

## CHAPTER 6

# PUNKS! TOPICALITY AND THE 1950s GANGSTER BIO-PIC CYCLE

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PETER STANFIELD

“This is a re-creation of an era.

An era of jazz

Jalopies

Prohibition

And Trigger-Happy Punks.”

— Baby Face Nelson

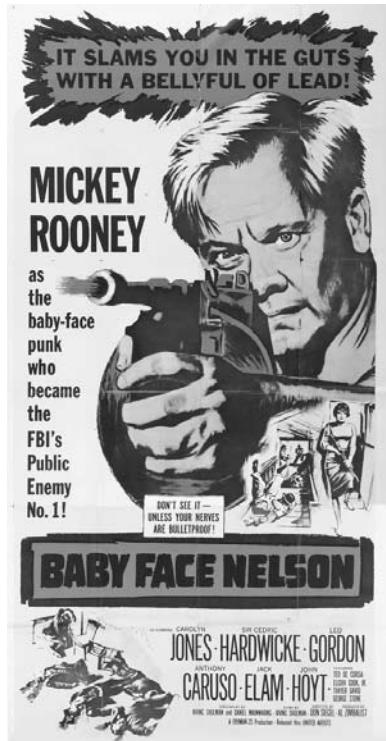
THIS ESSAY EXAMINES a distinctive and coherent cycle of films, produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which exploited the notoriety of Prohibition-era gangsters such as Baby Face Nelson, Al Capone, Bonnie Parker, Ma Barker, Mad Dog Coll, Pretty Boy Floyd, Machine Gun Kelly, John Dillinger, and Legs Diamond. Despite the historical specificity of the gangsters portrayed in these “bio-pics,” the films each display a marked interest in relating their exploits to contemporary topical concerns. Not the least of these was a desire to exploit headline-grabbing, sensational stories of delinquent youth in the 1950s and to link these to equally sensational stories of punk hoodlums from 1920s and 1930s. In the following pages, some of the crossovers and overlaps between cycles of juvenile delinquency films and gangster bio-pics will be critically evaluated. At the centre of analysis is the manner in which many of the films in the 1950s bio-pic gangster cycle present only a passing interest in period verisimilitude; producing a display of complex alignments between the historical and the contemporary.

## DELINQUENTS, GANGSTERS, AND PUNKS

In the 1950s, the representation of gangsters and of juvenile delinquents shared a common concern with explaining deviancy in terms of a rudimentary psychology, which held that criminality was fostered by psychopathic personalities. Part of the presentation of character archetype, with a basis in contemporary discourse on popular psychology, was the naming of gangsters and juvenile delinquents as “punks.” This essay locates in this a shared etymology that offers connections in the meanings generated by calling deviants “punk,” and observes the importance of considering the films discussed here as a distinct cycle of production, rather than examples of gangster films operating within a generic tradition.

The gangster bio-pics competed in the market place with other popular representations of Prohibition-era hoodlums including television programs, paperback books, pulp magazines, radio series, comic books, and bubblegum cards. The number of films produced between 1957 and 1961 based on the lives of gangsters was not particularly high, perhaps only twelve titles; it was, however, sufficiently concentrated and visible to spur the *Motion Picture Herald* critic to note that *Mad Dog Coll*, released toward the end of the cycle in 1961, was the latest in “a recent flurry of motion pictures dealing with the lives of gangsters of the 1920s.”<sup>1</sup> The November 1957 release of *Baby Face Nelson* effectively began the cycle. The film was an Al Zimbalist production, distributed by United Artists, directed by Don Siegel, and starred Mickey Rooney as the titular gangster. *Variety* accurately predicted the subsequent cycle, and called *Baby Face Nelson*: “A hot exploitation picture!”<sup>2</sup>

Independent production companies such as AIP and Allied Artists were the principal producers of the films in this cycle. In the wake of the bio-pic of Lester Gillis, aka Baby Face Nelson, came the AIP double billed *The Bonnie Parker Story* and *Machine Gun Kelly* in 1958. Allied Artists released *Al Capone* in 1959, in January 1960, Lindsay Parsons Productions with distribution by Allied Artists released *The Purple Gang*, a story of Detroit’s hoodlums. This was followed by The Le-Sac production of *Pretty Boy Floyd* and the Warner Bros. distributed *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* in February, 1960. Screen Classics’ production *Ma Barker’s Killer Brood* opened in June, 1960, while Princess Productions’ (20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox distributed) *Murder, Inc.* was released a month later. *Murder, Inc.* followed the exploits of killers Abe “Kid Twist” Reles and Lepke Buchalter.



**FIGURE 1:** Newspaper advertisement for *Baby Face Nelson*, which markets the sensational, calls attention to the film's visceral appeal, “guts,” “bellyful,” and calls Rooney’s character the “baby-face punk.”

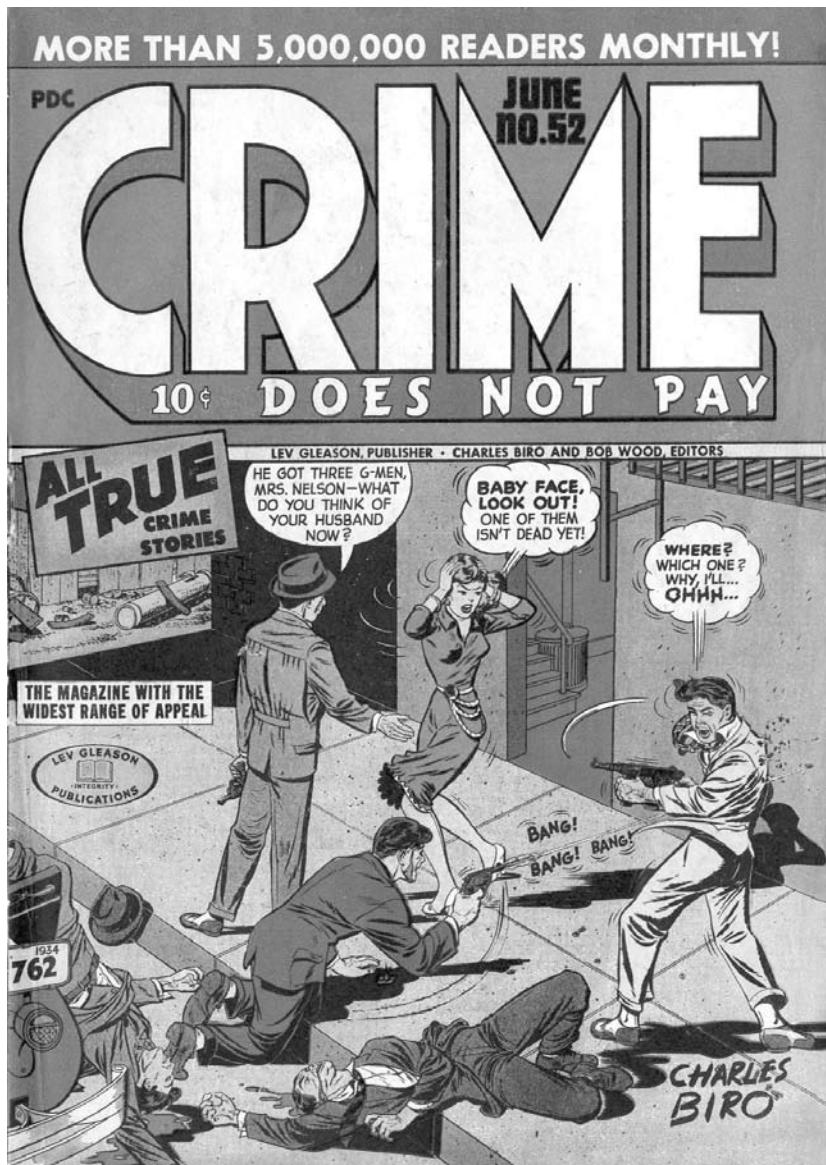
In 1961 Warner Bros. produced *Portrait of a Mobster*, a Dutch Schultz bio-pic and Thalia Films produced *Mad Dog Coll*, which was distributed by Columbia. Allied Artists closed out the year with *King of the Roaring 20's—The Story of Arnold Rothstein*. Other films that shared the same period setting and which also featured gangsters, but had relatively lavish production values compared to the independent pictures, included *Love Me or Leave Me*, *Pete Kelly's Blues*, both 1955, *Party Girl* (1958), and *Some Like It Hot* (1959).

