

Hoods and Yakuza
The Shared Myth of the American and Japanese Gangster Film
by
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**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of
Philosophy**

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March 2016

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Abstract

While there have been many studies of the Hollywood gangster film and others of the Japanese *yakuza-eiga* (gangster films), there have been very few which look in any detail at the relationship between the two traditions: indeed, most commentators maintain that the American and Japanese gangster films have little or no similarity. It is the purpose of this study to challenge the validity of this view by demonstrating that Hollywood and Japanese gangster films do indeed share common forms and functions. By adopting a theoretical framework which advocates a multifaceted approach to genre and narrative studies and also by exploring the question of hybridity in film, the study shows that there is, in fact, a commonality which underlies and unites the American and Japanese gangster film. The study centres on the analysis of a range of films from the 'classic' phases of both traditions—the pre-Code Hollywood cycle of the early-1930s and the 'golden age' *yakuza* films of the 1960s and 70s. It uses this analysis to propose a deep structure which incorporates elements of narrative, theme and an ideologically ambiguous function of social commentary. The study then goes on to test this deep structure against hybrid films made by American and Japanese filmmakers which draw on both traditions, and it concludes with the contention that Hollywood gangster films and *yakuza-eiga* share a mythology which revolves around the notion of code; that is, the personal code by which the gangster-hero lives and dies as well as the overarching code—an abiding set of principles or agreed rules of behaviour—that is accepted by the closed micro-society of the gang.

Acknowledgements

Huge thanks are due to Pauline Small and Guy Westwell, my project supervisors, for keeping me firmly on track with their invaluable help, advice and good sense. Thanks are also due to Libby Saxton for her continued support and to Kathryn Richardson for allowing me the flexibility to combine my day job with work on the project. I must express my great appreciation to Philippa Kennedy and Peter Latham, who throughout the PhD have offered unstinting encouragement and support, and also to Colin Dyer who, together with Philippa, offered his proof-reading services. Finally, and as ever, enormous thanks are due to my wife, Yoko, not only for allowing me to test my imperfect understanding of Japanese society and history on her and for correcting my even more limited grasp of the Japanese language, but most importantly for her infinite patience.

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Note on Translation

Japanese names are given in the Japanese order of family name followed by given name. In the first instance, film titles are given in Japanese first followed by the English translation; thereafter the English title is used. There are occasions when there is more than one English version of the title in use, in which case all common titles are used in the first instance (e.g. *Jingi naki tataikai / Battles without Honour and Humanity* aka *Tarnished Code of the Yakuza/War without Code/Wars without Morality/The Yakuza Papers*), with the most common used thereafter.

In quoting from Japanese texts, including screenplays, I have used the English translation available, for example the subtitle track on the DVD. In instances where there are no English translations or subtitles, the translations are mine, and I am indebted to Ueda Yoko for her invaluable help in this matter.

There are several different systems in use for the romanisation of Japanese. For the ease of the reader I am using the simplest form, omitting the macron for long vowel sounds (for example, Yoko, rather than Yōko).

Japanese Eras

Since the restoration of the imperial system in 1868, eras in the Japanese calendar have been defined by the reign of the Emperor. The official name given to each era is different to that of the given name of the emperor during his lifetime; for example, the present era is Heisei, while the emperor's name is Akihito (although it is highly unusual to use the reigning emperor's name in Japan: he is usually referred to as *Tenno Heika*, 'His Majesty the Emperor'). Upon death, the emperor is thereafter referred to by the era of his reign; for example, Hirohito is posthumously known as the Emperor Showa.

The post-restoration eras are:

Meiji (1868-1912)

Taisho (1912-1926)

Showa (1926-1989)

Heisei (1989-present)

Glossary

ani – brother

aniki – older brother

Anpo – the 1951 US-Japan Security Treaty, renewed amid widespread opposition in 1960 and 1970

apaato – apartment

bozozoku – literally ‘speed tribe’; motorcycle gangs

bukato – gambler

burakumin – literally ‘people of the hamlet’; members of Japan’s ancestral class of outcasts, similar to the untouchables of India

Bushido – samurai code

butsuzo – a statue of a Japanese Buddhist god

danchi – multi-storied block of flats, often in huge developments outside city centres, in suburbs or dormitory towns

eiga – film

gaijin – literally ‘outside person’; foreigner

geisha – a highly skilled entertainer, accomplished in traditional Japanese musical instruments, singing and conversation; not a prostitute

giri – duty or obligation; combined with *ninjo* (humanity) in the *samurai* code

gumi – gang or association

hai – yes

hyoshigi – wooden blocks used in *kabuki* which are clapped together to announce the beginning of the play, and also to punctuate and highlight dramatic episodes

izakaya – traditional Japanese-style pub

jidaigeki – historical or period drama; usually *samurai*-oriented

hana – flower

jinaghu (Chinese) – rivers and lakes; see *mizu-shobai*, the ‘water trade’

jingi – humanity and honour; the *yakuza* code, especially in *ninkyō* films but shown to be bogus in *jitsuroku* films

jingi naki – post moral (world)

jitsuroku – true account or documentary style; *yakuza* films from c. 1972 which depicted a grittier and less romanticised view of *yakuza*

Jiyu-minshuto – Liberal Democratic Party

kabuki – classical dance-drama dating from the 17th Century, noted for the stylisation of its drama, and elaborate costumes and make-up

kanji – pictogram

kami – the ‘spirits’ of *Shintoism* which inhabit many living things, including some humans and animals, as well as other natural objects like trees, lakes and mountains

kamikaze – literally ‘divine wind’; Japanese military suicide attacks by aeroplane or submarine on US forces during the Second World War

katana – traditional long *samurai* sword

keiretsu – ‘business groupings’; successors of the *zaibutsu*

kendo – Japanese martial art using bamboo swords

kimono – literally ‘wearing item’; traditional clothing for both men and women in everyday, formal and ceremonial styles

kodo keizai seichyo – the ‘economic miracle’ of rapid growth from the early 1950s

kubon – underling; a ‘son’ to the *oyabun* ‘father’

kyodai – sibling; brother; one of equal rank within the gang

kyodaibun – sibling/brother relationship

ma – from Japanese aesthetics, meaning absences, gaps, silences or negative spaces, something not positively provided

mama-san – proprietor of a hostess bar

manga – graphic novel or comic book

montsuki – family crests or emblems embroidered on formal and ceremonial *kimono*

mizu-shobai – the ‘water trade’; the night-time entertainment industry, including hostess bars, clubs and cabarets

Nihonjinron – theories of Japaneseness

ninjo – see *giri*

ninkyō – chivalrous; specifically used to describe the early *yakuza* films of the ‘golden age’, c. 1964-1972

ninkyōdo – chivalric code

obi – silk sash (wide for women, narrow for men) wound round the waist to keep the *kimono* closed

ojiki – uncle

ototo – younger brother

oyabun – gang boss; like godfather

sangoku jin – ‘three country people’; Koreans, Chinese and Taiwanese who had been subjugated by the Japanese until 1945

sarariiman – ‘salaryman’ or white-collar worker

sempai – senior colleague

seppuku – ritual suicide

shacho – company boss or section head

shi – death

shinkansen – bullet train

Shinto – the indigenous religious system of Japan which coexists with Buddhism; *Shinto* was the state religion (whereby the Emperor was considered to be a god) until 1946, when it was disestablished by the post-war Constitution

shishi odoshi – traditional garden bamboo water feature in which a length of bamboo is balanced on a pivot with its heavy end resting on a stone, water trickles onto the open end and tilts the bamboo tube so the water is emptied into a stone bowl, the heavy end then drops back onto the stone making a sharp cracking sound; originally used to scare deer or other herbivores

shoji – paper screen, used as a door, window or room divider

shomingeki – films popular during the immediate post-war period, centring on the lives of the 'little people'

tanto – short sword

taiyozuku – 'sun tribe'; featured in films of the 1950s centring on youth culture

tatami – traditional floor covering made of thick rush mats

tekiya – peddler; organised groups of peddlers, together with the *bukato*, were the forerunners of *yakuza*

torii – gate to a *Shinto* shrine

yakuza – gangster

yubitsume – finger cutting; to atone for a wrong-doing, a *yakuza* may cut off the tip of his little finger and the first joint and present it to the wronged party, often his or a rival *oyabun*

zaibutsu – industrial / financial conglomerates, ostensibly broken up during the post-Second World War Occupation

1. Introduction

The Hollywood gangster film, along with the Western, the musical, science fiction and the horror film, has been central to the study of film genres since the 1960s. In contrast, it has only been over the past two or three decades that the Japanese *yakuza-eiga* (gangster film) has gradually become accepted as an area for serious academic and critical study in both Japan and the West. With the exception of da Silva's narrow exploration of the confluence between Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) and Fukasaku Kinji's *Jingi naki tatakai / Battles without Honour and Humanity* aka *Tarnished Code of the Yakuza/War without Code/Wars without Morality/The Yakuza Papers* (1973), there has been no major attempt to look at these two cinematic traditions side-by-side to see at which points, if any, they touch.¹ Indeed, the first significant English language appraisal of *yakuza* films, Paul Schrader's seminal 1974 essay, insists that the American and Japanese traditions have little or no similarity:

The *yakuza-eiga* bears little resemblance to its American and European counterparts. The rules [...] for seminal American gangster films do not apply to the Japanese gangster film; and neither do the more recent definitions of the American and French film noir [...] The Japanese gangster film aims for a higher purpose than its Western counterparts: it seems to codify a positive, workable morality. In American terms it is more like a Western than a gangster film. Like the Western, the *yakuza-eiga* chooses timelessness over relevance, myth over realism; it seeks not social commentary but moral truth.²

It is the purpose of this study to test the validity of Schrader's argument by taking his two basic propositions—that the Hollywood and Japanese traditions have different 'rules', and that unlike Hollywood gangster films, *yakuza-eiga* do not function as social or ideological commentary—and demonstrating that Hollywood and Japanese gangster films do indeed share common forms and functions, and thus establish the link between the separate films and

¹ Joaquín da Silva, 'Fukasaku and Scorsese: Yakuza and Gangsters', in Silver, A. and Ursini, J. eds., *Gangster Film Reader* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight Editions, 2007), pp. 343-354

² Paul Schrader, *Yakuza-eiga: A Primer* in *Film Comment*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January-February 1974), reprinted in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., p. 65

the wider traditions. This will be achieved by showing that despite clear differences in the cultural context within which they were produced, all the films are fundamentally linked by identifiable narrative patterns, and that these patterns allow us to identify a common 'deep' narrative structure which underpins the more obvious 'surface' cultural, generic and narrative differences. This will lead to a proposition that the two traditions are linked by a shared myth based around the notion of code. I should emphasise here that in this study 'Code' refers to abiding principles or agreed rules of behaviour, rather than the semiotic discussion on the relationship between denotation and connotation.³

Before continuing, it is necessary to define what constitutes a gangster film for the purposes of this study. I have chosen to concentrate on films that are concerned almost exclusively with the activity of the gangster-hero, which has allowed me to exclude films that focus on the efforts of the legal establishment to defeat the gangster and control gangsterism (although this forms an element of many of the films discussed here, it is not their central interest), and also those in which the underworld of the gangster forms a backdrop to the narrative but only to the extent of how this affects the protagonists who are not themselves gangsters. Such a narrow focus could, I appreciate, draw a similar criticism to that made about the work of those commentators who elevated the place of the frontier as the site of a clash between civilisation and the wilderness to a central position in myth of the Western. These have been accused of disregarding 'the bulk of the genre, which consists of largely formulaic adventure stories or films that have no interest in the civilisation/wilderness issues as such'.⁴ Such an accusation of exclusivity levelled at this study may have some merit; however, it is not its intention to provide a definitive analysis of all facets of what could be called the wider

³ See, for example, Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977)

⁴ Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, *The Movie Book of the Western* (London: Studio Vista, 1996), p. 10

gangster genre. Such a study, one that includes consideration of all the variations or sub-genres, will have to wait for another day. It is also worth noting that throughout the study I have chosen to use the term 'gangster-hero' (and '*yakuza* hero') rather than any of the alternatives commonly employed by other writers: anti-hero, tragic hero (Maltby, Standish and Warshow), bad-guy hero (Rafter) or simply gangster (Mason and McArthur). This, I think, is more neutral and avoids the connotations of some of the other labels. 'Gangster-hero' is used primarily as a conceptual label, that is when discussing the role and function of the protagonist in the genre rather than specific characters in individual films. In these instances, and for variety, I tend to use the term 'hero' in recognition of the character's central position in the narrative of the film.

This introduction will review a range of critical analyses of *yakuza-eiga*, focussing especially on previous writers' views on its relationship to the Hollywood gangster film. It will then go on to discuss the theoretical framework on which this study will proceed by proposing multifaceted approaches to genre and narrative analysis. Chapters 2 and 3 will focus on the first question arising out of Schrader's hypothesis, that of form, to establish that there are many aspects of the gangster myth that are common to both traditions. In Chapter 2 I will undertake a structural analysis of the pre-Code Hollywood gangster triumvirate of *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930), *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface* (Howard Hawkes, 1932) in order to propose a set of thirteen narrative functions which define the 'classic' Hollywood gangster film. In Chapter 3 I will map these functions onto what Schilling calls the 'golden age' of *yakuza-eiga* (from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s) to show how the narrative structures of the American and Japanese gangster films create cinematic myths

which are closely connected.⁵ Chapter 4 will explore the historical and ideological functions of golden age *yakuza-eiga* to demonstrate that not only do the films comment on changes in post-war Japanese society, but many also include ideologically progressive elements.

The analysis of 'classic' Hollywood gangster films in these early chapters concentrates on the cycle of the three 'rise and fall' films of the early 1930s, while the chapters focussing on *yakuza-eiga*'s 'golden age' explore six films from two of the tradition's most celebrated directors, Suzuki Seijun and Fukasaku Kinji. Suzuki's films, *Hana to doto / The Flowers and the Angry Waves* (1964), *Tokyo nagaremono / Tokyo Drifter* (1966), *Koroshi no rakuin / Branded to Kill* (1967), come from the early stages of the 'golden age' and trace a development from the orthodox *ninkyō* (chivalrous) tradition to an *avant-garde* rendering of the form. The later films of Fukasaku, *Nihon boryokudan: Kumicho / Japan Organised Crime Boss* (1969), *Battles with Honour and Humanity* (1973) and *Jingi no hakaba / Graveyard of Honour* (1975), show the evolution of the *jitsuroku* (true account or documentary style) cycle, which moves the genre away from a mythology of Robin Hood-like defenders of the poor bound by a code of humanity and honour, to a grittier and less romanticised view of *yakuza*.

Chapter 5 examines a hybridisation of the Hollywood and Japanese traditions in the form of three co-productions which centre on a point of contact between American gangsterism and the *yakuza*, and which explore the resulting clash of cultures and the notion of 'code' in its various forms. The films, *The Yakuza* (Sydney Pollack, 1975) (US-Japan co-production), *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (Jim Jarmusch, 1999) (France, Germany, US and Japan co-production) and *Brother* (Kitano Takeshi, 2000) (Japan, UK and US co-production), will be analysed to show how they connect the two cinematic traditions and extend the myth. The

⁵ Mark Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book: A Guide to Japanese Gangster Films* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2003), p. 23

study, therefore, seeks for the first time to establish a clear connection between the Hollywood and Japanese gangster genres and shows how they share a common myth based on elements of a deep narrative structure and a commitment to social commentary. This is in opposition to the assessment of Schrader who, as we have seen, insists that no such connection exists. Even though he is only intermittently cited in subsequent works, his views appear to be largely accepted, as we shall see in the following analysis of writers who have looked into the question.

Critical analyses of *yakuza-eiga*: a brief overview

Schilling repeats Schrader's contention that the closest Hollywood parallel to *yakuza-eiga* is the Western whereby both are concerned with the passing of an era and the birth of a new, and not necessarily better, society.⁶ Iwai McDonald also notes the connection between the *yakuza* film and the Western, highlighting the 'good/bad, in/out, and individual/group polarities' of both genres; however, these polarities are not confined to Westerns but are also present in Hollywood gangster films, as I will show in Chapter 2.⁷ One seemingly lone voice arguing against the comparison with the Hollywood Western is Sato, who asserts that they differ greatly:

Although both genres have fighting scenes as their forte, their differences are deeper than the type of weapon used. With the exception of the US Cavalry, there is no distinction in the rank of characters that appear in Westerns. The sheriff, outlaw, cowboy, farmer, etc., are more or less on an equal social footing. In addition, there are no equivalents to *Bushido* (samurai code) and *ninkyodo* (chivalric code) in the form of special codes for sheriffs and poker players, and each group may have its heroes and villains, its strong and weak, its brave and cowardly.⁸

⁶ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 14

⁷ Keiko Iwai McDonald, 'The Yakuza Film: An Introduction', in Nolletti, A. and Dessler, D., eds., *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1992), p. 167

⁸ Sato Tadao, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*, trans. Gregory Barrett (New York: Kodansha International, 1987), p. 51

However, while there may not be these social distinctions in non-Cavalry Westerns, as we shall see they certainly exist in Hollywood gangster films, just as they do in *yakuza-eiga*.

Other writers take a more extreme view of the (lack of) relationship between the two gangster traditions, with Nolletti and Desser insisting that *yakuza* films 'owe nothing to the West and everything to the peculiarities of Japanese history, culture and society'.⁹ Such a view appears to contradict Bordwell's belief that Japanese cinema should not be viewed as 'wholly other, a blank drastic alternative'.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Nolletti and Desser are supported, albeit in slightly less strident terms, by Sharp who maintains that the *yakuza* film's 'cultural context means it has followed a trajectory distinct from Hollywood gangster movies',¹¹ while Ursini is a little more flexible when he claims that *yakuza-eiga* are related to American gangster films, but not closely.¹²

One characteristic of *yakuza-eiga* that is recognised by many of these commentators but denied by Schrader is the relation of the genre to its historical and socio-political context. This matches the commentary on the social and ideological makeup of the 'classic' gangster films of the 1930s identified by Warshow, James, Munby and others.¹³ Sato suggests that *yakuza* films successfully projected the feelings of those who had been 'shunted aside' by social change

⁹ Arthur Nolletti Jr. and David Desser, 'Introduction', in Nolletti, A. and Desser, D., eds., p. xiv

¹⁰ David Bordwell 'Our Dream Cinema: Western Historiography and the Japanese Film', *Film Reader* 4 (1979), p. 46

¹¹ Jasper Sharp, *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), p. 294

¹² James Ursini, 'Takeshi Kitano: Melancholy Poet of the Yakuza Film', in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., p. 225

¹³ Robert Warshow, 'The Gangster as a Tragic Hero', in *Partisan Times* (February 1948); C.L.R. James, *American Civilisation*, edited by Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster Film from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

during the 1960s, an argument that will be pursued more fully in Chapter 4.¹⁴ Likewise, Iwai McDonald discusses the role of *yakuza* films in reflecting Japan's 'changing social consciousness [...] in a century of radical change'.¹⁵ Chris D asserts that the films of such directors as Fukasaku and Sato Junya create 'a tapestry of socio-economic backstory and thus a political context for their ferocious, ultra-violent studies of the Japanese underworld'.¹⁶ Standish agrees, saying that *Battles without Honour and Humanity* clearly links post-war economic recovery and corruption to American policy in Japan during the period,¹⁷ while Phillips and Stringer note that such films were able to 'refract the pressures and social conflicts in Japanese society in a way that would have been impossible through more direct means'.¹⁸ They go on to claim that this is but one example of how Japanese cinema has over the years productively engaged with other film cultures, notably, but not exclusively, Hollywood.

Despite this acknowledgement that *yakuza-eiga* do indeed have a dimension of historical and socio-political commentary which matches that of the American gangster film, there is still very little direct comparison between the two traditions, with the exception of da Silva (and to a lesser extent, Iwai McDonald) as mentioned above. However, even da Silva's claim that there are only limited points at which the traditions intersect (for example in 1973 with *Mean Streets* and *Battles without Honour and Humanity*) is based on assumptions that need to be challenged. As the films were made in the same year, da Silva argues that it is highly unlikely that Scorsese and Fukasku knew of each others' projects. He goes onto say that

¹⁴ Sato, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*, p. 52

¹⁵ Iwai McDonald, p. 167

¹⁶ Chris D, *Outlaw Masters of Japanese Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 2

¹⁷ Isolde Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 331

¹⁸ Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer, 'Introduction', in Phillips, A. and Stringer, J., eds., *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 9

despite this they use similar themes and *cinema vérité* techniques to arrive at similar conclusions.¹⁹ On the one hand, both directors were influenced by films from their own tradition—Scorsese is in part paying homage to *The Public Enemy*, while Fukasaku is rejecting the idealised view of *yakuza* of the *ninkyō yakuza* films of the 1960s; on the other hand they reference themes and ideas from each others' tradition. *Mean Streets*, da Silva argues, shares the *giri* (duty) and *ninjo* (humanity)²⁰ conflict that prevails in the *ninkyō yakuza* films, while *Battles without Honour and Humanity* takes up the rise and fall themes of the 'classic' pre-Code Hollywood gangster films of the early 1930s.²¹ It is my contention that scholarship on this topic, while persuasive in some respects, does not go far enough. I will show that despite the obvious differences between the two traditions, there are clear links which manifest themselves before 1973, the date of the production of the two films. These can be seen in what Schatz describes as cultural and social conflicts,²² which are clearly present in the narrative structure and socio-political commentary of both the Hollywood gangster films of the 1930s onward and 'golden age' *yakuza-eiga*.

Before moving on to that detailed discussion and comparison, it is worth exploring the theoretical underpinning of this study; that is, the questions of genre and narrative.

¹⁹ da Silva, p. 343

²⁰ Although *ninjo* is usually translated as 'humanity', Iwai McDonald translates it as 'personal inclination' and argues that the conflict within the hero is one of social obligation against a more selfish personal desire. She uses this to build an argument which is slightly at odds with other commentators. In this study, I will side with the majority and use *ninjo* to mean humanity.

²¹ da Silva, pp. 344-347; Iwai McDonald, pp. 184-185

²² Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), pp. 34-35

Genre

Since the emergence of genre studies as a growing branch of film criticism in the 1960s, writers have struggled with two fundamental questions: 'What is genre?' and 'How can different genres be recognised and defined?' As Janet Staiger succinctly puts it, 'genre studies has been handicapped by its failure to sort out just exactly what critics are doing when they think about "genre"'.²³ Both Altman and Neale devote chapters to tracing the history of genre studies in film, with Altman especially linking it explicitly to the study of genre in literature.²⁴ And while most commentators confine themselves to questions of genre in Hollywood, implying, to say the least, that it is solely a feature of the US film industry, Williams argues that genre is not an exclusively American / Hollywood phenomenon, but is an important part of many national cinemas, a view this study shares and will demonstrate.²⁵

Some writers see genres as broad categories echoing the classical Aristotelian classifications of *Poetics*, although Neale argues that accepted film genres are in fact sub-genres of the 'narrative film' genre.²⁶ Likewise, Sobchack claims that there is a single category of 'fictional genre film' held together by a common origin and basic form, justifying his position as a way of sidestepping the issue of multiple 'categories within categories, and categories which overlap', and citing *An Illustrated Glossary of Film Terms*, which he says lists more than seventy-five film genres.²⁷ However, most commentators appear content to accept and work with the commonly recognised genre classifications and use a limited number in their

²³ Janet Staiger, 'Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre', *Film Criticism* 22:1 (Fall 1997), p. 5

²⁴ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999); Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2000)

²⁵ Alan Williams, 'Is Radical Genre Criticism Possible?', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9:2 (Spring 1981), p. 124

²⁶ Steve Neale, 'Questions of Genre', *Screen* 31:1 (Spring 1990), p. 65

²⁷ Thomas Sobchack, 'Genre Films: A Classical Experience', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 3:3 (Summer 1975), p. 196

discussions (Westerns, melodrama, musicals, science fiction, horror and gangster films are the most commonly cited). Nevertheless, they still struggle to define what genre actually is.

Defining 'genre'

Neale cites Tom Ryall's definition:

The master image for genre criticism is a triangle composed of artist/film/audience. Genres may be defined as patterns/styles/structures which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction by the film maker, and their reading by an audience.²⁸

Much of Ryall's thesis is reworked by Schatz who contends that genre films are a result of the industrial filmmaking processes of Hollywood in the 'classical' era. He argues that each genre developed fixed and recognisable elements in a compact between filmmakers, critics and the audience, and as such built successful formulas that were both economically beneficial for the industry and met audience expectations.²⁹ Schatz and Ryall are joined by Altman, who maintains that genre is a complex concept with multiple meanings:

- genre as a *blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production;
- genre as a *structure*, as the formal framework on which individual films are founded;
- genre as a *label*, as the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors;
- genre as a *contract*, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience.³⁰ (original emphasis)

These critics subsequently touch upon several key components for discussing genre which would be taken up by other writers: the film industry and its processes; the filmmaker(s); what Buscombe calls 'an outer form consisting of visual conventions' or iconography;³¹ the narrative

²⁸ Tom Ryall, 'Teaching through Genre', *Screen Education* 17 (1975/6), p. 28, cited in Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 12

²⁹ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, pp. 3-16

³⁰ Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 14

³¹ Edward Buscombe, 'The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema', *Screen* 11:2 (March-April 1970), p. 39

structure; and the knowledge and expectation of the audience (which includes critics). Buscombe and Tudor also note a problem with how genres are identified and individual films are placed within them.³² To put it succinctly, we know *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939) is a Western because we can compare it to other films also called Westerns, but how did we know which films to compare in order to arrive at the genre called the Western? One way is to use industry definitions or look at reviews of the films, but as Staiger points out, even here we do not have agreed and stable categories. On release *Little Caesar* was variously described as a crime movie, a gangster film and a detective film, while *The Public Enemy* was depicted as a gang film, a documentary drama, even a comedy, as well as being nothing like *Little Caesar*. Incredibly, both *Variety* and *The New York Times* failed to describe *Stagecoach*, of all films, as a Western because the term had negative connotations at the time.³³ We therefore have to return to a more formal and vigorous analysis, perhaps using those elements identified by Ryall, Schatz and Altman as a starting point.

The areas to consider when analysing genre as outlined by Ryall are not exhaustive, however. Neither should we rely too much on one of these factors in isolation. Neale makes a good point when he suggests that it is important to recognise genres as multifaceted phenomena rather than one-dimensional entities, and this recognition should lead to a detailed examination of the nature of genres in film.³⁴ Neale's argument is well illustrated by the narrow view of genre recognition proposed by McArthur and Buscombe, who both argue that iconography and visual characteristics are the primary defining characteristics of genres.³⁵ As I will demonstrate in this study, Hollywood gangster films are defined by much more than

³² Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 133

³³ Staiger, pp. 13 & 20

³⁴ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 28

³⁵ Colin McArthur, *Underworld USA* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), p. 24; Buscombe, 'The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema', p. 41

Tommy guns, cars and gaudy clothing, while there is more to *yakuza* films than *katana* (traditional *samurai* swords), severed fingers and tattoos.

Altman takes Neale's review of genre criticism in *Genre and Hollywood* a little further, suggesting ten claims that emerge from his overview of genre studies of the four decades leading to the turn of the century. It is important to note here that these claims are not Altman's but a distillation of what other writers have said. It is also worth noting that in proposing this list Altman is ignoring much previous criticism and oversimplifying many critics' arguments. He appears to put many of these forward only to argue against them:

1. Genre is a useful category, because it bridges multiple concerns
2. Genres are defined by the film industry and recognised by the mass audience
3. Genres have clear, stable identities and borders
4. Individual films belong wholly and permanently to a single genre
5. Genres are transhistorical
6. Genres undergo predictable development
7. Genres are located in a particular topic, structure and corpus
8. Genre films share certain fundamental characteristics
9. Genres have either a ritual or ideological function
10. Genre critics are distanced from the practice of genre³⁶

Or to put it another way:

... the film industry, responding to audience desires, initiates clear-cut genres that endure because of their ability to satisfy basic human needs. While they do change in predictable ways over the course of their life, genres nevertheless maintain a fundamental sameness both from decade to decade and from production through exhibition to audience consumption. Guaranteeing the broad applicability of generic concepts is the broad range of meanings attributed to the term genre, along with the conduit-like nature of textual structure. Seen from the

³⁶ Altman, *Film/Genre*, pp. 14-28

vantage point of the distanced critic, genres at times appear to function ritually, and at other moments to operate ideologically.³⁷

Rather than reviewing all these claims, thus repeating Altman's work, I propose to concentrate on a few areas which I believe most directly concern this study.

Development of genres

Schatz endorses Warshow's view that a genre develops and is refined over time into a familiar pattern that is accepted by the participants mentioned above:

For such a type to be successful means that its conventions have imposed themselves upon the general consciousness and become accepted vehicles of a particular set of attitudes and a particular aesthetic effect. One goes to any individual example of the type with very definite expectations, and originality is accepted only in the degree that it intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it.³⁸

Schatz utilises semiotics and linguistics to suggest that genres can be studied like languages as a formal system of signs whose elements and rules are generally understood, and he argues that certain characteristics—hero, setting, conflict, resolution and theme—should form the basis of any study of genre.³⁹ He also draws on the work of Metz and Focillon⁴⁰ in describing a generic cycle which, according to Focillon, consists of the following stages: experimental, classic, refinement and baroque, and it is only in the classic stage that the characteristics of a genre are set.⁴¹ In later stages the genre embellishes its characteristics and then becomes self-referential.⁴² Both Alan Williams and Steve Neale dispute this argument;

³⁷ Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 29

³⁸ Warshow, 'The Gangster as a Tragic Hero', reprinted in *The Immediate Experience Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: First Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 99-100

³⁹ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 19; p. 35

⁴⁰ Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema* (New York: Praeger, 1975); Henri Focillon, *Life of Forms in Art* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1942)

⁴¹ Focillon, p. 10

⁴² Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, pp. 37-38

they point out that self-reflection is present in early cinema, before many genres were codified (for example *Wild and Woolly* [John Emerson, 1917], which they assert is a 'self-conscious' Western). They go on to maintain that Schatz's argument does not take changes in the filmmaking system or social context into account.⁴³ An example of a gangster film that challenges Schatz's view of the evolution of genres is *The Little Giant* (Roy Del Ruth, 1933), which plays with many of the developing conventions of the genre. Edward G. Robinson, trading on his already established gangster screen persona, plays James 'Bugs' Ahern, who at the beginning of the film retires from the racket at the repeal of Prohibition and moves to California to seek respectability. The narrative structure of the film in many ways follows the 'classic' format proposed later, even though it is very much a comedy pastiche of the genre.

Neale offers an alternative to Schatz by citing the importance of the model of the Russian Formalists; for example, Eikenbaum and Tynyanov. The Formalists place genre not within a standard linear framework of development, but within both generic and wider cultural historical contexts, in which literary works break with their immediate predecessors by referring to older works. Neale maintains that this model:

... takes account the historicity, not only of genres, but of specific generic regimes; it takes account of their process-like nature; and, in its insistence on the importance of an interplay between canonized and non-canonized forms of representation, and between canonized and non-canonized genres, it takes account of both the transience of generic hierarchies, and of the role of hybridisation in the formation and dissolution of individual genres.⁴⁴

Staiger, on the other hand, seeks to redefine the idea of 'hybridisation' by questioning the notion of 'pure' genres in the first place. She argues that the idea stems from the emergence of 'New' Hollywood, which happened to coincide with the early critical examination of genre, when hybridisation was a convenient explanation to account for the

⁴³ Neale, 'Questions of Genre', p. 59

⁴⁴ Neale, 'Questions of Genre', p. 60

transformation in genres in the 1970s. It was at this time that Schrader wrote the screenplay for *The Yakuza*, which as we shall see in Chapter 5 includes elements of what might be called New Hollywood style and sensibilities, and also when he wrote his *Film Comment* essay (see this chapter, note 2). Staiger, however, is adamant that there were no ‘pure’ genres in ‘Old’ or, as she calls it, ‘Fordian’ Hollywood either, as all genre films contained at least two plots, one of which was usually romance.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, she concedes that Tudor’s idea of ‘patterns’ is valuable material for analysis, and that grouping films by genre can still be a ‘scholarly act’ which allows for discussions in terms of what filmmakers and audiences do—seeing films and comparing them against the pattern of other films.⁴⁶

Even though this study is not an historical analysis of the gangster genre in America and Japan, in that it does not systematically trace all stages of its evolution, the hypothesis that the two traditions share a common deep structure and myth can only be valid if it can be demonstrated over time and beyond their ‘classic’ phases. Therefore, an understanding of how the genres developed is an integral part of this analysis.

Genre as myth, genre as history

Altman and others cite Lévi-Straussian influence on literary structuralism as contributing to the propensity to either compare film genres to myths or treat them as present-day incarnations of myths.⁴⁷ This is especially prevalent in the work of writers such as Schatz and Wright. In his study, Wright uses Lévi-Strauss’s idea of a binary structure of meaning to examine the basic oppositions of characters in Westerns, but takes issue with the latter’s assertion that this

⁴⁵ Staiger, pp 186-195

⁴⁶ Andrew Tudor, ‘Genre and Critical Methodology’, in Nichols, B., ed., *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 119-121

⁴⁷ Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 19

binary structure is simply imposed by the mind.⁴⁸ Lévi-Strauss takes Roman Jakobson's work into the dichotomous scale in phonetics and language acquisition and production, and argues that it proves that the binary structure is inherently present in the mind and therefore explains the binary structure of myths.

But what exactly do we mean by 'myth' in this context? *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definition: 'A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena'.⁴⁹ Clearly this view of myth does not apply to the films discussed in this study: indeed it has more in common with the standard anthropological definition cited by Martinez:

Myths treat of origins but derive from transitions [... they] relate how one state of affairs became another [...] Myths are *liminal* phenomena: they are frequently told at a time or in a site that is 'betwixt and between'.⁵⁰ (original emphasis)

While this characterisation speaks to primitive myths of pre-literate and pre-industrial societies, it can certainly be argued that at least part of this description is applicable to Hollywood and Japanese gangster films. As we shall see when discussing the ideological functions of these films in Chapters 2 and 4, both traditions are concerned with the tension between tradition and modernity; in other words the films are sited at a time of transition. However, I do not feel they can be classified as 'origin stories' as I will argue that they do not

⁴⁸ Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 21-24

⁴⁹ C.T. Onions, ed., *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary of Historical Principles* Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 1381

⁵⁰ David L. Sills and Robert K. Merton, eds., *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* Vol 10 (New York: The Macmillan Company and The Free Press, 1968), p 576, cited in D.P. Martinez, 'NHK comes to Kuzaki: Ideology, Mythology and Documentary in Filmmaking' in Goodman, R. and Refsing, K., eds., *Ideology and Practice in Modern Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 155

act as a charter to confirm the mainstream ideology or ‘maintain the authority of a specific group’⁵¹—but much more of this later.

Lévi-Strauss, whose work, as we have seen, informs much of the subsequent thinking on myth in film, again is concerned with primitive origin myths which explore the relationship between nature and culture (or humanity). Like the anthropological definition cited above, these myths support integration into the mainstream social group, with the ‘novices of the society who hear the myths for the first time [...] being indoctrinated by the bearers of tradition’.⁵² Lévi-Strauss argues that primitive myth uses totemic symbols from nature to explain and account for human society, where the totems carry meaning—although the precise meaning can change depending on what it is put in opposition to; thus a jaguar can represent nature when opposite a man (culture), but can represent earth when opposite an eagle (sky). However, by only explaining what characters in myths mean without addressing what they do, Wright contends that Lévi-Strauss is ignoring the importance of narrative. He calls this omission ‘untenable’:

... in order to fully understand the social meaning of a myth, it is necessary to analyze not only its binary structure but its narrative structure – the progression of events and the resolution of conflicts. The narrative structure tells us what the characters do, and unless we know what they do, we can never know what they mean to people who do not only think but act.⁵³

Wright also objects to Lévi-Strauss’s assertion that societies are divided into two, each of which is mutually exclusive: historical and non-historical. The former maintains records of the past and so has an understanding of the relationship between the past and present and the cause and effect of history; the latter are uninterested in the past except as part of a recurring cycle of the seasons. Lévi-Strauss maintains that non-historical societies use ‘mythical’ or

⁵¹ Martinez, ‘NHK comes to Kuzaki’, p. 157

⁵² Edmund Leach, *Lévi-Strauss* (London: Fontana, 1974), p. 59

⁵³ Wright, p. 24

'analogical' thought, while historical societies use 'domesticated' or 'analytical' thought.⁵⁴ This highlights an ostensibly fundamental difference in the minds of primitive and modern humans, but fails to take into account (or perhaps refuses to accept) 'historical' society's propensity for mythmaking. Modern myths are often based on interpretations or, perhaps more accurately, slanted readings of history, which in many ways could be considered just as much origin myths as those of primitive societies. One example from history would be the myth of the French Resistance during the Second World War which managed to underplay the extent and severity of French collaboration with the Nazis, and which for decades was central to France's post-war national identity. Another example would be the myth of the American West, which is itself a fundamental part of the American myth and has shaped and, crucially, been shaped by the Western. Wright describes the myths presented in the Western (the plural is deliberate) and other modern myths as 'narratives of social action', and goes on to say, 'All myths fulfil this function for their societies, and therefore the Western, though located in a modern industrial society, is as much of a myth as the tribal myths of anthropologists.'⁵⁵ Modern historical myths are different from history because history *analyses* the past to demonstrate how past actions cause present conditions, while myths describe the present through *analogical* reference to the past as a code to counter the problems of modern life. As such, aspects of the myth can change over time to accommodate changes in society (see below for an example using the myth of Jesse James). As Wright puts it, '... historical myths describe the past in terms of the present, whereas history describes the present in terms of the past'.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 219; Wright, p. 205

⁵⁵ Wright, pp. 124 and 187

⁵⁶ Wright, p. 211

So, what are myths? My own view is that myths are a way of looking at and explaining the world we live in through the medium of story-telling. But the stories are not directly about us and our world, rather they are allegories—we learn about ourselves and our societies by exploring something else, something that is more-or-less fictional. In the case of primitive myths, culture is mapped onto nature and/or the supernatural; in the case of modern historical myths, the present is mapped onto the past. By examining the structure of Hollywood and Japanese gangster films, we will be able to ascertain whether the shared myth conforms with this definition.

