themselves or save their country (*The 39 Steps,* 1935). Hitchcock's thrillers, indeed thrillers generally, are essentially crime films that focus on the victims of crimes, or of the criminal-justice system.

Including in the definition of crime films all films whose primary subject is criminal culture, whether they focus on criminals, victims, or avengers, may seem to make the genre too broad to be truly useful or distinctive. But the test of this definition, like that of any genre, is neither its narrowness nor its inclusiveness; it is its ability to raise questions that illuminate its members in ways existing modes of thinking about crime films do not. If all genres, as Staiger and Altman suggest, are contingent, evolving, and transactional,[21] the question they raise is not whether or not a particular film is a member of a given genre, but how rewarding it is to discuss it as if it were. Nearly any film, from *The Wizard of Oz* to *The English Patient*, might be considered a crime film. The model of ambivalence toward the categories represented by the criminal, the victim, and legal avenger is not meant to distinguish crime films from non–crime films once and for all, but to suggest a new way of illuminating the whole range of films in which crimes are committed.