

FILM HISTORY

Movie gangster a social mirror

By James Gilbert

Do film characters portray the hopes, aspirations, angers and frustrations of the audiences who flock to see them? If so, American film culture reveals, among other things, a national obsession with gangsters, killers, gun molls, cowboys, desperate virgins, angry teenagers, and soldiers of fortune. To be sure, such fantasy heroes and heroines are the stuff of which escapist entertainment is made. But more than entertainment seems involved in the uniquely American gangster film, a genre that has persisted since the first days of movie making.

In his book, *Born to Lose* (Oxford, \$19.95), Eugene Rosow sees this genre as a barometer of the social history and the business ethics of the U.S. Rosow divides the history of gangster films into three parts. He first traces variations in plots and the varieties of crimes and criminals portrayed. He then discusses the way contemporary social history is reflected in the films, stressing the connections between the key events of a decade and the mode of crime portrayed.

Finally, he suggests that the shadowy, half-criminal, half-business worlds depicted in the films are partly constructed from the careers of important Hollywood moguls and from the experience of the industry itself.

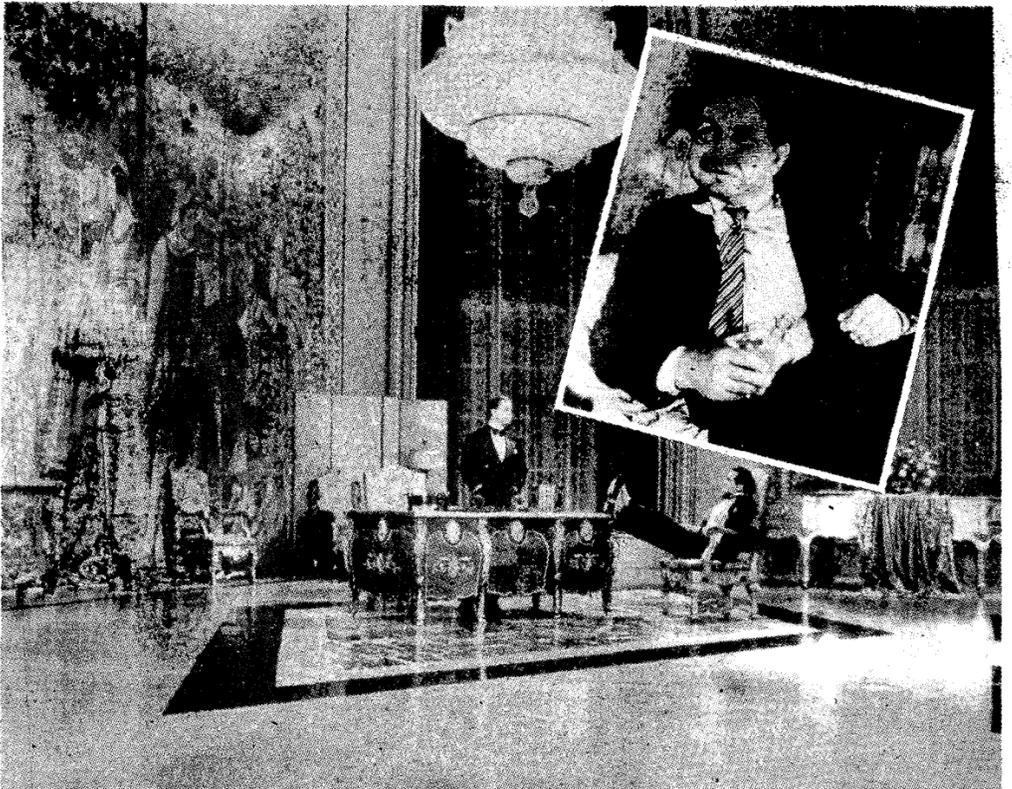
The gangster film expresses at least two different and contradictory images of American life. One is an ideal of democracy and camaraderie, exemplified in films where heroes feel ethnic solidarity, love of family, or loyalty to class. Here they are modern Robin Hoods rather than bandits or killers. Such figures have particularly strong ties to another impor-

tant American film hero, the cowboy, who defends shepherders against monopoly cattle barons and homesteaders against mauling gangs.

But the benign element does not predominate the gangster image: emerging from a real Eastern world of city slums, poverty and industrialism, the criminal is a man who chooses a violent short-cut to success. The result, according to Rosow, is a disturbing double image of the modern American as someone who personifies democratic aspirations, but most often lives by the violent instincts of American capitalism.

Since its early appearance in silent movies, the gangster film genre has undergone a number of changes. Its development, as well as the increasing glorification of the criminal hero, reflects the real and growing importance of crime in American life. Rosow suggests that film criminals also reflect the experiences of the giants in the film industry. Several owners of major studios—William Fox and Harry Cohn to name two—grew up in New York at the periphery of slum life crime. Their meteoric rise to power and fame is matched by the rise of film gangsters from the slums—with one significant difference: they retained their movie empires and lived lives of incredible luxury, whereas the American public and the industry Censorship Code demanded that film criminals be expelled from their positions of momentary power. Most die an ignominious death.