This cycle of films sat alongside the contemporary exploitation of Prohibition-era hoodlums in television, which included NBC's *The Lawless Years* (1959-61) and the extraordinarily popular *The Untouchables* (Desilu Productions) which ran for four seasons during 1959-63 (the first two episodes being released theatrically as *The Scarface Mob* in Britain in

1960 and two years later in the States). The first season's attractions used most of the hoodlums also being portrayed in the film cycle.<sup>3</sup> The gangland subject matter of *The Untouchables* had been preceded by the television series *Gangbusters* (1952), from which the producers spun off a feature film *Gang Busters* (1955) and re-edited three episodes as *Guns Don't Argue* (1957), which was given a theatrical release. Gangland was also the setting for *The Roaring 20s* (1960–62), which ran for two seasons, and was Warner Bros. Television's attempt to share in *The Untouchables'* success in the ratings.

Paperback publishers produced numerous titles on the lives of Prohibition-era gangsters; between 1960 and 1962 Monarch Books published biographies of Baby Face Nelson, Dutch Schultz, Legs Diamond, Lucky Luciano, Frank Costello, and John Dillinger, alongside a novelization of the film *Mad Dog Coll*. Pyramid Books carried John Roberts' novelization of *Al Capone* alongside his original novel *The Mobster* (1960), while Signet published Harry Grey's fictional account of Dutch Schultz, *Portrait of a Mobster* (1958), later to be produced as a film by Warner Bros., and his 1953 novel *The Hoods* (eventually adapted by Sergio Leone as *Once Upon a Time in America*). This publishing activity, however, only scratches the surface of the paperback industry's exploitation of the nefarious doings of 1920s and 30s gangsters, which was complemented by the retelling of their stories in men's adventure magazines.<sup>4</sup> Arguably more important than either magazine, book, film, or even television in the contemporary proliferation and dissemination of images and stories concerned with Prohibition-era hoodlums was the comic, edited by Charles Biro and Bob Wood, *Crime Does Not Pay*, published by Lev Gleason between 1942 and 1955, and, which at its height in the 1950s, was selling a million copies a month until it was brought to a close as part of the crackdown on crime and horror comics.<sup>5</sup> *Crime Does Not Pay*, and its many imitators, repeatedly covered the careers of gangsters such as Baby Face Nelson, Pretty Boy Floyd and John Dillinger.<sup>6</sup>

In order to counter claims of glorifying the criminal and encouraging acts of imitation, the Production Code Administration (PCA) had effectively thwarted the use of the names of real-life gangsters in fiction films, but, following the 1945 release of the King Brothers production of *Dillinger*, the moratorium on the exploitation, in Will Hays' words, of an "actual criminal figure from current life," was effectively ended.<sup>7</sup> With the break up of the studio system, and the consequent weakening of the



**FIGURE 2:** Typical cover splash for the comic book *Crime Does Not Pay*. This one features the exploits of Baby Face Nelson. Note the banner headline claiming the comic book had “more than 5,000,000 readers monthly!”

PCAs' control over film content, the new independent production companies undertook the exploitation of the public's prior knowledge of notorious gangsters with no little enthusiasm. The economic logic of this production strategy was clear to all, as *The Hollywood Reporter* remarked, *The Bonnie Parker Story* "finds exploitation in the name of a real criminal instead of an established star."<sup>8</sup> The exploitation of real-life hoodlums was such that in January 1958 *The Hollywood Reporter* also drew attention to an on-going attempt by Kroger Babb's Hallmark Productions to secure an injunction that would prevent Sam Katzman and Clover Productions from using the name "Pretty Boy Floyd," over which Babb claimed sole ownership. The injunction was denied.<sup>9</sup> A film purporting to tell Floyd's story was eventually made, but not by either Babb or Katzman. The Le-Sac Production of *Pretty Boy Floyd* was released in January 1960, just over two years after *Baby Face Nelson*.

If there was something of a rush to exclusively claim the names of better-known gangsters, the gallery of actual gangsters are represented, or are name checked, throughout the cycle regardless of who is named in a film's title. Dillinger, for example, featured in, or is referred to, in *Baby Face Nelson*, *Pretty Boy Floyd*, *Ma Barker's Killer Brood*, and *Machine Gun Kelly*. Actors also migrated from film to film in the cycle, or from film to television. Mickey Rooney in *Baby Face Nelson* and *King of the Roaring Twenties*, Dorothy Provine, who had the title role in *The Bonnie Parker Story*, reappeared as the lead in the television series *The Roaring 20s*, and Ray Danton played Legs Diamond, not only in *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*, but also in *Portrait of a Mobster*. In the latter film, Vic Morrow, who played Dutch Schultz, gave a performance that was modelled on Rod Steiger's Capone in *Al Capone*.<sup>10</sup> Actor, character, performances all produced connections between the films in the cycle.

## THE CINEMA AND TELEVISION LOOP

Bit part actors, as much as, if not more than, the stars, also created overlaps between the films. Before playing Al "Creepy" Karpis in *Ma Barker's Killer Brood*, Paul Dubov had occupied the same role in three episodes of the TV series *Gangbusters* from 1952, parts of which, that included appearances by Dubov, were re-used in *Guns Don't Argue*, released in 1957. Dubov also had a bit part in *The Purple Gang*. Continuity is reinforced by

the reappearances of other character actors, such as Frank De Kova who appeared in *Machine Gun Kelly*, *Legs Diamond*, *Portrait of a Mobster*, or Joseph Turkel who performed in *The Bonnie Parker Story*, *The Purple Gang*, and *Portrait of a Mobster*. These actors also had numerous appearances in other crime and gangster films from the period and in crime television series. De Kova and Dubov both had roles in the first episode of *The Untouchables*, and Turkel later appeared in the series on five separate occasions.

Conforming to stereotype, De Kova in *Legs* and *Portrait* played a sleazy Italian gangster, an ethnic caricature commensurate with his roles as a “red injun” or Mexican elsewhere. Turkel’s pinched rodent-like features and wirey frame made him a perfect casting choice to play hoodlums who seem to have just stepped out of the pool hall, or dusted their knees following a game of craps in an alley. De Kova and Turkel are part of the period’s rogues gallery—a lineup of familiar faces; landmarks on a tour of a fictional gangland, producing not only an aspect of the iconography of fictional crime, but an element of continuity that linked together individual films creating a gangster film meta-narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Repetition of the same found or stock footage from film to film also helped to produce this meta-narrative. According to gangster film historian, Carlos Clarens, at least a third of *Dillinger* was constructed out of stock footage, both documentary and fictional, including the armoured car heist sequence from Fritz Lang’s *You Only Live Once* (1937).<sup>12</sup> *Al Capone* and *The Purple Gang* (both Allied Artist productions) used newsreel footage from the age of Prohibition, with a good number of overlaps between them. Montage sequences are a particularly heavy user of this type of material, little being unique to the production in which the sequence is inserted. *The Purple Gang* reused footage of storefronts being bombed, machine guns being fired, and cars crashing in its montages that earlier appeared in *Al Capone*. *Legs Diamond* presented a twist on the use of stock documentary footage by having Legs watch newsreels as he tours around Europe; a means of keeping him (and the film’s audience) informed about developments in the underworld back home. *Murder, Inc.*’s montage used still, rather than moving, images; mixing documentary crime scene photographs with recreations that used the film’s actors. *Portrait of a Mobster* seamlessly used period footage to provide wide shots of exterior locations before cutting to medium or close up shots of the actors on stage sets. *Mad Dog Coll* recycled both found footage of the Prohibition

era and an opening shot of a burlesque marquee that is a direct steal from the opening of Samuel Fuller's *Crimson Kimono* from 1959. These were not films that made any particular claim to uniqueness or originality. What these films sold was the promise of the sensational.