The tendency of structuralism, together with semiotic genre analysis with which it is associated, is to allow critics to disregard historical differences so they can more easily recognise the similarities among texts. However, lifting texts out of time and making them ‘transhistorical’ has its drawbacks. Ignoring historical (including political, economic and sociocultural) questions is to discount important, if not vital, information by which to analyse and understand the text. This is the crucial point in Neale’s argument cited above when he discusses the ‘historicity’ of genres and generic regimes. Indeed, Schatz argues that when considering the mythic perspective of analysing genre films, both the studio system of production and audiences’ collective contribution to the mythmaking process must be taken into account:

[The genre film] is, on the one hand, a product of a commercial, highly conventionalized popular art form and subject to certain demands imposed by both the audience and the cinematic system itself. On the other hand, the genre film represents a distinct manifestation of contemporary society’s basic mythic impulse, its desire to confront elemental conflicts inherent in modern culture while at the same time participating in a projection of an idealised collective self-image [...] We can consider the genre film and film genre [...] from a *culturally responsive perspective* that acknowledges their shared as well as distinctive individual qualities.⁵⁷ (my emphasis)

⁵⁷ Thomas Schatz, ‘The Structural Influence’, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2:3 (August 1977), pp. 310-311

As mentioned earlier, audience expectation and knowledge is an important aspect of genre studies, but I would argue that this is not confined to the viewer's knowledge of the genre and its conventions. Surely, (original) audiences were also sensitised to the society and times in which the film was made, and therefore a critical genre analysis must consider this as well. To illustrate this point let us turn to the Western, which since the 1930s has altered its mythology in line with the ideological, political and social changes in American society, as noted above. These changes have been largely based on the differing 'progressive' and 'populist' ideologies which date from the 1870s, in which industrialisation and the emerging management class were pitted against ideals of economic independence and free movement. Using the cycle of Jesse James films as an example, it is possible to trace the various depictions of the Jesse James myth onto American society and politics from the Depression, through the Second World War, the Cold War, McCarthyism and the Red Scare, to the 60s counter-culture, Vietnam and Watergate, the neo-conservatism of the Reagan years and finally our present-day obsession with celebrity and media image. The character of Jesse is often a prime example of the populist ideology, representing the struggle of agrarian values against encroaching industrialisation.⁵⁸ Henry King's *Jesse James* (1939) is a Depression-era New Deal film: Jesse is a social bandit,⁵⁹ a Robin Hood-like character defending the rural poor against the tyrannical monopolies of big business, while the sequel, *The Return of Frank James* (Fritz Lang, 1940), presents him as a fallen martyr. By the late 1950s, Jesse can be seen as a juvenile delinquent in Nicholas Ray's *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957). Ray treats Jesse as a forerunner of his *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), who is psychologically scarred by his relationship with his mother. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (Philip Kaufman, 1972) shows Jesse as a

⁵⁸ Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western* New Edition (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), p. 19

⁵⁹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 281

'psychotic religious fanatic in a world of random violence and capitalist cynicism',⁶⁰ while by 1980, Walter Hill's *The Long Riders*, reverts to a traditional populist version of Jesse as the social bandit formed by the actions of the railroad and its agents. Hill puts the family and a doomed folk culture back in the centre of the myth, which shows the gang, when not robbing trains and banks, participating in community activities.⁶¹ Finally, Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) casts Jesse as a media icon whose various personas—outlaw, killer, popular folk hero, family man—merge and clash so we are never sure who the real man is.⁶²

Such an historical analysis is vital to our understanding of the development of genres as well as individual films. Altman suggests that, 'Whereas producers and exhibitors see genre films as 'product', critics increasingly recognize their role in a complex cultural system permitting viewers to consider and resolve (albeit fictively) contradictions which are not fully mastered by the society in which they live'.⁶³ For such a study as this, it is therefore imperative that there is an understanding of the historical context in which the films under discussion were produced, and that this is combined with an analysis of the narrative structure, especially when there is such a distance in time and/or culture to the present.

⁶⁰ Philip French, 'The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford', *The Observer* (2 December 2007)

<http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Observer_Film_of_the_week/0,,2221721,00.html> [accessed 6 March 2008]

⁶¹ Edward Buscombe, 'The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford', *Sight and Sound* (December 2007), p. 51

⁶² The section on the cycle of Jesse James films is adapted from an unpublished MA thesis: Simon Pate, 'The New West? Contemporary Reworkings of the Western' (unpublished master's thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2008), pp. 5-7

⁶³ Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 26

Approaches to genre criticism

Altman identifies three 'uncertainties' in genre studies which reveal contradictions in different critics' analysis of genre and highlights viewpoints which appear to be in direct opposition to each other: history and theory; inclusive and exclusive lists of texts; and the ritual and ideological approaches.⁶⁴ The first of these is briefly addressed in the previous section, and there will be a much deeper discussion and analysis of structuralist narrative functions later in this introduction. 'Inclusive and exclusive lists' refers to the drawing up of a genre canon, and whether that includes a broad range of films, perhaps defined by Buscombe's visual conventions, or a narrower, more selective range based perhaps on an individual writer's own preferences and prejudices. As mentioned earlier, this study follows the 'inclusive' model by concentrating on films which centre on the activities of the gangster-hero. The third 'uncertainty', ritual and ideological approaches, merits further discussion.

The ritual approach is favoured by those, including Will Wright and Thomas Schatz, who advocate the mythic qualities of Hollywood genres. They argue that the audience chooses what they want to see and the film industry is obliged to provide films that meet the desires, preferences and beliefs of the audience. This participation, it is argued, gives the spectator a high degree of power and as a result the ritual approach attributes ultimate authorship to the audience, with the studios serving the will of the spectator.⁶⁵ Hollywood's present-day output of Marvel- and DC Comic-based series to cater for an audience consisting mostly of males in their teens and early twenties is a case in point, as is the continuation of well-established and popular franchises like *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park*. Genres are therefore the film industry's

⁶⁴ Rick Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', *Cinema Journal* 23:3 (Spring, 1984), reprinted in a slightly different form in Grant, B.K., ed., *Film Genre Reader III* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. 28-31

⁶⁵ Altman 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach', p. 30

attempt to identify and then replicate what the audience desires, albeit by offering variety within the genre, thereby maintaining interest. Schatz declares:

Films within a genre represent variations on a theme, so to speak; the theme itself, as a manifestation of fundamental cultural preoccupations, may remain essentially consistent, but without variation the form necessarily will stagnate. The widespread exposure of genre films to the audience and the demand that filmmakers sustain audience interest in popular forms encourage continued manipulation of generic conventions if the genre is to maintain its vitality and cultural significance.⁶⁶

Conversely, the ideological approach argues that the audience is merely a cipher to be manipulated by the business and political interests of Hollywood. According to those advocating an ideological approach, rather than producing imaginative solutions as suggested by the ritual approach, Hollywood lures audiences in to deceptive non-solutions; and instead of serving the audience, Hollywood is serving governmental and industry interests. Genres pander to this agenda by being particularly soporific in repeating formulae which do the audiences' thinking for them, and by employing generic conventions which seduce them with false claims of societal unity and future happiness. Judith Hess Wright epitomises this approach when she argues:

[Genre] films came into being and were financially successful because they temporarily relieved the fears aroused by the recognition of social and political conflicts; they helped to discourage any action that might otherwise follow upon the pressure generated by living with these conflicts. Genre films produce satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt. They satisfy the status quo, and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganized and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept genre film's absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts. When we return to the complexities of the society in which we live, the same conflicts assert themselves, so we return to genre films for easy comfort and solace—hence their popularity.⁶⁷

She applies the idea of Hollywood preserving the status quo to the gangster films of the early 1930s, suggesting that far from being radical by having criminals as heroes, the films depict how 'rebels and renegades' fail to make their way to the top in the existing order. The

⁶⁶ Schatz, 'The Structural Influence', p. 309

⁶⁷ Judith Hess Wright, 'Genre Films and the Status Quo', *Jump Cut* 1 (May-June 1974), p. 1

criminals/heroes do not wish to change the structure of the gang, which is itself a microcosm of capitalist structure with the same pyramidal hierarchy, but to be 'top dog' of the established system.⁶⁸

Judith Hess Wright appears to be extending the argument of Comolli and Narboni, who propose five categories which show whether and to what extent filmmakers 'sever the connection between the cinema and its ideological function'.⁶⁹ They argue that the majority of films fall within what they call Category (a); that is, films that are 'imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form, and give no indication of the fact', and that:

This merging of ideology and film is reflected in the first instance by the fact that audience demand and economic response have also been reduced to the same thing. In direct continuity with political practice, ideological practice reformulates the social need and backs it up with discourse.⁷⁰

It would therefore appear that Judith Hess Wright's critique of the rise and fall cycle places it firmly within this category. However, it is also possible to argue that in fact these films, rather than reconfirming the sanctity of American capitalist society and ideology, present a picture of a society in crisis: one that is broken and whose values are inverted; a society in which violence is the only recourse to solve its ills. If this is the case then it is possible to identify other categories that better describe the films to be discussed in this study. Briefly, the other categories proposed by Comolli and Norboni are: Category (b)—films which attack their ideological assimilation through actively addressing a political subject that opposes the dominant ideology, which must also be linked with a break from the traditional way of

⁶⁸ Hess Wright, p. 18

⁶⁹ There are a further two categories, (f) and (g), both of which refer to *cinéma direct*. As these are outside the scope of this study, no further reference will be made to them.

⁷⁰ Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Norboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', trans. Susan Bennett, *Screen* 12:1 (Spring 1971), p. 30

depicting reality; Category (c)—the content is not explicitly political, but becomes so through analysis of the film's form; Category (d)—films which have an explicit political content, but which use conventional forms of representation and do not challenge the dominant ideology; and Category (e)—films which at first sight appear to belong to the dominant ideology, but do so in an ambiguous manner and ultimately denounce it.⁷¹ We shall see whether the films in question do in fact fulfil any of these criteria as we discuss them in detail later in the study.

Robin Wood attempts to offer a summary of the values and assumptions that are reinforced by Hollywood, or to put it another way, a definition of American capitalist ideology. The definition appears uncontentious and unsurprising; it includes such concepts as capitalism, work ethic, and (legalised, heterosexual, monogamous) marriage. But it also throws up a number of inconsistencies, including the opposition of commendable pursuit of success and wealth with the 'Rosebud syndrome'—money corrupts and the poor are happier. Wood acknowledges these contradictions and argues that instead of concentrating on the 'what' of genre (motifs, iconography, conventions and themes), critics need to concentrate on the 'why'. He suggests that far from being discrete, individual genres in fact represent different strategies for dealing with those ideological tensions in society which are highlighted by the contradictions in his definition.⁷² I would argue, however, that a comprehensive approach to the study of any genre needs to consider both 'what' and 'why'.

The ideological approach espoused by writers influenced by Louis Althusser and such journals as *Cahiers du cinema* and *Screen* is disputed by Richard Rushton. He claims this approach of 'political modernism' seeks to determine which films are politically 'good' and

⁷¹ Comolli and Norboni, pp. 31-33; Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 218

⁷² Robin Wood, 'Ideology, Genre, Auteur', *Film Comment* 13:1 (January-February 1977), pp. 47-49

'bad' (Rushton's terms); that, is the majority of Hollywood's output. Instead, Rushton proposes a new view on the politics of cinema, a 'democratic method', by examining a number of films from the classical Hollywood era which 'tackle politics and issues relating to democracy'.⁷³ By doing so he is attempting to redefine what is meant by the politics of cinema and reject the notion that films condemned by the ideological approach are no more than pacifiers for a mass audience who are 'immersed in capitalist ideological torpor'.⁷⁴ He particularly decries the privileged position claimed by advocates of the ideological approach by virtue of the 'informed gaze' of symptomatic reading—a reading of what is deliberately left out of a text for ideological purposes; that is, identifying the symptoms which show up the internal tensions that both highlight and denounce the dominant ideology.⁷⁵ Rushton supports Jacques Rancière's call for equality, and his condemnation of those who oppose it: 'The denunciation of "democratic individualism" is simply the hatred of equality by which a dominant intelligentsia lets it be known that it is the elite entitled to rule over the blind herd'.⁷⁶ Rushton may be right to re-examine Hollywood cinema in these terms, and it is certainly possible to argue that the ideological approach is too one-dimensional in its view of how popular films should deal with political, social and economic questions. It is for this reason that I will later call for a method of genre analysis that does not rely solely on an ideological approach, but one which also takes into account the ritual as well as other facets of genre analysis. However, my study will initially structure its analysis of the ideological framework of these films in the terms Comolli and Norboni propose, not least in order to challenge Hess Wright's charge that they preserve the status quo.

⁷³ Richard Rushton, *The Politics of Hollywood Cinema: Popular Film and Contemporary Political Theory* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 1

⁷⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 390, cited in Rushton, p. 212

⁷⁵ Comolli and Norboni, p. 32

⁷⁶ Jacques Rancière, 'Democracy, Republic, Representation', *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), p. 68, cited in Rushton, p. 56

In an attempt to reconcile the 'uncertainties' Wood identified, Altman suggests that Hollywood genres in fact owe their existence to their ability to serve both the ritual and ideological functions at once.⁷⁷ It can of course be argued that these functions are not incompatible at all and that the myths in any given society are often driven by a desire to maintain stability and the status quo and acknowledge, but ultimately iron out, contradiction. In discussing *Nihonjinron* (theories of Japaneseness), Martinez makes this very point while questioning the validity of separating myth and ideology. She goes on to argue that by defining ideology as a symbolic cultural system while admitting that myths have socio-political aspects, the separation of myth and ideology is completely artificial.⁷⁸ Altman also proposes a semantic/syntactic approach, again attempting to marry two seemingly opposing views. He observes that critics at times invoke semantic elements (common topics, shared plots, key scenes, familiar objects and recognisable shots and sounds) because multiple texts share the same building blocks; while at other times critics use syntactic elements (plot structure, character relationships or image and sound montage) to discuss generic affiliation because a group of texts organises the building blocks in a similar manner. While proponents of a syntactic approach argue that a purely semantic analysis is simplistic and that syntactic analysis provides much deeper extratextual patterns which can help contextualise the genre, Altman favours a dual approach:

It is not by chance that the film genres attracting the most popular and critical attention [...] have been those that feature both a high degree of semantic recognisability and a high level of syntactic consistency. What is most fascinating about these genres is the way in which they retain a certain coherence over multiple decades in spite of constant variation in semantics and syntax alike. Only a co-ordinated semantic/syntactic analysis can facilitate understanding of this interaction. At its most forceful, then, genre is located neither in common

⁷⁷ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 98-99

⁷⁸ Martinez, 'NHK comes to Kuzaki', p. 156

semantics nor in common syntax, but in the intersection of a common semantics and a common syntax, in the combined power of dual correspondence.⁷⁹

A multifaceted approach to genre criticism

Neale's call to recognise genres as multifaceted phenomena demands, I contend, a multifaceted approach to analysing genre. I therefore intend to examine the gangster genre through elements of myth and history, explore its ritual and ideological functions, and try to analyse both of Wood's 'what' and 'why' categories. Indeed, the semantic/syntactic approach advocated by Altman appears on many levels to allow such an analysis. However, Altman himself recognises a problem with his approach as laid out in 1984 and 1986, something that has run, unspoken, throughout this section of the study; namely, the fact that different people bring different experiences and reading to a particular film or genre. Genres therefore will have multiple conflicting audiences (not in this case a synonym for 'spectator' or 'viewer', the traditional consumer of films), and Hollywood itself has many conflicting interests. Therefore, to use 'Hollywood' and 'audience' as single, coherent and collective entities is mistaken.⁸⁰ Altman therefore suggests an amendment to his original thesis to propose a semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach.

Like many critics before him, Altman turns to linguistics. Pragmatics is based around what Altman refers to as a 'use factor'. Put simply, in language we know which sounds, clustered together into what we know as words, carry meaning through their use, and on upwards through syntax to discourse. Therefore, base utterances (vocal noise) transcend their own meaning as they are integrated into textual uses. Altman proposes a more sophisticated version of Ryall's definition we saw earlier:

⁷⁹ Altman, *Film/Genre*, pp. 89-90

⁸⁰ Altman, *Film/Genre*, pp. 207-208

Always assuming multiple users of various sorts - not only various spectator groups, but producers, distributors, exhibitors, cultural agencies, and many other users as well - pragmatics recognizes that some familiar patterns, such as genres, owe their very existence to that multiplicity.⁸¹

In other words, we should not view genre formation as one-way filmmaker-to-spectator arrangement, but neither should we view the spectator as the all-powerful final arbiter in the process. Rather there is constant interaction between the different agents (including the multifarious users or 'audience'). In many ways, it appears that Altman is adding the idea of the 'audience' to his original approach which was basically textual in nature. This makes it more rounded, but I believe it is still missing an important ingredient that most critics cited here appear to ignore: the impact of other national traditions (in this case Japanese) on a genre, and it is the purpose of this study to reflect on this question.

Narrative

Narrative, as Altman recognises, has the ability to be translated into different forms yet still present the 'same' story and can therefore be said to exist independently of the particular medium that gives it form.⁸² Like in genre theory, discussions of narrative and attempts to analyse it usually evoke Aristotle's *Poetics* and the work of the Russian Formalists as well as the French Structuralists. Altman argues that this has resulted in a narrow focus on action and plot at the expense of character,⁸³ and cites Branigan as an example of someone who provides a description of narrative that gives undue precedence to plot:

In a narrative, some person, object, or situation undergoes a particular type of change and this is measured by a sequence of attributions which apply to the thing at different times. Narrative is a way of experiencing a group of sentences

⁸¹ Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 210

⁸² Rick Altman, *A Theory of Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 1

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-9

and pictures (or gestures or dance movements, etc), which together attribute a beginning, middle and end to something.⁸⁴

This tendency can also be seen in Lothe's very straightforward definition: 'A narrative presents a chain of events which is situated in time and space'.⁸⁵

Schatz, on the other hand, includes character (in the form of the hero) as one of his narrative elements, as we have seen. He suggests sub-dividing generic patterns under the headings of 'genres of order' and 'genres of integration'. Genres of order (for example, the gangster film and the Western) are, in his view, characterised by the following elements:

<i>hero</i>	individual (male dominant)
<i>setting</i>	contested space (ideologically unstable)
<i>conflict</i>	externalised—violent
<i>resolution</i>	elimination (death)
<i>thematics</i>	mediation—redemption macho code isolated self-reliance utopia-as-promise ⁸⁶

Altman's alternative to Branigan is to argue that while narrative requires action (otherwise it could be said to be portraiture or caricature, for example), action alone is insufficient to define narrative. Indeed, action plus character (what Altman calls 'Narrative Material') only contains the bare minimum needed to produce narrative, and should be supplemented by 'Narrational Activity', a way of presenting and organising the narrative material, and 'Narrative Drive', a 'reading practice' needed in order to interpret the narrative

⁸⁴ Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1992), p. 4

⁸⁵ Jakob Lothe, *Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4

⁸⁶ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 35: It is worth noting that while Schatz is obviously discussing these characteristics in terms of Hollywood genres, we shall see in subsequent chapters it is valid to argue that they all equally apply to *yakuza-eiga*.

material and narrational activity.⁸⁷ As this implies, reception (reading, viewing) is an integral part of the narrative process and can narrow our focus for the time being away from narrative in general to film narrative in particular.

The role of the spectator in film narrative

As with several of the theories of film genre discussed above, the spectator is central to the discussion of narrative. Bordwell is among those who place the viewer at the heart of his theory of film narrative, arguing that film viewing is a dynamic psychological process. As part of this process the spectator is engaged in drawing on schemata based on prior knowledge and experience—of the everyday world as well as other artworks and films—in addition to the material and narrative and stylistic structure of the film itself. On the basis of these schemata, the spectator makes assumptions, erects expectations, and confirms or disconfirms hypotheses in order to ‘execute story-constructing activities’.⁸⁸ This allows for narrative comprehension to take place. Bordwell then turns to the Russian Formalists’ ideas of *syuzhet* (which he defines as ‘plot’) and *fabula* (‘story’), adding these to style (cinematic devices), to create a framework whereby plot and style combine to allow the spectator to construct the story, or as he puts it, ‘In the fiction film, narration is *the process whereby the film’s syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator’s construction of the fabula*’ (original emphasis).⁸⁹ By placing the *fabula* at one remove from the *syuzhet* and style, Bordwell suggests that the spectator uses explicit information from what is presented together with things that are not shown, or inferred events, to construct the story. This process allows the spectator to, for example, reconstruct the story from events that have been presented out of temporal order.

⁸⁷ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, p. 10

⁸⁸ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 32-33

⁸⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 53

Branigan, too, identifies the spectator as being an active agent in the process of narrative. He describes two of the three concepts that he suggests are traditionally viewed as fundamental to narrative theory—point of view and omniscience—before going on to offer his own ‘characterisation’ of the third—narrative:

Film *narrative* is a way of understanding data under the illusion of *occurrence*; that is, it is a way of perceiving by a spectator which organizes data as if it were witnessed unfolding in a temporal, spatial and causal frame. In understanding film narrative, a spectator employs top-down and bottom-up cognitive processes to transform data on the *screen* into a *diegesis*—a world—that contains a particular *story*, or sequence of events.⁹⁰ (original emphasis)

The emphasis here on time, space and causality within the narrative is repeated in Lothe’s general definition cited above.

Chatman agrees that the spectator constructs the ‘narrative synthesis’, while providing a much more comprehensive definition of Bordwell’s ‘style’, which he divides into the ‘Auditory Channel’—including Kind (noise, voice or music) and Point of Origin (on-screen or off-screen)—and the ‘Visual Channel’—Nature of Image (prop, location, actor) and Treatment of Image (cinematography, editing).⁹¹ However, both Chatman and Lothe raise questions about how Bordwell’s process actually works, and what role the ‘narrator’ or ‘author’ plays in it. As Lothe argues, it is difficult ‘to imagine that a film is “organised” without being “sent” [...] Therefore it makes much more sense to say [...] that the viewer reconstructs narrative than to say that he or she “constructs” it’.⁹² The ‘narrator’ Chatman and Lothe conceive should not be confused with a character providing a voice-over narrative or, indeed, the ‘invisible observer’.⁹³ Instead,

⁹⁰ Branigan, pp. 114-115

⁹¹ Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 134-135

⁹² Chatman, p. 126; Lothe, p. 29

⁹³ See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp. 9-12

it is composed of all of the elements (comprising both *syuzhet* and style, but also including the *filmmakers* themselves) that communicate with the spectator.⁹⁴

What, then, is the relationship between the narrator and spectator? Lothe identifies a communication route between them:

Film communication involves a presentation which is primarily visual, but which in addition also exploits other channels of communication. The superordinate 'instance' that presents all the means of communication that the film has at its disposal we can call the film narrator. Guiding the viewer's perception of the film, the film narrator is the film-maker's communicative instrument.⁹⁵

Altman also provides a clear link in his idea of narrational activity, in which he proposes that the reader/spectator 'follows' a character from action to action. A text is only recognisably a narrative when the narrator sets up a character to be followed (to use Altman's example, a film's opening long shot of a crowded train station becomes narrative when the camera focuses on, and starts to follow, a particular character). The process of following therefore at once links the narrator with the spectator:

For every reader, the experience of a text includes a chronological unfolding, word after word, image after image, scene after scene. This prospective view of the text is largely guided by the narrator's decisions. We circulate among the characters and place, not according to our own interests but according to an itinerary fixed by the narrator.⁹⁶

As stated above, each of the models discussed above acknowledges to a greater or lesser extent the importance of the spectator in the narrative process. This role would appear to be fundamental, as without a 'receiver' who can comprehend and interpret the narrative it would be meaningless. Indeed, Branigan identifies five types of narrative theory, four of which centre, at least partially, on the role of the spectator (or viewer, or reader): one concentrating on style (as with Bordwell); another on narrative as a discourse or speech act; a third looking at

⁹⁴ Lothe, pp. 30-31

⁹⁵ Lothe, p. 30

⁹⁶ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 15-16; 291-292

the reception of the narrative; and the fourth comprising of cognition or 'drive' theories, including psychoanalysis. The fifth (in fact the first discussed) examines the logic of a series of events which becomes a causal chain, and which includes Vladimir Propp's work on narrative functions.⁹⁷ As has been mentioned earlier, narrative functions form the basis of the analysis undertaken in Chapters 2 and 3 and therefore merit some further elucidation here.

Narrative functions

Propp proposes a series of functions to describe and define narrative structure as a way of achieving an accurate and unified description of fairy tales. These tales, Propp suggests, have both constants and variables. One of these variables is the names of the characters, but he contends that while the names may change their actions and functions do not, arguing, '*Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action*' (original emphasis).⁹⁸ Schatz redefines this and contends that characters' roles are determined by their relationship with the community and its value structure. Therefore, he argues, the generic character is:

... psychologically static – he or she is the physical embodiment of an attitude, a style, a world view, of a predetermined and essentially unchanging cultural posture [...] the generic character is identified by his or her function within the community.⁹⁹

It is unclear whether Schatz is referring to characters' relationships with the community within the narrative of an individual film, or whether he is arguing that generic characters are fixed and unchanging over time, and that the relationship he speaks of is with wider society—that which is outside the *syuzhet*, i.e. the audience. If it is the latter (which the phrase 'predetermined and essentially unchanging cultural posture' would seem to indicate), his

⁹⁷ Branigan, pp. 118-124

⁹⁸ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), p. 21

⁹⁹ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 25

argument raises serious questions as it would appear to dismiss the ideological, cultural and economic changes in society that contribute to the evolution of genres. Indeed, as we have seen, Schatz himself discusses the evolution of generic cycles. He also argues that film genre is both a static and dynamic system, in that while genre films may continually confront the same basic issues and cultural conflicts, changes in attitudes, the economics of the industry and new films contribute to a continual re-examination and refinement of the genre.¹⁰⁰ Even here, though, he appears to be dismissing wider societal and cultural influences by merely concentrating on changes within the industry.

Wright takes Propp's definition a stage further, and establishes 'character' as either an individual or a group of characters, all of whom 'share a single meaning in an opposition'; therefore, 'society' in a function takes the form of a character.¹⁰¹ The functions proposed in this study will conform to Wright's model of single-sentence statements describing a single action or a single attribute of a character.¹⁰² To identify the social meaning of the myth, Wright, like Schatz and Lévi-Strauss, borrows from linguistics by citing the work of Kenneth Burke, who discusses the use of symbols in human communication and how language classifies the world.¹⁰³ This is accompanied by a symbolic ordering by which people in a social group are arranged in a hierarchy of power, prestige, importance and value, which may be different from actual hierarchy, and which makes communication and social action possible. As such, characters do not interact simply as individuals, but as representatives of specific social principles; therefore a conflict in a narrative is not simply a conflict between two characters,

¹⁰⁰ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 16

¹⁰¹ Wright, p. 25

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motive* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 282

but one of principles—good versus evil, the outsider versus the establishment, or the new versus the old.¹⁰⁴

Propp proposes what he terms four basic theses for his functions:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. These constitute the fundamental components of the tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.¹⁰⁵

While Wright's perspective appears to adhere, at least in part, to the first and second theses, he explicitly disputes the third, calling it 'restrictive' and arguing that it is easy to recognise similar stories that have their events in a different order. He goes on to say that a single function may occur more than once in a narrative.¹⁰⁶ This point of view appears valid; for example, one of the functions I am proposing for the 'classic' 1930s Hollywood gangster narrative in the next chapter, *The gangster-hero forms relationships*, can occur at different times and with different characters within the narrative. (Indeed, one of the most common relationships, the sidekick or gangster brother, is often built outside the narrative in what Propp calls the 'initial situation').¹⁰⁷ Also, by suggesting four different narrative structures for the Western, Wright obviously disputes the fourth of Propp's theses.

Wright also discusses narrative sequence, which he defines as:

... an ordered group of narrative functions that is typically smaller than the entire list of functions for a story but in which the sequence of the functions is unchangeable. Thus, the narrative structure of a myth or story consists of one or more narrative sequences, each of which is ordered internally but unordered in

¹⁰⁴ Wright, pp. 18-19

¹⁰⁵ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, pp. 21-23

¹⁰⁶ Wright, pp. 25-26

¹⁰⁷ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, p. 25

respect to the other sequences where there may be embedding and overlapping.¹⁰⁸

Wright cites the work of Danto in stating that narrative is a form of explanation of ‘how the change from beginning to end took place, and both the beginning *and* end are part of the explanation’ (original emphasis),¹⁰⁹ from which it is possible to extrapolate the basic elements of the narrative, or the narrative sequence. In other words it explains a change from the situation at the beginning of the narrative to that at the end—a character’s actions take place within the context of one particular situation and result in a new situation and a new relationship between the characters.

This apparently traditional structuralist method of narrative analysis appears to be at odds with the more encompassing approach Altman is proposing. Indeed, he contends that theorists who focus on a shared narrative pattern are analysing not content but what he calls ‘framing’ (which, together with ‘following’, forms narrational activity). Framing distinguishes what Altman describes as *some* narrative—a small textual sample, or episode—from *a* narrative—a complete (framed) text with a discernible beginning and end.¹¹⁰ Altman goes on to claim that Propp (and his ‘followers’) assume that all narrative texts can be assimilated to a single model and therefore deserve to be studied together. He is being slightly disingenuous with this claim. He does not cite Wright directly, but mentions ‘Hollywood westerns’ as being among those areas to which Propp’s thesis of a unified narrative structure has been applied.¹¹¹ He does not, however, acknowledge Wright’s rejection of Propp’s third and fourth theses, which, as noted above, are the very ones that most strongly propose a universal narrative

¹⁰⁸ Wright, p. 125

¹⁰⁹ Arthur Danto, *The Analytical Philosophy of History* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 234

¹¹⁰ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 17-18

¹¹¹ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 97-98

structure. And neither does this study claim that there is a single narrative structure for all gangster films, no matter where or when they were produced; rather it seeks to identify areas where the narratives of Hollywood and Japanese gangster films cohere (which may indicate elements of a 'deep' narrative structure—see below), a point hitherto ignored or explicitly denied.

Therefore, as with genre, I contend that there is a place for a multifaceted approach for analysing narrative, one that is open enough to encompass elements of both Altman's and Wright's theories, which I do not see as being mutually exclusive. It is time, therefore, to return to Altman to explore his ideas in more depth.

Single-focus and dual-focus narrative

Altman presents two methods for analysing narrative. One, which he terms the 'rhetorical approach', is concerned with the analysis of a single, framed narrative by considering the relationship between the reader and the text created through what he terms 'following'. As noted above, following establishes both character and narrative, and a text, according to Altman, is divided into a succession of 'following units', 'a series of segments each made up of that portion of the text where a character (or group of characters) is followed continuously'.¹¹² When we start to follow a different character (or group), we are in a different following unit. The transitions between following units, 'modulations', come in three different types. The first is *metonymic*, where the characters have some sort of contact within the diegetic space—we follow Victor Laszlo into Rick's bar; Victor and Rick talk; Victor leaves and we follow Rick back upstairs to Ilsa. The connection in the second, *metaphoric*, is not physical; instead some other characteristic, for example time, links the two characters—Frau Beckmann is in the kitchen making lunch when the cuckoo clock strikes one; we hear the school clock strike one; we cut to

¹¹² Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, p. 22

see Elsie Beckmann leave school. The third, *hyperbolic*, does not present a logical connection; it merely jumps to a new character without any particular justification.¹¹³

Altman complements his rhetorical approach with a *typological approach*, which recognises common narrative patterns across a wide range of texts. He calls these patterns single-focus, dual-focus and multiple-focus. In this section I will concentrate on the first two as these are the modes most relevant to the types of narrative studied in this project. Perhaps the most common is the dual-focus narrative, in which two characters or groups are set in opposition to each other. This kind of narrative sets up parallels between the opposing groups by showing successive episodes of each group engaging in similar activities, providing a sense of balance between the groups. The narrative ends with a resolution of the conflict, either because the source of conflict is removed, the groups merge or one group overcomes the other. One example of the dual-focus narrative is *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), referred to above. The narrative is less about the murders of children than about the parallel attempts of the police on the one hand, and the criminal organisation on the other, to catch the killer in order to re-establish the status quo. In a well-known sequence in the middle of the film we see a series of parallel following units consisting of two groups—one the police and the other the criminals—discussing how to apprehend the murderer; as the discussions get increasingly heated, the rooms become more and more smoke-filled so that both groups are trapped in a fog of ignorance, competing theories and indecision. Parallelism is not confined to the discussions of the two groups, but also to shot selection—a close-up on the police chief follows a close-up on the leader of the underground—and modulations are emphasised by, for example, a hand gesture at the end of one follow unit being completed by a different character at the beginning of the next. The opposition here is an unusual one: clearly the two groups are on opposite

¹¹³ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 23-26

sides of the law, but their desire is the same. Another example of dual-focus is the stereotypical romantic comedy (for example, *Sleepless in Seattle* [Nora Ephron, 1993]), where the protagonists spend much of the narrative in conflict but we see them performing similar acts—seeking consolation from friends, eating solitary dinners, suffering sleepless nights.

Altman proposes a series of traits common to dual-focus narratives, of which I have included only those which are most relevant to the films in this study:

- A following-pattern that alternates between opponents or lovers
- An exposition establishing two equivalent and opposed individuals, groups or principles
- Progression of the text by replacement rather than cause-and-effect connections
- Characters who operate as representatives of a group or category rather than independent beings who develop and change
- A plot that results from temporary imbalance between the two sides and that proceeds by removal of expectations and restoration of unity
- Importance of the law, tradition, nature, or other established systems
- Textual completion and return to a stable situation that depends on the reduction of two groups to one, through elimination or merging¹¹⁴

While dual-focus narrative concerns two characters or groups opposing each other, in the single-focused narrative we follow a single protagonist, as the name implies. Again, unlike dual-focus where the narrative serves to protect society and its laws, single-focus protagonists seek to reject the codes of society. Single-focus protagonists appear to wrest the narrative from the narrator who seemingly abrogates all decisions to the character being followed. These characters can be as diverse as Elizabeth Bennet, Charles Foster Kane and Marion Crane/Norman Bates—in the latter example it could be argued that the single-focus passes from Marion to Norman when he kills her. As these protagonists are the centre of the

¹¹⁴ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, p. 90

narrative, they link other characters who we only usually see in relation to them. Their shared traits include:

- A following pattern that concentrates on the single individual
- Predominance of metonymic modulations as a method of circulating between the protagonist and the supporting cast
- A text generated by the protagonist's desire, often expressed through a departure into previously unexplored territory, behaviour or thought
- A narrator attracted by the main character capable of satisfying the readers' curiosity through unusual qualities, surprising activities, or culturally unacceptable practices
- Protagonists endowed with Promethean aspirations to self-creation, sometimes to the point of usurping the narrator's position
- Secondary characters who serve as a model for the protagonist, often taking the form of a father figure, tempter, mediator, or teacher
- Altered repetition that gives both reader and protagonist ample opportunity to measure the protagonist's progress, through moral mirrors, repeated scenes, reiterated locations, or developmental metaphors
- A text typically alternating between presentation of an event and evaluation or interpretation of an event
- Tales that are twice-told—as perversion and conversation, action and evaluation, murder and solution, encoding and decoding
- Values that depend on private and personal questions (motivation, intention, thought), always subject to interpretation
- Protagonists who are constructed as a combination of actor and observer, and thus alternated between the roles of viewer and viewed object¹¹⁵

Very briefly, multiple-focus narratives follow several different characters and often have multiple plots, for example, Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993).

In terms of the subject of this study, as we shall see in greater detail later, the 'classic' Hollywood triumvirate are clearly single-focus narratives, but later films made under the Production Code, for example the G-Man cycle, become dual-focused as they concentrate on

¹¹⁵ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, p. 189

the opposition of the gangsters and forces of law and order. As we shall also see, the narrative modes of *yakuza* films are not necessarily as clear-cut.

Altman then suggests a third way of considering narrative texts, the *transformational approach*. In this he uses what he calls 'mapping', whereby:

The process of following keeps our attention constantly riveted on current experience—with a thought toward those to come—but the techniques that contribute to the constitution of a narrative map all require a large measure of retrospection. Calling on our memory of the text at hand, as well as our prior experience of other texts, the process of mapping involves the reader in a perpetual return to the past and a constant attempt to define the present in terms of the past, permitting eventual understanding of the present.¹¹⁶

Mapping is primarily concerned with character/action considerations, taking us back to Wright's approach (although Altman may dispute this), and looks at how character/action units relate to each other. To this end, Altman offers a series of transformational matrices which analyse the relationship between different units by considering the character or Subject (S) and activity or Predicate (P), and how the reader/spectator maps this information in order to understand the narrative. Whereas single-focus narratives focus on the subject, following her from one activity to the next ($S_1P_1 \rightarrow S_1P_2$), dual-focus narratives highlight the predicate and the similarity of actions between two subjects—although it may only be in retrospect that we recognise this similarity—($S_1P_1 \rightarrow S_2P_1$). Therefore, when a new character/action unit is introduced (S_2P_2), mapping allows us to recognise the transformational relationship between the units. Thus, while the following units move from S_1P_1 to S_2P_2 , we understand the relationship between the units either in terms of the subject (single-focus) or predicate (dual-focus).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, p. 292

¹¹⁷ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 297-310

Deep and surface structure

Altman's proposal of a transformational approach takes us once again to linguistics and Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG), part of his developing theories of a Universal Grammar. TGG was established in 1957's *Syntactic Structures*,¹¹⁸ in which Chomsky noted a separation between the basic structures, the 'kernel sentences', and transformations which altered these in various ways and turning them into negative or interrogative sentences, for example. This theory was displaced in 1965 by the introduction of the distinction between competence and performance, or language knowledge and language use, and the recognition of 'deep' and 'surface' structure in sentences, the former replacing the 'kernel' sentence.¹¹⁹

Put simply, a group of related sentences can have the same deep structure and different surface structure or vice versa. In the classic test sentences, 'John is eager to please' and 'John is easy to please', the surface structure is the same (noun phrase *John*, followed by verb phrase, which in turn can be broken down to verb *is*, adjective *eager/easy*, particle *to*, and verb *please*). However the deep structure is different as 'John' in the first sentence acts as a subject (he pleases other people) but in the second sentence it acts as an object (other people please John). When sentences have a common deep structure, their surface structure is dictated by transformation or movement. Therefore, the sentence:

1. Yoko saw a film.

can give rise to the question,

2. What film did Yoko see?

As above, the first sentence has a standard 'phrase structure' (noun phrase *Yoko*, followed by verb phrase, broken into verb *saw*, determiner *a*, and noun *film*). Between the first and second sentences is an underlying level:

¹¹⁸ Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957)

¹¹⁹ Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of Theory and Syntax* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965)

3. Yoko saw what film?

with *what film* in its original position. The movement (or 'displacement') in sentence 2 places the word positions in the order in which the sentence is usually said; in other words, *What film* moves to the beginning of the sentence. The level of sentence after movement is surface structure, while the original (and third) sentence, with its elements in the position which follow the rules of phrase structure, is deeper in the syntactic system, and is therefore deep structure.¹²⁰ It would be wrong to assume, as some have, that deep structure represents meaning and surface structure represents sentences as spoken and written. Rather the deep structure is an abstract representation that identifies the ways a sentence can be analysed and interpreted.¹²¹

While Chomsky gradually moved away from the notion of deep and surface structure in syntactical analysis, abandoning it altogether in his minimalist programme,¹²² the terms at least have been appropriated for film analysis by Schatz. When discussing the idea of static and dynamic systems in genre, as outlined above, he contends that 'the genre experience [...] is organized according to certain fundamental perceptual processes,' and like in sport, even though there are fixed rules, no two films (or games) are alike. He goes on to say that this highlights the 'dual nature of any [...] genre, that is it can be identified either by its rules, components, and function (by its static *deep structure*) or conversely by the individual members which comprise the species (by its dynamic *surface structure*)' (my emphasis).¹²³ He then poses a conundrum:

¹²⁰ V.J. Cook and Mark Newson, *Chomsky's Universal Grammar: An Introduction* Third Edition (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 61

¹²¹ Richard Nordquist, 'Deep Structure' (nd) <<http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/Deep-Structure-term.htm>> [accessed 2 May 2014]

¹²² Noam Chomsky, *The Minimalist Programme* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995)

¹²³ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 18

Whether or not some static nuclear deep structure exists, which defines the genre and somehow eludes the effects of time and variation, we cannot overlook the gradual change (as revealed in individual genre films) in form and substance on the genre's surface. Genres evolve, and they tend to evolve quite rapidly due to the demands of the commercial popular media. But whether this evolution represents mere cosmetic changes in the surface structure (equivalent to fashionable clichés or idioms of verbal language) or whether it reflects substantial changes in the deep structure (the generic system itself) will remain, at least for now, open to question.¹²⁴

This study will go some way to answer this question, although perhaps not in Schatz's precise terms: instead of looking for a deep structure for *Hollywood* gangster films over time, it will consider whether there is a case to propose a deep structure which goes across Hollywood and Japanese gangster films, at least in their 'classic' phases. Wright and Altman's studies indicate that deep structures exist. The remainder of this analysis will put forward the case that such a structure binds the very different traditions of Hollywood gangster and Japanese *yakuza* films in the form of a shared mythology.