Gangster films produced before 1920 usually focused on the immigrant backgrounds of the criminal. After the 1920s, movie sets became lush, cars bigger, and crime more intricate and organized as movie thieves and bootleggers strove to match the



The gangster's rise and fall was traced in his dress and furnishings (above, Edward G. Robinson in penthouse and, insert, after *Little Caesar's* fall).

extravagant consumption of the very rich.

With the coming of talking pictures, the urban outlaw reached his zenith in such films as *Little Caesar* and *Public Enemy*, and the development of the genre was completed. But in the mid-'30s, bending before immense pressure from religious and law-enforcement groups, the studios ended their lionization of criminals. The gangster hero—with very little change—was transformed into a G-man who now turned his guns to the service of law and order.

In the 1940s and early 1950s such characters were easily enlisted in film struggles against Nazis and Communists. A number of movies in this period depicted FBI men breaking up sabotage rings or uncovering subversion.

Following an important change in the history of organized crime, however, the 1950s gangster film also increasingly portrayed the Mafia ("syndicate" in film parlance)—America's first multinational crime corporation. A final development of the 1960s and 1970s returned to the humble origins of the criminal. Rosow ar-

gues that films such as *The Godfather I & II* reflect a nostalgia for family life and immigrant history.

Sharper focus.

Although this is an excellent book, the author might have sharpened his conclusions with a discussion of British and French film history where there are very different but interesting traditions of depicting criminals. He also might have asked whether the gangster film is not sometimes an unconscious satire of American business and social mobility—a bleak but critical look at the American myth of success.

These films seem to say, over and over, that the rise from humble origins exacts great cost and violence. The exaggerated vulgarity of movie Al Capones and Little Caesars, who appear grotesque in the elegant social worlds to which they aspire, shows the rise from rags to riches to be illusory and impermanent. For a moment the audience can experience the luxury and elegance promised by the American Dream,

but they know that the dream is impossible and filled with danger.

Nonetheless, Rosow's attempt to link movie-criminals to American social history is an important one, and it tells us a great deal about the place of the gangster genre in popular culture. The photographs that fill the book eloquently illustrate the development of the genre and demonstrate the links between criminals and the business elite whom they emulate. The sumptuous offices and palatial nightclubs are constant reminders that the rewards sought by legitimate and illegitimate business are the same.

But, as a mythic caricature of the criminal and the successful capitalist, the film gangster must always fall after his moment of glory. Any hint of permanent success would come dangerously close to real life where the boundaries between the underworld and the business world are sometimes too indistinct to see.

James Gilbert teaches history at the University of Maryland and is writing a book on the history of film censorship.

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BROADCASTING

Carnegie II dips toe into TV swamp

By Joanna Foley

E.B. White once said public television should be our "Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minutemen, our Camelot." More recently *TV Guide* saw it instead as our "Sargasso Sea and our La Brea tar pits." And two weeks ago in New York, it was called "Our vision of nirvana that, at its best, offers sublime moments," by Dr. William McGill as he released a major new study, *The Public Trust*, from the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting.

Produced in response to the rising national debate on public broadcasting, the 400-page report is expected to influence pending congressional legislation. According to McGill, president of Columbia University, and his 16 fellow commissioners (five women, two blacks, one Latino), they worked for 18 months on the study to identify the major problems of this system that supposedly serves people, not profits.

Like a troubled adolescent, the 11-year-old public television system is afflicted by a scarcity of funds, too many bosses and too little freedom, not to mention isolation from the real world. The system is unhappily dependent upon its financial providers—Congress and the corporate sponsors who fund an estimated 70 percent of prime time shows. The result is that most public broadcast programming is unimaginative, spiced by occasional documentaries and frequent British imports, and interrupted by fundraising auctions.

Some citizens have switched off, but many others, including community groups and independent creative people, are speaking out instead. In response to their demands that public broadcasting begin to serve the public, not just the rich, the Carnegie Foundation launched the Commission with a \$1 million grant in 1977. The group conceived of its mandate in essentially liberal terms: to help public broadcasting serve as "some form of healing force that balances all the factional striving for narrow interests."

Politically palatable.

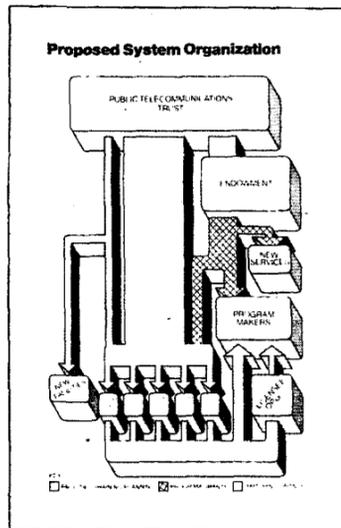
The recommendations of Carnegie II are being watched carefully by media and community activists because they possibly may be as influential as the report of an earlier Carnegie Commission, which became the basis for the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. Members, in fact, were most likely chosen for their ability to frame proposals palatable to Congress and the President.