Beyond the shared subject matter, these mediations on the figure of the gangster were designed for maximum impact in their appeal to an audience with a predisposition for the sensational. As the press book cover for the film *Baby Face Nelson* announced, exhibitors should "SELL IT SENSATIONALLY!" Why? Because this film portrayal of a gangster was "More Vicious Than Little Caesar! More Savage Than Scarface! More Brutal Than Dillinger!" Baby Face Nelson: "The Deadliest Killer of Them All! ... The 'Baby-Face Butcher' who lined 'em up—chopped 'em down—and terrorized a nation!" "It slams you in the guts with a bellyful of lead! ... Mickey Rooney as the baby-faced punk who became the FBI's Public Enemy No. 1!" This was the "shock-angle bally" that was to sell the film. The press book called the movie an "exploitation picture" and added that the promotional material "carries that 'extra' selling kick."<sup>13</sup> In its promise to deliver a "*more vicious ... more savage ... more brutal*" depiction of gangland violence than has been previously seen, the film's exploitative strategies are laid bare.

## CRIME FILMS AS URBAN EXPOSÉ

In all their many guises, crime films can be seen as part of what scholar Will Straw has defined as the urban exposé, in which one finds "a variable balance between the ameliorative impulse toward documentation and the exploitative imperative to produce moments of textualized sensation."<sup>14</sup> This is particularly so of the cycle of crime films that paralleled the gangster bio-pics. In the *Motion Picture Herald* review of the contemporary exposé, *Inside the Mafia* (1959), there is a direct acknowledgement of the grounds upon which the film will be sold: "Exploitation, accentuating newspaper headlines, is limitless in this particular instance." The film is a late entry in the cycle that initially exploited the topicality and headline grabbing attraction of the findings of The Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, popularly known as the Kefauver Hearings, which ran between May, 1950 to July, 1951.<sup>15</sup> Earlier films that worked a connection with the Hearings, and could claim to be as timely as

today's headlines, included *711 Ocean Drive* (1950), *The Enforcer* (1951), *The Racket* (1951), *Hoodlum Empire* (1952), and *The Captive City* (1952).

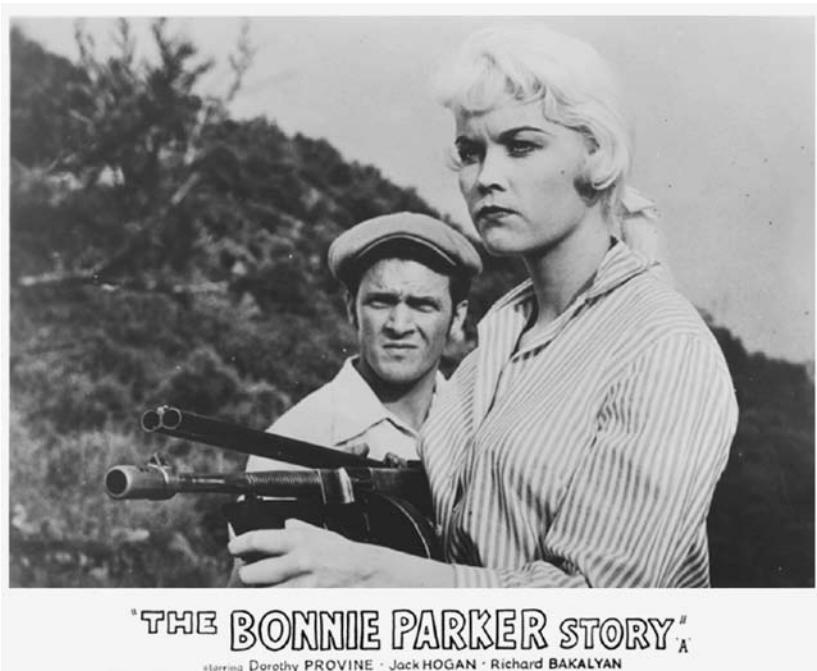
As an historian of this cycle of crime films, Ronald Wilson, has noted, filmmakers' attempts "to narrate the story of organized crime produced several cyclical variants of the syndicate-film format." These included the city exposé/confidential films that Will Straw has documented, the witness protection films that Wilson touched upon, as well the rogue cop and police procedural films. Closely allied to these cycles are films about the labor rackets, including *The Mob* (1951), *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Rumble on the Docks* (1956), *Edge of the City* (1957), *The Garment Jungle* (1957), and *The Big Operator* (1959). Yet another variant was the cycle of gangster films with "turn-of-the-century" settings; films that purported to show the deep roots of the syndicates and the authorities' response to organized criminal activities, notably *The Black Hand* (1950), *Black Orchid* (1953), and *Pay or Die* (1960). These linked with syndicate films such as *Chicago Syndicate* (1955), *Never Love a Stranger* (1958) and *Underworld USA* (1961) that had contemporary settings, but which also flashback to provide an historical context for present day gangland activities. Some of the films in the bio-pic cycle also represented the development of the syndicate.

## FROM THE TWENTIES TO THE FIFTIES

The opening narration for *Al Capone* tells the audience the story of Capone and the Roaring Twenties has "an important meaning for us today." And at the film's close, following the revelation of Capone's death, the voiceover narration returns: "we must continue to fight the remnants of the organization he built that still touches everyone of us today." The film's claim to topicality lies in what it has to say about the roots of contemporary organized crime. *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* is the story of a maverick, an individual's rise to prominence within gangland, his fall comes when the criminal fraternity forms a "combine—a syndicate, nationwide." The film does not make an explicit claim to having contemporary relevance, but the lone gangster who is able to control an empire of crime is shown to be an historical phenomenon. Rather than end with the demise of the individual gangster, *Murder, Inc.* begins at that point. The film tells the story of Louis "Lepke" Buchalter and his marshalling of a gang of hit men led by Abe Reles (Peter Falk), which spans the

historical divide between the demise of Al Capone and the contemporary era. Prohibition is over, Lepke tells Reles, “we’re working now like a combination. [...] Like any sensible business.” Or as the DA describes the syndicate, “a government within a government.” The modern gangland is controlled by anonymous mobsters working in combination with others, films such as *Murder, Inc.*, *Al Capone* and *Legs Diamond* told the story of the origins of these combinations, which linked them with a cycle of crime films with contemporary settings that explicitly set out to expose the many arms of organized crime.

The historical setting of the bio-pic cycle would appear to contradict the idea that these films had an equally topical relevance to those films that directly exploited the Kefauver investigations. Certainly this was the position a reviewer in *The Hollywood Reporter* took with regard to *Baby Face Nelson*, which he argued “seems as much a period piece as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Western about Billy the Kid.”<sup>16</sup> *New York Times* reviewer agreed, though thought it was the film’s formulaic story that was out-of-date: “a



**FIGURE 3:** Publicity still: *The Bonnie Parker Story*. Bonnie (Dorothy Provine) and punk boyfriend Clyde Darrow (Jack Hogan) in an armoured car hold up.

thoroughly standard, pointless and even old fashioned picture, the kind that began going out along with the old time sedans. As a matter of fact one of the few absorbing sights in this UA release [...] is a continual procession of vintage jalopies [*sic*] chugging in and out of the proceedings.”<sup>17</sup> Other reviews of films in the cycle noted the historical nature of the subject but also made the point that this was recent history, such as the review in *Motion Picture Herald* which reported that *Ma Barker's Killer Brood* was “a forceful study of a not-so-long ago crimeland era.”<sup>18</sup> Writing in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Jack Moffitt considered the historical veracity of *The Bonnie Parker Story* in his review, and added a very personal angle to its claim to verisimilitude: “Miss Provine’s performance gives promise for a credible acting future. She’s much better looking than the real Bonnie but, despite the accuracy of her cigar-smoking, her dialogue is monotonously on a tough key. The real Bonnie (who I knew in Kansas City) could scare you to death by smiling and saying ‘pretty please.’ ”<sup>19</sup>

## DRESSED TO KILL

The dialogue between past and present is particularly apparent in the costuming of the actors. *Al Capone* takes the most care with dressing its actors in fair approximations of 1920s dress styles; men’s headwear included homburgs and straw boaters, rather than 1950s fedoras with low crowns and wide brims which seem to dominate elsewhere in the cycle. Spats and co-respondent (black and white) shoes are noticeable, wide lapels and double breasted suits with waistcoats are also clearly on view. Women too are dressed with some regard to 20s trends, but dresses are, however, cut too tightly into the waist, too much cleavage is shown and atypical bra straps can be seen through the rear of some costumes. The dressing of actresses in cantilevered brassieres across all the films in the cycle which, with a tucked in waist line and a tight skirt, accentuate an hour-glass figure, had little to do with either 20s or 30s female fashions, and everything to do with a 1950s idealisation of a female body shape.