¹²⁴ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 18

2. The Narrative Structure of the ‘Classic’ Hollywood Gangster Film

The ‘classic’ Hollywood gangster film is often defined by what could be called the ‘Rise and Fall’ cycle of *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*. Grieveson *et al* note that academic and popular studies of 1930s gangster films consistently focus on these three films almost to the exclusion of all others, citing as examples the works of Altman, Browne, Neale and Stanfield (to which it is possible to add names like Mason, Munby, Schatz and Warshow). They argue that concentrating on these films alone raises questions of academic validity:

The most immediate problem is the attempt to construct a generic archetype from an extremely limited set of examples and the concomitant formulation of a set of formal features that gangster films, to qualify *as* gangster films, must follow. [...] It refines a particular cycle of films that were clearly closely connected to the particular socioeconomic context of the early 1930s; the articulation of a generic identity from a very small number of films [...] ignores the production of a vast number of other films about crime, gangs, and gangsters that do not fit with the restrictive definitions abstracted on the basis of the fact that those films fulfil preconceived ideas about the genre.¹ (original emphasis)

While this argument would appear to have some legitimacy, it disregards the crucial factors which combined to result in the three films being produced in a very short space of time. The first of these factors is the historic immediacy which leads to the emergence of the ‘classic’ narrative. Secondly, all three films are largely based on newspaper and magazine stories of organised crime in Chicago and New York to be found in the public domain—Rico in *Little Caesar* and Tony in *Scarface* were clearly understood to be representations of Al Capone, while the on-screen exploits of Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* were closely based on those of Chicago gangster Dion O’Banion and his gang.² Finally, the Association of Motion Picture Producers (AMPP) did all they could to ensure that no such films were subsequently made through the self-imposed moratorium from September 1931. The moratorium was designed to

¹ Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet and Peter Stanfield, eds., *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), pp. 1-2

² Richard Maltby, ‘Why Boys Go Wrong: Gangsters, Hoodlums and the Natural History of Delinquent Careers’, in Grieveson, L., Sonnet, E., and Stanfield, P., eds., p. 50

counter the growing denunciation of violence and other 'moral evils' in films, even though, as Maltby contends, films themselves did not become increasingly degenerate in this period.³

Hollywood and US politics in the 1930s

Examining more closely the first of the key factors, it could be argued that the 1930s Hollywood gangster film was an almost predictable result of social, political and economic change in the United States during the twelve years following the end of the First World War coupled with developments in the film industry, most notably the introduction of synchronised sound in 1927. The new talkies introduced a new level of realism to the movie-going experience and heralded new genres, including the musical and the gangster film, the latter of which 'exploited armed violence (including the sound of the newly-invented Thomson submachine gun) and tough vernacular speech in the context of social alienation'.⁴

The First World War had cemented the United States' position as a global economic and industrial power, and following the war, despite America's move to political and military isolationism, its economic power continued to flourish. The 1920s saw America's output almost double, and its production outstrip that of the six other great powers combined.⁵ At home the US entered a period of post-war boom which has variously been called the New Age, the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, or less optimistically, the age of the lost generation. Social and economic confidence was high; however, there was an increasing internal conflict between urban and rural America:

³ Richard Maltby, 'The Production Code and the Hays Office', in Balio, T., ed., *The Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 49

⁴ David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* Fourth Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 233

⁵ Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p. 60

... nothing explains the contradictions of the age than the antithesis between the log cabin and the skyscraper, between the old values of the land and the new civilisation taking place on the sidewalks of New York.⁶

This new urbanism is central to the gangster narrative, as is of course Prohibition, which was itself a manifestation of the rural-urban conflict. Prohibition, which followed the passing of the 18th Amendment and the Volstead Act in 1919, came into effect in January 1920.⁷

Brendon argues that it was a result of a protest against 'an urban culture, a culture spawned by immigrants and deemed to be radical, degenerate and vicious,' and that it had the effect of turning the United States into a 'nation of law breakers'.⁸ Presiding over this internal conflict were Calvin Coolidge (1923-1928) and Herbert Hoover (1928-1932). Hoover especially favoured the rural heartlands, decrying 'the insidious forces of moral degradation which are such corroding influences in the life of our great cities'.⁹

The Wall Street Crash of October 1929 put an abrupt halt to the New Age, and confidence in the systems of industry and commerce was shattered.¹⁰ In a complete change in popular opinion that has striking similarities to the reaction of large sections of the public and media following the 2008 financial crisis in the UK and US, capitalism itself was called into question, with *Time* magazine even coining the term 'Banksters'. The resultant Depression (a term first used by Hoover to avoid using the word 'panic')¹¹ engendered its own psychology of hopelessness and was often discussed using the language of war: 'Fate and Folly are making a

⁶ Brendon, p. 53

⁷ The Volstead Act, unlike the 18th Amendment, provided a definition of 'intoxicating liquors'.

⁸ Brendon, pp. 54 and 55

⁹ Herbert Hoover, quoted in David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York: Easton Press, 1979), p. 167

¹⁰ Brendon, p. 65

¹¹ Brendon, p. 70

concentrated attack upon the citadels of Civilisation.’¹² As in war, the very structure of society was endangered, and the *New York Times* reported that President Hoover worried that ‘timid people, black with despair, have lost faith in the American system’.¹³ In fact, Hoover himself initially seemed to act timidly, refusing to ‘seek effective national shelter from the gathering economic storm’, while in Chicago none other than Al Capone showed that he was far more in touch with the plight of the people by opening a soup kitchen, at the cost of some \$300 a day.¹⁴ Hoover eventually started a programme of public works, which was extended as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal following the latter’s election to President in 1932, an event which also presaged the repeal of Prohibition.

It was during this time of national crisis that Hollywood established the ‘classic’ gangster genre. Although there had been a number of silent films featuring gangsters, including *Regeneration* (Raoul Walsh, 1915), *Underworld* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1927) and *The Racket* (Lewis Milestone, 1928), it was not until the Wall Street Crash and the Depression (and the coming of talkies, as we have seen) that the genre became firmly established.¹⁵ It was as though Hollywood was viewing the current crisis, the worst peacetime catastrophe in US history, through the prism of another recent (and in the early 1930s still-ongoing) social crisis. Both crises had similar elements: the breakdown of established social order, the perceived degeneracy of the city, the negative effects of immigration (Hoover enacted tough anti-immigration laws in 1929), social alienation, a psychology of despair leading to the destruction of the American Dream, and a complete loss of faith in the system to solve society’s problems.

¹² Arnold Toynbee, ed., *Survey of Historical Affairs 1931* (Oxford: OUP, Under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1932), p. 60

¹³ *New York Times*, ‘Text of President Hoover’s Indianapolis Address’ (16 June 1931), p. 2

¹⁴ Brendon, p. 72

¹⁵ Indeed, McArthur maintains these earlier films cannot, thematically or iconographically, be called gangster films with *Underworld* not even making any reference to prohibition: McArthur, p. 34

The coming together of these two societal dangers had contributed directly to the rise of the gangster genre in Hollywood, as highlighted by Alain Silver:

For Depression-era audiences, whose suspicion and even resentment of establishment figures was likely, the avarice and attendant ruthlessness of such gangster characters could be interpreted at some level as a rebellion against the moneyed and powerful. "Populist" armed robbers such as Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde had fans who actually cheered their daily exploits, which they perceived as fighting against those unseen powers responsible for the turmoil of the Depression.¹⁶

As mentioned above, not only did the cycle of 'classic' Hollywood gangster films result, at least partly, from these historical factors, it was also defined by the introduction of the AMPP moratorium imposed in September 1931. In the short term the moratorium had the effect of delaying the release of *Scarface* as it had to go through four 'reconstructions' before it passed both the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the controlling body of the Production Code, and the New York censorship board.¹⁷ However, Will H. Hays, the President of the MPDDA, soon realised that postproduction reconstructions were not the answer and moved towards enforcement:

Films that questioned basic values, as did the gangster genre, illustrated the corruption and unfairness [...] or challenged the view that government was dedicated to the general welfare of the public [...] were worrisome to Hays [...] The lesson Hays learned [...] was no amount of postproduction cutting [...] could change a film's basic flavour. Controlling content would require strong, firm, preproduction control at the studio level.¹⁸

Even so, the initial move to censor Hollywood was not, as is often portrayed, an attempt to regulate certain words, actions or freedom of expression; rather it was about the very function of entertainment within society and the possession of cultural power. The development of the Production Code was a gradual one and a result of a negotiated system which was acceptable

¹⁶ Silver, 'Introduction' in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., p. 3

¹⁷ Maltby, 'The Production Code and the Hays Office', p. 52

¹⁸ Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 144-5, cited in Mark Wheeler, *Hollywood Politics and Society* (London: BFI, 2006), p. 56

to both the film industry and those who regulated it.¹⁹ It was this climate that led the AMPP to self-censor, but even then the changes were not solely driven by a willingness to acquiesce to moral outrage. Indeed, much of the self-regulation stemmed from economic considerations in times of Depression: the studios could not afford to antagonise the Church and others, as doing so would inevitably lead to a drop in audience numbers. In this way, the MPPDA had a dual function: as a self-censor as well as a protector of Hollywood's financial interests.²⁰ And with a continued eye on financial expediency, unsuccessful cycles were quickly passed over as the studios searched for more popular and profitable productions.

The moratorium was the AMPP's attempt to side-step controversy, and by 1934, when the Code was more rigorously enforced, the studios had already adapted crime films, shifting the narrative focus away from the gangsters themselves and on to the forces of law, and society in general, that opposed them. Such films as *The Mayor of Hell* (Archie Mayo, 1933) or the later G-Man pictures are examples of this shift, although it should be noted that the latter was one of those unsuccessful cycles quickly dropped by the studios in search for more successful formulae. There were also gangster-comedy films, including *The Little Giant* and *Lady Killer* (Roy Del Ruth, 1933) as well as films that were set against the backdrop of organised crime, but which were not ostensibly films about gangsters and which include, for example, *Three on a Match* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933) and *Picture Snatcher* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933). However, by the end of the decade and despite the strictures of the Code, Hollywood was revisiting the 'classic' narrative in *The Roaring Twenties* (Raoul Walsh, 1939).

The Production Code was very clear about what was and what was not acceptable, as set out in the three 'General Principals':

¹⁹ Maltby, 'The Production Code and the Hays Office', pp. 41 and 71

²⁰ Black, pp. 43 and 131, cited in Wheeler, pp. 54-56

No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.

Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.

Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.²¹

It is for these reasons that the 'classic' cycle is of such short duration. Nevertheless, as Silver and Ursini maintain, with *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*, Hollywood managed to 'quintessentially define the genre'.²² As a result, a detailed study of these films' narratives is worthwhile, as it will help define what the 'classic' narrative consists of.

As was noted in the previous chapter, this study is concerned with identifying a deep structure common to Hollywood and Japanese gangster films, which will lead to an understanding of a shared mythology. As a first step towards this I will draw on the work of both Vladimir Propp and Will Wright to analyse the 'classic' Hollywood rise and fall films in order to propose a set of narrative functions which can then be tested against *yakuza* films of the so-called 'golden age'. Wright's methodology as a basis for this study is validated by the fact that there is a clear connection between the Western and Gangster genres. As well as being examples of Schatz's 'genres of order' (see Chapter 1, note 86), both contribute to the American myth and explore the tension between the values of individualism and those of civic responsibility.²³ At any one time the Western views American society through the prism of the mythology of the West and the conflict between the Wilderness and Civilisation on the frontier.²⁴ Likewise, it could be argued that gangster films also explore the myth of the

²¹ MPPDA, *A Code to Govern the Making of Talking, Synchronised and Silent Motion Pictures* (1930)

²² Silver, p. 1

²³ See Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 12, and Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, pp. 82-85

²⁴ Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* New Edition (London: BFI Publishing, 2004), p. 12

American dream, but site this exploration in a contemporaneous urban setting rather than the wilderness of the late-nineteenth century. But unlike the Western, the gangster film presents a dark underbelly of the American Dream. As Warshow says, the gangster is 'the "no" to that great American "yes"'.²⁵

It is also worth noting that this approach is different to that adopted by Kaminsky in his 1972 essay, in which he suggests several episodes and themes that are present in *Little Caesar* and which then occur in subsequent films over the next forty years.²⁶ While some of his observations are similar to those presented below, they are not discussed in terms of narrative functions. Kaminsky's work is certainly enlightening and includes a number of interesting observations, although the following approach is quite different and, I believe, more robust.

Functions of the 'classic' Hollywood gangster cycle

I am proposing that the classic gangster narrative is comprised of thirteen functions, including an initial situation.

1. Initial Situation: The gangster-hero is outside mainstream society.
2. The gangster-hero craves power.
3. The gangster-hero has low status within the gang.
4. The gangster-hero displays special talents.
5. The gangster-hero embraces modernity.
6. The gangster-hero forms relationships.
7. The gangster-hero is sexually ambiguous.
8. The gangster-hero gains power.

²⁵ Robert Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', *Partisan Times* (March-April 1954), reprinted in Warshow, R. (2001), p. 106

²⁶ Stuart M. Kaminsky, 'Little Caesar and Its Role in the Gangster Film Genre', *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 1:3 (Summer 1972), revised in *American Film Genres* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1985), reprinted in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., pp. 47-64

9. The gangster-hero craves legitimacy.
10. The gangster-hero is strong, society is weak.
11. The gangster-hero breaks his own code.
12. The gangster-hero's relationships break down.
13. The gangster-hero dies.

The ubiquity of the gangster-hero as the subject of these functions confirms that the narrative pattern of these films is what Altman calls single-focus. Where there is opposition (which would normally be a constituent of a dual-focus narrative), it is weak and passive—whether that be the forces of law and order (*Little Caesar* and *Scarface*), rival gangs (*The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*), or rivals within the gang (all three films). The passivity of his opponents contrasts with, rather than parallels, the gangster-hero's assertiveness and ability to act, and as a result we follow the hero from one action unit to the next as opposed to seeing the hero and his opponent perform similar activities. This can be seen throughout the films, but a common example would be where sequences which emphasise the gangster-hero's freedom, highlighted by his ability to 'own' the streets, are followed by scenes showing his opponents trapped indoors and unable to control the gangster-hero's actions. We can see this between Rico and Vetorri in *Little Caesar* (when Rico is out doing a job while Vetorri stays in their hideout); between Tom and Putty Nose in *The Public Enemy* (when the only time Putty Nose ventures out he is caught and killed by Tom); and between Tony and both Gaffney and the Chief of Police in *Scarface* (the former is holed up in a bowling alley, while the latter stays in his office making speeches about the evils of gangs in general and Tony in particular).

In the following detailed analysis of each of the functions, precedence is given to those which most contribute to the deep narrative structure these films share with 'golden age' *yakuza* films as discussed in the next chapter.

Initial situation: The gangster-hero is outside mainstream society

At the beginning of each of the films, the gangster-hero is already outside society on a number of different levels. Firstly, all three heroes—Caesar Enrico ‘Rico’ Bandello (Edward G. Robinson) in *Little Caesar*, Tom Powers (James Cagney) in *The Public Enemy*, and Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) in *Scarface*—are the antithesis of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment. They are from working class immigrant stock—Rico and Tony are Italian-Americans and Tom is Irish-American—and have already, by the beginning of the films, rejected the norms of society and have in various ways turned to crime: Rico is a small-town small-time hoodlum, Tom is a ten-year-old involved in shop-lifting and other petty crimes, and Tony is already an established member of Big Louis Castillo’s gang. The immigrant background of the characters matches that of Robinson, Muni and Cagney, who were all from the Lower East Side of New York (Robinson and Muni’s backgrounds were Jewish and Cagney’s was Irish) and which gave the characters in these early talkies an authentic voice.²⁷ The heroes also all have a gangster-brother or sidekick at the beginning of the films—Joe Massara (Douglas Fairbanks Jr) in *Little Caesar*, Matt Doyle (Edward Woods) in *The Public Enemy*, and Guino ‘Little Boy’ Rinaldo (George Raft) in *Scarface*, each of whom will ultimately play a vital role in the gangster-hero’s downfall.

Even when gangster films have variation narratives, for example the Cain and Abel plot of *Manhattan Melodrama* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1934) or the G-Man plot of *Bullets or Ballots* (William Keighley, 1936), this initial situation contains similar elements. In *Manhattan Melodrama* childhood friends ‘Blackie’ Gallagher and Jim Wade are orphaned at the beginning of the film, and while Blackie may not be a criminal, he is already a trickster; while in *Bullets or Ballots* a corrupt police hierarchy has transferred, or exiled, detective Johnny Blake (Edward G. Robinson) from the city centre where he can most effectively fight crime.

²⁷ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 41

The gangster-hero craves power

All three heroes start the films wanting to, in the words of Rico, 'be somebody', and the genre as a whole is seen as a 'dark allegory' of Horatio Alger's stories of poor boy makes good through hard work and fortitude, thereby achieving the American Dream.²⁸ Of the three, only Tom Powers is specifically using crime as a route to escape poverty; his name, however, gives his motivation an added dimension. *The Public Enemy* starts with a montage of the modern city, beginning with bustling, traffic-filled downtown streets, moving to deserted stockyards and railroad sidings, and finally the dirt streets of urban poor neighbourhoods behind the stockyards, devoid of all traffic except children riding tricycles. Tom's route out of his working-class tenement to the bright lights of the city centre is through crime, and he disparages his brother Mike's alternative solution of attending night school, saying that he is merely 'learning to be poor.' As Tom's primary motivation is to escape poverty he is also the only one of the three who, once he has achieved wealth, is content to remain a foot soldier—for which Maltby describes Tom as a 'hoodlum' rather than a fully-fledged gangster.²⁹ He does not attempt to take over from Paddy Ryan or 'Nails' Nathan, instead his power derives from his freedom of action as the gang's enforcer (and therefore freedom to move around the city streets) and from his and Matt's acceptance into the social world of Paddy and especially Nails.

Rico and Tony on the other hand are more explicitly interested in wielding power: Rico contends, 'Oh, money's alright but it ain't everything. Be somebody. Look hard at a bunch of guys and know they'll do anything you tell 'em. Have your own way or nothing. Be somebody.' Tony, on the other hand, has a more specific plan: 'This business is just waiting for someone to come and run it right [...] Someday, I'm gonna run the whole works.'

²⁸ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 44

²⁹ Maltby, 'Why Boys Go Wrong', pp. 52-53

The gangster-hero has a low status within the gang

As mentioned above, Rico is a small-time small-town hoodlum, who goes to the city. He talks his way into Sam Vettori's gang, but his status is made perfectly clear: Vettori tells him that gun-play (Rico boasts of his abilities) is a thing of the past and then explains the hierarchy, 'I'm the boss. And I give the orders. When we split we split my way. And no squawks.' Vettori then introduces the other members of the gang to Rico, who is literally left outside the circle as they are sitting playing cards while he is left standing by the door. We see the introductions from Rico's point of view and it is clear that the established members are unimpressed by him. In the next scene at Little Arnie Lorch's gambling club, Rico is again shown to be without status as he is challenged by Little Arnie and sent from the room.

In *The Public Enemy* the adolescent Tom starts as a patsy figure in Putty Nose's gang in the fur robbery. Like Rico, his low status is clearly represented by his physical exclusion from the gang when the robbery fails and Putty Nose flees. Tom and Matt return to the gang's headquarters only to find the door locked: they are completely barred and can only talk to the gang through the door grille. In the 1917 sequence he is merely a delivery boy trying to sell stolen cigars to local gangster Paddy Ryan, and it is not until the coming of Prohibition in 1920 that he really becomes a member of the gang. Tony Camonte, on the other hand, is already an established member of Castillo's gang at the beginning of *Scarface*, but is described as Castillo's bodyguard. He only rises in the ranks of rival Johnny Lovo's gang after assassinating Castillo, but even then is left in no doubt about where he stands in the hierarchy when Lovo tells him, 'Stick to me. Do what I say [...] What I say goes. Don't you forget that.'

The gangster-hero displays special talents

As exemplified by Tony, all three heroes are, even within the culture of gang violence, particularly ruthless. In the opening scene of *Little Caesar* Rico holds up a gas station and murders the attendant. Later, as has been mentioned, he boasts of his prowess with a gun. His

impetuosity and willingness to resort to violence are highlighted throughout the early part of the film: he goes for his gun when Little Arnie challenges him and he unnecessarily shoots and kills the Crime Commissioner, McClure, which brings the police down on the gang. Likewise, Tom very quickly displays no compunction in killing the policeman following the botched fur robbery—indeed, the robbery failed because in his inexperience he panicked and shot at the stuffed bear in the warehouse. Later, Paddy Ryan describes Tom and Matt as his ‘tough squad’.

In addition to this ruthlessness, Rico especially possesses a natural intelligence and ability to organise, evoking Al Capone who possessed ‘a genius for organization and a profound business sense’.³⁰ After the gas station robbery, when Rico puts back the clock in the diner, Joe comments that Rico’s ‘old bean’s working all the time,’ while Otero, one of Vettori’s gang, says that he is a ‘smart guy ... he’s got plenty of brains.’ Rico’s greater abilities are seen in the planning of the Bronze Peacock robbery when, after his plan is rejected by Vetorri, he points out a clear flaw in Vetorri’s own plan. In contrast, Tony comes across as uneducated and gauche with his misunderstanding of the words effeminate and gaudy, taking them as a compliment rather than the criticism intended by Poppy (Karen Morley). However, his special talent is brutality as exemplified by his credo, ‘Do it first. Do it yourself. And keep doing it,’ which echoes Rico’s ‘Shoot first and argue afterwards’ philosophy.

The gangster-hero embraces modernity

Mason argues that the genre highlights the tension between traditionalism and modernity, where modern society has no conviction, values, social structures or ideologies. Modernity is represented by the city which encompasses the paradox of freedom and individuality on one hand and industrialisation and alienation on the other. Within the modern city the ‘iconic

³⁰ Hal Andrews, *X Marks the Spot: Chicago Gang Wars in Pictures* (Chicago: Spot Publishing, 1930), cited in Maltby, ‘Why Boys Go Wrong’, p. 47

figure' is the *flaneur*, the 'wandering citizen who moves freely about the urban landscape'.³¹

The heroes obviously embrace the city and its attractions and the freedom which their power grants them. However, this freedom is tempered by severe restrictions. As he becomes more powerful, Tony is surrounded by increasing numbers of bodyguards; Tom, who spends most of the film on the streets, is eventually holed up in a safe house by Ryan; and by the end of *Little Caesar* Rico is on the run and penniless. In their final moments they are all confined, both literally (in an impregnable room, a hospital, and the flophouse respectively), and figuratively (by the agents of law and order or rival gangs).

The city also offers the heroes a way of achieving their pleasures and desires, whether through its lax morality—Tony and Tom's 'molls'—or through consumerism and money.³² Both Rico and Tony are mesmerized by ostentatious jewellery and signs of wealth. Rico eyes 'Diamond' Pete Montana's tie pin and rings, and once he has acquired his own baubles boasts to Little Arnie that there is 'nothing phoney about *my* jewellery'. He is even besotted by the platinum and diamond watch the gang presents to him at the banquet, even after he finds out that it was stolen. And when he acquires his own 'palace' he repeats all Big Boy's formulas ('It'll do,' in relation to the splendour of the house; 'Do you want a cocktail or a dash of brandy?'). Tony also bedecks himself with jewellery, prompting Poppy's misunderstood 'effeminate' comment, and acquires a 'gaudy' apartment. The first thing Tom does after being paid off for the booze robbery from the bonded warehouse is to get fitted for a suit and then buy a large car. The trappings of modernity are not only represented by possessions, but by space. Each of the heroes moves into an ostentatiously large apartment complete with modernist and *art deco* design. As Frayling says, 'Once you've made money you get modern

³¹ Fran Mason, *Hollywood Gangster Cinema: From Little Caesar to Pulp Fiction* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 13-14

³² Mason, p. 15

architecture'.³³ These spaces contrast with their original family homes, most clearly in *Scarface*, in which Tony's mother and sister continue to live in a house where crumbling plaster reveals bare brick walls.

Running alongside this acquisition of the symbols of success, is the procurement and use of modern industrial technology. Tom's new car is custom-made rather than a result of Fordist mass production (and is therefore a metaphor for the man: unlike his brother Mike he is an individual who lives by his own rules and has risen above the norms of society). Tony's adoption of the industrial methods of gangsterism is highlighted by his interest in technology. The film contains several montage sequences of car chases and drive-by shootings and bombings; his car is bullet-proof with a steel bonnet; and his delight is obvious when he first sees a Tommy gun: 'Hey, look. They got machine guns you can carry. If I had them I could run the whole works in a month,' 'You can carry it around like a baby,' and 'I'm going to write my name all over the town with it. In big letters.'

The trappings of modernity are shown to be in stark contrast with the values of tradition. In *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* these are exemplified by the family who, as both Tom and Tony move into the city centre and large modern apartments, remain in their poor neighbourhoods. The ill-gotten gains of the sons will not taint the traditional family. In *Scarface* the tension is both within Tony himself and between him and his sister Cesca (Ann Dvorak). While Tony embraces modernity he insists that Cesca stay true to traditional values, becoming incensed when she displays herself as a modern young woman looking for fun—kissing another man in the hallway of the family home or going dancing at a speakeasy. In the first instance he gives her money on the promise that she won't carry on with men in the

³³ Christopher Frayling in Constantine Nasr, dir., *Public Enemies: The Golden Age of the Gangster Film* (Warner Bros., 2008), 0:41:51

future (only for her to immediately flirt with Guino through the window of her bedroom). In the second he drags her home, accusing her of showing herself off in a low-cut dress and then figuratively raping her, tearing the dress to apparently expose her breast which is only covered by a flesh-toned slip. At both times their mother—a traditional, perhaps even stereotypical, Italian mamma, dressed in peasant clothing and speaking with a strong accent—intervenes. She berates Cesca for taking the money, saying that Tony does not love her and will only hurt her, and then provides comfort after Tony's attack. Both Tony and Cesca represent a modern desire for excess—although Tony's is violent while Cesca's is sexual—but the paradox is that Tony's refusal to allow Cesca to be modern presents him as adhering to traditional values with regards to his family.³⁴

There are no such paradoxes within Tom's family in *The Public Enemy*. Other than Tom the family is a paragon of traditional values, as exemplified by Mike. He is content to stay at home to look after his mother, marry his childhood sweetheart, hold down a low-paid job while acquiring an education, and volunteer for the Marines when America enters the First World War—something that their mother refuses to allow Tom (her baby) to do. Tom's total rejection of these Algerist ideals leads him to deny the very existence of such virtues. He accuses Mike of hypocrisy, saying that he steals nickels from his employer, the transit company, and enjoyed killing during the war. He is thus able to goad Mike into knocking him to the ground with a single punch (arguably an ideological point is being made here: the traditional and virtuous Mike is man enough to fight with his fists; while Tom, his opposite, needs a gun). The scene which most clearly explores the clash between traditional and modern values is at the heart of the film: the welcome home party thrown for Mike upon his return from the war. He is obviously deeply affected by his experiences, either restlessly pacing the

³⁴ Mason, pp. 27-28

room or slumped in a chair, his face pale and eyes dark-rimmed. As the family sit down to dinner, Tom and Matt put a huge keg of beer at the centre of the dining table. The unspoken has become real: their world has invaded the family home, so much so that the people sitting around the table cannot see each other and have to peer around the keg in order to hold a conversation. Matt fills everyone's glass for a toast but Mike refuses drink, eventually hurling the keg to the floor and saying that he knows what it represents, 'beer and blood' (the title of the unpublished novel on which the film is based). The traditional and modern values of Mike and Tom cannot coexist; they are tearing the family (and by extension, the nation) apart. As Mason claims:

The film can be seen as a [clear] enactment of modernity, not only because it focuses on the cultural experiences of mobility, technology, and urban space, but also because it maps the tensions between residual hierarchy and ideological structures of stability and the emergent logic of transformation and contestation that characterises the modern period.³⁵

The gangster-hero forms relationships

In addition to the central lateral relationship with the gangster-brother already established in the initial situation (see above), the gangster-hero cultivates several other important relationships within the narrative, primarily with what I will call the mentor and the acolyte—relationships that are vertical. As discussed above, in *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* the hero also has a central familial relationship, and of course he has relationships with various women. However, the lateral and vertical relationships within the gang are male-male and many have an element of homosocial bonding, a label used in sociology to describe same-sex relationships that are not of a romantic or sexual nature, and therefore distinct, but not necessarily exclusive, from homosexuality. The term was defined in 1976 as a social rather than a sexual

³⁵ Mason, p. 17

preference for members of the same sex,³⁶ but was not popularised until Eve Sedgwick's discussion of male homosocial desire.³⁷ Herdt suggests that 'the more polarized the gender roles and restrictive the sexual code, the more homosociality one expects to find in a society'.³⁸ This would seem to be the case in the 'classic' gangster film where, according to Haskell, women are often relegated to marginal roles because the gangster himself has a feminine and vulnerable side that is brought out by their mothers or other women, for example Poppy in *Scarface* and Gwen (Jean Harlow) in *The Public Enemy*.³⁹ Nevertheless, the women in these films usually fulfil one of a number of set characteristics: the nurturer, the moll, and the woman who precipitates the downfall of the hero (who in a later incarnation would evolve into the *femme fatale*). I will further discuss the gangster-hero's relationships with women in the next section, *The gangster-hero is sexually ambiguous*.

The mentor gives the gangster-hero a place in the gang but is eventually betrayed and/or killed by the hero. In *The Public Enemy*, Tom has two mentors, initially Putty Nose and then Paddy Ryan; however, his relationship with the two men is very different. Putty Nose is a Fagin-like predator, exploiting the boys in his gang (or 'club' as he calls it), whilst entertaining them with vaguely dirty songs. Not only does he exploit them financially, demanding dues and underpaying them for the stolen goods he goes on to fence, there is also more than a hint of sexual predation. In the 1909 sequence at the beginning of the film, he gently strokes Tom's shoulder; and while playing pool in the 1915 segment, by which time Tom and Matt are adolescents, he clearly presents his behind to Tom on the pretext of leaning over the table to

³⁶ Jean Lipman-Blumen, 'Toward a Homosocial Theory of Sex Roles: An Explanation of the Sex Segregation of Social Institutions', *Signs* 1:3 (Spring, 1976), p. 16

³⁷ Eve Sedgwick, in Joseph W. Childers and Gary Hentzi, eds., *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) p. 138

³⁸ Gilbert H. Herdt, 'Extract from A Comment on Cultural Attributes and Fluidity of Bisexuality', in Merl Storr, ed., *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 162

³⁹ Molly Haskell in Nasr, 0:42:53

take a shot. When Tom kills him later in the film it is ostensibly for running out on them following the failed fur robbery, but as Mason points out, Tom is also avenging Putty Nose's sexual aberration even while the older man is singing his dirty song to remind Matt and Tom of the good old days.⁴⁰ Paddy Ryan, on the other hand, is a father figure, a surrogate for Tom's own father, a policeman who we see savagely beat the young Tom early in the film. Even though he is already a street punk by the beginning of the film, his father is presented as a possible explanation for his criminality: Tom is rebelling both against his father's professional legal authority as well as the personal violence he metes out. There is no hint of rebellion against Paddy, however, and unlike Rico and Tony, Tom does not attempt to take Ryan's place in the organisation. Instead he remains loyal and, as we have seen, continues to be content with his position in the gang. He does, though, unwittingly usurp or more accurately cuckold Ryan in the hideout, when Ryan's lover, Jane, seduces him when he's drunk. Tom, though, is appalled by this act of betrayal, and he and Matt leave the hideout which results in Matt's death.

Rico and Tony also develop a close relationship with other gang members who become their acolytes. This relationship augments, and in Rico's case, partially replaces, their relationships with the gangster-brother (other than Matt, Tom's only strong gang relationships are with Ryan and Nails). Rico's acolyte is Otero, who is impressed by Rico's intelligence and replaces Joe as Rico's number two. Tony's acolyte is Angelo, whom he is trying to train as a secretary. It is the fate of these acolytes to die as part of the gangster-hero's downfall.

The gangster-hero is sexually ambiguous

To match the social transgression of crime, the gangster-hero is presented as a sexual transgressor. This transgression takes many forms, from impotence to (hinted-at)

⁴⁰ Mason, p. 21

homosexuality and even incest, and adds to the notion of the 'Other' in these characters, further demonising them. They are immigrants, criminals and deviants (according to the moral majority of the times), and just as with Mike punching Tom, this transgression calls into question the hero's masculinity. Even in pre-Code Hollywood, these transgressions could not be made explicit and were therefore hinted at and disguised. Despite his constant and ultimately successful pursuit of Poppy and several references to other women, Tony's central sexual relationship is with Cesca. This is something she acknowledges towards the beginning of the film when he catches her kissing a man in the hallway. He grabs her wrist and tells her that he does not like people kissing his sister. She replies, 'You don't act it [like a brother]... You act more like... I don't know, sometimes I think...' The accusation of incestuous feelings is unstated but perfectly clear and culminates in the figurative rape discussed earlier. Even though Tony kills Guino out of jealousy, not knowing that he and Cesca have just married, brother and sister end up together in the final shootout. Cesca concedes 'You're me and I'm you' and they die not as siblings but as unconsummated lovers. Munby contends that while the film could not end with Tony and Cesca's love confirmed, the killing of the 'natural' lover (Guino) means that there can be 'no resolution in the resanctification of the heterosexual couple'.⁴¹

There is a clear undercurrent of homosexuality in the heroes. Poppy calls Tony 'effeminate' for his taste in jewellery and clothes, while Rico rejects women at the beginning of the film: when Joe talks of all the beautiful women they will meet in the city, Rico merely poses the rhetorical question 'What good are they?' Instead Rico has two quasi-homosexual relationships, both of which involve unrequited love. The first of these is with Joe who he loses as soon as they arrive in the city. Joe pursues his dancing career and becomes Olga's lover, a rejection that Rico cannot accept. He tries to get Joe back in the gang, using him as the inside

⁴¹ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 57

man for the Bronze Peacock, and continuously defends him against the gang's accusations of disloyalty. It is not Joe's rejection of the gang life that Rico cannot comprehend or forgive; it is his choice of Olga over him that he finds devastating and makes him intensely jealous. He pleads with Joe to come back:

And I kinda took pride in you, Joe, brought you into the gang, pushed you ahead [...] You're my pal. We started off together, didn't we? Well, we've got to keep going along together. Who else have I got to give a hang about? I need you Joe.

When Joe rejects him and is persuaded by Olga to go to the police, Rico knows he must kill them but finds he cannot. We see a close-up of Rico from Joe's point of view, his expression is one of bewilderment at both Joe's rejection and his own inability to act. As the camera tracks back we cut to a point-of-view shot of Joe, slowly going out of focus as Rico backs further away. The relationship is over. The other relationship is with Otero, but in this case the adoration is directed towards Rico. Otero admires Rico as he poses in a tuxedo with white handkerchief in front of a full-length mirror (his other self, the dandy), and praises him for deposing Little Arnie, throwing himself onto the bed on which Rico is reclining. Shadoian suggests that while this action signifies Otero's subservience, it is also a coded expression of his desire for Rico.⁴² Later, when Rico and Otero confront Joe over his betrayal it is Otero who tries to shoot him in an attempt to eliminate a rival for Rico's love.

On the surface, labelling Tom as sexually ambiguous seems flawed. As we have seen, he kills Putty Nose for the latter's own sexual predation, and in an earlier scene he mocks the clearly homosexual tailor who is fitting him for his first suit. However, he seems unable to maintain, or even start, a sexual relationship with a woman. Matt describes him as not 'the marrying kind', and even in the 1909 sequence, while Matt wants to chase girls all Tom wants to get on with is 'business'. As an adult he lives with Kitty (Mae Clarke) but is led into the

⁴² Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), p. 30

relationship by Matt and Mamie (Joan Blondell), and while Matt and Mamie are engaged in noisy lovemaking in the next room Tom is pushing a grapefruit into Kitty's face. He then pursues Gwen but, as we have seen, this seems to be a quest for the unattainable; she even asks whether the only reason he wants her is to impress his 'boyfriends'. And even when it finally seems as though they will consummate their relationship they are interrupted by Matt with news of Nails's death. Given the choice of Gwen or Nails he chooses his male friend and, in what could be seen as the act of a bereaved lover, shoots the horse that threw and killed him. In addition, he has a man / boy relationship with his mother (who always calls him by the childish form of his name, Tommy) which spills over to his relationship with Gwen. Ma Powers is constantly calling him her baby, sentiments repeated by Gwen who calls him a 'spoilt' and 'bashful' boy; even Jane calls him a 'fine boy'.

The gangster-hero gains power

Having survived initiation, been promoted by his mentor, and demonstrated his special talents, the gangster-hero gains power, either through betrayal (in the case of Rico and Tony), or through loyalty (Tom). In all cases, though, the gangster-hero must continue to display ruthlessness and his innate intelligence to gain and then cling on to power.

The gangster-hero craves legitimacy

Once he has gained power, the gangster-hero seeks recognition and legitimacy—not by going straight, but by gaining a certain degree of recognition and acceptance by society. Munby argues that this quest for legitimacy is not only to create a front for his illegal activities but, more importantly, as an outsider he seeks to gain 'cultural acceptance'.⁴³ This appears to be a major driving force in Rico, who reads about Pete Montana's banquet at the beginning of the film. Once he replaces Vettori he has the gang throw him a banquet, complete with a menu

⁴³ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 44

card with salutations from well-wishers, speeches and presentations, and has his photograph taken for the papers. This tells the world, both the underworld and wider society, that he has arrived and has finally become somebody. Tom craves legitimacy in another way, through his relationship with Gwen. She is from a different class, as we can hear by her accent, and although she is also outside mainstream society in that she is, in the language of another popular genre of the time, a 'fallen woman' who has known 'dozens' of men, she is not a moll.

Tony's quest for legitimacy can be seen through language and his adoption of the features of a legitimate business; for example by having Angelo as his secretary and by trying to teach him how to answer the phone properly (saying 'secretary' instead of 'seckertary') and take the caller's name. Like Tom, he also seeks acceptance by a woman, Poppy, who is more educated and sophisticated than he is. He attends the theatre—to see a 'serious' play, not vaudeville—and discusses the plot saying how the heroine is 'disillusioned', a far cry from his 'effeminate' and 'gaudy' faux pas.