They included John Gardner of Common Cause, a former HEW secretary; Walter Heller, an economist who formerly headed the Council of Economic Advisors; Bill Moyers, the television journalist and former assistant to Lyndon Johnson; and J. Leonard Reinsch, chair of Cox Broadcasting who served as communications adviser to Kennedy and Johnson. Other members includ-

ed Peggy Charren of Action for Children's Television, Kathleen Nolan of Screen Actors' Guild and Alex Haley.

First, the Commission called for a three-fold increase of federal support for public broadcasting by the mid-1980s, bringing the total up to \$1.2 billion with \$590 million to come from federal funds. This would elevate government support to \$5 per capita, a level comparable to that at which Britain and Japan support their public broadcasting systems. The vision of a larger, more independent and better financed non-commercial broadcasting system will probably receive support from everyone except the most die-hard of competitive commercial broadcasters—and some congressional leaders who insist on belt tightening.

But the specifics of where the money will come from and how it will be used are more controver-



If commercial broadcasters pay a fee for use of public airwaves—on which they make \$10 billion—the funds could subsidize public television.

sial. Carnegie II recommends offsetting \$200 million of the increased federal expenditures by charging commercial broadcasters a spectrum fee for their use of public airwaves. The National Association of Broadcasters has already protested. This proposal is expected to draw heavy opposition from the commercial broadcasting lobby, although McGill explained it in terms that would persuade the average person.

"Oil companies pay for leases on public land which provide them with enormous benefits, so what's good for them should be good for America's commercial broadcasters," he said. "The industry makes \$10 billion in revenue off the public's airwaves and pays not a dime for their use." This recommendation is favored by Lionel Van Deerlin, the California Democrat who heads the House Communications Subcommittee.

Carnegie II also calls for structural changes in public television, replacing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting with two new national organizations. The Public Telecommunications Trust would set policies and evaluate



The Carnegie Commission report, headed by William McGill (upper right), does not please many independent video and filmmakers, like CETA crew (below).

performance; programming would be handled separately by the Program Services Endowment.

Hands off?

Ostensibly, the structural changes were suggested to protect public broadcasting from the political interference that occurred during the Nixon years. Its budget was vetoed in 1972 and attempts were made to curb political commentators such as Bill Moyers and William Buckley. The new plan supposedly would protect the system's independence because some non-presidential appointees would

accurately, according to former FCC chair Nicholas Johnson. "The report itemizes the major problems of public broadcasting—its insular quality, its establishment control, its oppression of independent creative people," he said. "As for Carnegie's solutions...." Johnson then remembered his mother's admonition that if he couldn't say something nice, he shouldn't say anything at all.

Other media activists were more explicitly critical. The national debate on public broadcasting that women, minorities and community groups initiated

board members, we wouldn't be present at all." And despite new requirements that local stations must observe EEO regulations, Perez reports that WNET has no Hispanics in management or administration. NOW's Kathy Bonk says that women also have trouble crashing through "old boy" employment barriers.

Approach—avoidance.

Carnegie II received cautious praise from Van Deerlin, Carter and PBS leaders Newton Minow and Larry Grossman, but several activists believe the report avoided some problems at the heart of public broadcasting. For instance, who runs the 268 local stations?

"You can have better programs being made under the new programming endowment, but if the boards don't choose to put them on the air, what good does it do?" asks AIVF's Halleck. She believes that the only way to ensure diverse programming is to have diversity on the boards, which now consist of business people and upper class cultural types. As McGill put it, "They're influential citizens, people who can attract talent and money."

NOW's Kathy Bonk finds that some women board members don't represent the needs of working women because they're dilettantes who spend their lives volunteering for civic and cultural boards. Not one board has a labor representative. Only recently have some boards such as Washington's WETA begun allowing the membership to elect a few representatives.

"The money that corporations give is another real problem," notes Paulsell of the National Tasforce. She believes that corporate sponsors should be allowed to contribute to a foundation for programming but not to put their names on particular shows from which they derive enormous PR benefits.

Although corporations fund only 10 percent of total programming (but a much higher percentage in prime time), she says they can still exercise a chilling effect on a station's program choices: "Local stations always need money, so they don't air shows that might alienate local companies."

Public broadcasting could still become the "radical idea whose time has come," as McGill described its potential. If it hasn't worked out that way so far, media activists still aren't giving up hope. This spring in Washington they will testify before Van Deerlin's committee, pointing out where Carnegie II did not go far enough: public broadcasting needs more than additional funds and a few structural changes at the top.