*Murder, Inc.* is the film least concerned with maintaining specific period identity as, apart from some vintage cars and two verbal and textual declarations that the film is set in the mid-thirties, absolutely no one is dressed in 30s clothing. No homburgs, no straw boaters, and men’s coats, hats, shoes are all contemporary with the film’s production, which is also

repeated in the female costuming. The leading actresses' blonde hair is worn long and unprocessed, completely inappropriate for women's hair-styles of the 1930s but completely in accord with styles of the early 1960s.



**FIGURE 4:** Publicity still: *Murder Inc.* Abe “Kid Twist” Reles (Peter Falk), right. Joey Collins (Stuart Whitman), center, and Eadie Collins (May Britt), left. The costuming and dressing, particularly the hair-styles, are all contemporary with the film’s release date of 1960, yet the film is set in the 1930s.

Locations also offer moments of temporal contradiction and confusion. Much of *Murder, Inc.* is shot on stage sets, though it has some notable exterior location scenes, many shot on empty city streets. However, one short sequence uses the crowded public space of a New York train station. The scene is composed in long shot with the camera positioned high above the concourse, though not so far away that we are unable to identify Peter Falk/Abe Reles. As the gangster walks through the concourse the people surrounding him go about their business, moving past the actors playing out the scene. It is no more than a snapshot of a train station in 1960, there has been absolutely no attempt to dress the station or extras in period costumes or detail. Only the knowledge that we have been told the film is set in the “mid-thirties” and that the events portrayed are “factual and the people real” contradicts the scene’s contemporaneity.

None of the films in the cycle display an obsession with period costuming and interior and exterior design that can be seen in the cycle of gangster pictures with historical settings made in the late-1980s and early 1990s, which included *The Untouchables* (1987), *Miller’s Crossing* (1990),

*Mobsters* and *Bugsy* (both 1991). Anachronisms do appear in that cycle, not least, and in keeping with the 50s cycle, female undergarments, but there is nevertheless an extraordinary obsession displayed with period detail elsewhere. This is an aspect of the ‘90s retro gangster film that Esther Sonnet has documented; arguing that the costuming of these films is used to reinstate the image of hegemonic masculinity—“a retrenchment into outdated gender orthodoxies.”<sup>20</sup> The 1950s gangster bio-pic cycle is not discernibly concerned with nostalgia, but, in contradistinction, by a fixation to mark the films as topical—to be seen to be of the moment, producing a distinct form of dialogue between “past” and “present.”

On *Baby Face Nelson*’s fast and free approach to historical verisimilitude, Geoffrey O’Brien in a laudatory 2006 review wrote:

Some appropriate clothes and cars are provided to avoid blatant anachronism—the cars more than earning their rental fees since so much of the movie is devoted to shots of them tooling along obscure country back-roads—but otherwise Baby Face Nelson feels absolutely like a movie about the mid-Fifties. In fact, with black-haired Carolyn Jones (as Rooney’s faithful-unto-death girlfriend Sue) coming across as an archetypal Beat Girl, Van Alexander’s jazz score pouring out large doses of West Coast Cool. [...] Baby Face Nelson taps into a mood of subcultural nihilism far more effectively than those exploitation pictures that attempted to take on the Beats directly.



**FIGURE 5:** Publicity still: *Baby Face Nelson*. Nelson (Mickey Rooney) and Sue (Carolyn Jones). Sue is dressed and costumed as an “archetypal Beat Girl.”

Despite O'Brien's claims that *Baby Face Nelson* stands apart from the rest of the cycle in its "lack of interest in even making a gesture toward period flavor or historical perspective," all the films exhibit historical anachronisms and use automobiles as the principal means of signifying a 1930s time period. *The Bonnie Parker Story*, which could equally be said to tap into a mood of "subcultural nihilism," opened with a voyeuristic view of Bonnie undressing in a locker room. Parker's dress, undergarments, and hair, all conform to 1950s styles. An instrumental rock 'n' roll soundtrack, principally produced on an electric guitar, aurally underscores the sense of contemporaneity. At the end of the title sequence the film's setting and dateline is verbally announced and reinforced in text: "Oklahoma City —1932." The announcement undercuts the preceding visual and aural clues to the film's historical setting. The effect is to create temporal instability which allowed for a reception of the film as both historically located and yet contemporaneous with the time of the film's initial screening.

In terms straight out of a 50s JD or Beatnik movie, Bonnie wants "kicks—real kicks, big city style." The eponymous villains in *Pretty Boy Floyd* and *Mad Dog Coll* are also out for "kicks": "power and kicks," for the former, and "killing for fun and kicks" for the latter. A further link to JD and Beatnik movies is casually made toward the end of *The Bonnie Parker Story* when Guy is shown laying back in an easy chair and blowing on a saxophone. Following the ambush in which Bonnie and Guy are killed, the saxophone is seen for a second time, now lying alongside a tommy gun in the smoking wreck of the automobile—a symbol for the age, but clearly for the 1950s, not the 1930s; making the popular association of illegitimacy now extended from the 1930s gangsters to the non-productive society of JDs and Beats. Apart from incorporating the occasional 1920s jazz motif into the mix, the soundtrack to *Machine Gun Kelly* is as equally contemporaneous as that used in both *Baby Face Nelson* and *The Bonnie Parker Story*. Rather than west coast cool or rock 'n' roll, *Kelly* opens with a rhythm and blues sound of squalling saxophones. There are no Beatnik allusions in the film, but the men's haircuts are 50s styled and the suits are all off the peg, narrow lapels, cut straight at the waist, and only the occasional character wearing a newsboy flat cap suggests any interest in replicating 30s fashions.

While these films make no overt claim to topicality, *The Purple Gang* makes an explicit connection with the day's headlines. The film opens with a prologue supplied by California Congressman James Roosevelt.

He believed the same sickness that lay behind bootlegging is still present today, the symptoms have changed but the illness remained the same, and only an informed and vigilant public can provide the cure. A text crawl follows which explicitly aligned Prohibition era gangsters with juvenile delinquency. At the end of the film, Harley in a voiceover told viewers: “The times have changed yet the daily headlines remain the same.” The Congressman asks for public vigilance in helping to counter delinquency, and the premise of his appeal is that *The Purple Gang* provides a history lesson from which we might better understand contemporary criminality.



**FIGURE 6:** Publicity still: *Mad Dog Coll*.  
Vincent “Mad Dog” Coll (John Davis Chandler), standing in light colored double-breasted suit, in his gang’s clubhouse. Note the high-styled 1950s hair-cuts of two of his gang members.



**FIGURE 7:** Publicity still: *Stakeout on Dope Street*. The three young tearaways who have discovered a canister of heroin discuss what to do with their find in their clubhouse. The setting is interchangeable with the clubhouse used by the young gangsters in *Mad Dog Coll*.