The gangster-hero is strong, society is weak

There are two forms of weak society in these films: the first is mainstream society, and the second is the counter society of the underworld. The former is obviously weak, with corruption in the law (*Scarface*), the killing of the Crime Commissioner (*Little Caesar*), or the inability of the police to protect the neighbourhood (*The Public Enemy*). In *Scarface* especially, the gangs are ruling the city and causing murder and mayhem on the streets. As mentioned earlier, to make society appear stronger the AMPP enforced changes to the original film. These included two scenes, both of which Howard Hawks refused to direct.⁴⁴ In the first there is the denunciation of Tony by the Chief of Police after a reporter calls him colourful: 'Colourful? What colour is a crawling louse...'; and secondly the meeting of concerned citizens and an

⁴⁴ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, pp. 58-60

outraged newspaper proprietor, who speaks directly to camera asking for new tougher laws, even marshal law, and strict enforcement of deportation laws as most of the gangsters 'aren't even citizens.' The addition of the two scenes delayed release of the film by a year,⁴⁵ but as they are totally out of place, both cinematographically and in content, their message is somewhat diluted.

In spite of its ability to cause havoc, the underworld society is also weak: firstly, the immediate gang is ripe for taking over; and once the gangster-hero has secured his place he tries to expand by either attacking rival gangs (O'Hara's mob on the North Side in *Scarface*, and Schemer Burns's mob in *The Public Enemy*), or by continuing to rise within the ranks to the very top. Both Rico and Tony seize power from their mentors, Vettori and Lovo respectively. The mentor gives the gangster-hero a place in the gang and is initially someone to look up to and emulate: Tony is attracted by Lovo's clothes, apartment and especially Poppy, the 'ownership' of whom represents control of the gang; while Rico covets Vettori's power over the other gang members, as exemplified by his role in planning jobs. However, as time goes on the mentor tries, unsuccessfully, to assert his own authority and reject the ruthless methods of the gangster-hero. As a result he is seen as being or going soft (as Rico says: 'You can dish it out, but you can't take it.'). The gangster-hero's ultimate success in taking over from the mentor is presaged by a clear indication of a shift in power—Poppy's decision to dance with Tony rather than Lovo in the speakeasy; Rico's better plan for the raid on the Bronze Peacock, which is accepted, even praised, by the other gang members. His authority is confirmed after the raid when the police come to question the gang following the raid and Commissioner McClure's murder. He retreats with the proceeds of the raid to the small hideaway off Vettori's

⁴⁵ Richard Maltby, 'Tragic Heroes? Al Capone and the Spectacle of Criminality, 1948-1931', in Benson, J., Berryman, K. and Levy, W., eds., *Screening the Past: The Sixth Australian History and Film Conference Papers* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 1995)

office—he now controls the inner sanctum. It is only after the police leave that Rico's takeover is formalised when Vettori fails to stand up to him and loses the support of the other gang members. Rico later has another mentor, Big Boy, who grants him Diamond Pete Montana's territories. He immediately starts to plan to take over from Big Boy himself, but it is a plan that never reaches fruition. Tony's takeover of the gang is more straightforward. Once he has won Poppy, the symbol of power, he simply kills Lovo. Unlike Rico he now has no-one to answer to and so can pursue his own agenda of eliminating O'Hara's mob and gaining control of the whole city.

Whether it be 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate', society is not strong enough to defend itself against the gangster-hero until he finally overreaches himself and is brought down by the forces of law and order (*Little Caesar* and *Scarface*) or the underworld itself (*The Public Enemy*).

The gangster-hero's relationships break down

At the very height of power and just as his world starts to collapse around him, the gangster-hero's relationships begin to break down. Particularly important in his downfall is the breakdown of the homosocial lateral relationship with his gangster-brother. In all cases the failure of the relationship is predicated by the gangster-brother having to make a choice between the hero and a woman; and in all cases, to a greater or lesser extent, the gangster-brother chooses the woman. In other words, while the gangster-hero is intent on continuing or even extending his transgressive behaviour, the gangster-brother chooses to opt for domestication and a more conventional and mainstream lifestyle: their desires are now at odds.

As we have seen, the hero's relationship with his gangster-brother is in place at the beginning of each film, and while they are a team it is not a totally equal partnership: the hero

makes decisions and acts while the gangster-brother tends to observe and follow. In the opening scene of *Little Caesar*, only Rico enters the gas station and shoots the attendant while Joe remains in the car. While we do not know the characters at this stage and we cannot see their features, the figure we see is clearly that of the squat simian-like figure of Rico rather than the taller, slimmer Joe. Rico then continues to dominate as he ensures their alibi by altering the clock in the diner, makes the decision to go to the city and actively seeks to join Vetorri's gang. His assertiveness is in contrast with Joe's willingness (up to a point) to follow. Later in the city, it is Rico who plans and executes the Bronze Peacock job while Joe is merely a lookout. Despite this, Joe is not an acolyte—their friendship is much deeper and Rico treats him as an equal. Tom and Matt have a similar friendship, where Tom leads and Matt follows. Even though they work together as partners it is clear that Tom is the dominant personality and we therefore assume that he is the one who shoots the policeman in the aftermath of the fur robbery. This impression is supported when Tom kills Putty Nose and metes out threats and beatings in his role as enforcer-in-chief while Matt remains in the background. When they later make it and move up in the gang it is Tom who owns the car but Matt who drives it, and when Tom insists on giving Gwen a lift on their first meeting he sits in the back with her: Matt is relegated to the position of chauffeur. When Matt tries to lead, Tom cannot follow. As noted above, Matt instigates their pairing up with Mamie and Kitty, and while they share an apartment with the girls it is very quickly clear that Tom is interested in neither Kitty nor domesticity in general, instead he escapes on the pretext of meeting Gwen. Matt, on the other hand, marries Mamie. From then on we only see Matt and Tom together with other people, usually other members of the gang; they are no longer an exclusive partnership. The dominant-subservient friendship is perhaps most marked between Tony and Guino in *Scarface*. Whereas Tony is ruthless, impetuous and gauche, Guino is calm and stylish. Tony acts; Guino observes. And while he seems much more 'knowing' than Tony, he is still the follower. Tony

expects and receives loyalty from Guino but is unaware that Cesca is throwing herself at him (Mason describes Guino as a ‘trophy’ fought over by the two of them).⁴⁶ Following her first row with Tony she goes to her room and from the window sees Guino waiting by the car, listening to a barrel organ and, as is his habit, flipping a coin (something that would itself become part of the genre’s iconography).⁴⁷ Cesca throws him a coin, as if presenting him with a favour, which he keeps, giving his own coin to the organist. There is clearly an understanding between them, but Guino refuses to act on it even when she tries to seduce him later in the film with a sensual dance. Guino, however, resists her, knowing that to take Cesca would lead to disaster. He is not wrong: while Tony and Poppy are away, Guino and Cesca secretly get married. Finding them together, Tony kills him.

A form of betrayal ends all three lateral relationships and hastens the downfall of the hero: Joe rejects Rico in favour of Olga; Guino comes between Tony and Cesca; and Tom usurps Paddy by sleeping with his lover, Jane (albeit while drunk), and then disobeys him by leaving the hideout. Matt loyally follows Tom and is gunned down in the street by the Burns mob—Tom has betrayed both his mentor and his gangster-brother. Other relationships also finish: the acolytes, Otero and Angelo, die trying to protect Rico and Tony; and as we have seen, Tom chooses the dead Nails over Gwen—the last time we see her.

The gangster-hero breaks his own code

As we shall see in the next chapter, the concept of code is central to the *yakuza* myth and the *yakuza* gangster-hero is bound by it—breaking the code leads to downfall. No such rigid or established code governs the actions of the heroes of the ‘classic’ Hollywood gangster film, but

⁴⁶ Mason, p. 38

⁴⁷ It is generally assumed that this affectation was introduced by George Raft in *Scarface*; however, the same coin-flipping can be seen performed by a minor character in *Doorway to Hell* (Archie Mayo, 1930).

such a code exists even if it normally remains unstated. When something which could be described as a code is put into words in *Little Caesar* it is used to ridicule the idea that such men live by a set of principles. The cover of the menu for the banquet organised for Rico includes the inscription 'Friendship and Loyalty' over a pair of white doves of peace (the motto also appears on the banner for the Palermo Social Club which Rico is sitting in front of). This scene comes immediately after Rico guns down Tony, one of his own gang who, he believes, is going to confess following the Bronze Peacock job.⁴⁸ Tony is given a lavish gangland funeral, the largest and most expensive floral tribute coming from Rico. The accusation of hypocrisy is clear in both the funeral and the inscription. Nevertheless, loyalty and friendship are central to the myth generated by these films and, as we have seen, the breaking of this 'code' heralds the downfall of the gangster-hero. Therefore, not only do the heroes transgress the rules of society at large, they also transgress the gang code, and while this may initially allow them to rise within the gang (in the case of Rico and Tony), it eventually leads to their destruction. As noted above, betrayal is the precursor to fall.

Not only does the gangster-hero break the universal code, as he overreaches himself he also breaks his own codes of behaviour. For Rico, this comes in two stages: he fails to kill Joe and Olga when he suspects them of going to Sergeant Flaherty, the police detective who has been pursuing him since McClure's murder; and when he is on the run he turns to drink after eschewing it throughout the film. As we have seen, having been loyal and obedient to Paddy Ryan, Tom disobeys him and leaves the hideout (having also cuckolded him). As mentioned earlier, this leads to Matt's murder and his single-handed attempt to kill the Burns mob—an

⁴⁸ The murder takes place as the victim is entering a church. He falls down the stone steps, an iconographic image that would be reprised in *The Roaring Twenties* and *The Godfather* and one that duplicated the 1926 assassination of Hymie Weiss on the steps of Chicago's Holy Name Cathedral: John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 60

action that was also specifically forbidden by Ryan. After killing both his internal and external gang rival, Tony kills his only friend, Guino. He then turns into a coward after Cesca is shot and he's left alone—something which Munby calls entirely out of character.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, both Rico and Tony finally fail to live up to their own credos: 'Shoot first and argue afterwards', and 'Do it first. Do it yourself. And keep doing it'.

The gangster-hero dies

Munby argues that the heroes' deaths are 'tacked-on' to the films' endings and are a result of 'authoritarian impositions of censorship' even before the enforcement of the Production Code.⁵⁰ Wood disagrees, at least in the case of *Scarface*, arguing that Tony has a child-like (or 'monstrous') innocence which is seen through his excesses, his delight with the Tommy gun, his lack of self-awareness or sympathetic awareness of others, and his inability to recognise the true nature of his feelings towards Cesca. Realisation and self-awareness only dawn after he kills Guino and, having lost control over Cesca, he loses control of himself and finally understands his own vulnerability—he is all alone and his steel shutters 'don't work'. Rather than being a moral ending to make the film respectable, Wood describes it as 'inevitable'.⁵¹ Whether the heroes' deaths are a timid acquiescence to authoritarian censorship or a narrative inevitability, the gangster-hero does indeed have to die; society has to be seen to triumph (if only indirectly in the case of Tom Powers), and the status quo has to be restored—as Frayling recognises, these are, on one level at least, sociological morality tales.⁵² Because of this, the gangster-hero needs to die in a suitable setting—in the gutter (Rico and Tony) beneath suitably significant or ironic signs (Joe and Olga in their first review, 'Topsy Topsy

⁴⁹ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 63

⁵⁰ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 63

⁵¹ Robin Wood, '*Scarface*' *Howard Hawks* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), reprinted in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., pp. 22-25

⁵² Fraying in Nasr, 0:44:00

Turvy', or 'The World is Yours' respectively), or in Tom's case delivered by a rival gang to the family home wrapped up like a baby in hospital sheets, a final comment on the mother-son relationship that Ma, still making the beds upstairs, thinks is about to resume.

As noted above, the heroes' power is represented by freedom of movement and is contrasted with their opponents' confinement, indicating weakness. By the end of the films the tables have been turned: the heroes are weak and confined; their opponents have now regained control of the streets (the city; the nation) and have power restored to them. The transgression represented by the rise of the gangster has been overcome by his downfall.

While this proposed narrative structure is clearly valid for the 'classic' triumvirate, it can also be applied for other pre-code films within a fairly broad generic spectrum, and I would argue that the structure's relevance to other films weakens any charge of there being an over-reliance on the cycle of the three films examined above. A case in point could be *Smart Money* (Alfred E. Green, 1931) in which the hero, Nick 'The Barber' Venizelos (Edward G. Robinson) is not a gangster but a gambler. At the start of the film he is a small-time gambler, running crap games in the back room of his barber's shop, and placing side wagers on the races and anything else that his clients and friends are willing to bet on (*the gangster-hero is outside mainstream society*). He is a talented and successful gambler, the self-styled 'luckiest man in the world' (*the gangster-hero displays special talents*). His sidekick, Jack (James Cagney), and friends stake him for the big poker game in the city (*the gangster-hero craves power; the gangster-hero embraces modernity*), where he loses all the money as the victim of a gang of fraudsters, (*the gangster-hero has low status within the gang*). Nick has to resort to working in a barber's shop, where Jack and he raise another stake to get revenge on the gang and the girl who set him up by beating them at their own game (*the gangster-hero gains power*). He

eventually becomes the most successful gambler in the city and opens his own gambling club, which attracts the rich and influential (*the gangster-hero craves respectability*). However, the authorities cannot touch him as there is no paper trail proving his ownership of the club (*the gangster-hero is strong, society is weak*). He rescues a young woman, Irene, from poverty and looks after her (*the gangster-hero forms relationships*). This relationship is based on Nick's kindness to women rather than sexual attraction (*the gangster-hero is sexually ambiguous*), and follows a pattern established earlier in the film, where women who he is kind to always betray him. Irene is arrested for an earlier misdemeanour and does a deal with the District Attorney to entrap Nick (*the gangster-hero's relationships break down*), and when Jack accuses Irene of betrayal Nick accidentally kills him (*the gangster-hero breaks his own code*). He is arrested and sent to jail (*the gangster-hero—figuratively—dies*).

Even though he devotes an entire chapter to the three films, Munby argues against the classification of the 'classic' triumvirate, saying that rather than attaining the classic status over time, they mark themselves out as classics because they stood out from what had come before. This can be seen when comparing *Little Caesar*, for example, to *Alibi*. The latter has a very different narrative structure which was closer to the melodrama of the silent gangster films mentioned earlier. Instead of following the career of the main gangster character, Chick Williams (Chester Morris), *Alibi* concentrates on his duplicity with regards to the heroine, Daisy (Mae Busch), and the often legally questionable and brutal efforts by the police to bring him to justice. Munby contends that the 'classic' films are therefore prime examples of how genres develop according to social, economic and political changes, and it is a mistake to try to fix a narrative structure on a genre as it does not account for the flexibility of the form.⁵³ In a similar way, Mason warns against the trap of 'imposing a restrictive and unworkable taxonomy on to

⁵³ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, pp. 12-14

resistant texts' and instead proposes an approach that highlights the 'flexibility and variety' of the genre.⁵⁴ Both are correct in their criticism, but as Mike Newell, the director of *Donnie Brasco* (1997), argues, these 'classic' gangster films are central to the creation of the myth, 'With this particular genre there's a very thick, deep, rich tilth out of which these things grow, and that if you went to look at a modern crime movie and then pick it apart layer by layer by layer, you will wind up back in the classic times'.⁵⁵ In addition, the proposal for a series of narrative functions for these films (and indeed the rise and fall narrative itself) concentrates on their *surface* structure while, as stated earlier, this study is more concerned with identifying a *deep* structure. Nevertheless, identifying the surface structure of these films has been an important first step which will be useful when examining *yakuza* films in the next chapters. As Propp reasons when discussing the difficulty in analysing the relationship between the narratives of different traditions:

... as long as no correct morphological study exists, there can be no correct historical study. If we are incapable of breaking the tale into its components, we will not be able to make a correct comparison. And if we do not know how to compare, then how can we throw light upon [...] relationships?⁵⁶

Conclusion

By analysing and defining the surface narrative structure of the 'classic' Hollywood gangster film through a series of narrative functions we have adopted a ritual approach to start to identify elements of the mythology of the gangster genre (Wood's 'what' category). By doing so we have also identified many of both the semantic and syntactic elements of the cycle, while Altman's pragmatic elements will be discussed in greater detail when we look at hybrid films later in the study. However, we have yet to consider an ideological approach to establish whether these films serve and perpetuate the status quo, as argued by Hess Wright, or if they

⁵⁴ Mason, pp. xv-xvi.

⁵⁵ Mike Newell in Nasr, 1:42:56

⁵⁶ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, p. 15

in fact denounce the ideology they appear to uphold. Neither have we yet considered Wood's 'why' category—how the myth represents strategies for dealing with ideological tensions in society. On the surface, Hess Wright's case appears to be overwhelming: the heroes do not challenge the structure of the organisation, but merely use their own ruthlessness to claw their way to the top; and their transgressive behaviour—social, sexual, personal and hierarchical—leads to their ultimate destruction, thereby re-establishing the status quo. This argument seems to be supported by the clear stance the films make in written prologues which decry the cult of the gangster and provide a statement of intent to present an honest depiction of elements of modern American society. Maltby disagrees with a common tendency to belittle this editorialising as merely a cynical attempt to appease critics, and cites contemporary commentators who took the claim of 'honest depiction' to be serious and laudable.⁵⁷ However, despite this apparent acquiescence to the establishment standpoint of the futility of crime, filmmakers were also making clear ideological statements about its causes. Darryl F. Zanuck, head of production at Warner Bros., advocated a progressive political and social agenda which would be embedded in the studio's gangster films.⁵⁸ In a letter to the MPPDA accompanying a draft copy of the screenplay for *The Public Enemy*, he wrote:

PROHIBITION is not the cause of the present crime wave—mobs and gangs have existed for years and years BECAUSE of *environment* and the only thing that PROHIBITION has done is to bring these unlawful organizations more noticeably before the eyes of the public. REPEAL of the Eighteenth Amendment could not possibly stop CRIME and WARFARE. The only thing that can STOP same is the

⁵⁷ Maltby, 'Why Boys Go Wrong', p. 42

⁵⁸ This progressive stance by Zanuck should not be particularly surprising. Unlike Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg at MGM who, among others in the upper echelons of Hollywood, were conservative Republicans and supported Herbert Hoover, Jack L. Warner was an enthusiastic supporter of Roosevelt, and following FDR's successful presidential campaign was appointed Los Angeles Chairman of the National Recovery Administration. Warner would go on to oversee Warner Brothers' production of movies supporting the New Deal. Likewise, James Cagney supported Upton Sinclair's unsuccessful bid to become Governor of California under the campaign of End Poverty in California (EPIC), while Edward G. Robinson was one of the stars who accompanied Roosevelt on the campaign trail and lent his support to several liberal and international causes: Wheeler, pp. 73 and 80

betterment of ENVIRONMENT and living conditions in the lower reasons [*sic*]. In other words, “The Public Enemy” is a story of two boys who know nothing but CRIME, STEALING, CHEATING AND KILLING, and they both come to their death in the picture because of their activities.... Our picture is going to be more biography than plot.... I feel that if we can sell the idea that ... ONLY BY THE BETTERMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND EDUCATION for the masses can we overcome the widespread tendency toward *lawbreaking*—we have then punched over a moral that should do a lot toward protecting us.⁵⁹ (original emphasis)

The films however convey an even stronger ideological message than Zanuck outlines.

Even though, as Maltby points out, they fail to tackle the endemic political and police corruption which enabled gangster activity,⁶⁰ they still manage to present a study of a society in crisis where the establishment is powerless: the heroes may die but this is hardly an overwhelming triumph for society—Tom is killed by another gang, and while Rico and Tony die at the hands of the police, it is not outstanding police-work which leads to their demise but a mistake made in a jealous rage by Tony and a final act of hubris by Rico. The heroes overreach and destroy themselves; they are not destroyed by the forces of legitimate society. Rather than being in control, the figures of authority are belittled, something recognised by the contemporary audience. As *The Public Enemy*'s screenwriter, John Bright, notes, ‘The basic and most important reason for its success was its attitude toward authority, its almost gleeful thumbing of its nose at authority’.⁶¹ So even though the films present an apparent image of mainstream (white) society's triumph over the (immigrant) gangster, the narratives overwhelming focus on the gangster-hero and his actions, rather than on society's or the law's efforts to defeat him. Any such instances of these attempts appear to be out of place and often, as we have seen, the product of post-production censorship in the form of added scenes. These have all the appearance of being ‘tacked on’ in the name of rebalancing the film

⁵⁹ Darryl F. Zanuck to Jason S. Joy (6 Jan 1931), cited in Maltby, ‘Why Boys Go Wrong’, p. 43

⁶⁰ Maltby, ‘Why Boys Go Wrong’, p. 51

⁶¹ John Bright in Nasr, 0:25:25

in order for society to be seen to triumph over the transgressive behaviour of immigrant and working-class protagonists. However, rather than celebrating the success of mainstream society, these endings highlight the impression that the dominant WASP culture and the institutions that maintain it are discriminatory. Because of the prevailing moral climate, the 'classic' 1930s gangster films could not be as overt in their condemnation of the establishment as were later films, as shown by the dishonesty and corruption endemic in 'legitimate' society—politicians, police, judges, the Church—that we see, for example, in the *Godfather* films. Despite this, the pre-Code cycle still manages to provide an ideologically ambivalent view of America through the films' inversion of the Algerist myth of the American Dream of success achieved through capitalist endeavour and enterprise, coupled with their condemnation of the establishment's impotence—the downfall of the gangster-hero is the result of his own hubris and vanity rather than the effectiveness, intelligence or moral superiority of the agents of law and order.

That society is powerless; that the police are impotently confined to their offices; that even the deaths of the heroes will not prevent a continuation of gangsterism speaks of a broken society, one where the old certainties no longer apply and in which the American Dream is itself shown to be a fantasy. Warshow recognised this as long ago as 1948, '...the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects "Americanism" itself'.⁶² As mentioned earlier, these films were made at the height of the Depression when the economic and social system appeared to be on the verge of collapse and many felt powerless to effect any change. Their working class urban audience recognised the portrayal of a 'polyglot American reality that was

⁶² Warshow, 'The Gangster as a Tragic Hero', p. 100

increasingly at odds with the rarefied discourse of official society'.⁶³ And they created a myth in which 'the anti-heroes took action, tried to beat the system, did something with their lot in life and seemed to articulate cultural issues intrinsically embedded in American society'.⁶⁴

In addition, the films' progressive social commentary was an anathema to Will Hays and Joseph I. Breen, the head of the Production Code Administration (PCA). The PCA was the body which applied the Production Code and awarded a Seal of Approval to films, but only after vetting them for sex, violence, crime and language. The progressive stance on political and social issues had no place in cinema for Breen and Hays, and it is this, as much as the more obvious objections to violence, the glorification of crime and criminals and attitudes to sex, which hastened firstly the moratorium and then the imposition of the Code:

Films were not vehicles for social and political criticism; rather [...] they were opportunities to promote the 'social sprit of patriotism' [...] Promoting a conservative political agenda, [Breen and Hays] felt [they] had to protect audiences [by adhering ...] to accepted conservative moral standards and were not to challenge, attack or embarrass the government; they were, in fact, to support the government.⁶⁵

The either/or ideological paradigm (either a film supports or denounces the dominant ideology) could be said to be too simplistic and it is possible to have 'incredibly revolutionary standpoints merged with conservative ones' in a single text.⁶⁶ This would appear to be the case with many gangster films, including the 'classic' cycle, in which the transgression that is caused by and therefore highlights society's ills is balanced with the eventual triumph and restoration of the 'legitimate' social order. Nevertheless, I would still argue in answer to the Hess Wright's

⁶³ Maltby, 'Why Boys Go Wrong', p. 50

⁶⁴ Sheri Chinen Biesen, 'Reforming Hollywood Gangsters: Crime and Morality from Populism to Patriotism' in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., 260

⁶⁵ Black, p. 246, cited in Wheeler, p. 59

⁶⁶ bell hooks, *reel to reel: race, sex, and class at the movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 3, cited in Nicole Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 13

view (that these films do no more than preserve the status quo and uphold capitalist ideology) and the question posed by Wood (What strategies do the films employ for dealing with the ideological tensions in society?) that these films contain at their heart a progressive criticism of American society. As both Warshow and Biesen recognise, this criticism chimed with popular feelings in the US—the progressive FDR was elected President by a huge majority in November 1932.⁶⁷

Now that a surface narrative pattern has been identified, it is time to look at the deeper structure that can be applied not only to the films of the Hollywood rise and fall cycle, but to other US gangster films and also *yakuza-eiga*. It is around these that the shared myth evolves, and includes the gangster-hero as an outsider; his relationships (the vertical hierarchical relationships, the lateral relationship with the gangster-brother, and his relationships with women); the tension between tradition (or traditional values) and modernity; and the gangster-hero's code of behaviour. In the next two chapters we shall see how these also form a part of the myth in 'golden age' *yakuza-eiga*.

⁶⁷ Roosevelt garnered 22.8 million votes against Hoover's 15.75 million, almost sixty percent of the vote: Brendon, p. 86

3. The Narrative Structure of ‘Golden Age’ *Yakuza-eiga*

The structure of the ‘classic’ pre-Code Hollywood gangster films of the early 1930s has now been explored. Over the next two chapters we turn to the Japanese equivalent, the ‘golden age’ of *yakuza-eiga* which ran from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. In this chapter we will examine *yakuza* films in terms of their narrative structure—both in relation to Altman’s proposition of single- and dual-focus narrative, and in a comparison to the narrative functions of the ‘classic’ Hollywood gangster films suggested in the previous chapter. The chapter will in addition consider the motifs, iconography, conventions and themes of the cycle—as Robin Wood puts it, the ‘what’ of the genre—as well as looking at the semantic elements (common topics, shared plots, key scenes, familiar objects) that are shared by the films discussed. Chapter 4 will investigate Wood’s greater area of concern, the question of ‘why’, by concentrating on the issues of history and ideology to investigate the films’ social commentary credentials. At the end of Chapter 4, a conclusion will draw together the findings of both of these chapters in order to make comparisons with the conclusions reached in the previous chapter about the narrative form and ideological functions of the pre-Code Hollywood gangster films. This will be followed by an examination of the proposed deep structure shared by the two traditions.

By most standards, *yakuza* films of the ‘golden age’ can clearly be seen as products of a ‘national’ cinema: they are Japanese studio productions, locally funded and made by Japanese filmmakers for an indigenous audience.¹ And while gangsterism is common to many societies, the behavioural mores, historical settings and iconography (tattoos, dress and weapons, including *katana* or *samurai* swords) depicted in the films are unique to *yakuza-eiga* and, in

¹ There is a more detailed discussion of national, transnational and transcultural cinema in Chapter 5.

the eyes of many commentators, make the mythology of these films a purely Japanese phenomenon. Despite their apparent national cinema pedigree, I will challenge the view held by the wider critical literature and instead argue that these films have elements that have much in common with earlier Hollywood gangster films. As I will show, there are essential thematic similarities between the Hollywood and Japanese gangster myths: these include the gangster-hero's relationships, both the vertical relationship with the boss and hierarchy of the gang, and lateral relationship with the gangster-brother and women. A further area of comparison is the narrative structure of 'classic' American gangster films and *yakuza-eiga*.

The examination of the themes and narrative structure of *yakuza-eiga* will draw on several films of the 'golden age', paying special, but not exclusive, reference to four works: *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*, *Tokyo Drifter*, *Branded to Kill*, and *Japan Organised Crime Boss*. These films come from different stages of the 'golden age' and serve to show how the genre developed over time. In this way the development of the *yakuza* genre differs from that of the Hollywood tradition. As noted in the previous chapter, the Hollywood studios' moratorium put a stop to the production of the 'classic' gangster film, and what followed could not be described as purely 'gangster' films—that is single-focus narratives centring on the activities of the gangster-hero. The *yakuza* film did not go through a similar phase of censorship and therefore films focusing on the gangster-hero, rather than society's attempts to defeat him, were produced throughout the 'golden age'. There was, however, an evolution of the form, from the chivalrous *ninkyō* cycle of the mid- to late-1960s, to the documentary-style *jitsuroku* films of the early 1970s, and as the genre developed so did the myth. Despite the differences in the way the genres developed, the 'golden age' can be compared with the 'classic' era of Hollywood gangster films of the 1930s in that while there had been *yakuza* films produced since the silent era—for example Ozu Yasujiro's *Hogaraka ni ayume / Walk Cheerfully* (1930),

Sono yo no tsuma / The Night's Wife (1930), and *Hijosen no onna / Dragnet Girl* (1933)—it was not until the 'golden age' that the narrative conventions of the genre were fully formed.

It is important, therefore, to examine films made throughout this period in order to establish the full extent of the deep structure. *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* is quite typical of the early 'golden age' film: it is set near the beginning of the 20th Century and concerns the fortunes of a young *yakuza* forced to flee from the countryside and work in the corrupt construction industry in Tokyo. *Tokyo Drifter* and *Branded to Kill* are examples of an evolving genre, the latter certainly being a more *avant-garde* style of *yakuza-eiga*. Finally, *Japan Organised Crime Boss* is an example of the last phase of 'golden age' *yakuza-eiga* that started to be produced from 1968. In this and the following chapter I will draw parallels between the narrative and thematic structure of both traditions, and by doing so will then progress to a proposal for a common deep structure which points to a shared cinematic mythology. However, before examining the films in detail, it will be useful to highlight some of the cinematic trends that led to the development of the *yakuza* genre by briefly tracing the progress of Japanese cinema from the end of the Second World War to the early 1960s.

Post-war Japanese cinema

Following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the US-led Supreme Command of the Allied Powers for the Occupation and Control of Japan (SCAP) was mandated to carry out the demilitarisation and democratisation of Japan.² This mandate not only concerned military and political structures and institutions, but covered every aspect of Japanese public life, including culture. As part of the attempt to democratise Japanese culture, SCAP formed the Civil Information and Education Office (CIE), which from September 1945 started work on bringing

² John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Aftermath of World War II* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 77

the Japanese film industry in line with the democratising aims of the post-war occupation. CIE's first task was to revoke the 1939 Film Laws, which had restructured the relationship between the film industry and the state. As well as tightening censorship controls, the 1939 Law limited the type, number and even the length of films that could be produced as the government controlled the distribution of film stock. It also rationalised the industry so that all existing drama production companies merged into three conglomerates, Shochiku, Toho and Daiei, each of which was restricted to producing two films a month. In addition, cultural and education film production companies merged to form one company, as did all newsreel producers. The distribution of all films, both domestic and imported, was controlled by one central company. In what appears to be a remarkable example of parallelism, even while dismantling the 1939 Film Laws, CIE set about defining what could and could not be produced by the Japanese industry. The restrictions CIE enforced were introduced to further the cause of 'encouraging the development of ideals associated with American "democracy" while preventing the media from disseminating anything considered unsuitable or dangerous to the Occupation Government' (although the irony of 'democratising' legislation codifying restrictions on the production of culture and art appears to have escaped the framers of the regulations)³. *Jidaigeki* period dramas were deemed to be among these 'unsuitable and dangerous' films. They were prohibited on the grounds that they showed revenge as a legitimate motive and portrayed feudal loyalty and contempt of life as desirable and honourable, two of the thirteen themes forbidden by the CIE.⁴ On the other hand, *gendaigeki*, films about contemporary life, were easier to make under the occupation than they had been under the pre-war Film Laws because they espoused the democratic values of the 'modern' Japan, as opposed to the Confucian/Imperial/feudal moralities of period dramas. Despite these

³ Isolde Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 155

⁴ Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, pp. 156-157

restrictions and CIE censorship, many filmmakers felt that there was an improvement in their freedoms under the Occupation. Kurosawa commented, 'Not a single one among [the US Army censors] treated us as criminals, the way the Japanese censors had [...] Having lived through an age that had no respect for creation, I recognised for the first time that freedom of creation could exist'.⁵

One of the genres which flourished during the Occupation was *shomingeki*, films about 'little people' which reflected the everyday struggles and the harsh realities of post-war life for the vast majority of the population in a new kind of realism. One of these films was Kurosawa's *Yoidore tenshi / Drunken Angel* (1948) set in a bombed out Tokyo and depicting the black market and the life and death of a *yakuza* suffering from tuberculosis. Nolletti argues:

The *shomingeki* was actually a broad, all-inclusive genre [...] as such it was able to accommodate an often wide and disparate range of materials and moods, among them farce, light comedy, lyricism, social criticism, and melodrama [...] The genre exhibited remarkable variety in structure, thematic emphasis, and, most of all, style.⁶

With the end of the occupation in 1952, a different genre developed which explored the experiences of the young student 'volunteers' of the Special Attack Forces of *kamikaze* pilots and submariners, which included *Kumo nagaruru hateni / Beyond the Clouds* (Ieki Miyoji, 1953) and *Ningen gyorai kaiten / The Human Torpedoes* (Matsubayashi Shue, 1955). Both films were concerned with the individual's sense of identity and the dynamics of power within the group, themes which would become central to the *yakuza* films of the 'golden age'. Also common to both genres was the central 'homosocial' relationship between the hero and warrior- / gangster-brother. This view is supported in Standish's exploration of masculinity in Japanese cinema in which she identifies a 'homosocial love upon which the Japanese male collectivity is

⁵ Kurosawa Akira, quoted in Joan Mellen, *Voices from the Japanese Cinema* (New York: Liverlight, 1975), p. 105

⁶ Arthur Nolletti Jr., 'Women of the Mist and Gosho in the 1930s', in Nolletti, A., and Desser, D., eds., p. 7

founded' and which is demonstrated in war and *yakuza* films by the ideological metaphor of loyalty.⁷ Standish discusses this in relation to the *kamikaze* films, but simply by transposing words 'war' and '*kamikaze*' for 'gangster' and '*yakuza*' respectively, the arguments she presents could also be describing later *yakuza* films:

... at one level, it is possible to argue that these films conform to the general formula of most war films, both Western and Japanese, that is, that in the extremes of a war setting men are allowed to express an intensity of emotion prohibited in civil society; on the other level, they expose the negative aspects of this bonding which, in the case of the *kamikaze*, demands the death of the individual as a solipsistic act of group identity.⁸

The 'golden age' of *yakuza-eiga*

The name *ya-ku-za* literally means 8-9-3, the losing hand in a traditional Japanese card game (gambling is central to the *yakuza* myth and forms one of Schrader's 'set pieces'—see below; in addition, one of *yakuza*'s traditional sources of income is through illegal but mostly tolerated gambling dens). Unlike their American counterparts, however, *yakuza* are not regarded as outcasts from society, and over time there has developed a 'tolerance of and sympathy for native gangsters, who have long been regarded less as predatory outsiders than errant members of the same cultural and racial family'.⁹ Although there had been realistic portrayals of *yakuza* in earlier films, for example *Drunken Angel*, the *yakuza* genre can only really be traced back to the mid-1960s. It evolved out of the *jidaigeki* period or *samurai* film, in which the traditional virtues of the *samurai*, *giri* (duty) and *ninjo* (humanity) are combined in *Bushido* (the *samurai* code) so as to be indistinguishable from one another, i.e. duty is humanity and vice versa. Thus, if a *samurai*'s feudal lord acts inhumanely and dishonourably (usually through exploitation, murder or rape of his vassals), the *samurai* recognises the wrong

⁷ Isolde Standish, *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema: Towards a Political Reading of the 'Tragic Hero'* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), p. 22

⁸ Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, p. 184

⁹ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 21

through his sense of *ninjo* but is unable to avenge it because of *giri*, his duty to his master. The *samurai's* downfall and death is a result of his inability to live up to this code when he is forced to choose one (usually *ninjo*) over the other. In the *yakuza* film on the other hand, *giri* and *ninjo* are separated, so the protagonist can act with either humanity or duty but is not compelled to combine them. Thus, in the early stages of a *yakuza* film, the hero will be loyal to the *oyabun* (gang boss, equivalent to a Godfather) but at the same time may act inhumanely; however by the end of the film he will forego duty and kill the boss for committing some particular act of inhumanity or breaking the *yakuza* code. Nevertheless, the *yakuza* hero, like the *samurai* before him, often pays for the code of *giri* and *ninjo* with his life or, at the very least, imprisonment. This *yakuza* code or *jingi* (humanity and honour) is founded on neo-Confucian precepts of a rigid hierarchical relationship based on seniority, exemplified by the quasi- father/son relationship between the *oyabun* and the *kubon* (underling), and can be traced back to the *tekiya* or peddlers who by the mid-18th century had banded together for mutual interest and protection and who, together with the *bakuto* (gamblers), were the forerunners of the *yakuza*. *Tekiya* were bound by a strict organisation under an *oyabun* and followed three 'Commandments':

Do not touch the wife of another member (a rule established because wives were left alone for long periods while their husbands went peddling).

Do not reveal the secrets of the organization to the police.

Keep strict loyalty to the *oyabun-kubon* relationship.¹⁰

The early 'golden age' *yakuza* films were almost exclusively made by the Toei and, to a lesser extent, Nikkatsu studios on low budgets and with fast shooting schedules (two or three weeks was the norm). This first period ran from 1964, its beginning marked by the production of *Bakuto / Gambler* (Ozawa Shigerhiro), until 1968, when other studios (for example Toho and

¹⁰ David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, *Yakuza Japan's Criminal Underworld 25th Anniversary Edition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 10-11

Shochiku) started to make *yakuza* films, and budgets increased.¹¹ Early *yakuza-eiga* are commonly referred to as *ninkyō* films which is usually translated as ‘chivalrous’, although Standish points out that this term more specifically refers to an ‘authentic’ masculinity epitomised by the star personas of leading actors such as Takakura Ken and Tsuruta Koji.¹² Schrader asserts that most *ninkyō yakuza* films are set in the Taisho (1912-1926) and early Showa (1926 up to c.1935) eras; however, this appears to be an oversimplification used to support a theory of a tightly unified cycle. Of the twenty-six *ninkyō* titles Schilling cites, just over half (fourteen) are set in the pre-war era, while the other twelve are set in the post-war period. This latter group includes *Abashiri Bangaichi / A Man from Abashiri Prison* (Ishii Teruo, 1965), the first in a series of 18 films made between 1965 and 1971 (10 of which were made by 1968).¹³

The commercial success of the early *yakuza* films, based on their popularity with students and young urban male salaried workers, brought about a second period of *yakuza-eiga* which lasted from approximately 1968 until the early 1970s. As stated earlier, this cycle was characterised by larger budgets (and therefore higher production values) and a greater diversity of film-makers and stars. In this cycle, *ninkyō* films, with their underlying morality of *giri* and *ninjo*, were soon eclipsed by a new style of *yakuza* film known as *jitsuroku* (‘true account’ or ‘documentary-style’). The development of *jitsuroku yakuza-eiga* is commonly seen

¹¹ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, pp. 66-68

¹² Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, p. 293

¹³ While the *Abashiri Prison* series appears on most lists of *yakuza-eiga*, and is discussed at length by many commentators, it is not included here as a main text (although it is occasionally referred to). *A Man from Abashiri Prison* can be more accurately classified as a prison film, more akin to such films as *Each Dawn I Die* (William Keighley, 1939) than the classical Hollywood gangster genre: like the Hollywood social commentary prison dramas of the 1930s and 40s, the film documents the brutality of the system as manifested by both the prisoners and the authorities, and includes scenes of prisoners working in appalling conditions in the forest (an equivalent of the American chain gang) and in the prison factory.

as a reaction to the huge popularity of *The Godfather* in Japan. However, da Silva maintains that this view is contradictory, as *The Godfather* shares the *ninkyō yakuza-eiga* preoccupation with family, a criminal's sense of honour and underworld justice, and that if there was any Hollywood-inspired catalyst for the *jitsuroku* cycle, it is far more likely to be such films as *Mean Streets*.¹⁴ This argument too seems flawed inasmuch as the *jitsuroku* documentary style can be traced back to such films as *Japan Organised Crime Boss*, made four years earlier.

Nevertheless, *jitsuroku* films rendered obsolete the romantic and moralistic *yakuza* myth which had underpinned the *ninkyō* cycle, and transformed it to a more brutal form in which duty had become more important than humanity, and the traditional *katana* was replaced by a gun. As such, the *jitsuroku yakuza* films were more violent and intent on exposing the brutality and corruption of the *yakuza* life-style, revealing the *jingi* code as a 'monstrous sham'¹⁵; however, the production of these films, along with much of Japanese film-making, was vastly reduced after the collapse of the Japanese studio system in the 1980s.

The films

At this stage, and before embarking on a detailed examination of the comparative themes and narrative structure of *yakuza-eiga* in relation to the 'classic' Hollywood gangster films, it is useful to provide brief synopses and synoptic account of the film style of the four films which will form the basis of much of the subsequent discussion. The films represent different strands of the development of *yakuza* films of the 'golden age' and are remarkable and stimulating examples of their respective locations within the cycle. They will be used to illustrate the strong narrative and thematic connections the *yakuza* film has with the 'classic' gangster films of Hollywood.

¹⁴ da Silva, p. 345

¹⁵ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 33

Hana to doto / The Flowers and the Angry Waves

Set in the Taisho Era (1912-1926), *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* is superficially a typical early *ninkyō yakuza-eiga*, in which a former *yakuza* is forced to choose between duty to his *oyabun* and humanity in the form of his love for his wife. However, interwoven with this typical narrative is an exploration of the modernisation of Japan and the introduction of cultural influences from the West.

The film begins with a bridal procession through coastal marshes at dusk. The bride, Oshige (Matsubara Chieko), is being taken to the wedding ceremony when the party is ambushed by a lone *yakuza* swordsman. Oshige recognises him, gasping his name, 'Kikuji', and they escape together in a boat. We cut to the thwarted groom, the local *oyabun*, demanding face-saving vengeance and commanding his gang to find Oshige and return her. The film jumps one year to the downtown Tokyo area of Asakusa, where Oshige is a waitress in an *izakaya* (a traditional Japanese-style pub), and Kikuji (Kobayashi Akira) is working as a construction labourer in the Murata gang. From this point there are two interconnected narrative strands. Firstly, the story of the eloped lovers, Kikuji and Oshige (now, as we later discover, husband and wife), and their attempts to evade the vengeance of the jilted *oyabun*; and secondly, the gang war surrounding the building of the new headquarters of Daito Denryoku, a huge electric power company, the contract for which has been awarded to the Murata clan against their rivals, the Tamai-*gumi* (gang). To protect themselves, Kikuji and Oshige live apart and pretend not to know each other when they meet in public. Their situation is complicated by the presence of a local detective who frequents the *izakaya* where Oshige works, and the arrival of a mysterious stranger (Kawachi Tamio) dressed most unconventionally in a cape and bolero hat. The stranger is an assassin sent by Kikuji's former *oyabun*, while the detective suspects Kikuji of being a *yakuza*. The two strands of the story are linked by Kikuji, the assassin, and also

by Manryu (Kubo Naeko), a *geisha*. Unaware that he is already married, Manryu falls in love with Kikuji and rejects the advances of Izawa, the boss of the rival Tamai gang.

The main body of the film, though, is more concerned with the rivalry between the Murata and Tamai gangs over the Daito construction contract. Kikuji joins the Murata gang and leads his fellow labourers back to work following a dispute with dishonest foremen who are withholding their wages. However, he is inadvertently drawn into the struggle with the Tamai-gumi when he confronts an old man who appears to be trespassing on the construction site. The man turns out to be Shigeyama, a union official and Murata ally, who takes a liking to Kikuji, seeing in him an honesty and spirit lacking in the corrupt modern world. The rivalry between the two gangs increases when the Tamai-gumi *yakuza* soldiers invade the worksite, killing a number of Murata workers. Kikuji demonstrates his bravery and skill with a *katana* defending his workmates, while at the same time fighting off the assassin who has taken the opportunity of the battle to try to kill him. Having proven himself at work and in combat, Kikuji is taken under the wing of Murata, the gang's *oyabun*. To avoid further bloodshed, Shigeyama negotiates an agreement between the gangs to share the construction work, and following the ceremony to complete the deal the two gangs celebrate with a dice game. The assassin, now without his trademark hat and cape, poses as a Tamai member and draws Kikuji into accusing him of cheating, while claiming Kikuji is himself a *yakuza*. Murata in turn accuses Kikuji of attempting to sabotage the agreement, and savagely beats him while demanding to know whether the claims about his past are true.

Kikuji, now horribly disfigured, discovers that Murata, for whom he was willing to sacrifice his life, is plotting to have him killed. Shigeyama urges him to escape to Manchuria, but before he can do so he is forced to defend himself and kills Murata. He is now being pursued by both the assassin and the police in the form of the detective from the *izakaya*. He hides out with the aid of Manryu who begs him to take her as his wife. He refuses, and as she

is trying to stop him from leaving his *yakuza* tattoo is revealed, showing the inscription 'Oshige forever'. Manryu now understands that Kikuji and Oshige are married. The couple escape to Niigata in northern Japan on route to Manchuria, and in a snowy wasteland is finally overtaken by the assassin and the detective. Manryu, who is also following them, is killed by the assassin who mistakes her for Oshige, and Kikuji kills him in turn. The detective, who has always been fond of Oshige, lets Kikuji go while promising to look after the injured Oshige until she is strong enough to join him in Manchuria and safety.

Rayns suggests that through concise story-telling, highlighted by the opening five shots of the first two-and-a-half minutes which provide the back story, Suzuki shows his impatience with conventional narrative structures, and that the film marks the beginning of Suzuki's rebellion against formula film-making and genre conventions which would lead to *Tokyo Drifter*, *Branded to Kill*, and his eventual sacking by Nikkatsu.¹⁶ In addition, Schilling notes that while *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* is 'well within the bounds of the film industry and social conventions', some of Suzuki's narrative choices are, 'unconventional, if not outwardly rebellious'.¹⁷ This rejection of conventions can be seen in the snowbound climax to the film, in which, far from being the fearless protagonist, Kikuji betrays a more cowardly side by hiding while both Oshige and Manryu are in danger. Such an act is unheard of in early *ninkyō yakuza-eiga* and as Chris D points out, subverts audience expectations (it is worth noting that throughout this study, the words 'subvert' and 'subversive' are only used in terms of generic subversion and not in terms of ideology).¹⁸ In addition to these unconventional narrative choices, Suzuki's cinematography and *mise-en-scène* elevate the film above many of its more formulaic contemporaries. The secrecy of Kikuji and Oshige's relationship is emphasised by

¹⁶ Tony Rayns, *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* DVD notes (London: Yume Pictures, 2007b)

¹⁷ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 205

¹⁸ Chris D, p. 139

low-key lighting during their scenes together, which contrasts with the scenes between Kikuji and Manryu, a relationship ostensibly in the open, which are lit with more conventional three point lighting. And as she is keeping her identity secret by working as a waitress in the *izakaya*, Oshige is often partially obscured from the camera which shoots her through slats or shelves. Suzuki also uses innovative framing in many of the one-to-one fighting sequences as a contrast to the inter-gang battles which are more conventionally shot in wide-angle and long shot so we can see the extent of the fighting and the sheer number of people involved. Suzuki stages the more intimate fight scenes in such claustrophobic settings as corridors and staircases thus denying the fighters the room for the sweeping and balletic movements and poses more usually associated with *katana* sword fighting. Alternatively, he creates an artificial frame within a frame for the action which both focuses and restricts it; for example, the scene where Murata savagely beats Kikuji with a chain, which we see through a partially closed *shoji* (paper screen) which blacks out either side of the screen, leaving a narrow vertical frame in which we see the beating against a white background. Another example of innovative framing is when Kikuji kills Murata. The fight takes place in an indoor courtyard with a well. Once again, instead of a classic and aesthetic *katana* fight, Kikuji chases Murata around the well, slashing at him with a *tanto* (short sword), while Murata tries to defend himself by throwing anything that comes to hand—umbrellas, a bucket. Kikuji finally catches and stabs him. We cut to the wooden lattice and white rice paper of a *shoji* filling the screen. We see a shadow on the other side of the screen and then a bloody handprint. The paper rips and through one of the squares of the lattice we see Kikuji, his face a mask of anger and vengeance. These claustrophobic settings for the fights have the effect of making them more chaotic, violent and realistic than the choreographed beauty of the fight scenes of many contemporary *yakuza-eiga*.

Tokyo nagaremono / Tokyo Drifter

Only two years after the relative conformity of *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*, Suzuki took a radical turn with *Tokyo Drifter*, in which he made what should have been a routine *yakuza* film into a pop art fantasy. In doing so, Suzuki 'took pop art's appetite for pastiche and appropriation and spun it into a cool web of subliminal associations, a flabbergasting assemblage of tough-guy kitsch, poetry, and self-mockery'.¹⁹ He does this by combining a *mise-en-scène* which employs blocked primary colours and grids in the style of Mondrian with jump-cut editing, extreme high- and low-angle shots, highly stylised performances, razor-sharp costumes, and a title song which the hero, Hondo 'the Phoenix' Tetsu (pop singer Watari Tetsuya), sings or whistles as a prelude to the action sequences.

The plot, on the other hand, is relatively straight forward for a *yakuza* film. The opening sequence, shot in black and white, is set in the Tokyo docks where Tetsu is set upon by a rival gang. He refuses to fight back as his boss, Kurata (Kita Ryuji), has disbanded his gang and is going straight. Tetsu is deeply loyal to Kurata, who in turn loves him like a son. However, the rival gang boss, Otsuka, is still wary of Tetsu, and having failed to lure him into his gang sets about neutralising both him and Kurata. Kurata's first legitimate business enterprise is to buy a medium-sized office building in Tokyo, but he is having trouble meeting the mortgage payments to the financier Yoshii. Yoshii's secretary is the lover of one of Otsuka's men, and he exploits this connection to trick Yoshii into signing over the building's freehold behind Kurata's back. When being forced to accept the new arrangement Kurata accidentally kills the secretary, and even though Tetsu tries to take the blame for the killing, Otsuka has a double hold over Kurata. To nullify the threat of Tetsu, Otsuka tries to have his men kidnap his

¹⁹ Howard Hampton, 'Tokyo Drifter: Catch My Drift', *The Criterion Collection Film Essays* (13 December, 2011) <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2095-tokyo-drifter-catch-my-drift>> [accessed 21 December 2012]

girlfriend, Chiharu (Matsubara Chieko), a night club singer, but Tetsu foils the plan. As a final resort, Otsuka sends one of his assassins, the Viper, to kill Tetsu.

Tetsu has no option but to leave Tokyo and his *oyabun*. He escapes to snow-swept Yamagata in northern Japan and reluctantly becomes embroiled in a gang war between the South and North gangs, the latter of which is allied to Otsuka. The Viper follows Tetsu north and after several showdowns, Tetsu is saved by another itinerant *yakuza*. Known as Shooting Star (Nitani Hideaki), he is a former Otsuka *yakuza* who has rejected the gangster life and become a drifter. Despite the debt he owes him, Tetsu distrusts Shooting Star because he has turned his back on the concept of *giri* (duty) by abandoning his *oyabun*. Furthermore, Tetsu cannot accept Shooting Star's warning that sooner or later Kurata will betray him, and leaves Yamagata, eventually reaching Kyushu in southern Japan where he contacts one of his *oyabun's* allies, Umetani. Shooting Star and the Viper are also in Kyushu, and when there is another attempt on his life during a saloon bar brawl, Umetani and Shooting Star join with Tetsu to finally defeat the Otsuka-gumi assassin. With this final failure, Otsuka uses his hold over Kurata to force him to agree to betray Tetsu and order his death—Shooting Star was correct all along. Kurata instructs Umetani to kill Tetsu, but after initially agreeing, he is unable to bring himself to do it.

Tetsu returns to Tokyo, and in the final shoot-out in Chiharu's nightclub, he kills Otsuka and his henchmen. Kurata, who has repaid all of Tetsu's sacrifice and loyalty with the ultimate treachery, kills himself. Tetsu's *giri* has been extinguished and he is destined for an existentially lonely future, leaving Chiharu to resume his life as a drifter.

At the time Nikkatsu saw *Tokyo Drifter* as another example of Suzuki's 'maverick visual flourishes and incoherent narratives',²⁰ and warned him of his future conduct. However, it has since received world-wide acclaim and during the 1995 Tokyo International Film Festival was included in the top ten of an international panel's favourite Japanese films. Apart from Kitano's *Sonatine* (1993) it was the only *yakuza-eiga* to be on the list.²¹ Attention has been paid primarily to its pop art sensibilities and look, but the narrative is also worth analysis as it explores the relationships between the hero, his boss and his lover, the struggle of individualism (all the more pertinent in the light of the conformity expected within Japanese—and *yakuza*—society, and that demanded of Suzuki by the studio), and as Rayns maintains, the death of *giri*.²²

Koroshi no rakuin / Branded to Kill

Released as a B feature in June 1967, *Branded to Kill* was Suzuki Seijun's final Nikkatsu film.

The studio president, Hori Kyusaku, sacked him ten months after the film was released, claiming:

Suzuki Seijun is a director who makes incomprehensible films. Therefore his films are not good. It is shameful for Nikkatsu to show his films. Nikkatsu cannot have an image of making incomprehensible films. Nikkatsu fired Suzuki Seijun on April 25. His films are prohibited from exhibition at any commercial theatres or at any theatres specializing in retrospective screenings.²³

Indeed, even one of *Branded to Kill's* screen writers claimed he felt confused when he first saw the film.²⁴

²⁰ Chris D, p. 142

²¹ Phillips and Stringer, 'Introduction', pp. 16-17

²² Tony Rayns, *Tokyo Drifter* DVD notes (London: Yume Pictures, 2007c)

²³ Hori Kyusaku, quoted in Ueno Koshi, ed., *Suzuki Seijunzen eiga (All Films of Suzuki Seijun)* (Tokyo: Rippu Shobo, 1986), p. 217, cited in Miyao Daisuke, 'Dark Visions of Japanese Film Noir: Suzuki Seijun's *Branded to Kill* (1967)', in Phillips, A. and Stringer, J., eds., p. 194

²⁴ Ueno, p. 337, cited in Miyao, p. 193

Branded to Kill (*Koroshi no rakuin*, literally 'Killing's Brand'—*rakuin* implies a stigma) has been described as being 'overtly scornful' of generic conventions,²⁵ marrying excessive violence and graphic sex scenes with dreamlike surrealism—even including references to *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929)—and a Kafkaesque descent into paranoia and destruction for the film's hero, Haneda Goro (Shishido Jo). Haneda is a hit man rising through the ranks of the Tokyo underworld to become 'number three killer', and the film opens with him and his new wife, Mami (Ogawa Mariko), returning from their honeymoon in America. A former assassin, whose alcoholism led to his downfall, offers Haneda a share in a job to escort an important client—who we later find out is the number one killer (Nanbara Koji)—to the mountainous region of Nagano. On their way they are ambushed twice. The alcoholic assassin fails again and is killed, but Haneda and the man he is protecting escape, eliminating the number two killer in the process. Haneda now takes his place as number two killer in the underworld hierarchy.

Having successfully deposited his charge at the mountain-top safe house, Haneda's car breaks down in the middle of a rainstorm and he hitches a lift from Misako (Annu Marie), a mysterious Indo-Japanese woman. Misako is obsessed by death and surrounds herself with symbols of mortality—a dead canary hangs from her rear-view mirror and she has a vast collection of dead butterflies in her apartment. On his return to Tokyo, Haneda is given a contract to assassinate three members of a diamond smuggling ring, a job he carries out with peculiar inventiveness. Misako, with whom he is becoming increasingly obsessed, offers him another job, killing an American investigator who is looking into the same smuggling ring. Haneda botches the job and kills an innocent bystander when his view of the target is obscured by a butterfly landing on his rifle scope. As a result, he is now pursued by his own

²⁵ Tony Rayns, *Branded to Kill* DVD notes (London: Yume Pictures, 2007a)

organisation. His wife, who is having an affair with his boss, Yabuhara, tries to kill him, and in a set-piece battle in the docks he dispatches several other hit men who are sent to assassinate him.

His descent into paranoia is complete when he holes himself up in an apartment in a *danchi* complex—a huge development of multi-story blocks of flats. Here he awaits the next attack, and it eventually comes in the form of the number one killer. Strangely, however, he does not immediately try to kill Haneda, but instead moves into the flat and toys with him. The number one killer shows him an 8mm film of Misako being tortured; they eat together, sleep in the same bed tied to each other, and escort each other to the bathroom so neither can gain a deadly advantage. The climax comes in a deserted boxing arena. Haneda realises that if he kills his tormentor he will rise to the rank of number one killer. He does, but is fatally wounded in the exchange of fire, which also claims Misako.

Chris D maintains *Branded to Kill* is Suzuki's 'tour-de-force masterpiece [...] an exhilarating deconstruction of both gangster films and the studio's own hit man subgenre'.²⁶

Rayns suggests Suzuki has given himself the freedom to:

... pursue the visual coups and conceptual surprises that interest him, and, incidentally, to ridicule the aspects of the genre that bore him. It's the "deconstructive" approach—it sometimes looks more like demolition—which makes it possible to reduce the characters to ciphers and the action to abstraction.²⁷

Suzuki himself describes *Branded to Kill* as a Mafia film rather than a *yakuza-eiga*, and says that he was trying to make a new type of (*yakuza*) film, 'I wanted to kill off the hero. I finally

²⁶ Chris D, p. 142

²⁷ Tony Rayns, 'Branded to Kill: Reductio Ad Absurdum', *The Criterion Collection Film Essays* (13 December, 2011) <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2096-branded-to-kill-reductio-ad-absurdum>> [accessed 21 December, 2012]

shot it so you couldn't tell whether he was alive or dead in the end. In Japanese films then you couldn't kill off the hero, but I tried to come as close as I could'.²⁸

Nihon boryokudan: Kumicho / Japan Organised Crime Boss

Directed by another of the most celebrated *yakuza-eiga* filmmakers, Fukasaku Kinji, *Japan Organised Crime Boss* has strong elements of *jitsuroku* documentary-style *yakuza* films, even though it was made some three years before this cycle finally took over from the *ninkyō*-style films around 1972. As became common in *jitsuroku* films, it opens with a newsreel-style narration over black-and-white stills detailing the chaos following the Japanese surrender in 1945, and the crime, violence and corruption which resulted from the gangs' control of the black market. The narration then brings us to the present day by detailing how the gangs were able to evolve and grow by exploiting the property boom, and then goes on to describe how the Osaka-based Danno-gumi is battling to take control of the entire Japanese underworld.

Danno, the *oyabun*, ruthlessly exploits other gangs to fight as proxies in local territorial wars as he expands his empire towards Tokyo. One such proxy is the Hamanaka-gumi in Yokohama, which Danno uses as part of his push into the Kanto region around Tokyo. The hero and second-in-command of the Hamanaka gang, Tsukamoto (Tsurata Koji), has just been released from prison after an eight-year sentence and disagrees with his *oyabun's* decision to ally himself with Danno. Nevertheless, as a loyal *kubon* Tsukamoto follows his *oyabun's* orders and works with Danno's Chief Executive, Tsubaki (Uchida Ryohei), who just happens to be his blood brother. In the meantime, the Tokyo gangs form an alliance, the Kanto Rengo, in order to fight off the threat from the Osaka organisation. The Kanto Rengo orders Hamanaka's assassination, and as he lays dying he confides in Tsukamoto that the alliance with the Danno-gumi was a mistake and begs him to take control of the gang. Following his *oyabun's* death,

²⁸ Suzuki Seijun, quoted in Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, pp. 102-103

Tsukamoto negotiates an agreement for his gang to become neutral in the war. While Danno and Tsubaki ostensibly recognise Hamanaka-gumi's neutrality, they form an alliance with another Yokohama gang, the Hokuryu-kai, firstly to attack the local Kanto Rengo proxy gang, and then to destroy the Hamanaka-gumi.

The Hokuryu-kai is led by the amphetamine-addicted Miyahara (Wakayama Tomisaburo), and the difference between him and Tsukamoto provides one of the great set-piece scenes of the film. Miyahara's gang have taken a young Hamanaka-gumi member hostage and Tsukamoto walks unarmed into their headquarters to free him. Miyahara is doped up and attacks Tsukamoto with a *tanto* (short sword), slashing his forehead. Tsukamoto's stoicism and lack of reaction nonpluses Miyahara and wins the latter's reluctant respect. Tsukamoto's principles and loyalty to his dead *oyabun* stand in sharp contrast to those around him and show how the world has changed during his time in prison. His values are those of the classic *ninkyō* hero, while those surrounding him, with the exception of his boss and a fellow gang member, Kazama (Sugawara Bunta), who dies after avenging their *oyabun's* assassination, are corrupt and perfidious. When his lover, Kazama's sister (we never learn her name),²⁹ urges him to quit and go straight, Tsukamoto refuses saying, 'A *yakuza* is always a *yakuza*,' thereby affirming his allegiance to the *jingi* code.

The accidental killing of an American woman in the gang war provides the catalyst for a truce between the Danno-gumi and the Kanto Rengo. A corrupt politician acts as a go-between and negotiates an agreement 'for the good of the country', which is to be sealed with a solemn ceremony in a Shinto shrine. However, as part of the truce, the two sides agree that the Hamanaka-gumi must be once and for all destroyed and Tsukamoto killed. His blood brother, Tsubaki, is given the task of killing Tsukamoto, but as the latter interrupts the ceremony,

²⁹ Not widow, as Schilling claims, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 160

Tsubaki does not defend himself and dies. Tsukamoto shows himself to be one of the last of a dying breed and as such has to sacrifice himself while killing the 'evil' *oyabun*, Danno, who is the embodiment of the corruption of the new type of corporate boss for whom loyalty and the *yakuza* code mean nothing.

As mentioned earlier, even though *Japan Organised Crime Boss* has many elements of a *ninkyō yakuza-eiga*, it is at the forefront of a major shift in the style and content of *yakuza-eiga*. For many *yakuza* film fans, the star and director respectively represented the generic old and new guard, and it is in this film where we can see the baton being passed. After this, *yakuza* films would increasingly move away from the romantic myth of the *yakuza* as a defender of the weak against the corrupt and towards a perhaps more honest, and definitely more gritty and violent, exploration of the *yakuza* culture. Talking about this period, Fukasaku described the changes that were going on:

We thought that it was strange to have only noble heroes here, even though we were making films in Japan. We decided that it was all right [*sic*] to have heroes who weren't so noble. Those noble heroes were lies. Instead we wanted heroes to show us who they really were [...] We made crime films that were like documentaries, Toei included. Everywhere you looked then, film technique was making enormous strides, becoming more realistic.³⁰

The four films examined in this chapter therefore chart the progress and evolution of the 'golden age' of the *yakuza* film—a 'classic' *ninkyō* film set in the early 20th Century; a 'pop-art' *yakuza-eiga*; an *avant-garde* deconstruction of the genre; and a film which was at the cusp of the evolution from the *ninkyō* to a more realistic *jitsuroku* style. In spite of their differences, as we shall see together they demonstrate that there are in fact more similarities between the structure and themes of the Hollywood and Japanese gangster traditions than most commentators would allow.

³⁰ Fukasaku Kinji, quoted in Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 50

Parallel narrative themes

In his 1974 evaluation of *ninkyō* films, Schrader argues that they follow a quite rigid narrative structure and include six to ten of what he calls 'set pieces'. He identifies eighteen of these set-pieces, any of which are common to 'golden age' films. The following list also includes which of these set pieces appear in the four main films under discussion: *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* (*Flowers*); *Tokyo Drifter* (*Drifter*); *Branded to Kill* (*Branded*); and *Japan Organised Crime Boss* (*Boss*).

1. The protagonist comes out of prison. (*Boss*)
2. The evil *oyabun* plots the takeover of the gang. (*Flowers, Drifter, Boss*)
3. The evil *oyabun's* henchmen, all huffing and puffing, bully local merchants or workmen. (*Flowers, Boss*)
4. The gambling scene. In the gambling scene colourful flower cards are spread across a white table. The scenes end in a minor unresolved confrontation. (*Flowers*)
5. Yakuza introduction scene. A *yakuza* introduces himself to a fellow gangster in a special ceremony. Putting his right hand on his right knee, he extends his left hand, palm upturned, and states his name, place of birth, and clan affiliations. These ritual introductions can go on for several minutes.
6. The revealing of the tattoo. Most *yakuza* wear a full upper-body tattoo. The dramatic revealing of this tattoo reveals the bearer's profession and is an invitation to fight. The workmanship and motif of the tattoo (dragons, peonies, etc) serve to define even further the personality of the wearer. (*Flowers*)
7. The blood brother ritual. Small porcelain cups are exchanged in an elaborate ritual. If, at a later point, the cup is broken wilfully, the former blood brothers are now mortal enemies. (*Drifter, Boss*)

8. Low comedy scenes with workers and townspeople. (*Flowers, Drifter*)
9. The disclosure scene. The hero, geisha or best friend reveals a tortured episode from the past which further tightens the web of duties and obligations. (*Flowers, Boss*)
10. The finger cutting. To atone for a great offence or injustice a *yakuza* is sometimes required to cut off his left little finger and present it to the one he has offended. The protagonist will sometimes do this to atone for the mistake of his evil *oyabun* or an errant follower. (*Flowers*—offered but not carried out)
11. The evil *oyabun* dupes the honourable *oyabun* into accepting a dubious liaison. The protagonist respectfully registers his protest. (*Flowers, Drifter, Boss*)
12. Deathbed scene. The good *oyabun* or some other honourable person slain by the heavies offers a variety of deathbed platitudes to his weeping family and friends. (*Boss*)
13. Duel scene. Two honourable *yakuza* protagonists are forced to fight each other out of duty to the *oyabun*. (*Flowers, Drifter, Boss*)
14. The redeeming of the geisha. Sometimes the protagonist will purchase the geisha he loves outright (borrowing money from his enemies if necessary). Sometimes he will offer his life as a stake in a gambling contest for her life. In either case, their love will never be consummated. (*Flowers, Drifter*)
15. Cemetery scene. The hero visits the grave of the dead *oyabun* (wife, father) before seeking revenge. (*Boss*)
16. The entreaty. The geisha or lover entreats the protagonist not to seek his revenge, but he does not heed her pleas. (*Flowers, Drifter, Boss*)
17. The final march. The protagonist and his one or two closest friends walk down darkened empty streets toward the enemy compound. The movie's theme song,

usually sung by the protagonist, plays as they walk. (*Drifter, Boss*, parodied in *Branded*)

18. The final battle. A tour-de-force fight scene where all the accumulated obligations are expiated in the grand finale of bloodletting. (*Flowers, Drifter, Branded, Boss*)³¹

It is note-worthy that *Branded to Kill* only contains two of these 'set pieces'—one of which is a parody—a further indication of Suzuki's refusal to follow the rules of the genre while still making a compelling *yakuza* film.

While these set-pieces are in their nature very different from the functions for the 'classic' Hollywood gangster film set out in Chapter 2 (not least because the functions are common to all the films, whereas a particular set-piece will not necessarily occur in every film), they are an interesting starting point to explore one of the key relationships between the two traditions. This section will highlight what I consider to be striking narrative similarities between the two traditions and which begin to point to a shared deep narrative structure. These mostly centre on the gangster-hero's relationships, including those that are vertical (the boss / *oyabun*), lateral (the gangster- / blood brother), as well as his relationships with women. In the classic Hollywood gangster narrative, these relationships are defined by the functions, *the gangster-hero forms relationships, the gangster-hero is sexually ambiguous, the gangster-hero breaks his own code, and the gangster-hero's relationships break down*. Such an analysis goes beyond the scope of Schrader's review of the narrative elements of *ninkyō yakuza-eiga*; however, for this study it is important to recognise that the heroes' relationships in *yakuza-eiga* have a comparable function and follow similar patterns to those in the 'classic' Hollywood gangster cycle. Before examining the hero's relationships in detail, however, it is worth

³¹ Schrader, 'Yakuza-eiga', pp. 74-76

exploring another of the proposed functions of the 'classic' Hollywood gangster film, the initial situation.

The gangster-hero is outside mainstream society

Like the 'classic' American gangster, the *yakuza* hero is outside mainstream society. While it remains unacknowledged in the films, and only reluctantly recognised by Japan officialdom, *yakuza* gangs parallel those of the American underworld in relation to the various underclasses that comprise their membership. In some ways this is surprising considering the toleration of *yakuza* as errant members of society mentioned above, which could lead to a general belief that while the gangster in America is regarded by mainstream society as 'one of them', a non-WASP immigrant defined in terms of race and class, the *yakuza* is 'one of us'. The reality is quite different. *Yakuza* gangs recruit predominantly (about two thirds of new members) from the working class, particularly those who dropped out early from the highly competitive education system. Yoder cites a 1985-86 survey by the National Research Institute of Police Science, which reported that 'most new recruits were poorly educated, nineteen to twenty years of age, and were living alone when they joined'. This includes large numbers (about a third) from *bozozoku* motor cycle gangs, a major source of serious juvenile crime.³² Kaplan and Dubro report that along with *bozozoku*, the *yakuza*'s 'biggest employment pool likely comes from minority groups in Japan,' and note, as stated above, that this is a subject of great sensitivity in Japan. These minority groups include the *burakumin*, Japan's ancestral underclass, somewhat akin to the untouchable caste in India, and ethnic Koreans and, to a lesser extent, Chinese. The 70,000 ethnic Koreans living in Japan comprise only 0.5 of the population of the country but, according to an FBI report, make up some 15 percent of all *yakuza*, a figure with which the Japanese police concur. Kaplan and Dubro go on to argue:

³² Robert Stuart Yoder, *Deviance and Inequality in Japan: Japanese Youth and Foreign Migrants* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011), p. 48

For these minorities, for the bozozoku, and for the nation's poor, the gangs can easily seem like the only way out of an otherwise miserable life. Like the Mafia in America, the yakuza provides a vehicle for upward mobility. Children of successful gangsters are invariably given first-class education and encouraged to get legitimate jobs. Such are the attractions of adoption into a yakuza family.³³

Even though the social and, especially, racial make up of the gangs is not a feature of *yakuza* films, the style of speech and the language the characters use are elements which place them outside mainstream society. As mentioned earlier, the the 'classic' American cycle also uses the gangster's non-standard language to highlight, and authenticate, his outsider status. Likewise, and as with the archetypal cinematic prohibition-era gangster, the *yakuza* hero is also outside society at the outset of the narrative—not only outside mainstream society by virtue of being a gangster, but also removed from the *yakuza* community itself. As we have seen, Kikuji in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* is isolated from the gang and hiding out in Tokyo following the rescue of Oshige from the arranged marriage to his *oyabun*. Similarly, in *Tokyo Drifter* Tetsu and his boss, Kurata, have abandoned gangster life and are therefore cut off from both the *yakuza* and wider society, while in *Branded to Kill* Haneda is literally as well as ethically outside Japanese society at the beginning of the film as he is flying back from the US. In all three examples the hero is not only outside mainstream society but is also isolated from the gang culture as well, whether as an initial situation, as in the first two films or, in Haneda's case, as he is set up for assassination by his own gang. *Japan Organised Crime Boss* offers another type of outsider in the shape of Tsukamoto. He is both physically removed from society (both society at large and the gang) by being in prison at the start of the film; and, as we have seen, his old fashioned adherence to the traditions of the *jingi* code place him apart from the new realities of *yakuza* dealings.

³³ Kaplan and Dubro, pp. 132-133

A different form of isolation from society which also has parallels with the Hollywood tradition can be seen in later 'golden age' films. As discussed in Chapter 2, Hollywood gangster films explored a society in which there was social alienation, a psychology of despair, a breakdown of the established social order, and a complete loss of faith in the ability of the political and economic system to solve the problems of society. It is in these circumstances that the heroes of the classic Hollywood gangster films, who are themselves working class immigrants and are therefore outside mainstream society, reject its norms and turn to crime. In later examples of *ninkyō-eiga* as well as in subsequent *jitsuroku* documentary-style films, a different society in crisis is presented as an initial situation. In this case it is the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and early occupation. As we have seen, *Japan Organised Crime Boss*, as well as such films as *Battles without Honour and Humanity* and *Graveyard of Honour*, starts with a 'voice of God' narration detailing the chaos following the surrender, and the crime, violence and corruption which resulted from the gangs' control of the black market. The heroes, whether they be the street thug Rikio (Watari Tetsuya) in *Graveyard of Honour*, or the former soldier Hirono Shozo (Sugawara Bunta) in *Battles without Honour and Humanity*, emerge from this chaos as rising members of *yakuza* gangs. Following the title sequence of *Battles without Honour and Humanity*, which includes pictures of the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima (where the film is set) and the aftermath of the bombing, the voiceover narration explains, 'A year after Japan's surrender, the violence of war is gone but a new type of violence replaces wartime violence. People had to depend on themselves to guard against it.' We then see a montage sequence of the chaos of a post-war Japan black market: gangsters stealing from or getting paid protection by stallholders; an attempted rape of a Japanese woman by American soldiers and the protection of the victim by some Japanese ex-servicemen; and a bloody conflict between two gangs. At the beginning of the film the hero, Hirono, makes it clear that he is not *yakuza*, but his very situation of being an itinerant ex-soldier having to live

by his wits places him outside mainstream society. The brutality of the inter-gang fighting draws him in and he murders an *oyabun*, an act which forces him into the Yamamori *yakuza* gang.

Vertical relationships: *oyabun* and *kubon*

Just as in the 'classic' Hollywood gangster film, the *yakuza* hero's relationship with his boss is central to the narrative. However, unlike the Hollywood gangster who, as we saw in the previous chapter, betrays his boss, the *yakuza* hero is himself betrayed by his *oyabun*. This 'evil' *oyabun* stands in contrast to the 'good' *oyabun*, to whom the gangster-hero displays unwavering loyalty. In the case of *Japan Organised Crime Boss* the difference between the good and evil *oyabun* is presented as a clash of cultures: tradition opposed to modernity; family opposed to corporation; honour opposed to immorality and expediency. The difference between the two bosses, Hamanaka and Danno, is clear, even though we only see the former as he is dying following the car bomb attack. Hamanaka's headquarters are in a traditional Japanese house, with *tatami* (rush) mats on the floor, and *shoji* separating the rooms. He surrounds himself with ordinary gang members, and in the only scene in which he appears is wearing a plain everyday *kimono*. In contrast, Danno's headquarters are like those of a major corporation with only his top lieutenants, akin to company executives, in attendance. Danno himself wears tinted spectacles and gold rings, smokes cigars and dresses in either formal *kimono*, adorned with *monsuki* (the family crest or emblem), or expensively tailored western suits. Danno's rejection of the traditional *jingi* code can also be seen in the inter-gang war he is fermenting: rather than lose his own men or expose himself to 'legal or moral censure' he uses local gangs as proxies to fight the territorial battles; likewise, while his opponents fight with the traditional *katana*, Danno's soldiers and proxies use firearms.

There is a twist to the 'honourable' *oyabun* character in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*. As we have seen, Murata, the boss, accuses the hero, Kikuji, of trying to wreck the

peace-treaty between the warring gangs and beats him mercilessly. Kikuji is huddled on a dirt floor with his back to the camera, as if ashamed to show even the viewer the harm that has been done to him. With the camera at floor-level and using a wide-angle lens, Kikuji is lying in the foetal position in the foreground while Murata towers over him. He attempts to explain once again that the disguised assassin was cheating at dice and that he could not let his *oyabun* and fellow gang members be so dishonourably humiliated. However, Murata is seemingly less interested in his own honour than is Kikuji. As a dishonoured *yakuza*, Kikuji pleads with his *oyabun* to be allowed to commit *yubitsume*—that he cut off the tip of his little finger in repentance and atonement. Instead Murata plays on Kikuji's sense of *giri* by ordering him to kill the rival gang boss, Izawa, not to avenge any shame suffered by his gang, but so he can keep control of the Daito construction project—self interest overcomes honour. In the ultimate insult to Kikuji's code, Murata tosses a pistol into a puddle—Kikuji must not only use this 'dishonourable' weapon instead of his *katana*, but has to further humiliate himself by scrambling in the dirt to retrieve it. *Giri* dictates that Kikuji has no choice but to carry out his *oyabun's* command, but he is stopped by the *geisha* Manryu. She has stolen a letter from Murata to rival boss Izawa giving him permission to kill Kikuji as he has 'no ties with the Murata clan'. Schilling notes that this behaviour by a good *oyabun* is unconventional, as is the disfigurement of the star of the film;³⁴ however, Suzuki is introducing a different facet to the *oyabun-kubon* relationship by turning the good boss against his favoured protégé, and thus the opposition of good and evil *oyabun* is played out within a single character.

This reversal of the *oyabun's* character from honourable to evil becomes a more common characteristic of later 'golden age' films. As we have seen, the *oyabun* in *Tokyo Drifter*, Kurata, conspires with his rival gang's boss to have the hero, Tetsu, killed. The film

³⁴ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 205

forms a clear demarcation between the concept of *jingi* as espoused in *ninkyō-eiga*, and the later films which rejected the romanticised version on the *yakuza* code. At the beginning, Tetsu demonstrates complete and unquestioning loyalty to Kurata, even following him into a legitimate lifestyle. He explains to a rival gang member that ‘The boss’s rule is my rule,’ and continues throughout most of the film to reject disloyalty and ‘ingratitude’. However, by the end he discovers his *oyabun*’s betrayal and tells him, ‘I’m not your man anymore,’ at which Kurata commits suicide.

Just as clothing is an iconographic symbol of success which charts the gangster-hero’s rise in the ‘classic’ Hollywood gangster films—Rico’s tuxedo and Tony’s jewellery—we can see Tetsu’s evolution from loyal *kubon* to independent drifter through the change in the colour of his (extremely sharp) suits. Indeed, colour is used as a signifier throughout the film. At the beginning of the film, Tetsu is in a powder blue suit. This is when he is still Kurata’s man, willing to sacrifice himself by offering his life as collateral for the loan Kurata takes out for his building and taking the blame for the murder of Yoshii’s secretary. He is still in powder blue in snowy Yamagata, where he fights in the local gang war on the side of Kurata’s allies against Otsuka’s. However, when he arrives in Kyushu after ‘drifting’ through Japan, his attachment to Kurata is on the wane—his *oyabun* is just about to betray him. He now wears a light grey-green suit, a colour which has associations with the distinctive green jacket that Shooting Star wears and is a sign of his increasing independence. On his return to Tokyo following Kurata’s betrayal he is in white, as if reborn.³⁵ We see him walking through a long, narrow white corridor of stylised Gothic arches, as though he were entering the nightclub through a church aisle (or even, to emphasise the suggestion of rebirth, a birth canal). Inside the club, Otsuka is forcing Chiharu

³⁵ White is the colour of not only purity but also death—traditionally in Japan the dead are dressed in white *kimono*—so Tetsu’s white suit could also be interpreted as the death of his *yakuza* bonds: like Shooting Star, he is now an itinerant drifter.