## FROM HOODLUMS TO DELINQUENTS

A number of the films in the bio-pic cycle made direct links between pre-war hoodlums with post-war delinquents. The independent trade journal aimed at exhibitors, *Harrison's Reports* related the hoodlums in *The Purple Gang* openly to their later counterparts through a use of contemporary nomenclature: “A teen-age rat pack operating out of Detroit’s slums and led by the psychotic Robert Blake.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly the *Motion Picture Herald* noted the link, overtly relating the production company’s exploitation of

topical subjects with the film's historical dimension: "Lindsay Parsons, whose Allied Artists releases have had critical and audience acclaim for their briskness of approach and topical subjects has turned engrossing attention to Detroit's fabled Purple Gang, the Manor City juvenile mob which emerged as one of the country's most feared band of racketeers."<sup>22</sup> "Rat-pack terrorists" is the term used by the police Lt. Harley (Barry Sullivan) to describe Detroit's hoodlums. When the gang were still no more than a group of teen-agers running wild on Hastings Street, moving up from petty theft to shakedowns, Harley had confronted the boys' welfare worker, an earnest young woman who believed the young gangsters would respond positively to more sensitive treatment, a little "psychological readjustment." They have, she tells Harley, "grown up without love and no real feeling of security." Harley dismisses her "three syllable words." "They are just a gang of punks," he tells her. The gang later rape and murder the welfare worker.

*The Purple Gang* is forthright in its statement that delinquents, young and old, are best dealt with by direct and unfettered police action, supported by a civic-minded American public. Though the film rejects outright the value of psychological explanations as a means toward solving the problem of juvenile crime, it nevertheless uses popular psychology in its characterization of the principal characters, particularly the gang leader Honey Boy Willard, played by Robert Blake. Willard suffers from claustrophobia and Harley uses his knowledge of the phobia to try and get the hoodlum to crack. By the end of the film Willard is crawling around on all fours, hysterical, a broken boy/man. The psychologically fractured protagonist typifies the cycle, at the close of *Machine Gun Kelly* we are presented with the image of the abject gangster: confronted by the law he withdraws into a foetal position at the feet of the arresting officers. By the close of *Mad Dog Coll*, the gangster is completely delusional. Coll dies in a shoot out with the police in a drug store, his death crawl takes him out onto the street, his last words are "I hate . . ." At the beginning of the film the narrator had asked the question of how Coll would have turned out if his father had been a high school principal, would he have been like other kids, or was he born different? The film does not give a definitive answer, but shifts attention away from complex problems of determination by deferring attention onto the commonsensical and simplistic solution of shooting "mad dogs," which presupposes that criminal deviants are no more than animals.

The gangster bio-pic and juvenile delinquency cycles shared a general-

ized concept of how to understand and explain criminality. For the most part the films in the cycle proposed that criminal careers are nurtured on urban streets, or in an environment of rural deprivation, that was very much in keeping with earlier explanatory schemes given by the movies.<sup>23</sup> However, social explanations for criminality are often contradicted within the films by recourse to popular psychology that explain deviancy in terms of individual complexes. The *King of the Roaring Twenties* is a good example of how the contradiction between determining factors works. Arnold Rothstein comes from an upper middle-class family, but as a juvenile he spends all of his free time on the streets. Street life forms the man and helps to explain his move into a criminal career. However, it is not the only explanation offered, as if in an echo of the *The Jazz Singer*'s Oedipal rebellion, the Jew, Rothstein, rebels against the word of his father and chooses the secular streets over respectability and ethnic tradition. In this instance it is not lack of opportunity, but a failure of character that explains the criminal. In all cases, however, the explanation given for criminal behavior, whether sociological or psychological, it is always crude and reductive; a caricature of sophisticated and complex theories.

The casting of the bio-pic cycle of films also fostered a marked overlap with juvenile delinquency movies, both the heady exploitation films produced by AIP and Allied Artists and those financed and distributed by the older studios that strove for a greater social realism. Richard Bakalyan, who was Bonnie Parker's husband in *The Bonnie Parker Story*, initially made his mark in an independent production directed by Robert Altman, *The Delinquents* (1957), and went on to become something of a JD icon; Vic Morrow who played the deranged Artie West in *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) is cast as Dutch Schultz in *Portrait of a Mobster*; John Davis Chandler who played a despicable gang member who murders a blind teenager in *The Young Savages* (1961) played Vincent Coll in *Mad Dog Coll*; and Fay Spain, who had the female lead in *Al Capone*, had previously played the leader of a female gang in *Teenage Doll* (1957) and a hot-rodder in *Dragstrip Girl* (1956). Such casting visually linked the gangster and the JD films together, but it was also designed to garner interest from a core film going constituency. As the *Motion Picture Herald* noted about the casting of the lead in *Pretty Boy Floyd*, "John Ericson, of considerable marquee weight, to the vitally important teenage film audience as well as to the post-35 age group that will patronize an appealing motion picture tops the cast of this Le-Sac [...] attraction."<sup>24</sup>

The casting of Mickey Rooney as Baby Face Nelson had little overtly to do with making connections between the bio-pic and JD cycles, but it was not wholly unrelated to representations of adolescence. The role helped Rooney to establish a persona far removed from his origins as a song and dance man and the boy-next-door in the *Andy Hardy* series. But audience memories of that wholesome juvenile must surely have informed the reception of his portrayal of a psychotic killer in *Baby Face Nelson* and his subsequent tough guy persona in two 1959 crime films, *The Last Mile* and *The Big Operator*. In the former Rooney plays “Killer” Mears, a man on death row who leads a prison riot, and in the latter his character is the labor racketeer “Little Joe” Braun.<sup>25</sup> *Motion Picture Herald* described Rooney’s character in *Baby Face Nelson* as a “warped sadistic killer”; the actor, it reported, “proves once again his versatility as an accomplished performer [and] sinks his teeth into the role and shakes it for everything that is in it.” The journal’s reviewer noted that the “physical attributes of Nelson match those of Rooney, in the two respects of short stature and a round, young face, which provides even greater verisimilitude to the role.”<sup>26</sup>

### LITTLE CAESARS AND POP PSYCHOLOGY

Rooney’s lack of height recalled the casting of the lead figures in the canonical gangster films: James Cagney in *Public Enemy*, Paul Muni and George Raft in *Scarface: Shame of a Nation*, Humphrey Bogart in *The Petrified Forest*, and, of course, Edward G. Robinson in the aptly named *Little Caesar*. Other films in the cycle followed *Baby Face Nelson* in using short actors in the lead, Robert Blake in *The Purple Gang*, Peter Falk in *Murder, Inc.*, and John Davis Chandler in *Mad Dog Coll*. Even the “distaff side of American crime” was portrayed as undersized. The *Motion Picture Herald* suggested that Dorothy Provine’s portrayal in *The Bonnie Parker Story* may stretch some audience members’ credibility who “will challenge the excess viciousness attributed to a diminutive member of the fairer sex.”<sup>27</sup> This characterization of Parker as deviant in terms of both her criminal actions and her gender was in keeping with the other films in the cycle, regardless of whether the gangster was male or female.

The gangster portrayed as a runt underlined “common-sense” psychology’s view that deficiency in height equates with an inferiority com-

plex, and hence the resentment of and resistance to authority. *Baby Face Nelson* repeatedly emphasised Rooney's/Nelson's diminutive presence. Infantilized in both name and body, from sloshing around in a bathtub, to being picked up off a bed by a policeman as if he were a child, and when Nelson first meets John Dillinger it is at a children's playground. The gangsters sit on swings, above which a sign reads: "No Children over the age of 12." Coded messages between mobsters—"Baby—call. Daddy needs you"—that appear in newspaper advertisements further instantiates the infantilization of adult men. It is Dillinger, significantly known as "The Big Man," who names Lester Gillis "Baby Face," but it is Gillis' girl, played by Carolyn Jones, who provides her surname, Nelson, as his alias. Lester, it is suggested, is just a little too ready to lose his patrilineal privilege when he takes her name. "You've got all of me but my name. Why don't you take that too?" she offers, after cooling him down following a killing by repeatedly calling him "Baby." "Yeah, okay," replies Gillis, "any name's better than my old man's."