(also in white) to sing—and thereby surrender to him—by threatening to shoot the piano player(!). The minimalist set of the club itself (designed by Kimura Takeo) is built on a sound stage and is more reminiscent of a dream sequence in a Gene Kelly musical than a realistic representation of a sleazy club in downtown Tokyo. Stairs leading to an archway represent the entrance to the club, and a bar, piano, statues, and chairs and tables are isolated within the large space. Earlier in the film, the club had been lit using a yellow filter, but now it is completely white save a splash of red (Otsuka's colour throughout the film) projected on a statue. When Tetsu kills Otsuka, the red spotlight is also extinguished only to be replaced by the jet of crimson blood as Kurata slashes his wrist. Red therefore links the perfidy of the two dead gang bosses who both tried to kill Tetsu. He is now purified, alone without the need for the outdated codes of loyalty or *giri*, even to the extent of refusing to stay with Chiharu.

Branded to Kill highlights the vertical relationship in a very different manner. Loyalty is not the basis of the relationship between Haneda and his boss, Yabuhara. Haneda is a professional assassin who receives his orders and does the job. And while Yabuhara orders Haneda's death, there is no sense of betrayed loyalty, rather it is a decision based on his failure to kill the investigator which resulted in the accidental killing of a 'civilian'. Instead of the standard *oyabun-kubon* vertical relationship Haneda is obsessed with his place in the hierarchy of the organisation and, as Miyao points out, the film is filled with visual motifs which 'emphasise the vertical axis'.³⁶ Haneda, as the number three killer, is 'trying hard to hang between his upward intention and his downward fear'.³⁷ The motifs that Miyao refers to are mostly, but not exclusively, in relation to his work as an assassin. Early in the film, he is given a job to escort the number one killer to the mountainous region of Nagano. Driving through a

³⁶ Miyao, p. 198

³⁷ Shigehiko Hasumi, 'Suzuki Seijun matawa kisetu no fuzai (Suzuki Seijun, or the Absence of Reason)', *Yuriika*, 23:4 (1991), p. 54, quoted in Miyao, p. 198

road cutting leading to a tunnel, they are attacked from above and Haneda initially shoots one of the attackers who is positioned on a roof and then gains the high ground to dispatch the others. Haneda and his companion are attacked again as they are driving up a mountain, this time by the number two killer. Haneda kills him, thereby taking his place as number two; he therefore climbs within the hierarchy of the organisation while physically ascending the mountain. Later in the film, he is given the mission to assassinate three members of a diamond smuggling ring. On each occasion, the vertical axis is highlighted. In the first killing, he fires down from an advertising hoarding while his victim is standing on a station platform—Rayns suggests that Suzuki borrowed the idea from *From Russia with Love* (Terence Young, 1963);³⁸ in the second, he shoots up the waste pipe from the basement while his victim is washing his hands in a sink; and in the third, following the assassination he escapes from a high-rise building by jumping on an advertising balloon and rises above the danger. Finally, near the end of the film, when Haneda decides to kill the number one killer, thereby becoming number one himself, he plays with a toy balloon in the manner of Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* (1940), while in the background we hear the radio commentary of the end of a boxing match, with the winner repeating (in English) ‘I am the champion’ again and again. There have been no rising motifs for the previous forty minutes of the film; clearly Haneda sees himself as on the way back up.

Haneda’s upward trajectory early in the film is highlighted by a recurring motif of fire: he dispatches the number two killer by setting fire to his hideout; and the billboard through which he carries out the first assassination is an advertisement for a lighter, as is the balloon he makes his escape from after the third killing. Conversely, in the first indication of his coming downfall and just after his elevation to number two killer, he drops his lighter in Misako’s car;

³⁸ Tony Rayns, ‘*Branded to Kill*: Reductio Ad Absurdum’

and the first attempt on his own life is by his wife who shoots him and then sets fire to their apartment. In contrast to Haneda's upward trajectories, his infatuation with Misako is highlighted by the metaphor of falling water. They first meet when he is hitching a lift in the rain and she picks him up in an open-top sports car, and we also see her in the shower and by a fountain. The fire-water motifs of Haneda and Misako oppose and cancel each other out. Her continued rejection of him has the effect of quenching his fire and precipitates his downfall, while later on Misako is tortured by fire. In addition to water, Misako is accompanied by recurring motifs of dead birds and butterflies—things which can no longer fly (rise). The bird / death metaphor is extended to include those contracted to be killed, who are referred to as 'birds'. As the film progresses, Haneda also falls. When his own assassination has been ordered, he crawls under a car in order to shoot his attackers, and in the climactic scene set in a boxing arena, he kills the number one in an exchange of gunfire, in which he is also mortally wounded. He therefore simultaneously rises to the top of the underworld pecking order while falling from the ring and dying. The bright white of the canvas against the black of the surrounding space gives the appearance of the ring being suspended in mid-air, a final motif of Haneda's own rise / fall duality. As noted earlier, Suzuki describes *Branded to Kill* as a gangster as opposed to a *yakuza* film. We can see why, given these rise-fall motifs, which are both synonymous with the narrative of this film, but also with those of the 'classic' Hollywood gangster films.

Lateral relationships: blood brothers

Standish highlights the primacy of the male-male relationship in the concept of the *jingi* code. She argues that this stems from a Japanese Buddhist-inspired tradition of the 'self' being predicated in the social, as opposed to the Western-Christian philosophical belief in the pre-

eminence of the 'inalienable rights' of the individual.³⁹ She goes on to quote Sato Tadao, who maintains that the traditional cinematic *yakuza* fights to preserve the social order as 'a member of the gang which honours traditional values, he kills his rivals who trample on the morals (*moraru*) that the yakuza are supposed to uphold. He is faithful to the point of sacrificing his life for the *oyabun* whom he trusts, for his gang and his brother yakuza'.⁴⁰ Despite their very different philosophical and metaphysical traditions, the gangster-hero's homosocial relationship is central to both the Hollywood gangster film and *yakuza-eiga*. However, this relationship in *yakuza* films is not confined to the so-called blood brother: the set piece ritual suggested by Schrader is certainly not a ubiquitous feature of even *ninkyō* films, and the male-male bond is just as likely to develop between rivals who grow to respect each other and then fight for the same cause.

Such a relationship can be seen in *Tokyo Drifter* in which Tetsu, Shooting Star and Umetani share a deep professional understanding. The relationship between the three men is never close—they cannot be described as friends in the same way as 'classic' Hollywood gangster-brothers—nevertheless, their bond is incredibly strong: they have a mutual respect which goes beyond other loyalties⁴¹. When Umetani is ordered by Tetsu's (now turned) *oyabun* to finish the job the Viper (the Otsuka-gumi assassin) could not complete, he initially acquiesces but quickly realises he cannot kill a 'brother' on the orders of a disgraced former boss—his bond with and loyalty to Tetsu is too strong. The close connection between the three men can be seen during several episodes in the middle section of the film. Shooting Star cares for a wounded and stripped-to-the-waist Tetsu following a shootout with the Viper in

³⁹ Standish, *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema*, pp. 162-164

⁴⁰ Sato Tadao, *Nihon Eigashi Vol 3: 1960-1995* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996), p. 52, quoted in Standish, *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema*, p. 166

⁴¹ Isolde Standish, 'Film Narrative and the Yakuza Genre', *Cinemaya*, 1:2 (2006), p. 21

Yamagata. Having removed the bullet from Tetsu's arm he washes the blood from his hands, turning the water bright red—Otsuka's colour, as we have seen. Shooting Star is symbolically cleansing himself of any residual loyalty to his former *oyabun*, and by doing so demonstrating his brotherly bond to Tetsu. From this point Tetsu even calls him *aniki* (older brother). Their attachment is further demonstrated in the bar fight in Kyushu when Shooting Star prevents the Viper from shooting Tetsu by using himself as a shield, knowing that the assassin will be bound by the same loyalty and therefore unable to shoot a former fellow gang member or 'pal' in the back. Later in the brawl, in a classic device taken from countless Hollywood Westerns, Tetsu, Shooting Star and Umetani back into each other, turn expecting to have to fight, recognise each other, smile in recognition and then start to laugh. Each of these episodes ends, however, with Tetsu berating Shooting Star for his 'ingratitude' to his former *oyabun* (whist acknowledging his own debt to his *aniki*). In the end Shooting Star has to defend him once more, this time against Umetami, and Tetsu finally acknowledges that he needs to return to Tokyo to discover the truth about his *oyabun* for himself. After Umetani backs down from killing Tetsu and allows him to escape, the two older men walk towards the setting sun—the end of *giri*—discussing how Tetsu will have to 'go through it (betrayal) once.'

The male-male bond in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* is more communal. Even though he develops a connection with Sakurada, the foreman whom he previously fought, Kikuji's real bonds are with the group of labourers. His strongest relationships with individuals are with the *oyabun* and, as we shall discuss later, two women. Likewise, Haneda's close relationships in *Branded to Kill* are with women. As a lone assassin, he does not forge close male-male relationships, except with the number one killer who is stalking him towards the end of the film. This, though, is not the homosocial bond that Standish identifies, nor is it based on the mutual respect that Tetsu has with Shooting Star; rather it is a connection between the hunter and the hunted (roles they both play as time passes) that becomes a

parody of a loving couple as they walk arm-in-arm to a restaurant and sleep in the same bed; however, their motivation is based not on love but on self preservation—neither can allow the other any chance of achieving a potentially fatal advantage.

Japan Organised Crime Boss, on the other hand, explores the male-male relationship in perhaps a more conventional way. The hero, Tsukamoto, has three lateral male-male relationships: Kazama, a fellow Hamanaka-gumi gang member; Miyahara, the amphetamine addicted boss of the rival Hokuryu-kai; and Tsubaki, the Chief Executive of the Danno-gumi, the Osaka-based gang attempting to control the entire Japanese underworld. Throughout the film Tsukamoto is called *ani* (brother) by fellow gang members as well as Tsubaki, his real blood brother. As mentioned earlier, Tsukamoto's relationship with Miyahara revolves around initial conflict leading to mutual respect. Just before he is killed, Miyahara phones Tsukamoto to tell him that he had finally followed his lead by rejecting the alliance with the Danno-gumi, and ends by saying, 'Ever since I slashed your face I wanted to be your blood brother. I swear, real brothers.' Kazama also dies with the word 'brother' on his lips. He has saved Tsukamoto by killing Sakurada, the boss of the rival gang, following the assassination of the Hamanaka-gumi *oyabun*. In spirit of the *jingi* code he has sacrificed himself for the sake of the welfare of the gang, but most importantly, his brother. As mentioned earlier, Tsubaki is Tsukamoto's blood brother from when they were young. Early in the film they reminisce about their days twenty years before in the black market, 'surrounded by enemies'—American GIs and *sangoku jin* (so-called 'three country people': Koreans, Chinese and Taiwanese who had been subjugated by the Japanese until 1945). Tsukamoto says these are 'ancient times', and indeed the world has moved on. When Tsukamoto was first jailed as a young man, Tsubaki was run out of Yokohama and eventually joined the Danno-gumi in Osaka, rising to the rank of Chief Executive. Despite their changed circumstances as potential enemies, they cannot forget or abandon their bond. Towards the end of the film, Tsubaki refuses to follow Danno's orders to

kill Tsukamoto. Danno accuses him of putting his blood brotherhood ahead of gang loyalty, which Tsubaki denies, saying before the truce he would have been willing to carry out his *oyabun's* orders, but now such an action would be dishonourable. The director, Fukasaku Kinji, refutes the suggestion that the white suits which Tsubaki wears throughout the film signify that he is the only member of the corporate gang who had any remnants of decency left. Instead he claims the decision was based solely on style, 'He looked good in the suit. Also he wore the white suit to show he was a member of a more prosperous, money-conscious gang. It made him stand out from the rest of the gang, but I wasn't consciously doing it because he was the only honourable one'.⁴² Fukasaku is perhaps being a little disingenuous: in the climactic scene in the shrine, Tsubaki confronts his blood brother, knowing that Tsukamoto is out to kill Danno. He says they must fight and when he pulls his gun, Tsukamoto stabs him with a *tanto* sword; it is only then that we realise that Tsubaki had emptied his gun of bullets. He had done what he 'needed to do', and like Kazama and Miyahara before him, he too dies uttering the word 'brother'.

Lateral relationships: lovers

As we have seen, in the Hollywood gangster tradition there are a number of set female characters: the nurturer, the moll, and the woman who hastens the downfall of the gangster-hero. Variations of these characters are also present in *yakuza-eiga*. Unlike classic Hollywood gangster films, however, there are also female *ninkyo* heroes, for example Fuji Junko in the *Hibotan bakuto / Red Peony Gambler* series. The female gangster-hero has to take on the masculine role (often, as in *Red Peony Gambler*, to avenge her father's death), but in doing so still manages to maintain her graciousness and femininity.⁴³ However, this cycle of *yakuza-eiga*

⁴² Fukasaku, quoted in Chris D, p. 18

⁴³ Schrader, '*Yakuza-eiga*', pp. 78-79

is outside the scope of this study, and so I will concentrate on the relationship the male heroes have with their lovers.

The most common character type is the nurturer. While she is outside the gang culture, she often works in the *mizu-shobai* (water trade)—the night-time entertainment industry, including hostess bars, clubs and cabarets, which are often fronts for *yakuza* activity or at the very least, pay protection to the gangs. She may be a night club singer (Chiharu in *Tokyo Drifter* and Kazama's sister in *Japan Organised Crime Boss*), or a waitress in an *izakaya* (Oshige in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*), but she is always a 'nice girl'. She attempts, usually unsuccessfully, to draw the hero away from gang life; both she and the hero know this is a fantasy but she continues to support him, as is literally the case in *Japan Organised Crime Boss*. The confrontation in the scene discussed earlier in which Tsukamoto goes to rescue the gang member captured by Miyahara's gang takes place in the back room of the club where Kazama's sister is singing. She witnesses Miyahara's attack on Tsukamoto and they leave together with the injured gang member: Tsukamoto is supporting his subordinate, while Kazama's sister is supporting him. After they become lovers, she urges him to go straight but Tsukamoto is fully aware that he is trapped by the *jingi* code: 'I thought about it when I was doing time. But when I got out I was dragged into this whole mess.' Over twenty years after *Japan Organised Crime Boss* was released, Michael Corleone would lament his own situation in a similar fashion in *The Godfather Part III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990): 'Just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in.'

The support for the hero in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* is not provided by Kikuji's wife, Oshige, but by the *geisha* Manryu. Throughout the film it appears that she has more in common with Kikuji, and she is instrumental in saving him several times. She is introduced near the beginning of the film, following Kikuji's dispute with the corrupt foreman over withheld wages. He has just left Oshige's *izakaya* when he is set upon by the foreman's

henchmen. Manryu, whose rooms overlook the alley where confrontation takes place, throws Kikuji a pistol so he can defend himself. He fires into the air, scaring the attackers off. Later, in a gambling game at Manryu's *geisha* house, Kikuji is losing to the rival gang boss, Izawa. Having lost all his money he gets up to leave, at which point Manryu, who is supposed to be with Izawa, gives him money to continue playing. She then intervenes in the game on Kikuji's behalf (and against Izawa) by placing the hand on the shoulder of the player who is just about to throw the dice—an action considered to be bad luck. Kikuji consequently wins while Manryu clearly demonstrates her preference for him over Izawa, resulting in humiliation for the gang boss. However, he manages to get his revenge after his gang has destroyed the Daito construction site. Kikuji confronts him at Manryu's *geisha* house while he is trying to buy her affections. She refuses, saying that he cannot buy an 'indomitable *geisha*'. After their confrontation, Izawa's men grab hold of Kikuji, but Manryu again intercedes and offers herself to Izawa in exchange for Kikuji's life. He accepts, but humiliates her in the process. In a tableaux shot in which we can see both the ground floor covered walkway where Kikuji is being held and the open *shoji* of Manryu's first floor room, Izawa forces her to show him her back. He calls down to the other customers in the house that he is about to 'subdue the indomitable *geisha*' and makes her strip to the waist. She turns her back to the window as she unwinds her *obi* (wide silk sash), and we cut to an interior close-up shot of her face. She turns and walks away from the camera and kneels facing the open *shoji*, undraping the kimono to reveal a tattoo completely covering her back (Schilling is mistaken in claiming that it is Kikuji who shows his tattoo at this stage, revealing that he is a *yakuza*⁴⁴). The camera slowly zooms in on the tattoo, focussing on a lion—a symbol of masculine ferocity—entwined with a red peony—a symbol of feminine beauty. Manryu is revealing her *yakuza* affiliations as well as her unfulfilled harmony with Kikuji.

⁴⁴ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 205

However, while Manryu is saving Kikuji, Oshige is endangering him. The local police detective, a regular customer at the *izakaya* she works in, has become infatuated with her but suspects she is hiding a connection with Kikuji who is now wanted for the murder of Murata, the corrupt *oyabun*. In addition, the assassin knows who she is and is using her as bait to trap Kikuji before he kills them both. Kikuji is willing to send her to safety in Manchuria alone, and it is only when he finds out that she is pregnant that he agrees to go with her.

Haneda, the hero in *Branded to Kill*, also has relationships with two women, his wife, Mami, and Misako, but neither of these are nurturers. Mami is akin to a Hollywood gangster's moll, mercenary, revelling in brutal sex, and sleeping with Yabuhara, Haneda's boss. As has already been discussed, Haneda is obsessed with Misako and it is when he meets her, having just attained the rank of number two killer, that his downward trajectory begins. If Mami plays the role of a moll, Misako is a *femme fatale*, and the wife's passion is juxtaposed with Misako's indifference. The scene in which he first meets Misako in the rainstorm is followed by the first on-screen sex between Haneda and his wife. Suzuki joins the scenes with metaphoric modulation appropriating Welles's 'lightning mix' technique: we see Misako in the rain, and the sound of the rain continues as we cut to Mami in the shower. The scenes are also joined by a montage of close-ups of the emotionless face and eyes of Misako, the face and eyes of Haneda, and a number of panning shots of his room. The women's connection is clear, and is emphasised by Suzuki's use of a perverse parody of Misako's falling water motif in the scene where Haneda shoots and kills Mami. After failing to kill him, she goes to live with Yabuhara, where he eventually catches up with her. He knocks her out and apparently urinates on her. When he finally shoots her she falls into the bathroom with her head coming to rest on the rim of the toilet bowl, her hair swirling in the vortex of flushing water (it could be argued that the intense misogyny of this scene is an extreme echo of the grapefruit-in-the-face scene in *The Public Enemy*). Both women endanger Haneda in their own way: Mami by her unfaithfulness

and attempt on his life; and Misako, both through his obsession but also by her hiring him to make a hit. The importance of both these women in his downfall is clearly signalled near the beginning of the film. He receives his instructions for the job of escorting the number one killer (as it turns out) in a bar called *The Club Mikado*. The club's beer mat, on which the contractor writes a contact phone number which Haneda memorises and then tears in half, has the design of a double Queen of Spades (i.e. four heads). The Queen of Spades is thought of as being calculating, disciplined, logical and craves power—an amalgam to Mami and Misako.

In addition to the stock female roles adopted by both classic Hollywood and 'golden age' Japanese gangster genres, there does appear to be a further connection between the heroes of both traditions and their relationship with women. In Chapter 2 I argued that the classic Hollywood gangster is 'sexually ambiguous' and cited Tony's incestuous feelings for his sister, Rico's rejection of women, and Tom's inability to consummate his relationship with Gwen. This tendency is also present in 'golden age' *yakuza-eiga*, but is perhaps not as prevalent. Tetsu in *Tokyo Drifter*, like Rico in *Little Caesar*, rejects women even though he has a lover, Chiharu. At several points in the film he explicitly discards her, saying, 'I'm off women', 'A drifter doesn't need a woman', and 'I can't walk with a woman'. Tetsu's rejection of Chiharu is often highlighted by a physical barrier between them, and the fact that the relationship is played only by his rules. After he foils Chiharu's abduction by Otsuka's gang, we see a close-up of a pistol being fired. However, this is not the bloody conclusion to the kidnapping, but Tetsu and Chiharu playing an arcade shooting game—following her real encounter with Tetsu's world, they are now playing at it as she leans against him and he puts a protective arm around her shoulders. But this tenderness does not last. As they get to her place she invites him in for tea, he says yes, but closes the taxi door after she gets out. They each put their hands on the closed window, he simply smiles and says goodnight as the taxi drives off and she is left alone. A similar scenario is played out in *Yamagata*. Tetsu is leaving, sitting on a stationary train when

another train draws up alongside. We see the windows pass from his point of view as the train slows to a stop, and when it does, Chiharu is sitting opposite him—she has come to find him. She looks up and sees him, opens the window, reaches out and calls his name but he does not answer. He looks at her without speaking until a whistle sounds and his train starts to move off. Chiharu jumps onto the platform in a vain attempt to get on his train, but it is already pulling out and we once again see a point of view shot of Tetsu being carried away from her while she is left in despair.

In contrast, Haneda in *Branded to Kill* is obviously highly charged sexually, but he is presented as having a fetish—he can only get aroused by smelling freshly-cooked rice. We see him several times leaning over a steaming rice cooker, as in the montage scene discussed above, and in the first instance of this, while he is sniffing rice in the restaurant kitchen, Mami is flirting with Yabuhara. We see Haneda, but hear the boss saying, ‘I can’t help smelling your perfume.’ This voiceover could just as well be Haneda’s inner voice ‘talking’ to the boiling rice. Rather than his love for women, which destroys him, this is a love that sustains him. Suzuki explained, ‘It’s because he’s a Japanese assassin. If he was Italian, he’d get turned on by macaroni, right?’⁴⁵ By extension, Suzuki is linking Haneda’s rice fetish to American gangsters’ love of booze.

When challenged about the superficiality of women’s roles in *yakuza* films, Fukasaku Kinji cited the examples of *Red Peony Gambler* and *Gendai yakuza: hitokiri yota / Street Mobster* aka *Bloodthirsty Man/The Code of the Killer/Modern Yakuza: Outlaw Killer* (Fukasaku Kinji 1972).⁴⁶ He also countered that there were not many strong women’s roles in American gangster films. However, while the genre may be, in Fukasaku’s words, telling tales about men,

⁴⁵ Suzuki, quoted in Donald Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (Revised Edition) (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2005), p. 181

⁴⁶ Chris D, pp. 19-20

‘And when you have to concentrate on one or two male characters, you just don’t have time to concentrate as much on female roles’,⁴⁷ I would argue that he is belittling the importance of women in *yakuza-eiga* and their role in the heroes’ motivations and fate. I would further argue that the lover often has a stronger role to play in *yakuza* films than she does in the classic Hollywood gangster tradition.

Conclusion

We have already established that films of the ‘classic’ Hollywood gangster cycle of films had a single-focus narrative structure, as proposed by Altman, in that we follow a single protagonist who rejects the codes of society. It is clear that *Tokyo Drifter* and *Branded to Kill* can also be categorised as single-focus narratives—for example, the hero departs into previously unexplored territory, behaviour or thought; and secondary characters serve as models for the protagonist, for example, the father figure (Kurata in *Tokyo Drifter*), tempter (Misako in *Branded to Kill*), or teacher (Shooting Star in *Tokyo Drifter*). On the other hand, *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* and *Japan Organised Crime Boss* are perhaps more difficult to classify. It has already been noted that *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* has a parallel narrative structure: Kikuji working as a building-site labourer and being pursued by the assassin, and Oshige working in an *izakaya* and being pursued (in a different way) by the detective. Despite this, the characters (or subjects) are not in opposition to each other—they share the same goal of surviving and eventually being together—and there are few instances of successive episodes of each of them engaged in similar activities (or predicates). And neither do Kikuji and Oshige have equal weight in the film: the narrative clearly follows Kikuji, and we mostly only see Oshige (and the other characters in the film) in relation to him. Nevertheless, the opposition of the two rival gangs and Kikuji’s personal rivalry with Izawa over Manryu give the film elements

⁴⁷ Fukasaku, quoted in Chris D., p. 19

of dual-focus within a largely single-focus narrative. *Japan Organised Crime Boss* also has elements of both dual- and single-focused narrative. On the one hand it clearly follows Tsukamoto as the protagonist and he, like Kikuji, Tetsu, and Haneda is entering previously unexplored territory by not only taking over the Hamanaka gang but also taking on Danno. On the other hand we have the clearest example in all four films of a parallel narrative—the conflict between Hamanaka and Danno together with Hokuryu-kai. In this we see following-patterns which alternate between opponents, and regular movement between the two sides by means of metaphoric modulation, while Tsukamoto himself embodies the dual-focus narrative's trait of highlighting importance of the law (in this case the *jingi* code) and tradition. Of the four films, therefore, only *Japan Organised Crime Boss* has a different narrative pattern, in the terms proposed by Altman, to the single-focus of the 'classic' Hollywood films.

So far, we have explored *yakuza* films of the 'golden age' in terms of their narrative structure as well as the motifs, iconography, conventions and themes of the cycle, and we have seen that there are clear semantic elements that are shared by the films discussed. It is also becoming clear that, contrary to the claims made by many commentators, the *yakuza-eiga* of the 'golden age' has much in common in terms of narrative and thematic structures with the classic Hollywood gangster genre, in that many of the functions I proposed for classic Hollywood gangster films in Chapter 2 are equally applicable to *ninkyō* and *jitsuroku-eiga*. These include: *The gangster-hero is outside mainstream society*; *The gangster-hero displays special talents*; *The gangster-hero is sexually ambiguous*; *The gangster-hero breaks his own code*; *The gangster-hero's relationships break down*; and *The gangster-hero dies*. One of the clearest examples of a *yakuza* film which fulfils these criteria is *Branded to Kill*. As mentioned earlier, the director, Suzuki Seijun, has described this as a 'mafia film', and while there may not be specific references to the American gangster films of the 1930s, we have seen that not only does it have a rise-fall narrative, but that all of the above functions apply to Haneda. To take

the example of *the gangster-hero breaks his own code*, early in the film, the failed hit man, Kasuga, cites the rule which he broke: 'Don't drink, don't touch women. Drink and women kill a killer.' As has been discussed, Haneda's obsession with Misako hastens his downfall, and when he is being hunted by the number one killer he starts to drink. His downfall is akin to that of Rico in *Little Caesar*, who eschews alcohol until he has fallen, then becomes a drunk. Haneda, like Tony Camonte in *Scarface* before him, ends up holed up in his apartment awaiting his fate. However, many of these similarities concern the *surface* structure of the films and clearly do not apply as strongly to other *yakuza* films examined here. The question therefore arises of whether it is possible to identify any *deep* structures common to both traditions.

The deep narrative structure of Hollywood and Japanese gangster films

So far we have explored and compared the surface narrative structures of Hollywood and Japanese gangster films in their 'classic' phases. We have found that the two cycles, despite their obvious cultural differences, share many aspects of form. However, the aim of the study thus far is to identify a *deep* narrative structure. To find this we can turn to the films' syntactic elements (plot structure, character relationships), and it is clear that there are indeed important points of cohesion. This leads us to a proposal of a deep narrative structure which is shared by the two traditions and which is composed of four elements:

1. *The gangster-hero as an outsider*. We have seen that in both the 'classic' Hollywood cycle and in the 'golden age' *yakuza* films the gangster-hero is cut off from society. Rico, Tom and Tony are outsiders by virtue of birth, social environment and education—their immigrant working-class backgrounds exclude them from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment—which has led them to further distance themselves from 'legitimate' society by rejecting Algerist ideals of honest effort as a way of achieving the American Dream, and instead choosing criminality. And while Tom and Tony are low-level members of their gangs at the beginning of the narratives and therefore isolated from their power structures, at the opening

of *Little Caesar* Rico is one step further removed by not even being a member of the gang society at all. In the 'classic' Hollywood cycle, the gangster-hero naturally remains outside legitimate society; however, he soon establishes himself as an integral part of the gang society, rising, as we have seen, to a position of power before overreaching himself, which leads to his downfall. At the end of the films, Rico, Tony and Tom are alone—they have abandoned their gangs and are again outsiders.

The concept of the outsider in 'golden age' *yakuza-eiga* is slightly different, but is nevertheless a key element of the narrative structure. With the exception of Kikuji in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*, all the heroes are established members of their gangs (although it is worth noting that in the films examined in the next chapter, *Battles without Honour and Humanity* and *Graveyard of Honour*, the heroes are either low-level *yakuza* or completely outside the gang, in common with the 'classic' Hollywood gangster-hero). Instead, the *yakuza* gangster hero is removed from the gang society in other ways: Tetsu and his *oyabun* in *Tokyo Drifter* are attempting to go straight; Haneda in *Branded to Kill* is basically unemployed and returning from America; and Tsukamoto in *Japan Organised Crime Boss* is in prison. As the films progress the heroes are reintegrated into the gang, but like their Hollywood counterparts become outsiders again by the end of the narrative: Kikuji is fleeing to Manchuria, Tetsu becomes a drifter, Haneda dies alone in the boxing arena, and Tsukamoto is the sole survivor of the Hamanaka-gumi and dies having killed the evil *oyabun*, Danno. In both the American and Japanese traditions, the gangster-hero starts and ends the narrative as an outsider, of both mainstream and gang society.

2. *The gangster-hero's vertical relationships.* The gangster-hero's relationship with his boss, or in some cases with an underling, is a narrative theme common to both traditions. In all cases, the relationship with the boss or *oyabun* is tinged with betrayal, and it is this that drives the narrative. In 'classic' Hollywood gangster films it is the gangster-hero who betrays his boss,

either, as in *Little Caesar* and *Scarface*, by seizing control of the gang, eliminating the boss, and claiming all the trappings of power, or (in *The Public Enemy*) by unintentionally undermining and then disobeying the boss. In all cases, however, this betrayal leads to the gangster-hero's downfall. In 'golden age' *yakuza-eiga* the betrayal is reversed; the evil *oyabun* turns on the loyal *yakuza* hero and by doing so betrays both the hero and the very tenets of the *jingi* code. This leads to the isolation or death of the hero in addition to the *oyabun's* destruction (although, as we shall see in the next chapter, this fate is not guaranteed in the more cynical *jitsuroku yakuza-eiga*).

The gangster-hero's relationship with his acolyte is not central to all the films discussed here, and unlike the relationship with the boss, is marked by loyalty rather than betrayal. The underling usually has to pay for his loyalty to the hero with his life, as is the case with Otero in *Little Caesar* and Angelo in *Scarface*.

3. *The gangster-hero's lateral relationships.* Along with his vertical relationships, the gangster-hero's lateral relationships are central to the narrative and can be divided between relationships with his gangster- / blood brother and his lover. The former is characterised by a deep homosocial bond but, unlike the relationship between the gangster-hero and boss, can embody either betrayal or loyalty. In the 'classic' Hollywood cycle, the gangster-hero/gangster-brother relationship is already formed at the beginning of the film. The hero and his 'brother' form a team, but it is the hero who acts while the brother observes. As the narrative progresses, the hero and brother drift apart, usually due to gangster-brother's desire for domestication which is contrasted with the gangster-hero's continued transgressive behaviour. While Matt remains a loyal follower of Tom in *The Public Enemy* even after he marries, both Rico and Tony sense Joe and Guino's domestication as betrayal. However, eventually all three relationships are destroyed by the actions of the gangster-hero: Matt is killed as he follows Tom from the hideout after the latter's betrayal of Paddy Ryan; Tony kills Guino in a fit of

jealous rage; and Joe is threatened by Rico and only survives because Rico's love proves greater than his need to eliminate him, but the relationship is irrevocably broken.

While the hero/brother relationship in the Hollywood tradition is predicated on personal friendship, the bonds in 'golden age' *yakuza* films are based on professionalism, whether through the formal relationship of a blood brother (Tsukamoto and Tsubaki in *Japan Organised Crime Boss*), mutual respect (Tetsu and Shooting Star in *Tokyo Drifter*) or even rivalry (Haneda and the number one killer in *Branded to Kill*). Nonetheless, this homosocial bond is as strong, if not stronger, than in the 'classic' Hollywood cycle—rather than ending in betrayal, these relationships are mostly loyal to the last, to the point of the brother sacrificing himself for the gangster-hero. They are therefore in sharp contrast to the *oyabun/kubon* vertical relationship described above.

Unlike the relatively straightforward hero/brother relationship in both traditions, the gangster-hero's relationship with women can be much more problematic. As we have seen, there is a distinct ambiguity about the sexuality or sexual desire of the 'classic' Hollywood gangster-hero, either in terms of homosexuality (Rico), inability to consummate a relationship (Tom) or incestuous feelings (Tony). And in one way or another, relationships with women contribute to the downfall of the gangster-hero: Joe's choice of Olga over Rico; Tom sleeping with Jane; and Cesca marrying Guino. Lovers can be equally, and often more directly, dangerous for the 'golden age' *yakuza* hero: Kikuji is vulnerable because of Oshige, and both Mami and Misako endanger Haneda in different ways. Lovers (or would-be lovers) can also be supportive—Manryu (*The Flowers and the Angry Waves*), Chiharu (*Tokyo Drifter*) and Kazama's sister (*Japan Organised Crime Boss*)—but the heroes ultimately reject their support as *giri* dictates they have to fulfil their *yakuza* destiny. While there is real strength in the lateral male-male homosocial bond in both these traditions, even if it is ultimately betrayed, the relationship between the gangster-hero and his lover(s) is at one point weaker but also likely

to lead to his destruction. This manifests itself in two ways: firstly in 'classic' Hollywood gangster films, sexually transgressive behaviour is equated with betrayal and leads to the downfall of the hero; secondly, the depiction and treatment of women in both traditions, but especially in *yakuza-eiga*, has distinct, and sometimes very disturbing, misogynistic overtones. In all cases, the lover must be sacrificed in order for the gangster-hero to fulfil his destiny: Tom leaves Gwen when he hears of Nails's death; Cesca is killed in the final shootout; Manryu dies defending Kikuji while Oshige is wounded, leaving Kikuji to escape to Manchuria alone; Tetsu abandons Chiharu; Mami and Misako both die; and Tsukamoto leaves Kazama's sister in order to confront Danno (as she says, 'You always put the gang and your buddies first, you never think about us').

4. *The gangster-hero departs and loses his place in society.* As we have seen when discussing the first element of this proposed deep structure, in all the films the gangster-hero starts and ends the narrative as an outsider. He must leave the stage, either through death, imprisonment or by escaping the shackles of the gang only to wander as an itinerant drifter.

It is important to note, however, that the proposed deep structure concerns more than just questions of narrative, and must include themes and ideological functions as well. Therefore, having proposed a common deep narrative structure for 'golden age' *yakuza-eiga* and 'classical' Hollywood gangster films, the focus of the project moves on to consider the position of social commentary in *yakuza* films, a further point denied by Schrader. In doing so we will not only consider how the cycle represents the post-Second World War social, cultural and economic shifts in Japanese society, but we will also be able to explore questions of ideology and make further additions to the common deep structure.

4. Questions of History and Ideology in the ‘Golden Age’

The previous two chapters have explored the myths of the Hollywood and Japanese gangster traditions through an analysis of their narrative structures and established some of the points at which these two traditions meet, which has allowed us to propose four narrative elements of a common deep structure. In doing so, we have considered the ritual approach to genre studies favoured by Will Wright and Thomas Schatz, and gone at least some way to an understanding of the motifs, iconography, conventions and themes (those elements which Robin Wood describes as the ‘what’), and the similarities between them. It is time now to consider the different national genres’ strategies for dealing with the ideological tensions in society (the ‘why’), with the aim of addressing Judith Hess Wright’s contention that gangster films serve, rather than challenge, the status quo, placing them within Comolli and Narboni’s Category (a)—films that reproduce the dominant ideology in undiluted form. However, as mentioned earlier, this study is interested in examining whether gangster films belong more properly in any of the other categories: Category (b)—films which attack their ideological assimilation through actively addressing a political subject that opposes the dominant ideology which must be linked with a break from the traditional way of depicting reality; Category (c)—the content is not explicitly political, but becomes so through analysis of their form; Category (d)—films which have an explicit political content, but which use conventional forms of representation and do not challenge the dominant ideology; and Category (e)—films which at first sight appear to belong to the dominant ideology, but do so in an ambiguous manner and ultimately denounce it (see Chapter 1, note 71).

As has been noted, there is a general acceptance that the ‘classic’ gangster films of the early 1930s were at least partly driven by a desire to make social commentary. As Munby states:

As a key part of growing mass culture, gangster narratives addressed the consequences of modernization, mediating the relationship of modern Americans to an increasingly anachronistic national idealism. Gangsters captured the antagonistic imagination of a population afflicted first by the repressive order of Prohibition and then by the devastating consequences of the Wall Street Crash.¹

He also highlights the question of 'legitimate and illegitimate Americans' addressed in the cycle and argues that these issues are equally prevalent in later films, including the gangsta 'hood' cycle of films which dramatised the plight of ghettoised African Americans in the post-industrial United States of the late 1980s and early 90s,² for example *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991), *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Albert and Allen Hughes, as the Hughes Brothers, 1993). Neve notes that the 'classic' cycle charts the breakdown in the normal mechanism of society, and goes on to quote Richard Griffith, who argues that the films lead the way in accustoming audiences to the notion that 'the screen could legitimately take its place beside the printing press as a channel for the discussion of public ideas'.³ There can be little doubt that this function of social commentary in the 'classic' cycle was an active articulation by filmmakers to address social issues, rather than being merely a reflection of the contemporary societal context—see, for example, Zanuck's letter to the MPPDA detailing the concerns over education, the living conditions and the social environment of the working classes that lay behind *The Public Enemy* (see Chapter 2, note 59). However, as has also been noted, there is no such universal agreement as to whether *yakuza-eiga* similarly seek to make social commentary. Those who argue that they do, including Chris D, Standish, Iwai McDonald, da Silver, and Phillips and Stringer, tend to concentrate almost exclusively on *jitsuroku* documentary style films like *Battles without Honour and Humanity*,

¹ Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 2.

² Munby, *Public Enemies Public Heroes*, p. 2

³ Richard Griffith, 'The American Film: 1929-1948', in Rotha, P., ed., *The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema* (London: Vision Press, 1949), p. 437, cited in Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1992), p. 15

and disregard the earlier *ninkyō* films that were discussed in the previous chapter. However, I will establish that the ideological aspects (including historical, political, economic and sociocultural) are indeed features of *ninkyō* films, and will also reassess two *jitsuroku yakuza-eiga*, *Battles with Honour and Humanity* and *Graveyard of Honour*— films considered to be supreme examples of the change *yakuza* films underwent during the first half of the 1970s. The movement away from the idealistic *ninkyō-eiga* of the 1960s to the more realistic and less romantic cycle of *jitsuroku* films coincides with what Cazdyn calls an ‘end of utopianism’ in Japan in 1970. ‘Not only was there a “de-Marxification” in the universities and public discourse that was no less profound than in France in 1968, but there was also a redoubled acquiescence to the rhetoric of the Japanese “economic miracle”’.⁴ Despite this, and as we shall see, the *jitsuroku* films continued to attract a young, educated and left-wing audience, notwithstanding some critics’ concerns over what they maintained was the danger of the cycle legitimising wartime notions of fascism.