In terms of characterization, the figures in the film are all drawn with broad strokes, caricatures rather than nuanced and complex individuals. Dillinger—The Big Man—played by Leo Gordon contrasting with the squat Rooney, the "brain guy," played by the lanky Jack Elam offering another contrasting physical presence; the use of other undersized actors like Sir Cedric Hardwick, who plays the mob-employed doctor who tends to Baby Face's wounds and attempts to burn off the killer's fingerprints, or gang member played by Elisha Cook Jr. who Nelson knocks around. Taking a banker hostage, Nelson rides with him in the back of the getaway car. Noticing that he has an inch or two in height over the man, Nelson pulls himself higher in his seat and asks the hostage whether he has considered using lifts in his shoes. The banker replies he *is* wearing them. With caricature, size matters.

*The Hollywood Reporter* indirectly noted the use of caricature when it called attention to the characters' "stark presentation," which had "none of the contemporary effort to provoke and understand the how and the why. The characters are vicious but flat and never very interesting."<sup>28</sup> This period of film production was something of a high point in the popularization of psychoanalysis as a means of explaining character motivation. An example of this can be seen in the contemporaneous cycles of police procedurals and rogue cop movies. Will Straw has noted that in these films there was a "transformation of police characters from unde-



**FIGURE 8:** Publicity still: *Baby Face Nelson*. Nelson holds his tommy gun on the kidnapped banker (George E. Stone). Nelson lets the man live, because he is shorter than himself. Also sitting in the car is the equally diminutive actor Elisha Cook Jr., who plays Homer van Meter.

veloped ethnic figures of ridicule or inconsequence to fictional persona whose characterological density is the pivot around which narratives frequently turn.”<sup>29</sup> In contrast, the gangster bio-pics resolutely reject psychological density and complexity, and, unlike the generic novelty of policemen as “bearers of class resentment or disgust at urban degradation” such as are found in *The Prowler* (1951) or *On Dangerous Ground* (1952), the bio-pic gangster is a ready-made, familiar, conventionalized and standardized figure.<sup>30</sup>

It was, however, precisely this very lack of psychological subtlety in American action movies and their use of the visually arresting image that would appeal to the cinephiles and cineastes in France. Jean-Luc Godard wrote in 1959 of François Truffaut’s *Les 400 Coups*, then in production, that its “dialogue and gestures [would be] as caustic as those in *Baby Face Nelson*. ”<sup>31</sup> Later Anglo-American critics with a cultish appreciation of postwar American films, such as Geoffrey O’Brien, would echo Godard’s sentiments: “You keep waiting for the false note—the grandiloquent symbol, the self-conscious lyrical touch, the hammy emotional explosion, the heavy-handed injection of sociology or psychology—and It never comes.”<sup>32</sup>

The comic play with pop-Freudian explanations for the gangster’s “warped sadism,” undersized with an Oedipal complex, is as sophisticated as the films get to “explaining” their characters’ subconscious motiva-

tions. *Mad Dog Coll* opens with the title character walking through a cemetery at night, dry ice swirling around his ankles, like a scene from a cheap horror movie. Coll stops before his father's grave and fires a machine gun at the tombstone—a fantasy that sees him obliterating the man that beat him senseless for being a mama's boy. By the film's close, Coll is completely delusional: first recalling his visit to the graveyard to "kill" his father, he then believes a member of Dutch Schultz's gang he is holding hostage is in fact his father; "killing" him once more by stabbing the gangster.

Alongside the rudimentary articulation of Oedipal complexes, visual images of emasculated men appear in all the films in the cycle. In *Machine Gun Kelly* two minor characters are used to maximum effect; one a fey man, Fandango, who Kelly uses to ferry booty from bank and kidnapping jobs, the other, Harry, who might or might not have lost the use of his right arm when mauled by a lion. Harry now runs a gas station behind which he has a small zoo stocked with caged monkeys and a mountain lion he claims he trapped himself. For dipping into the takings from a bank job, Kelly punishes Fandango by pushing him against the mountain lion's cage; he loses his left arm. Toward the end of the film Harry and Fandango are visually linked together, two matched one-armed men. Among the many instances of the signifying of impotence in the film, the most withering occurrences are built around Kelly's inability to act out a masculine vitality. His girlfriend tells Kelly that she had "mothered" him until he was able to prove he was a man, but when tested he falls short of the potent ideal she desires. Faced with images of death—an empty coffin carried in the street, a skull and crossbones tattoo on the back of a mug's hand—Kelly becomes immobilised, fear runs through him and he is exposed as being "naked yellow." His tommy gun is revealed to be just a prop to hide his lack of virility. When Federal agents at the film's close take him away they mock the cowed gangster, infantilizing him as "Popgun Kelly."

## CHEAP PUNKS GOING NOWHERE

Demeaning the gangster is a key narrative strategy in this cycle, and a primary means of achieving this is in the use of the term "punk." The bio-pic gangsters are repeatedly referred to as "punks," which takes place not only in the films' dialogue, but also in publicity and marketing materials, and in reviews of the films. The *New York Times* thought Rooney's char-

acter Baby Face Nelson was “nothing more than a rotten, sadistic punk without one redeeming trait.”<sup>33</sup> *Harrison’s Reports* called the title character, in *Pretty Boy Floyd*, “a cheap punk who made it big.”<sup>34</sup> Even Rothstein, in *King of the Roaring Twenties*, and Capone, in *Al Capone*, are called punks early in their criminal careers to signify both their youth and the lack of respect they are held in by older and more powerful figures to whom they yet pose an inchoate threat. In contemporary set *Chicago Syndicate* the mob boss takes a nostalgic tour of the neighborhood he grew up in and recalls the time when he was a “young punk.” Being a “punk” was something you left behind with your youth; a measure of the distance since travelled from ghetto to penthouse, from juvenile to adult, by Capone, Rothstein, and the Chicago mobster.

When DA Burton Turkus asks police Lt. Tobin, in *Murder, Inc.*, how he would deal with the hoodlum problem, the Irish cop gives it to him straight: “play dirty. Show the neighborhood what they are—bums, punks, hoodlums.” When finally cornered and spilling all he knows to the authorities, bum, punk, hoodlum, and hit-man, Abe “Kid Twist” Reles tells the DA, “any punk we hit, deserved to be hit.” When Dutch Schultz in *Portrait of a Mobster* is confronted by a delegation to the Bronx of “spaghetti benders,” he dismisses them and their attempt to coerce him into joining their Chicago organization. He tells the “greaseballs” that “in that town, any punk can be big.” Whether determined by policeman, hoodlum, or killer, a punk is anyone considered beneath contempt. But in these films to call someone a punk is not simply to demean them socially, it also calls into question their masculinity.

In *The Bonnie Parker Story*, Bonnie is introduced waiting tables in a greasy diner, her husband Duke Jefferson (Richard Bakalyan) is serving a 175-year jail sentence, and as a wife of a convicted criminal this is the best job she can find. As she explains to the owner: “All I ever met was punks; they come from no place, going nowhere.” She hooks up with Guy Darrow (Jack Hogan) who sports Elvis-like sideburns and a Brando-esque penchant for walking around in a white vest. (Guy had caught her eye when he pulled out a tommy gun with the cool intent to impress a girl such as Bonnie with the size of his weaponry—an image of potent masculinity, a virility that has been denied to her in her relationships with “punks.”) Guy, though, fails to fulfill Bonnie’s desire, and toward the end of the film she tells him what she really thinks of him: “you’re a punk! You can stand on your head but you’d still be a punk.”



**FIGURE 9:** Publicity still: *The Bonnie Parker Story*. In a world where the only men she meets are punks, Bonnie sleeps alone. Note the long guns propped up beside her bed.

More than anything, Ma Barker hates sissies. She wants her kids to show plenty of guts, and, in *Ma Barker's Killer Brood*, she follows gang member Al Karpis' maxim that guts are more important than brains. Surrounded by the police the old woman plays out her final hand, and for the last time attempts to beat the sissy out of one of her boys. Cajoling a cowering Fred Barker to take action, she calls him "a gutless punk, you're as yellow as your old man." Caught between a castrating mother and representatives of the law, suitably chastened and emasculated, Fred dies a punk's death in a hail of bullets. Similarly, Charles Bronson's eponymous character in *Machine Gun Kelly* is called a punk by a Ma Barker type, who has little time for his ineffectual bragging and is able to see through his virile posturing as being no more than an empty gesture.

In *Portrait of a Mobster* the female lead wants a man who can live up to the masculine ideal embodied by her recently deceased father; not a punk. She's sick of weak men, she tells her policeman husband. He, though, like Guy Darrow, fails to fulfil the masculine ideal. "Lean on me," says Dutch Schultz, who exploits her frustration and dissatisfaction with her husband. However, unbeknownst to her, Schultz is the killer of her father. Her punishment for having an illicit desire for Dutch is to become a lush, trapped in a loveless relationship. Good (whole) men are hard to find, this cycle of films contended, but emasculated infantilized

punks seemed to be everywhere. The semantic work of the term “punk” thus undermined (and unmanned) upstart hoodlums.

Punk is used in the same manner in films that more explicitly exploit the hot topic of juvenile delinquency, such as *Four Boys and a Gun* (1957) or *Stakeout on Dope Street* (1958) where the JDs are called punks by an authority figure in the former, and by older hoodlums in the latter. In the 1961 musical *Westside Story*, patrolman officer Krupke confronts the street gang, called the Jets, by threatening to “run *all* you punks in!” And the Jets respond, in song:

Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke,  
Ya gotta understand –  
It's just our bringin' upke  
That gets us outta hand.  
Our mothers all are junkies,  
Our fathers all our drunks.  
Golly Moses—natcherly we're punks!

The domestication of the word via its comic and musical inclusion in *Westside Story* was new to the movies, but not to other forms of American popular culture. The fairly common usage of “punk” as a put-down in 1930s and 1940s in newspaper comic strips, such as *Dick Tracy* and *Terry & the Pirates*, a means to verbally demean or show a marked lack of respect toward someone, suggests its use was not considered to be particularly offensive at that time, at least not in the United States, and certainly not when used to describe a caricatured underworld figure or street hoodlum.<sup>35</sup> The 1946 edition of Funk & Wagnall’s *New Practical Standard Dictionary* gave a “young gangster” or someone who is “worthless and useless” as comparable definitions of the popular use of “punk.”<sup>36</sup> This was certainly the dominant meaning in the word’s use in Alex Raymond’s widely syndicated daily strip, *Rip Kirby*, between August 1946 and April 1947. “Punk” was used in the story’s dialogue on eight occasions during this period. A boy playing cops and robbers, holding his scarecrow adversary at gunpoint first uses it in the series, he exclaims: “You can’t win, punk!” It is next used to describe gangsters a taxi driver is reading about in the papers. 13 strips later a policeman calls one of the gangsters a “punk.” In early December, in a new story, a blackmailed band-leader hands over some money to a juvenile delinquent, who he calls a “corrupt little punk.” In a January strip a card shark is called

a “gamblin’ punk” by a fellow member of gangland, and later he is simply called a “punk” by one of his victims and “da punk!” by another hoodlum.<sup>37</sup> The repeated use of the term in the strip suggests there was an accepting familiarity with it on the part of readers, particularly when used in the context of crime and underworld stories.

## THE LEXICON OF PUNK

In Great Britain, “punk,” alongside terms such as “shag” and “sissy” were blacklisted by film censors and hence had been excised from American films by the PCA in the years prior to the 1950s, though it makes a remarkable, but isolated, appearance in *Dillinger*, released in 1945.<sup>38</sup> Given its cinematic absence, the emphatic use of “punk” in gangster films in the latter years of the 1950s undoubtedly appealed in terms of its novelty value and its seemingly benign vulgarity; an authentic example of lowlife slang that carried a suggestion of indecency in its use. The etymology of “punk,” however, reveals the word to be rich in meaning, and utterly indecent, not least in its sexual connotations. “Punk’s” deep roots are in Elizabethan slang, in which it was used as a common term for prostitute, and more recently, in the United States, as a term for a hobo’s or prison inmate’s younger male sexual companion. If the term had any shared meaning in England in the 1950s, other than as a vernacular Americanism, it was conversely, given its Elizabethan meaning, now used to denote a “pimp,” and hence its problematic standing with the censors.<sup>39</sup>

The post-40s use of “gunsel” offers a parallel to “punk” in organizing a range of meanings to do with deviancy, crime, sexuality, and power. Often understood as referring to a gunman, gunsel is in fact a slang name for a catamite.<sup>40</sup> The shared context of commonly recognized acts of deviancy, criminal or sexual, has helped to promote the misrecognition of the meaning of gunsel. As a prison slang term, the root meaning of “punk”, like gunsel, signified the passive, often coerced, partner in homosexual acts. The way “punk” is used in the gangster bio-pic cycle there is little, if any, overt signifying of its sexual meaning. “Punk’s” sexual connotations, nevertheless, lie behind all of the putdowns that seek to emasculate, diminish and infantilize the gangster.

The homosexual undertone of “punk’s” meaning is never entirely absent, and certainly adds piquancy to an early prison scene in *Dillinger*

when the more mature inmate, Specs Green (Edmund Lowe), explains his philosophy to the jailhouse novice Dillinger: “First society gets careless with the criminal and then the criminal gets careless. First thing to gum things up is a trigger-happy punk. Personally, I have no use for a punk. Some fellers, if you pat them on the back, they’ll kill a man for you. If you treat a punk right, you can get the biggest man in the world killed.” Though what he is saying is not readily apprehended by the naïve Dillinger, Green is obviously describing his young jail mate. A point confirmed to the audience almost immediately when Green introduces Dillinger to his fellow gang members, including Kirk Otto (Elisha Cook, Jr.), who spits judgmentally in his direction and, when Dillinger leaves, calls him a “fresh punk.” “He’ll learn,” says Green. “The hard way,” says another. “I think the kid has possibilities,” says Green, concluding the scene. Without knowledge of the word’s etymology “punk” is used in this context as little more than a means to demean Dillinger the neophyte; he has yet to earn his reputation, but if an audience has any knowledge of prison slang then the dialogue becomes overly ripe in its sexual inference, adding much to the film’s tale of criminal deviancy.

The somewhat indeterminate meaning in the use of “punk” to help indicate a concealed sexual aspect of deviancy among the criminal classes can be found in other forms of popular culture. In *Rip Kirby*, for example, an effeminate underworld character, Boom Boom, who is twice referred to as a “punk,” is also called a “perfumed little maggot!”<sup>41</sup> Similarly suggestive of sexual deviancy is the camp performance by Mark Rydell, in Don Siegel’s JD pix *Crime in the Streets* (1956), who, alongside Sal Mineo, plays sidekick to John Cassavettes’ street punk, and who, in the course of the film, shuns all female attention. This tacit play with “punk’s” homosexual association is made explicit in a 1958 pulp paperback by William R. Cox, *Hell to Pay*, in which a gambler is caught in a war between the syndicate and a gang of punk hoodlums in leather jackets with high-combed greased hair, high on marijuana and the “Big H.” “They’re hopped-up punks, at war with the syndicate—and they kill, just for kicks”—is how the cover’s tag line describes the story’s premise. At the close, the gambler discovers that one of his errand boys, Little Skinny, has sold him out to the gang’s leader. He witnesses the two punks “fawning” over each other and smelt “lavender.” Little Skinny, he is “shocked” to discover, is a “deviate.” With gangs of young punks going head to head with the syndicate, the gambler is a witness to a “social revolution” made up of “homosexual kids in a world of switchknives and marihuana.”<sup>42</sup>



**FIGURE 10:** Cover of the Signet paperback original of William R. Cox's *Hell to Pay*. This story of juvenile delinquents and the syndicate made explicit use of "punk" as an idiom for a young homosexual.