By the end of the decade, the genre had fallen out of favour with both audiences and filmmakers and would not make a concerted comeback until the emergence of Kitano Takeshi and Miike Takashi towards the end of the century. It could be argued, therefore, that *Graveyard of Honour* is almost the apogee of this phase of the genre, and there is certainly a clear development from *Japan Organised Crime Boss*, at the very earliest stages of *jitsuroku* films, to *Graveyard of Honour*, just as there is from *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* to *Branded to Kill*. *Battles without Honour and Humanity*, holding the central position in this Fukasaku triumvirate, still has some small vestiges of *giri/ninjo* sensibilities in the person of the hero, Hirono Shozo, but by the time we get to *Graveyard of Honour*, these have completely disappeared.

⁴ Eric Cazdyn, *The Flash of Capital: Film and Geopolitics in Japan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 115

It is the purpose of this chapter, therefore, to explore questions of history and ideology in *ninkyō* and *jitsuroku yakuza* films to show that the active articulation of Japan's social problems in the two or three decades following the end of the Second World War is just as central a factor in their makeup as the questions posed by Hollywood gangster films of the 1930s and later. This articulation, I will argue, has led to a socially conscious cycle of films that contain clear progressive elements and appealed to an audience who felt alienated from, and in some cases resisted inclusion in, mainstream middle-class society. To help the reader's understanding of the issues under discussion, it will be necessary to outline the changes in Japanese society brought about by defeat and occupation and the subsequent rapid economic development which provide the background of this period of *yakuza* films. I will then use this analysis to highlight the level of social commentary in *yakuza-eiga* and, where appropriate, link the findings to similar features in Hollywood gangster films.

As noted before, the two additional films which will be featured in this discussion are in many ways very different to those discussed in the previous chapter.

Jingi naki tatakai / Battles without Honour and Humanity

Battles without Honour and Humanity is often credited as being one of the first of the new breed of *jitsuroku yakuza-eiga*. It tells the story of three young gang 'underbosses', Hirono Shozo, Sakai Tetsuya (Matsukata Hiroki) and Wakasugi Hiroshi (Tatsuo Umemiya), starting in the chaos of the street markets in Hiroshima a year after Japan's surrender and finishing in the mid-1950s. Subsequent films in the series (five were made between 1973 and 1974, all directed by Fukasaku) take the story up to 1970,⁵ and like many *jitsuroku* films, episodes in *Battles without Honour and Humanity* depict actual events.

⁵ The series was revived in 2000 with *Shin jingi naki tatakai / New Battles*, directed by Sakamoto Junji

As noted before, *Battles without Honour and Humanity* has been attributed with drawing on the rise and fall themes of the 'classic' Hollywood gangster films.⁶ The narrative structure of the film has many similarities to that of the films discussed in Chapter 2, with many crossover functions (for example, *the gangster-hero craves power; the gangster-hero has low status within the gang; the gangster-hero displays special talents; the gangster-hero forms relationships; the gangster-hero is strong, society is weak; the gangster-hero's relationships break down; and the gangster-hero dies*). However, its real interest is found in the fact that it may be termed a *jitsuroku yakuza-eiga*. It is therefore very different from the *ninkyō* films discussed in the previous chapter—the optimism of post-occupation post-Olympic Japan had given way to harsher and more politically divided nation in the grips of the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis. *Battles without Honour and Humanity* captures the mood in Japan of the early- and mid-70s; it does so through the gritty realism of the documentary-style which links the rise of the Yamamori gang with that of post-war emergence of Japan as a regional and global economic and political power, thereby questioning the post-war values of the nation and its leaders.⁷

The three main protagonists are recently demobbed servicemen who are members of gangs operating in a black market rife with crime, corruption and inter-gang violence. Shozo and Tetsuya are minor members of the Yamamori street gang, while Hiroshi is in the more powerful and organised Doi-gumi. The film depicts how these three rise within their organisations but are manipulated and betrayed by their *oyabun* and other underworld bosses, Yamamori, Doi, Obuko, an elder of the Hiroshima underworld, and Kaito, the boss of bosses. The loyalty and sacrifice of the young gangsters is shown as being in sharp contrast to the deceit, treachery and perfidiousness of their elders. Early in the film, Shozo kills a rival gang

⁶ da Silva, p. 346

⁷ da Silva, pp. 346-347

boss and while in prison supports Hiroshi in a riot over food stolen by the prison guards. The two are put in solitary together and despite being from rival gangs become blood brothers in a scene with strong sexual overtones—as they suck the blood from each others' linked forearms, the position of the camera and the soundtrack makes us feel as if they are engaged in a lengthy and passionate kiss.

Upon release (arranged by Hiroshi through his better connections), Shoko returns to the Yamamori gang, which soon becomes bigger, more powerful and a fully-fledged *yakuza-gumi*, under the patronage of Obuko. To avenge an attack on his *oyabun*, Shoko murders a rival gang member, only to find out that he has killed Okubo's nephew. Despite Shoko's loyalty, Yamamori is furious and orders that he commits *yubitsume*—that he cuts off the tip of his little finger in repentance and supplication to Okubo. In a clear departure from such displays of fealty and honour in earlier films, Fukasaku transforms the finger-cutting ceremony into a low comedy farce: none of the gang members know how it should be done, and when Shoko finally manages to sever his finger, the tip flies off into the garden only to be retrieved after a frantic search, by which time it has been pecked at by chickens. The elder accepts the gesture and calm is briefly restored while the gangs entrench and expand their business. However, this lull does not last long and soon a territorial war breaks out between the Yamamori and Doi gangs. Tetsuya has to leave Hiroshima to escape a prison sentence, while Hiroshi, now also released from prison, recognises his *oyabun's* deceitfulness and joins the Yamamori gang. He offers to kill his former boss but that would be an ultimate betrayal, so Shoko, despite the possibility of receiving a death sentence, carries out the assassination. The inter-gang war becomes more violent and claims several gang members' lives, including that of Hiroshi. This orgy of violence, while spread over a longer period of the film, is reminiscent of the closing stages of *The Godfather*, where the acts of vengeance and score settling ordered by Michael intercut with

the christening of his godson. In *Battles without Honour and Humanity*, each murder is held in freeze-frame, with the name of the victim and date superimposed on the screen.

Shoko is finally betrayed by a former Yamamori gang member and sent to prison once again. While he is inside, Tetsuya returns from exile and starts a process of taking over the gang, which under Yamamori has started dealing in drugs. This sparks off another wave of violence, but this time in an intra-gang battle for superiority. When Shoko leaves prison, Yamamori pleads with him to kill Tetsuya. Despite his *oyabun's* litany of broken promises Shoko agrees, but eventually cannot do it: instead he ceremoniously breaks the sake cup which they drank from during their induction to the gang, thus symbolising an irreversible severing of connections. This does not save Tetsuya who is gunned down on the streets, just like Eddie Bartlett in *The Roaring Twenties*, on the orders of Yamamori. Shoko is left disillusioned and still under the control of his *oyabun* who has regained all his power. Iwai McDonald contrasts Shoko and Yamamori, and in doing so highlights the changes in the *oyabun-kubon* relationship from the *ninkyō* to the *jitsuroku* films:

... the *giri*-bound (Shoko) is pitted against *yakuza* opportunists. Through a painful process, he comes to learn that he must adjust himself to the *yakuza* world, in which money is the be-all and end-all [...] The traditional vertical relationships fostered by *giri* have all but vanished. A boss is a top-dog, not a benevolent dictator concerned with the wellbeing of his henchmen. Yamamori is a master manipulator from beginning to end [...] He is not above pitting one of his men against the other if that removes obstacles to his ambitions.⁸

Jingi no hakaba / Graveyard of Honour

Like *Battles without Honour and Humanity*, *Graveyard of Honour* has a classic 'rise and fall' narrative. It is based on the true story of Ishikawa Rikio (Watari Tetsuya), a young *yakuza* sociopath who, unlike Shoko in the earlier film, has no vestiges of the conventions of *giri/ninjo* central to the *ninkyō* hero. Instead he is a street thug whose indiscipline and refusal to accept

⁸ Iwai McDonald, p. 185

authority, even to the point of stabbing his *oyabun* and torching the car of another *yakuza* boss who intercedes on his behalf, leads to his downfall and destruction. Rikio is in many ways very similar to Tony Camonte in *Scarface* in that he uses brute force to rise within the organisation and attempts to take over the gang by attacking his boss. Unlike Tony, however, Rikio does not succeed: the whole underworld turns against him and the bosses exile him from Tokyo for ten years and then order his murder.

Like *Scarface* the film is punctuated by an external narrative which comments on the actions and progress of the gangster-hero. However, rather than newspaper headlines, the film uses a 'voice of God' narration, often over sepia-tinted film of *yakuza* battles shot with a hand-held camera and framed with oblique angles. It opens with an expository intertitle ('Ishikawa Rikio. Born 6th August 1924') over black and white still photographs of Rikio as a child, and we then hear various voices from his past—his family, teachers, friends—describing him as a boy who 'lost his mother' when very young, had 'smart ... native intelligence', was 'good at school', 'headstrong' and 'hard core', and 'always wanted to be a *yakuza*'. This is followed by a narrator (again over black and white stills, but this time of a young man) telling us how Rikio ran away from home in 1940, went to Tokyo and joined the Kawada-gumi, and was arrested and gaoled in 1942 for assault. We return to voices from his past, this time fellow *yakuza*, who say that he 'really respected his *oyabun*' and how Rikio had said of himself that he was 'like a balloon—keep rising until he bursts'. Whereas there are hints that the war is at least partly responsible for the situation Shoko and Tetsuya find themselves in *Battles without Honour and Humanity* (again echoing Eddie Bartlett's story in post-First World War New York), there is no such mitigation for Rikio—one of the voices says, 'No, it wasn't the war. He was just crazy.'

The film is set in Shinjuku in the immediate aftermath of the war against a backdrop of overwhelming corruption: the police aiding the *yakuza* gangs against the so-called *sangoku jin*

who have now been freed as equals under the protection of the US Occupation Force and have formed their own gangs; US officers brokering peace deals between *yakuza* gangs, and using them to sell whiskey on the black market; individual US soldiers selling contraband, including weapons, or giving them to prostitutes who are themselves run by *yakuza* gangs; and the first democratic elections in which a gang-sponsored candidate stands for the city council under the banner of 'The Light of Shinjuku'. This all has the ring of authenticity, as it accurately depicted the situation in the markets of Tokyo, Osaka and other large cities during the early years of occupation.⁹

As all this is going on, Rikio is rising within the ranks of the Kawada-gumi by proving himself to be a ruthless soldier. At the same time he is a loose cannon, setting up his own gang of street thugs and showing scant respect for his *oyabun* and others in the gang's hierarchy. Eventually he is sent to prison for the attack on his *oyabun*. On his release, Rikio is expelled from the Kawada gang and banned from joining any Tokyo gang for ten years. He is exiled to Osaka, living in flophouses and contracting tuberculosis. He spirals out of control and goes into an amphetamine and heroin fuelled decline. Returning to Tokyo after only a year, he commits further outrages by killing the gang boss, Imai, who had sheltered him when he was in trouble with his own *oyabun*. He is arrested after his hideout is surrounded by both police and gangsters and sentenced to ten years, but is soon released from prison on bail pending appeal. At this stage the film almost enters into the realm of surrealism. His lover, Chieko, who he had raped earlier in the film, commits suicide, but not before he registers their marriage. His drug-induced decline continues when he takes the urn containing her cremated bones to his former *oyabun* and asks for support in forming his own family. As his former gang members look on incredulously he opens the urn and starts to eat her bones— not in remorse but, according to

⁹ Dower, pp. 140-144

Schilling, with the appalling hunger of a man who fears nothing because he has lost everything.¹⁰ He is doomed and dies not a glorious gangster death in a hail of bullets or cut down by enemies' *katana*, but by throwing himself off the roof of his prison and plunging to oblivion.

Rikio's epitaph, scrawled in chalk on his prison cell wall, is 'What a laugh! Thirty years of frenzy,' and the voice of God narration that closes the film informs us that, 'Ishikawa was a stereotype of the post-war gangster and even today he lives on in legend.' He appears to be an apt hero for the corrupt and corrupting Japan of the mid-70s.

The outside influence: *yakuza-eiga* and America

The early 1960s were in the middle of a period of a huge and, for many, traumatic transformation in Japanese society, politics, and the economy. These developments went hand-in-hand with Japan's changing perception of its relationship with the rest of the world, and also the growing international awareness of Japan as a modern nation of increasing regional and global influence, both economic and political. The Tokyo Olympic Games of 1964 embodied this altered state of affairs, and coincidentally corresponded with the flowering of the 'golden age' of *yakuza* films, some of which took up the theme of a growing national self confidence by indirectly exploring and reappraising Japan's relationship with the US through encounters and dealings with individual Americans. The depiction of Americans in many of the films studied here indexes wider societal tensions to do with these transformations in Japanese society, the negative aspects of which were often blamed on the Americanisation of Japan. As such, these depictions highlight a key social issue addressed by the films.

Even though Japan had been admitted to the United Nations in 1956, many Japanese considered that it was the Olympics which finally marked the end of the post-war period and

¹⁰ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 221

when the country fully rejoined the community of nations.¹¹ In 1946 as part of its mandate to carry out the demilitarisation and democratisation of Japan, SCAP (the US-led Supreme Command of the Allied Powers for the Occupation and Control of Japan) introduced (some would say imposed) a new constitution which enshrined, among other things, a pacifist foreign policy, universal franchise (women were enfranchised for the first time in Japanese history), labour unionisation, a constitutional monarchy and a pluralist democracy. The San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, which officially ended the Second World War, was accompanied by a US-Japan Security Treaty which dictated that Japan grant the United States the territorial means to establish a military presence in the Far East. The treaty tied Japan's foreign policy to that of the US who in turn used Japan as a bulwark against the spread of communism in East Asia, as well as providing the US with regional bases during both the Korean and Vietnam wars. Even though it officially ended in 1952, to some it appeared as though the occupation was ongoing as the US retained permanent military bases on Japanese soil and even had the right to deploy its own forces in Japan to quell civil disturbances. It was not until 1972 that Okinawa was returned to Japanese sovereignty.

The ubiquity of American involvement in Japan during the post-war period is apparent in several films. Even though there are no major American characters, Americans serve either as a catalyst for major change in the narrative, an enemy to be defeated, or a malevolent and corrupting force. In *Branded to Kill* and *Japan Organised Crime Boss*, the accidental killing of an innocent bystander as a result of a failed assassination attempt is the first act in the eventual downfall and death of the hero. While an American investigator is the target for assassination in *Branded to Kill* (instead a Japanese passerby is killed), in *Japan Organised Crime Boss* an American is the unintended victim of a blundered gangland killing. Either way, the involvement

¹¹ William Horsley and Roger Buckley, *Nippon the New Superpower: Japan Since 1945* (London: BBC, 1990), p. 72; see also Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, p. 300

of Americans, however transient, has a transforming effect on the fate of the protagonists—and not for the better. Even though the 1946 constitution was widely welcomed by the Japanese, bringing with it the hope of peace, equality and democracy, by the mid-1960s many were becoming increasingly sceptical of the benefits of what some saw as the Americanisation of Japan. This, together with a centuries-old (official at least) mistrust of and enmity towards *gaijin* (the word most commonly used for ‘foreigner’, but literally meaning ‘outside person’), is a possible reason for what might be seen as the disproportionate effect that American ‘involvement’ has in the fate of the heroes. However, it is clear that this outside involvement is key, and is further accentuated in *Branded to Kill* in the person of the Indo-Japanese *femme fatale*, Misako. As has been mentioned before, the assassination of the American investigator is botched because a butterfly lands on Haneda’s rifle scope just as he fires. As we have also seen, butterflies are one of the motifs of Misako. And it is Haneda’s obsession with Misako which leads to the failed assassination and precipitates his descent into paranoia and eventual destruction. Likewise, the killing of the American woman in *Japan Organised Crime Boss* takes place in a traditional Japanese garden, highlighting a juxtaposition which links the death of a single American together with the destruction of the *jingi yakuza* code (or, to put it another way, traditional Japanese culture).

Tokyo Drifter is more open in its treatment of Americans in the comedy bar fight scene described in the previous chapter. In the scene drunken American GIs and sailors start a fight over a dancer and are easily defeated by an alliance of Tetsu, Shooting Star and Umetani, together with locals and bar girls. The Americans are portrayed as foolish and unthreatening and are dispatched by the bar girls who march the by now dazed servicemen to stand in line before breaking bottles over their heads. Suzuki acknowledges that the scene is an homage to

the type of over-the-top bar fights seen in some Hollywood Westerns.¹² It contains many of the hallmarks of a Western saloon brawl, with chairs and bottles broken over heads, tables destroyed like matchwood and even a collapsed balcony. Here, therefore, we have a different approach to any perceived cultural danger, and one that has been used in satire and propaganda over many years—portraying the enemy as oafish and defeatable. In an interesting and telling twist, the dancer who the GIs and sailors are fighting over is herself a Caucasian American. As she fights off her would-be suitors, she spots Tetsu and is immediately attracted and offers herself to him (Tetsu declines). Clearly, Japanese manliness and virility are preferable to the drunken boorishness of the American male.

A different and more severe approach can be seen in *jitsuroku* films. In *Japan Organised Crime Boss*, the American occupying forces, along with ‘third nationals’, are described as ‘the enemy’ but by the time of *Battles without Honour and Humanity* and *Graveyard of Honour*, the Americans are shown to be a more corrupting influence. This matches Japan’s experience of the early- to mid-70s: amongst much protest, the renewed US-Japan Security Treaty (known locally as *Anpo*), was signed in 1970; the ‘economic miracle’ was interrupted by outside events, including the 1973 oil crisis as previously mentioned; and there was a general air of corruption in the highest circles of government which would culminate with the Lockheed Scandal. Even though this would not come to light until Lockheed executives gave evidence to a US Senate panel in 1976, the corruption involving payments of some \$2 million in bribes to the Japanese Prime Minister, Tanaka Kakuei, dated back to 1972. The bribes were paid to facilitate the purchase of Lockheed Tri-Star passenger jets by the Japanese airline, All Nippon Airways, and involved a wartime right-wing activist, Komada Yoshio, and the *yakuza*, as well as top level politicians. Tanaka had to resign over the scandal and was later convicted but never served a

¹² Suzuki Seijun, quoted in Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 102

day of his four-year sentence (he was reported to be furious at being arrested over such a 'trifling sum').¹³ Despite the obvious acquiescence and guilt of a Japanese Prime Minister and other officials, in the eyes of many the corrupting influence of American-style capitalism and corporate culture was clear.

In *Battles without Honour and Humanity*, this American corruption of Japan (and Japanese officialdom's compliance) is highlighted, not very subtly, by the attempted gang-rape of a Japanese woman by American GIs in the opening scene of the film. Shoko, Tetsuya and other members of the street gang attack the GIs to protect her, but they in turn are assaulted by Japanese police and shot at by American Military Police. While this is the only episode featuring Americans in the film, the portrayal of the US during the occupation and after is clear. Standish notes that the series is a 'critique of the intimate connection between Japan's post-war economic recovery and American foreign policy'.¹⁴ The American military have a much larger role in *Graveyard of Honour*, in which they are complicit in the *yakuza's* black market activities, both officially and as individuals, but also act (for a price) as an effective deterrent against the encroachment of a rival gang during territorial disputes, while the local Japanese police are powerless. Nevertheless, despite doing deals with the Americans and acting as their trading arm in the black market, the *yakuza* still despise them as 'Animals, wearing shoes inside,' and they see themselves as using the occupying forces rather than being used, or governed, by them.

This portrayal of Americans, and other foreigners, as figures of ridicule as well as agents of corruption and disastrous change necessarily leads to the question of whether *yakuza-eiga* present an ideology that is right wing and nationalist. Certainly the social, economic and

¹³ Horsely and Buckley, pp. 128-129

¹⁴ Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, p. 305

political upheaval of the two decades following the end of the Second World War had, for many, a special resonance as it seemed to echo the upheavals following the opening up of Japan after nearly 300 years of isolation during the Edo Era (1603-1868). In 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry's 'Black Ships' of the US Navy had arrived to force the country to open. Fifteen years later, the Meiji restoration was complete and heralded major reforms (based on models from abroad) in education and the military, together with the end of feudalism and the demise of the *samurai* class. Japan also learnt the ways of survival in an imperialist world and became a major regional power following the military victories against China (1895) and Russia (1905). As a popular song of the 1880s put it, 'There is a Law of Nations, it is true / but when the moment comes, remember / the Strong Eat up the Weak'.¹⁵ The result of this was of course the rise of militarism and totalitarianism in the 1930s based around the cult of the Emperor, which ultimately led to defeat in the Second World War. Once again, Japan had been forced to alter from without, but this time it seemed to many as though it was being emasculated in the process.

Standish talks of 'Anti-American discourses' in *jitsuroku yakuza-eiga*,¹⁶ and undoubtedly the violence and rejection of the traditional *jingi* code in these films fuelled fears in some writers, for example Sato Tadao, that they were legitimising old notions of fascism.¹⁷ The ultra right-wing writer Mishima Yukio praised *yakuza-eiga* but, as we shall see later in this chapter, the left were also taken with the notion that an individual must forego duty in order to serve humanity. The appeal of *yakuza* films to a left-leaning audience is acknowledged by Fukasaku:

There were a lot of leftist writers and directors, but also many in the general audience shared that leftist sentiment. The students and blue-collar workers who made up a good proportion of the audience cheered that type of story (an

¹⁵ Dower, p. 21

¹⁶ Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, p. 306

¹⁷ Sato Tadao, 'Reflex of Loyalty', cited in Schrader, '*Yakuza-eiga*', p. 69

honourable *yakuza* helping the working class, who are being exploited by evil gangs or the government). The creators of those films really enjoyed that kind of scenario and loved presenting it on screen.¹⁸

The ‘Economic Miracle’: corporatisation, materialism and corruption in *yakuza-eiga*

Far from the commonly-held belief that Japan was annihilated following the war, it was in fact poised for recovery with SCAP actively encouraging the continuation of many of its pre-war institutions, including its tightly integrated and micromanaged economic structure.¹⁹ This paved the way for what became known as the *kodo keizai seichyo*, or ‘economic miracle’. Between 1954 and 1971, the Japanese economy grew at an average of 10% a year, expanding by five times. Within that period, it outstripped the economies of the UK (in 1962) and West Germany (in 1967), and by the 1980s the country’s GNP surpassed that of the USSR, making it the world’s second largest economy behind only that of the US.²⁰ This almost unparalleled period of growth has become known as the ‘economic miracle’ and was overseen by an ‘iron triangle’ of conservative politicians, career bureaucrats and big business. Unlike the constitutional and political reforms introduced under the occupation, Japan was largely allowed to resist the imposition of a free-market economy along the Western model. Instead it achieved success through a combination of strict central control by the all-powerful Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), coupled with strong domestic competition, restrictive foreign trade and foreign exchange laws which protected local industry, and an initial focus on the development of heavy industry at the expense of social infrastructure. During the occupation, the *zaibatsu*, the huge integrated financial / industrial oligopolies like Mitsubishi and Mitsui which were the engine of the war effort, were broken up. It was not long, however,

¹⁸ Fukasaku Kinji, quoted in Chris D, p. 24

¹⁹ Cazdyn, p. 6

²⁰ Horsley and Buckley, p. 37

before they transformed themselves into new cliques, the *keiretsu* (business groupings), which adopted a system of integrated manufacture that was far more efficient than the family groupings they replaced. Thus in 1970s and 80s the *keiretsu* had control of a quarter of the economy—the same as pre-war *zaibutsu*. However, the new system also encouraged a new generation of entrepreneurs like Ibuku Masaru, who founded Sony. As a result of MITI's strategies, first heavy and then light industries developed, concentrating especially in the Tokaido corridor, the old east-west route between Kanto (Tokyo and its environs) and Kansai (Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe), and around the Inland Sea between the islands of Honshu and Shikoku, with many heavy industries in Kawasaki, south west of Tokyo, the car industry in and around Nagoya, and electronics giants near Osaka.

In 1960 Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato pledged to double workers' incomes within a decade—a feat in fact managed within seven years. Government policy encouraged consumerism, with MITI overseeing price fixing in order to promote the mass purchase of specific goods. Thus by 1964 90% of households had a television, and over half also possessed the other two items of what became known as the 'three sacred treasures' of the household, a refrigerator and a washing machine, ownership of which was undreamt of by the vast majority of the population less than a decade earlier.²¹ This consumerism was the basis of a dizzying increase in the consumer electrics industry during the 1960s, which was accompanied by overseas trade that grew at twice the speed of Europe's. However, despite this new-found prosperity the Economic Survey of Japan, an Economic Planning Agency report published in

²¹ The 'three sacred treasures' is an ironic popular corruption of Japan's real sacred treasures: the mirror, sword and jewel, the symbols of the Emperor's authority: Horsley and Buckley, p. 76

1970, showed that social capital in Japan (including housing, property and public amenities) was barely half that of Britain and a quarter of the US.²²

In addition to directing industrial strategy, MITI was also instrumental in such areas as industrial relations and companies' employment policy. The Marxist independent trade unions which arose out of the 1946 constitution were gradually replaced by so-called 'enterprise unions', which were far more malleable as their membership was confined to employees of a single company. These, along with lifetime employment and promotion by seniority comprised MITI's own 'three sacred treasures' which served to provide security for both employers and employees and engender loyalty. Saito Eijiro, President of Nippon Steel, described employer-employee relationship like 'a parent and child',²³ taking feudal paternalism into the modern company, and this attitude by the powerful elite towards those outside the 'iron triangle' was endemic. The price of the security of lifelong employment was slow advancement within the company, based on length of employment rather than merit, and neither employees nor shareholders had much, if any, say in the business decisions by and about major public companies, which continued to be taken in secret by the elite. Millions of people, therefore, while being able to benefit from the 'economic miracle' (at least in materialistic terms), had little or no influence on it.

As we have seen, *yakuza-eiga* commonly reveal a distrust of modern corporate culture, which is often embodied in the person of the evil *oyabun* and is especially immoral when a corrupt, usually right-wing, politician is involved. We can see this to various degrees in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*, *Tokyo Drifter*, and *Japan Organised Crime Boss*. The latter contains perhaps the clearest indictment of corporate/political corruption as highlighted by

²² Horsley and Buckley, pp. 70-71

²³ Horsley and Buckley, p. 66

the differences between the dress, surroundings and behaviour of the good and evil *oyabun*, and the determination of Tsukamoto to distance himself and his gang from Danno's corporate organisation. This is highlighted in a scene in which Tsukamoto asks for advice from the retired *oyabun*, Kamiyama. The setting for the scene is Kamiyama's Japanese-style house. The two men are kneeling either side of a low table, facing each other before open *shoji* which reveal a traditional Japanese garden. The shot provides a series of frames: Tsukamoto and Kamiyama flanking the open door which itself frames the garden, and in the garden a splash of light from the room falls on the bamboo fence in the background. These are men who are connected to the traditions of Japan itself—they could be in a teahouse or Zen Buddhist temple—as well as the *jingi* code. The scene opens and closes with the sharp cracking sound of a *shishi odoshi* (traditional bamboo water feature), which we also see and hear when Tsukamoto reveals his plan to kill Sakaruda. The sound of the *shishi odoshi* is evocative of the *hyoshigi* (wooden blocks) which are clapped together in *kabuki* theatre to announce the beginning of the play as well as to punctuate and highlight dramatic episodes. Thus the setting (traditional house and garden), conversation topic (honour and sacrifice), and sound (the cracking of the *shishi odoshi*) all combine to place the 'honourable' *oyabun* firmly within Japanese cultural traditions and virtues; a complete contrast with the dishonourable, modern and corporate methods of the evil *oyabun*.

The Flowers and the Angry Waves, on the other hand, depicts corporate corruption from the inside. The workers are cheated by their foremen and beaten if they complain; they are housed in squalid conditions and ordered to fight (and die) in inter-gang battles, which are in reality only a negotiating tactic employed by their *oyabun*; and their union leader (in a clear parody of the acquiescent 'enterprise unions') is just as implicit in the corruption and deal-making of the rival bosses as is the politician who negotiates an agreement for a kickback. Initially, Kikuji seems to side with the bosses—he breaks a strike over food and living

conditions and fights loyally to defend his gang against the incursions of the rival Tamai-gumi. However, he soon learns that he, along with the other members of the Murata gang, is expendable if the bosses think he stands in the way of their ambitions. In the corporate world, *giri* is a one-way concept.

According to Standish *Battles without Honour and Humanity* is a 'critique [...] of the rapacious economic materialism of the "post-moral" age'.²⁴ Whereas Shoko and Hiroshi represent the traditional values of the *yakuza*, Tetsuya and the *oyabun*, Yamamori, are more corporate and vie for the economic control of the gang—Iwai McDonald calls them 'high-level executives of violence, who do not get directly involved in the mayhem they profit from. They merely administrate, monopolize, and control the agents of *yakuza* warfare'.²⁵ Later in the series, the Yamamori gang gains the appearance of legitimacy by moving into tourism, trading and transportation. The *oyabun* and the corporation president are one and the same, but this is as much a reflection of the illegitimacy of modern-day business as it is a story of the conversion of the gangster into businessman,²⁶ a common theme in American gangster narrative from *The Roaring Twenties* (in which Eddie describes his bootlegging business as a corporation) to *The Godfather*, *The Sopranos* and *New Jack City*. Standish cites Sato who argues that the appeal of the *Battles without Honour and Humanity* series lay in its depiction of the transformation of *yakuza* organisations from groups involved primarily in gambling enterprises to the modern-day organisations that form a part of the quasi-legitimate world of Japanese political and economic life,²⁷ thus explicitly making a comparison between the morality of *yakuza* gangs and modern-day corporations. The link between the two groups is

²⁴ Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, p. 306

²⁵ Iwai McDonald, p. 185

²⁶ da Silva, p. 347

²⁷ Sato Tadao, 'Jingi naki tatakai Shiriizu no Omoshirosa', *Shinario* (August, 1974), cited in Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, p. 307

historical, with business using *yakuza* gangs to break strikes before the advent of the 'enterprise unions' and also, up until the 1990s at least, employing them to keep a lid on any dissent and prevent awkward questions being asked during share-holders meetings.²⁸ Kaplan and Dubro highlight this shift of *yakuza* activities (or as they call it, a 'growth in sophistication') from traditional to corporate, much of which, as we have seen, is traced in the films under discussion:

[The gangs moved] from gambling dens to the stock market, from construction gangs to real estate, and from local, feudal structures to multinational, corporate ones. Even as pundits continued to praise the success of Japan's postwar economic miracle, few in the West understood the key positions that the nation's financial industry—debt collection, bankruptcy management, consumer finance, investor relations—were even then heavily influenced by the *yakuza*.²⁹

A Man from Abashiri examines a different side of the corporate world. It does not so much comment on the morality of the corporate culture but parodies the experiences of many young Japanese entering the corporate world for the first time. During the title sequence we see the winter wastes of Hokkaido, sometimes called the Siberia of Japan. The new prisoners arrive in temperatures of -20°C and are taken by open truck to the Abashiri prison. Eleven prisoners share a cell, eight new prisoners and three current inmates, and in the initiation scene that follows we learn about some of the prisoners—a rapist, a petty thief, an arsonist, and a man who attempted suicide. The leader of the current inmates introduces himself as the *shacho* (the company boss) and the hierarchy of the group is established by the seriousness of the crime and length of sentence (i.e., length of service). Standish argues that this sequence is a satire of the initiation of new company recruits,³⁰ and would be recognised as such by many in the audience of *yakuza* films. Schilling notes that the audience consisted of mostly young men who would be drawn to the genre for three reasons: stories of the weak confronting the

²⁸ Horsley and Buckley, p. 54

²⁹ Kaplan and Dubro, p.xiii

³⁰ Standish, *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema*, pp. 167-168

strong; identification with the loner hero defending Japanese values against those who would betray them, often in the name of Westernisation; and what he calls the 'social and political zeitgeist'—those who worked in cramped offices or noisy factories for low pay and were bound by rigid rules and hierarchy.³¹ Likewise, Shiba and Aoyama point out that the narratives of anti-establishment heroes struggling against the authorities 'reflected the situation of the period,' and that the young men who flocked to these films 'were isolated in an era of high economic growth and tight social strictures' and 'felt a strong attraction to the standard [*ninkyō-eiga*] motifs of male comradeship banding together to battle the power structure'.³²

One of the most obvious negative results of the 'economic miracle' was the devastation of the natural environment in the quest for industrial growth and world status. The most famous and cited example is that of Minamata on the southern island of Kyushu, where methyl mercury waste from an aluminium plant owned by the Chisso company was poured as effluent into Minamata Bay. This resulted in people suffering from a range of symptoms including numbness, muscular spasms and blindness, and a number of babies were born with brain damage. Although the 'disease', as it was known at the time, was first noted in the early 1950s, it took until 1956 for medical researchers to identify it as heavy-metal poisoning caused by eating locally caught fish and shellfish. In 1959 evidence emerged that the responsibility for the disease was mercury from the Chisso plant, by which time one hundred patients had been identified, of whom over twenty had died. It was not until 1970 that a district court ruled that Chisso make payments totalling US\$3.2 million to the original group of patients.³³ Despite its

³¹ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 24

³² Shiba Tsukasa and Aoyama Sakae, *Yakuza eiga to sano jidai (Yakuza Films and their Times)* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shinso, 1998), pp. 16-17, quoted in Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, pp. 24-25

³³ Douglas Allchin, 'The Poisoning of Minamata' (nd) <<http://www1.umn.edu/ships/ethics/minamata.htm>> [accessed 28 June 2011]

notoriety, Minamata was not an isolated incident of industrial pollution. Petrochemical smog in the cities caused by traffic exhaust and factory emissions was a daily occurrence, especially in the summer, and was a serious health hazard. This was not helped by the lack of zoning in Japanese city planning, whereby industrial and residential developments were built side-by-side.

While there is little specific reference to the environmental impact of rapid industrialisation in the genre, it serves as a backdrop to highlight the degradation of society set against the detritus of industrialisation in certain films. One such instance is the closing shots of *Jingi naki tatakai: Hiroshima shitoen / Battles without Honour and Humanity 2: Fight to the Death in Hiroshima* aka *Wars without Morality: Mortal Combat in Hiroshima/The Yakuza Papers, Vol. 2: Deadly Fight in Hiroshima* (Fukasaku Kinji, 1973), in which we see a graveyard surrounded by industrial plants pouring smoke into the sky and creating an industrial smog and haze which obscures the 'atomic dome' at ground zero. While the shot focuses on the broken gravestone of the hero, Yamanaka (Fukumoto Seizo), the voiceover sums up the pathos of the hero's death, 'Yamanaka, as a typical Hiroshima *yakuza*, has had his name passed down to today, however, now no one visits his grave. And the Hiroshima *yakuza* wars continue to expand.' The futility and tragedy of Yamanaka's death, in that the wars and killings continue, are juxtaposed with both the devastation caused by the atomic bomb and the industrial destruction of the 'pure' Japan of national mythology, that of Mount Fuji and cherry blossom.

Migration, modernisation and isolation

One of the most significant outcomes of the economic miracle was a massive change in Japan's demographics. Workers were needed in the factories, head offices and supporting financial and service industries, so there was a mass migration from the countryside to the new 'bed towns' growing around the major conurbations (in 1950 one out of every two Japanese worked in farming, fisheries or forestry; by 1960 the proportion was down to one in three; in

1985 it was one in ten³⁴). The migrants were housed in company dormitories or vast developments of *danchi*, multi-storied blocks of flats (*apato*), designed to house the new ideal, the nuclear family. These new households then wanted to acquire the newly available white goods and other gadgets, thereby further increasing demand. As well as higher living standards (at least in the cities), the economic boom resulted in other social changes. Migration from the countryside was mostly confined to the young, which had the effect of dividing the traditional multi-generational household. City dwellers now tended to visit their family homes only during the festivals of New Year and *bon* in August. However, the alienation this caused was not confined to families but to whole sections of society. The new *danchi* householders may have been the first generation to experience indoor hot and cold running water, flush toilets and mains electricity, but they found themselves to be isolated without a support community. Workers would often find they had to commute for more than an hour to work on the overcrowded, but highly efficient, rail system. They would work long hours, often for six or seven days a week, and would frequently be expected to go out at night drinking with colleagues. This was in exchange for the stability and security of a life-long job with the company, which would also provide healthcare and even company vacation resorts. The company therefore replaced the extended family and local community as the primary support provider. This was the lot of millions of members of a new class in Japanese society, the *sarariiman* (white collar worker) and the OL (Office Lady). The latter did not participate in the business of the company but were employed to bring tea to the *shacho* and *senpai* (senior colleagues), answer the occasional phone, perform some minor clerical duties and generally look decorative. Typically these women, as well as those employed as low-paid workers in factories, worked until they married, and some would return to work after their children had left school. Employees worked long hours and when they finally got home found that they

³⁴ Horsley and Buckley, p. 42

were isolated in one of thousands of small *apartos* with no sense of community; married women were secluded at home, raising their children practically single-handedly and waiting for their *sarariiman* husbands to eventually stagger through the door late at night.