## THE GANGSTER BIO-PIC CYCLE

The shared designation of "punk" to define delinquent juveniles of the 1950s and gangster hoodlums since the 1920s, the compact of crude environmental and psychological means to explain their deviancy, the exploitation of shock and sensation to sell these films, the lack of interest in historical authenticity and verisimilitude, and the dependence upon convention in the telling of these tales produced a formulaic, standardized, product, where differences in temporal settings are little more than superficial appeals to novelty: this ensures that even in their historical guise the films, which form the gangster bio-pic cycle, are topical. Not only because they were part of a broad discursive contemporary fascina-

tion with crime, but because they were also conceived as sensational fictions tied to the exploitation of everyday headlines, albeit ostensibly reworked as history.

Mapping the repetitions, overlaps and fusions that form the associations that link the individual films within the cycle and in turn the liaisons and connections between various cycles of crime fictions in this period helps to produce a better understanding of film production trends than can be achieved by traditional genre analysis, because cycles are inherently temporal while genres tend to be conceived as a-historical. Conceiving of films in terms of genres too often means conceptualizing films as belonging to exclusive fixed groupings. The concept of cycles, however, allows for both the recognition and identification of films with shared characteristics, and also allows the scholar to see how a cycle merges and blends with other cycles. The scholar thus becomes interested in film's inherent seriality, indeed, its commonality with other films, and therefore less with any given film's apparent uniqueness. The study of cycles often reveals uniqueness to be little more than a re-articulation of existent components, a shibboleth dedicated to the myth of originality and individual creative endeavor. But the shape, form, style and content of film do change over time and documenting and analysing cycles of films while being cognizant of shifts in social and cultural contexts, and in the production, distribution, exhibition and reception of films, can help account for these changes.

## ENDNOTES

1. *Motion Picture Herald*, Product Digest Section (6 May 1961): 276.
2. *Variety* quotation used in advertising copy and press book for *Baby Face Nelson* (6 November 1957): 6.
3. For a history of the television series and a episode guide, see Tise Vahimagi, *The Untouchables* (London: British film Institute, 1998).
4. See for example *Stag Magazine*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (May, 1958), which includes "THE FBI'S DEATH DUEL WITH BABY FACE NELSON," or *Amazing Detective Cases* (December, 1958) featuring "Vince 'Mad Dog' Coll. The killer who killed for kicks," "Free Love Ladies of Murder Inc.," "The Amazing Saga of a Renegade G Man," and "The Spider Spins a Noose." For an illustrated, anecdotal, history of men's magazines see, Adam Parfrey, ed., *It's A Man's*

- World: Men's Adventure Magazines, the Postwar Pulps* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2003).
5. David Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2008).
  6. Mike Benton, *The Illustrated History of Crime Comics* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1993).
  7. On the PCAs' attempt to distinguish between representations of legendary, historical and contemporary criminals see, Peter Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s: The Lost Trail* (Exeter: University fo Exeter Press, 2001), 183–85.
  8. *The Hollywood Reporter* (3 July 1958): 3. In preproduction the film had been called *Lady with a Gun* and *Tommy Gun Connie*. *The Hollywood Reporter* (6 March 1958): 4.
  9. *The Hollywood Reporter* (21 January 1958): 3.
  10. Both play their parts by producing an over fabricated supplication in appealing for understanding or trust from others. In its excess, this pretence reveals rather than hides their true psychotic personalities.
  11. For a guided tour of movie gangland's most memorable mug shots see Ian & Elizabeth Cameron, *Heavies* (London: Studio Vista, 1967).
  12. Carlos Clarens, *Crime Movies: An Illustrated History* (New York: Norton, 1980), 189.
  13. Even the notes on the back sleeve of the tie-in soundtrack album promoted the sensational: “A word about the picture. Mickey Rooney is ‘Baby Face Nelson.’ He is. But only for the film. Carolyn Jones is the ‘chick.’ Mmmmmmmmmmm. Sir Cedric Hardwick is the ‘Doc.’ Wow! The original story was written by Irving Shulman. He collaborated with Daniel Mainwaring on the screen treatment. Al Zimbalist was the producer. The picture was directed by Don Siegel. It’s gutsy.”
  14. Will Straw, “Urban Confidential: The Lurid City of the 1950s.” In David B. Clarke, ed., *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997), 113.
  15. *Motion Picture Herald*, Product Digest Section (3 October 1959): 437.
  16. *The Hollywood Reporter* (6 November 1957): 3.
  17. *New York Times*, 12 December 1957, 35.
  18. *Motion Picture Herald*, Product Digest Section (25 June 1960): 749.
  19. Jack Moffitt, *The Hollywood Reporter* (3 July 1958): 3.
  20. Esther Sonnet & Peter Stanfield, “‘Good Evening, Gentleman, Can I Check Your Hats Please?’: Masculinity, Dress and the Retro Gangster Cycles of the 1990s,” Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, & Peter Stanfield, eds., *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of American the Gangster Film* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 182.

21. *Harrison's Reports* (9 January 1960): 6.
22. *Motion Picture Herald*, Product Digest Section (January 16, 1960): 557.
23. Richard Maltby, "Why Boys Go Wrong: Gangsters, Hoodlums, and the Natural History of Delinquent Careers." In Grieveson, et al. (2005), 41–66.
24. *Motion Picture Herald*, Product Digest Section (23 January 1960): 565.
25. "The Last Mile," *Motion Picture Herald* (31 January 1959): 433.
26. *Motion Picture Herald*, Product Digest Section, (9 November 1957): 593.
27. *Motion Picture Herald* (12 July 1958): 905.
28. *The Hollywood Reporter* (6 November 1957): 3.
29. Straw (1997), 119.
30. Ibid.
31. Jean-Luc Godard, "La Photo du mois" *Cahiers du Cinema*, No. 92 (February 1959), reprinted in translation in Jim Hillier, ed., *Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s – Neo Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1985), 51.
32. Geoffrey O'Brien, "In Cold Blood," *Film Comment* (May-June, 2006), 22–3.
33. *New York Times*, 12 December 1957, 35.
34. *Harrison's Reports* (30 January 1960): 18.
35. *Terry and the Pirates*, by Milton Caniff ran from 1934–46. The complete strips have been reprinted in six volumes by The Library of American Comics, published by IDW (San Diego). The same company is also reprinting the complete Dick Tracy strips.
36. The dictionary defines a "gangster" as a "member of a gang of roughs, gunmen or the like." *Funk & Wagnall's New Practical Standard Dictionary* (New York: Funk & Wagnall, 1946).
37. The strips are reproduced in Alex Raymond, *Rip Kirby 1946–1948* (San Diego: The Library of American Comics, IDW Publishing, 2009), 71, 72, 77, 100, 115, 141, 142.
38. In a November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939 memorandum on profanity and vulgarity in films, produced by the PCA following discussions engendered by the use of "damn" in *Gone with the Wind*, a list of proscribed words is produced with an indication in which territory the word is particularly problematic. I am grateful to Richard Maltby for sharing this document with me. For a wider discussion of the British censors' influence on the PCA, see Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997).
39. See the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the word's etymology. The English use of punk for pimp was provided by my father-in-law, Ron Sonnet, who recalls it being used this way in Portsmouth in the 1940s and 1950s. The OED lists

“punkateroo,” a vulgar compound of “punk” with the Spanish “muleteer,” as a procurer of prostitutes.

40. For a revealing discussion of the confusion over the use of “gunsel” see, Gaylyn Studlar, “A Gunsel is Being Beaten: Gangster Masculinity and the Homoerotics of the Crime Film, 1941–1942.” In Grieveson, et al. (2005), 120–145.
41. Raymond (2009), 110.
42. William R. Cox, *Hell to Pay* (New York: Signet, 1958), 119–21.