The new urban reality of modernisation and isolation faced by millions of Japanese became a feature of *yakuza* films. Like Hollywood gangster films (and unlike Westerns or *jidaigeki* samurai films) *yakuza-eiga* are urban dramas. Although it cannot be said that all *yakuza* heroes embrace modernism, as I have suggested is true of the classic Hollywood gangster, modernisation is central to *yakuza* films; however, the genre treats the modernisation of Japan in various ways. As we have seen, *Tokyo Drifter* parodies the old certainties of traditional *ninkyō* films by depicting the breakdown of the *oyabun/kubon* relationship. This is set against a background of the almost futuristic post-Olympic Tokyo, which is contrasted with the corruption of the old and traditional. Suzuki appears to revel in the modernism that infuses the entire film, combining a jazz soundtrack with a pop-art *mise-en-scène* and a depiction of icons of modern Tokyo. The opening credits run over a montage of the Tokyo of the mid-1960s, including shots of the *shinkansen* (bullet train), the raised Tokyo expressway, both of which were built especially for the Olympics, and the Olympic stadium itself. This contrasts with the pre-credit prologue, which is shot in black and white and shows an older, dirtier, industrial Tokyo of rain-soaked railway sidings and docks. Here we see Tetsu, the hero, being set upon by members of the rival Ostuka gang but he does not fight back, instead allowing himself to be beaten and is left lying ingloriously in the dock-side filth. The contrast of the old, decaying industrial landscape with the new neon-lit clean city highlights the hero's attempt to leave his criminal past and emerge into a new, legitimate life. His refusal to be provoked demonstrates his seriousness and loyalty to Kurata, his *oyabun*, as discussed in the previous chapter. The relationship between the older-generation *oyabun* and the young hero is highlighted in a recurring motif of the view from the boss's home—an old, gnarled,

leafless tree with the Tokyo Tower (again built for the Olympics) in the background. Both Kurata and Tetsu are trying to go straight, but it is the *oyabun* who is compromised and not the young *kubon*. From then on we only see the view by night, when just the tree is visible. The breaking of the *oyabun/kubon* bond results in isolation which is analogous to that felt by the new urban immigrants. As Standish notes, 'The loss of the father figure is further correlated with the loss of place, which accentuates the loneliness of the 'drifter''.³⁵

A year after *Tokyo Drifter* Suzuki presented an alternative dystopian view of the metropolis in *Branded to Kill*, in which the hero, Haneda, is isolated in a nightmarish blend of fear and paranoia. He is holed up in his apartment waiting for the number one killer and death; we see a city devoid of humanity, often shown in negative. The shots are not of the shiny new Tokyo, but of the concrete jungle of rows of *danchi* seen from Haneda's apartment, railway sidings and filthy decaying docks as he wonders where the fatal shot will come from. These images show the underside of the sanitization of Tokyo's urban areas in the run-up to the Olympics, which was both rapid and superficial. As Miyao comments, 'Tokyo's dirty, vulgar and filthy things became hidden beneath an apparently clean surface. Moreover, the country's high rate of economic growth [...] fostered this distinction between the clean and developed surface and the hidden and isolated abject'.³⁶ Haneda's sole communication with the outside world is when he receives mocking phone calls from the number one killer, underlining that Haneda is literally and constantly in his sights. As Haneda looks through the cross hairs of his telescopic sight as he scans the urban landscape to search for the killer, all he can see are rooftops crowded with television aerials and a crying child. Not only is Haneda isolated in this superficially sanitized city, but so is everyone else. The only sign of humanity we get is aural:

³⁵ Standish, *A New History of Japanese Cinema*, p. 295

³⁶ Miyao, p. 197

the tolling of a solitary bell and the screaming of babies echoing around the dehumanising *danchi* blocks.

The isolation of modern city living is also present in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*, even though the film is set in the Taisho era in the early decades of the 20th Century. At this time, following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan was going through a transformation from a feudal to a modern industrialised society, and the film presents a society in upheaval which has clear parallels to Japan's post-war experience. Melville calls *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* a film 'of transition', linking the traditions of Japan's feudal past with a warning of the country's future as a World War II aggressor (the 1905 defeat of Russia had given Japan a foothold in Manchuria—to where Kikuji and Oshige would escape) and a modern-day industrial powerhouse (the contract to build a new HQ for the huge Daito Power Company).³⁷ Like millions of Japanese in the decades following the war, Kikuji and Oshige leave the countryside for the city, but in their case it is to use the city's anonymity as they try to escape the wrath of Kikuji's former *oyabun*. Their isolation is heightened as even though they have secretly married they have to live apart to protect their identities. Although the city provides the lovers with a level of anonymous safety, they are endangered when they lose their anonymity and come to the attention of others—the detective's infatuation with Oshige and Kikuji's fighting skills on the construction site. Nevertheless, they both manage to use the concealment of disguise during their final escape, Kikuji dons a traditional festival mask and Oshige fools the assassin by changing her hair from the 'modern' style to a traditional one.

³⁷ David Melville, 'The Pleasure of the Image – *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*', *Cinémathèque Annotations on Film*, 63 (July 2012) <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/cteq/the-pleasure-of-the-image-the-flowers-and-the-angry-waves/>> [accessed 31 July, 2013]

By the mid-1970s, the *jitsuroku yakuza* films were painting a very different picture of modernisation and the virtue of the new. As we have seen, *Graveyard of Honour* puts paid to the myth of *jingi* code and the ideal of unwavering youthful *giri* to the elder generation. Rikio's refusal to offer respect and unquestioning loyalty is an anathema to his *oyabun* and other gang leaders, and is a symbol of what Standish calls the *jingi naki* (post moral) world. Now it is not only the bosses who are corrupt, but the youth as well. The corruption is complete, not only moral (extortion, blackmail, rape and murder) but physical (drug addiction and tuberculosis). It may be that Rikio has his own moral code: he orders a gravestone for himself and Chieko, his lover/wife, after she commits suicide, and has it inscribed with the words Humanity and Justice. As the end narration says, no-one knows why he chose these words, 'Nor ever will'. Gerow contends that in Fukasaku films 'the means of much historiography - words - such as with the inscription on Ichikawa Rikio's grave [...] are misleading if you don't know the story behind them'.³⁸ As we do know the story, the audience is invited to decipher the puzzle. As far as Humanity goes, it does not appear that Rikio/Fukasaku are ironically referencing the word *ninjo* from the samurai code, and neither does it seem credible that Rikio is referring to himself—it can hardly be stated that he treats anyone with humanity, especially not Chieko, who he raped. Therefore, the only conclusion must be that Humanity represents Chieko herself, and by extension Justice refers to Rikio. However, is the justice that which came with his own death, an admission of his own guilt, or the justice he meted out on others, in which case it is a justice of a barbarous age? Either way, Rikio in *Graveyard of Honour* and Tetsu in *Tokyo Drifter* (both played by Watari Tetsuya) are the diametric opposites of each other and chart the downward spiral of the *yakuza* hero as a symbol of the cult of the new. *Graveyard of*

³⁸ Aaron Gerow, 'Fukasaku Kinji, Underworld Historiographer', *New Cinema from Japan News*, 2 (January, 2000). Republished in a slightly different form on <http://www.aarongerow.com/news/fukasaku-kinji-underworld-h.html> (4 October 2010) [accessed 31 July 2013]

Honour completely reverses the idea of the purity and loyalty of youth (in opposition to the perfidy of the older generation) in *Tokyo Drifter*, and shows modernism (as well as the *yakuza* myth) to be corrupt and bankrupt.

The 'new' politics as a subtext

The social isolation many Japanese experienced, the ubiquitous control of the companies they worked for and the destruction of the environment, led to an overwhelming feeling of a lack of empowerment. This was heightened by the political system itself. Far from being the pluralist democracy envisioned in the post-war constitution, Japan managed the almost unique feat of being ruled for over fifty years by a single party within a multi-party system. The right-wing *Jiyu-minshuto* or Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was an alliance of anti communist and anti socialist parties which first came to power in 1955 and ruled continuously until 2009, with the exception of a brief period of 11 months in 1993-4. The LDP and the extremely powerful Civil Service were supreme examples of the establishment, the leadership of which being products of a small number of national universities. Party leaders (and therefore Prime Ministers) were appointed by a small clique, which included for many years the disgraced former Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei of Lockheed Scandal fame. Seats in parliament were routinely handed down from father to son (or occasionally daughter, as in the case of Tanaka Makiko). The LDP's grip on power was largely due to disproportionate weight given to the rural vote in Japan's multi-seat constituency voting system which naturally bred corruption and government by special interest. As a result, the vast majority of urban voters felt they had little say over the elected government.

Following the so-called 'democratic revolution from above' of the 1946 constitution,³⁹ there was a brief hope by many in Japan of a liberal Western-style democracy, which would reject the militarism and social control of the pre-war system. Instead, the nation soon found itself ruled by an elite within a 'bureaucratic democracy' that appeared to want to return to some of the pre-surrender status quo.⁴⁰ Despite its all-things-to-all-people aims, 'to stabilise the national livelihood, advance the country's welfare, restore Japan's international prestige by establishing true independence and strengthening the conditions for lasting peace', the LDP's 'Mission of the Party' statement displays a strong nationalist agenda. It states that as a result of 'mistakes of occupation policies' in the constitution, and in educational and other reforms, 'the national sentiment and patriotic feeling of the nation were unjustly impaired, and the national power of Japan was weakened'.⁴¹ As Dower argues:

To conservatives, the overriding tasks of the post-defeat period were to thwart social upheaval, preserve unchanged the emperor-centred 'national polity', and put the country back on its feet economically. They rejected all arguments about the 'root' causes of militarism, repression, and aggression, choosing instead to depict the recent war as an aberration brought about by irresponsible and conspiratorial elements within the imperial military. This being the case, their argument continued, sweeping structural reforms were unnecessary. On the contrary, all that needed to be done was a return to the state and the society to the *status quo ante* of the late 1920s, before the militarists took over.⁴²

Indeed, many in the higher echelons of the party had been high-ranking officials in the wartime government, some of whom were classified as war criminals by the Occupation forces but were 'depurged' in the late 1940s as US fears of communism in East Asia increased. One of these depurged war criminals was the future Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke (1957-1960). The LDP also had connections, including financial links, with other 'former' ultra-nationalists including Kodama Yoshio who by the mid-1970s controlled the majority of Tokyo and

³⁹ Dower, p. 69

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 28

⁴¹ Horsley and Buckley, p. 92

⁴² Dower, pp. 83-84

Yokohama *yakuza* gangs. Kodama acted as an unofficial 'king-maker' within the party and was instrumental in the elevation to party leader, and therefore Prime Minister of Tanaka Kakuei (1972-1974) and Nakasone Yasuhiro (1982-1987), among others.⁴³

There was little vocal opposition to the rightward shift in Japanese politics until the lead up to the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty (*Anpo*) in 1960 and then again in 1970. Even though the US made a number of concessions in the 1970 treaty, including withdrawing the right to use its troops to quell civil disturbances, an alliance of students and activists on the left held mass demonstrations, including the surrounding of the national Diet building and Foreign Ministry. The demonstrations were violently opposed by an alliance of ultra-nationalists and *yakuza* thugs and culminated in the death of a twenty-two year old Tokyo University student, and even after the ratification of the security treaty continued in a decade of often violent unrest which included the clashes over the compulsory purchase of farm land in order to build the new international airport at Narita, 75 kilometres east of Tokyo.

The *yakuza* genre does not generally engage in overt political commentary; however, there are certainly instances where individual films contain a clear political slant. Rayns argues that elements of *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* have a 'mildly left-wing thrust'⁴⁴ with its corrupt politicians, unscrupulous bosses and underpaid workers. Yet more obvious in its rejection of the right-wing agenda of the political elite is *Japan Organised Crime Boss*. As mentioned before, the warring factions of the Osaka- and Tokyo-based gangs agree to a truce brokered by a corrupt government official 'for the good of the country'. Following the killing of the American woman, the need to support and ensure the success of the 1970 *Anpo* is specifically stated as the deciding factor. The climax of the film—the killing of the Danno-gumi

⁴³ Kaplan and Dubro

⁴⁴ Tony Rayns, *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*

oyabun by the hero, Tsukamoto, and his own subsequent death—is set in the grounds of a Shinto shrine,⁴⁵ where the truce ceremony is taking place. After singing the Japanese national anthem, the gangs swear an oath: ‘We solemnly swear that our Patriotic Union will mount an all-out attack on Communism, battling to eradicate it entirely. We also swear to instil patriotism in all our people. We also swear the Union will rectify Japan’s misguided post-war democracy...’ The political message of the film is clear: the hero, who has tried to remain neutral (and therefore incorruptible) in the inter-gang war following the murder of his *oyabun*, is set against the government-sponsored gangs which plan to divide the country between them, while supporting a right-wing, pro-American regime. The corruption of the establishment and its motives are made clear, and it is up to the independent forces of morality to stop it.

Viewing the gang in *yakuza-eiga* as a microcosm of society allows us to perceive the *oyabun* and his lieutenants as representative of the iron triangle of political, bureaucratic and corporate authority structures that the Japanese live under. Corruption is endemic within the hierarchy of the gang, and the hero’s dilemma is to fight against it while maintaining loyalty. As such, the gang is a damning indictment of authority within wider society. However, when the films depict authority figures and structures outside the gang, the indictment is even stronger, as is clear in the prison scenes in both *Battles without Honour and Humanity* and *Graveyard of Honour*. As has been noted previously, the riot which throws Shozo and Hiroshi together in

⁴⁵ Shintoism, the Japanese state religion until the 1946 constitution and under which the Emperor was revered as a god, is closely associated with pre-war militarism and right-wing politics. Shintoism considers that the Yasakuni shrine in Tokyo houses the souls of the war dead who served the Emperor, including those who were found guilty of war crimes after the Second World War. Recent annual prime ministerial visits to Yasakuni remain highly controversial in Japan and around the region, with right-wing Japanese supporting such visits while many on the left, together with the governments of PR China and North and South Korea, among others, condemning them as provocative and a sign of a return to a more nationalistic, aggressive and militaristic Japan.

Battles without Honour and Humanity starts as a protest against the guards stealing the prisoners' food, while the gangs use bribery and their corrupt political and legal contacts to arrange for bail, even for those convicted of murder. The conditions depicted in *Graveyard of Honour* are even more desperate. The narration explains that as Rikio had pitted himself against the entire *yakuza* world by attacking his *oyabun*, 'any gangster [...] would win favour by killing him,' and that while in prison he had to fight for his life. The sequence is shot in sepia and we see an angled overhead shot of men sleeping on *futons* in an overcrowded cell. One of the inmates gets up to use the toilet, separated from the rest of the cell only by a waist-height wooden partition. Rikio attacks the inmate, lunging at him with hidden scissor blades and creating uproar in the cell—the fight is shot with a hand-held camera. He is finally restrained by guards who drag him off. We next see him in solitary, literally a cage with a barred floor and ceiling as well as walls. The scene is shot from below, and we see Rikio, restrained by handcuffs, lying on the bars of the cage. A guard is looking down on him, while another opens a side door and leaves a bowl of gruel-like food by his head. He cannot use his hands but attempts to eat; all he can do is upset the bowl so the food falls through the bars onto the concrete floor below, joining the slops from countless previous meals. The guard just laughs.

These conditions, along with those depicted in the *Man from Abashiri Prison* series, show life outside gang society, where officialdom and authority is at least as corrupt as the worst of the *oyabun*. It is only the loyalty engendered by their code and oaths that binds and protects the *yakuza* soldiers and underbosses against the corruption of power of those in authority, whether that be within the gang or in wider society. In this respect, these films can be directly compared with the Hollywood prison dramas of the 1930s, such as *Each Dawn I Die*, in which the brutality of the regime matches that of only the most violent of inmates. These representatives of 'official' society, both in the US and Japan, show how those in authority are dishonest and vicious, but are even more dangerous than gangsters as they have been given

legitimacy by society through a mandate to act on its behalf, just as have our political and business leaders.

This reading of *yakuza-eiga* explains their appeal to the left, especially the radical students who were active from the late 1960s to mid-70s. Fukasaku Kinji notes that:

During the sixties and early seventies the students were rebelling against the status quo and government policies. There were incidents with The Red Army. But these sentiments weren't only prevalent amongst the students. There was a kind of restless, rebellious energy bubbling under the surface with the general public. There were clashes between students and police and campuses and in other areas of the city. It was a time when students, the general public and women who worked in the water trade would go to late-night movie theatres to see the *yakuza* pictures. It was a kind of emotional release.⁴⁶

While the link between corruption in gang hierarchy and that in society's elite is clear in some *yakuza* films, it is less obvious in Hollywood gangster films. The 'classic' rise and fall triumvirate clearly separates the activities of the gangster from society, and there are few, if any, corrupt officials. Indeed, in the late additions to *Scarface* authority figures inveigh against the activities of the gangs directly to camera, and the subsequent imposition of the Production Code meant no such connections could be made. *Manhattan Melodrama* is a case in point, where the gangster Blackie (Clark Gable) accepts his fate rather than use his childhood friend, now District Attorney, Jim (William Powell), to escape the electric chair. By the end of the decade there was a slight blurring of lines and some low-level corruption with an on-duty police officer snaffling a drink in a speakeasy in *The Roaring Twenties*, but this is just a comedy interlude. However, as noted above, the film does equate bootlegging with 'legitimate' business and has Eddie use corporate language on a number of occasions (while still extolling a message of a post-Prohibition new society in which gangsters have no place). It wasn't until the 1970s that Hollywood finally merged legitimate and non-legitimate authority structures in *The Godfather* with its panoply of corrupt law officers, politicians, businessmen (including

⁴⁶ Fukasaku Kinji, quoted in Chris D, p. 24

Hollywood moguls), and even the Church (in *Godfather III*). Here we see a commentary on the alliance of corruption between the legitimate and illicit, which can also be seen in *yakuza-eiga*—the corruption involving unions and big business in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*; the corrupt politician in *Japan Organised Crime Boss*; and the gangs and Occupation forces working together in the black market in *Graveyard of Honour*. However, *yakuza* films also use the gang as a metaphor for the corruption within Japanese political, bureaucratic and corporate power structures, which the ordinary citizen has no control over.

Conclusion

Chapters 3 and 4 of this study have focused on the form and function of *yakuza* films of the 'golden age' which lasted roughly a decade from the mid-1960s. They have done so in order to discover whether and to what extent these films share a common surface narrative structure with the films of the 'classic' cycle of Hollywood gangster films of the early 1930s, and also whether they share a function of progressive social commentary, as with the American films. This has led us to consider what elements might constitute a common deep structure which can then contribute to a shared myth between the two traditions.

Chapter 3 showed that there are some obvious differences in several of the semantic elements of the two traditions, including motifs, iconography and conventions, as well as a minor divergence from the Hollywood films' single-focus structure. Nevertheless, these disparities are to be expected given the clear difference in the cultural context within which the two cycles were produced. Of much greater significance are the striking similarities in many of the elements of the two traditions' narrative structure and themes. Many of the functions proposed for classic Hollywood gangster films in Chapter 2 are equally applicable to *ninkyō* and *jitsuroku-eiga*, and include *the gangster-hero is outside mainstream society; the gangster-hero displays special talents; the gangster-hero is sexually ambiguous; the gangster-hero breaks his own code; the gangster-hero's relationships break down; and the gangster-*

hero dies. These shared functions have further allowed us to identify syntactic elements (plot structure, character relationships) that the traditions have in common, including a shared focus on vertical and lateral relationships: both the Hollywood and Japanese films feature the gangster-heroes engaged in power struggles within and between underworld organisations, which result in their having to sacrifice their relationships with their gangster- / blood brothers and lovers, and put them in direct conflict with their bosses, either as a result of their own ambition (Hollywood) or that of the boss (*yakuza*). Likewise, all the films examined in these two chapters focus on protagonists who are removed from their *yakuza* societies just as the heroes of Hollywood films are outsiders in American society.

The main questions posed in this chapter are firstly, whether the *yakuza-eiga* of the golden age serve, rather than challenge, the status quo, as Hess Wright contends is true of Hollywood gangster films; and secondly, what, if any, strategies for dealing with the ideological tensions in society they employ. Answering these questions will allow us to consider which of Comolli and Narboni's categories dealing with the relationships between film and ideology these films fall in to. This will further allow us to determine whether or not *yakuza* films share the pre-Code Hollywood gangster films' generally accepted function of progressive social commentary. In Chapter 2 I disputed Hess Wright's position by arguing that the 'classic' Hollywood gangster films provide a progressive criticism of contemporary America by depicting a society in crisis where the establishment is powerless and broken; a society in which the social environment, living conditions and poor education of the immigrant and working classes directly contribute to this crisis; and a society where the old certainties no longer apply and in which the American Dream is itself shown to be a fantasy. Therefore, I contend that the Hollywood cycle's reputation of progressive social commentary is well founded. Can the same be said of *yakuza* films of the golden age?

The short answer is yes. The six films evaluated clearly comment on the Japanese post-war experience—of the individual as well as the society as a whole—in terms of the country's politics, economics, corporatism, modernisation, urbanisation and its complex and paradoxical relationship with America and other countries in the region. As Kasahara Kazuo notes, 'it is possible to write the history of modern Japan by documenting the rise and fall of yakuza organisations'.⁴⁷ The complicated relationship Japan has with the US forms a backdrop to many of the films and accurately depicts the contradictory feelings the nation and its people have for America. On the one hand, Japan was humiliated, even emasculated, and impoverished by its defeat in the Second World War and the subsequent occupation, and there remains a streak in some that looks back fondly to a time when Japan was America's military equal, if not superior. On the other hand, there is a sense of admiration for the power that defeated it (as the song had it, 'The strong eat up the weak'—see this chapter, note 15) and the financial, industrial and technological resources it was able to bring to bear to do so. Likewise, while many individuals relished the opportunities for peace, equality and democracy the US-drafted 1946 constitution promised, the effects of Americanisation over the next two decades and more were less welcome and the right-wing political elite railed against what they saw as the mistakes of the occupation and democratisation. And while successive governments acquiesced to American demands for security treaties and support of its foreign policy, many citizens protested violently against such a relationship. As we have seen, even though it is never central to their narratives, the majority of the films discussed acknowledge the importance and contradictory nature of the Japan-US relationship and generally represent America as a malevolent presence, whether it be through an attempted rape, the corrupt supporter of the gangs, a catalyst for major change, or the motivation for corporatist gang

⁴⁷ Kasahara Kazuo, 'Jitsoroku Shinario Taikenteki Jingi naki tatakai no Sanbyaku Hi', *Shinario* (February 1974), cited in Standish, 'Film Narrative and the Yakuza Genre', p. 22

bosses and corrupt politicians to negotiate a truce in a gang war in order to consolidate their power. In these depictions of the power of the US over Japanese society, the films are very much siding with a populist left-wing assessment of American hegemony and influence, and not with the position of the political, bureaucratic or business establishment.

Just as there is an inherent paradox in the US-Japan relationship, there is also one at the heart of the post-war 'economic miracle'. By the mid-1960s, most Japanese had access to modern, affordable and domestically-produced electronic goods. The same is true for car ownership, which rose from practically zero cars per thousand head of population in 1959 to well over three hundred vehicles per thousand people twenty years later.⁴⁸ This vast growth in industrial output provided people—or more accurately men—with jobs for life, not just in the large corporations but also in the smaller local supply industries and the financial and service industries that supported them. However, all this came at the expense of any influence over the shape and direction of the economy, as ordinary workers were restricted to membership of malleable enterprise unions and individual shareholders were literally bullied into compliance in annual meetings. Instead, power over the economy was held by a triumvirate of (right-wing) politicians, bureaucrats of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, and leaders of the large corporations. Once again, *yakuza* films take a progressive stance on this economic culture aimed at those who worked in offices or factories for low pay and were bound by rigid rules and hierarchy. The films associate the evil *oyabun* with modern commercial culture, and portray him as an immoral corporatist who, with the cooperation of corrupt politicians and pliable union leaders, willingly sacrifices his men (or, better still, those of a smaller and weaker proxy gang) in the search for greater power and wealth, all without

⁴⁸ Mark Baker and Markus Hyvonen, 'The Emergence of the Chinese Automobile Sector', *Reserve Bank of Australia Bulletin* (March 2011) <<http://www.rba.gov.au/publications/bulletin/2011/mar/4.html> > [accessed 19 April 2015]

getting personally involved in the mayhem he instigates. This difference between the boss and the soldiers (or 'workers') is couched in terms of a clash between modernism and traditional values, with the gangster-hero representing the virtues of humanity and duty, defending Japanese values against the dishonourable, modern and corporate methods of the evil *oyabun* who betrays them.

Intrinsically linked to the financial and moral corruption of modern corporatism in the films is the overarching power of the right-wing nationalist politics of the 'bureaucratic democracy' that has ruled Japan since the end of the occupation. Here, all figures representing the establishment are corrupt, whether they be corporate *oyabun*, politicians, union officials, the police and prison guards, or the American occupying forces. The *yakuza* hero and ordinary foot soldiers are usually pitted against these establishment forces, and while they may win the personal battle they are fighting, usually having to sacrifice themselves in the process, it is clear that the elite will remain in power and the corruption will continue—nothing has changed. The powerlessness of 'the people' continues and is exacerbated by the life they lead in order to support the establishment. They are isolated in the urban sprawl of the huge cities, where even the sparkling modern veneer of *Tokyo Drifter* hides a dark and dangerous underbelly. Community is a thing of the past and even the gangs, which represent the idea of community in the films, usually only manage to tear themselves apart in internecine warfare. The best the gangster-hero can hope for is to become an isolated drifter.

To return then to the question of social commentary in *yakuza-eiga*, I believe it is clear that the films of the 'golden age' share this function with the 'classic' 1930s Hollywood gangster films. As noted earlier, these films were popular with those who felt disengaged from the social, economic and political power bases—students and young factory and salaried workers. Writing about 'Nikkatsu Noir', in which he includes *Branded to Kill*, David Desser discusses the appeal of these films to such an audience by linking it to the bars and clubs of the

‘water trade’ (for which he uses the Chinese word *jianghu*, literally rivers and lakes), frequented by these same people:

This separation from society, the closed world of the *jianghu* of gangsters, low-level criminals, hitmen, bar hostesses or waitresses, may be a dark mirror of Japanese society if one wishes to see it that way, but it seems clearer that the separation from *sarariman* reality is what is at stake. In fact, the Toei *ninkyo yakuza* films had an overwhelmingly working-class audience, just as Nikkatsu Noir appealed to educated youngsters: the former alienated from mainstream middle-class society; the latter resisting inclusion therein.⁴⁹

The ideology of ‘golden age’ *yakuza-eiga*

If, as I have shown, *yakuza* films do have a social commentary function, one which does not serve the status quo, it is time to consider which of the categories proposed by Comolli and Narboni the films fall in to. Given the constraints of space it is not possible to conduct a film-by-film analysis in the style of *Cahiers du cinéma*’s examination of *Young Mr. Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939) showing it as a Category (e) film.⁵⁰ Instead I will discuss the possibility of identifying the best category for the group of films under consideration. The evidence presented above allows us to discount Category (a) as the films clearly do not provide an unadulterated reproduction of the dominant ideology; neither do they have explicit political content while still using conventional form of representation—Category (d). Similarly the lack of overt political content which does not actively reject the dominant ideology means that Category (b) is not applicable. Suzuki’s subversion of the form in *Tokyo Drifter* and especially *Branded to Kill* might suggest that these films at least belong in Category (c): they actively challenge conventional forms of representation (certainly of the *ninkyo yakuza* cycle), but Comolli and Narboni warn against merely relying on ‘turning cinematic syntax upside-down’;

⁴⁹ Desser, David, ‘The Gunman and the Gun: Japanese Film Noir since the Late 1950s’, in Pettey, H.B. and Barton Palmer, R., eds., *International Film Noir* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014b), p. 118

⁵⁰ Editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*, ‘John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln*’, in Nichols, B., ed., *Movies and Methods Volume 1: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 493-529

instead films in this category must, 'create a new code, which operates on the level of the impossible, and has to be rejected on any other, and is therefore not in a position to transgress the normal'.⁵¹ Subversive though Suzuki is with narrative form, his films do not pass this test.

Which leaves us with Category (e). Comolli and Narboni state that even though films in this category may,

... start from a non-progressive standpoint [...] they have been worked upon, and work, in such a real way that there is a noticeable gap, a dislocation, between the starting point and the finished product [...] The films we are talking about throw up obstacles in the way of the ideology, causing it to swerve off course [...] Looking at the framework one can see two moments in it: one holding it back within certain limits, and one transgressing them.⁵²

The films studied in the last two chapters do, I contend, fulfil these criteria: they open by showing us stable hierarchical society—the gang society if not the wider society (see, for example, the overall chaos of the black markets in *Japan Organised Crime Boss* and *Battles without Honour and Humanity*, but within them there operates a gang culture in which everyone knows their place and the *kubon* are loyal to their *oyabun*). However, this stability, like the stability within real society, is illusory: it only works for the elite. The *symptom* of this illusion is the perfidy of the evil *oyabun* and his corrupt political allies, all of whom are willing to bypass the traditional Japanese virtues of honour, duty, humanity and sacrifice for their own personal gain. It is only the gangster-hero and his brothers who stand in the way of this treachery, but while they may succeed in defeating the immediate enemy, sacrificing themselves in the process, we know that the dishonour will continue because the system itself is corrupt; the elite will continue to hold on to power; and 'the people' will continue to be subjugated.

⁵¹ Comolli and Narboni, p. 36

⁵² Comolli and Narboni, pp. 32-33

The paradox of the *yakuza* hero and his relationship with the gang and his *oyabun* can be seen as an allegory of the post-war discourse about how the conditions that led the nation to war were allowed to develop and how they could be prevented from happening again. This debate went to the very heart of questions about the individual and nationhood: What is or should be the capacity and legitimacy to act as an individual and to intervene against the state and collective opinion? Must the individual be sacrificed; must he or she give him- or herself over to the collective and the nation in order to rebuild the country? These questions could just as easily be asked in terms of the corporation in a modern capitalist society. Cazdyn notes, while talking about Japanese films in general, that these questions constitute some of the symptoms of the most pressing problems of Japanese modernity; symptoms which ‘allegorize the dreams and nightmares of modernity’, and which give further credence to the argument that *yakuza-eiga* fall within Comolli and Narboni’s category (e)⁵³

Comolli and Narboni go on to make two further claims for category (e), which it is also important to note. Firstly, they say that because of the internal criticism that takes place within these films but not in what they call the ‘ideologically innocuous’ films of category (a), ideology becomes subordinate to the text, arguing that ‘[ideology] no longer has an independent existence: it is *presented* by the text’ (original emphasis). Secondly, they state that even though the films are ‘completely integrated in the system and the ideology’, they end up ‘*partially* dismantling the system from within’ (my emphasis).⁵⁴ The first of these points clarifies a lack of an ‘either/or’ that is present in the other categories—either a film supports the dominant ideology, or it denounces it. And this is a result of the second point: the system (or dominant ideology) is only *partially* dismantled in these films. In other words, while some parts of the text can be seen, on close analysis, to be progressive or radical, other parts are

⁵³ Cazdyn, p. 6-8

⁵⁴ Comolli and Narboni, p. 33

clearly regressive or conservative. As a result, and as Comolli and Narboni clearly state, these films are fundamentally ambiguous in terms of ideology.

The symptomatic reading highlighting the perfidy of the *oyabun* clearly works better for some of the films than for others. The one main difference would be *Branded to Kill*. But even this film addresses many of the social issues outlined earlier in this chapter. I do not think, therefore, it can be dismissed as a film which blindly and unquestioningly accepts and perpetuates the dominant ideology. It must also be noted, however, that in one aspect the films do indeed accept and perpetuate the dominant ideology: that is in their portrayal and treatment of women. At best, the heroes' lovers are there to passively support the protagonist: they may attempt to 'control' the gangster-hero by begging him to leave the *yakuza* lifestyle, but they are doomed to failure as the hero leaves them to be imprisoned, wander as an itinerant *yakuza* or to die. At worst, women are the victims of the worst misogynistic excesses: rape, torture and abuse—in one case, as noted above, the (ex-) lover is urinated on and then killed. Almost as troubling is that they forgive their abuser and come back for more—see, for example, Chieko in *Graveyard of Honour*. There may be instances of female protagonists in *yakuza-eiga* as noted earlier (in fact Suzuki himself created one in *Pistol Opera*, 2001), but generally the treatment of women in both Japanese and Hollywood gangster films is unenlightened at best. Therefore, like the 'classical' Hollywood gangster films, these films accommodate an ambiguous mixture of radical and conservative ideologies, placing them clearly in Comolli and Narboni's category (e).

Thematic and ideological dimensions of the deep structure

In the previous chapter, a deep structure underlying both 'classic' Hollywood gangster films and 'golden age' *yakuza-eiga* was proposed. It consists of four narrative elements that are common to both traditions:

1. At the beginning narrative the gangster-hero is an outsider, removed from both mainstream and gang society.
2. The gangster-hero's relationship with his gang boss is beset by betrayal.
3. The gangster-hero's relationships with his gangster-brother(s) and lover(s) may appear stronger than his vertical relationships, but ultimately break down.
4. As a result of the breakdown of his vertical and lateral relationships, the gangster-hero departs and he again loses his place in society.

However, from its outset this study has aimed to not only examine and compare the narrative structure of American and Japanese gangster traditions, but also to analyse their themes and ideologies in order to discover whether there are common elements in both form and function. The analysis of the ideologies of the 'classic' Hollywood cycle in Chapter 2 and the 'golden age' *yakuza* films in this chapter makes it possible to present a deep structure that encompasses all areas of enquiry, both narrative and ideological, and conforms with the brief of this study to follow a multifaceted approach. This allows us to add two further elements to the proposed deep structure, one thematic and the other ideological.

5. *The clash of traditional values and modernity*. This is a theme central to both traditions but takes different forms, at least on the surface, in different films. The Hollywood gangster's immigrant status is key to this conflict between tradition and modernity. His ethnic and immigrant identity highlights a complex and difficult relationships between the Old World of Italy or Ireland and the apparent promise of 'America'. Even though the gangster-hero seems to reject one and embrace the other, both the past and the future are seen as threatening. This can be seen in his adoption of the city-centre lifestyle: his lovers, clothing, cars, the interior decoration of his apartment and, of course, his weaponry, which in *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* is juxtaposed with the traditional values of the gangster-hero's family and home background. His rejection of these values runs parallel to his rejection of Algeirist ideals of

honest hard work. The gangster-hero sees himself as a modern man, which allows him the freedom to live the life of a *flaneur*. However, we see a fundamental paradox in Tony Camonte: while enthusiastically embracing modernity for himself, he vehemently tries to deny it to his sister Cesca.

Unlike the 'classic' Hollywood gangster films, in which modernism is equated with transgressive behaviour, some 'golden age' *yakuza* films, like *Tokyo Drifter*, present the Tokyo of the mid-1960s as a place where modern architecture and technology form a backdrop to a new society in which the young are pure and honest while the old are compromised and corrupt. In other films, however, the veneer of modern Tokyo merely hides its decaying interior. This is a world in which modern corporatism and materialism are corrupting the traditional values of honour and humanity, and it is only the *ninkyo yakuza* hero who can fight against these forces and ensure the continuation of the traditional virtues enshrined in the *jingi* code. As the genre evolves into the *jitsuroku* cycle, the dark forces of modernity grow ever stronger and while the *yakuza* hero may win the immediate fight, it is clear that the corruption of modernism will continue to triumph.

The combination of the deep narrative elements and the theme of tradition and modernity generate a political dimension to the films. The gangster-hero being removed from society; the betrayal and irreversible breakdown in the relationship between the gangster-hero and his boss caused by the pursuit of power allied to a societal clash of values; and the sacrifice of his relationships with his gangster-brother and lover on the way to his own exit are all signs which can lead us to an understanding of the films' ideological position. This leads to the final element of the common deep structure:

6. *History and ideology*. As we have seen, the films of both traditions share a function of social commentary, which includes a clear appreciation of the social, political, economic and

historical forces which shape the world—both real and diegetic. By analysing the ways by which the films deal with ideological tensions in society, we have been able to deny the accusation that they serve and perpetuate the status quo, and argue that instead they offer an ambivalent ideological standpoint, one that is at the same time progressive and regressive.

While the films' attitudes to questions of social environment, political and official corruption, corporatist capitalism and the power of the business/political elite may indeed be progressive, as noted above their attitude to and treatment of women, especially in some *yakuza* films, is clearly not. This has to be recognised as a substantial caveat to the otherwise justifiable view that the films generally do denounce the dominant ideology, even though ambiguously.

This deep structure points to a shared myth which, I will argue in Chapter 6, revolves around the notion of a code—both a shared code that members of the micro-society of the gang accept and follow (or not), and a personal code by which the gangster-hero lives (and again, or not). However, before this can be discussed in greater detail, the concept of the deep structure needs to be tested. To do that we will move away from the 'classic' phases of the Hollywood and Japanese traditions and examine three hybrid gangster films which explore the clash of the American and Japanese gangster myths.

5. Three Hybrids: subverting the myth

In the previous chapters we have tested the claims made by Schrader and others that the link between the Hollywood and Japanese gangster film is, to say the least, tenuous. We have found that, on the contrary, there are elements of what could be called a deep structure that belies more superficial national/generic narrative differences, and that is common to both traditions. We have also found that both traditions at these particular historical moments share the function of social commentary. The convergence of form and function points to a shared cinematic gangster myth which, as we shall see in the next chapter, revolves around the notion of code. This chapter focuses on three 'hybrid' films that explore and subvert this myth: *The Yakuza*, *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* and *Brother*. The films will be examined to show that the common threads discovered in the previous chapters are present in these hybrid films, and will identify the ways in which each explores the clash of culture and the notion of 'code' in its various forms. Finally, instances of stylistic hybridisation—instances where the films deliberately adopt visual motifs and styles more usually employed in Japanese cinema as opposed to a more common 'Hollywood standard'¹—will be highlighted.

This also puts the idea of pragmatics, the third strand Altman added to his semantic/syntactic approach, into the heart of this analysis. Pragmatics inserts the idea of a 'use factor' into genre studies; that is, the reception of a genre by multiple users, comprising not only the traditional viewer or audience, but also producers, distributors, exhibitors, cultural agencies, and many other users (see Chapter 1, note 81). As Altman's list of users includes filmmakers themselves, a study of generic hybrids must shed light onto how the genre, in both its Hollywood and Japanese traditions, was received by at least one group of

¹ Andrew Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen* 30:4 (April 1989), p. 40

these multiple users. We shall also be able to judge whether these users adopted or even extended aspects of the deep structure identified earlier.

The concept of hybridisation within genres has been discussed briefly in Chapter 1, but more flesh needs to be added to these very bare bones. Writing about the martial arts film, Stern provides a simple (or perhaps simplistic) definition of hybrid genres in cinema in that they are ‘informed by a range of influences’.² This, however, seems too all-inclusive and could be applied to the vast majority of all films made. Does, for example, the range of influences include literature and other media (either as primary source or merely referenced), the work of other filmmakers, parody and pastiche, a merging of two genres (for example, the Comedy-Western), or the near-ubiquity of the Hollywood standard of filmmaking? Or all of the above and more? Discussions of hybridity can focus on the stylistic, generic or transnational. Some argue that at its worst, this tendency feeds a transnational homogenisation (or ‘Hollywoodisation’³) of cinema, with the films which achieve popular success being, ‘those that are more “Western friendly”, adopting similar genres, narratives or themes in their hybrid productions’, becoming, ‘tasty, easily swallowed, apolitical global cultural morsels’,⁴ or what Ezra and Rowden call cinematic Mcnuggets.⁵ While this argument may have some traction, it appears to rather arrogantly assume that Hollywood/US films are somehow less than worthy, banal and superficial, catering to a lowest common denominator and purveying only base

² Lesley Stern, ‘How Movies Move (Between Hong Kong and Bulawayo, Between Screen and Stage...)’, in Āurovičová, N. and Newman, K., eds., *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 194

³ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ‘The Resurgence of Cinema’, in Nowell-Smith, G., ed., *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 762

⁴ Jinga Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: the Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 45 and 90

⁵ Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, ‘What is Transnational Cinema?’, in Ezra, E. and Rowden, T., eds., *Transnational Cinema, the Film Reader* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 6

‘entertainment’ for commercial gain. There may very well be elements of truth in this (see Comolli and Norboni’s Category (a) films), but such an argument ignores the globally significant cultural importance of much of Hollywood’s (in the broad sense) output.

Ira Jaffe, on the other hand, sees hybridisation as being subversive:

Possibly hybrid films are inherently subversive, since in mingling genres and styles instead of keeping them separate, these films choose heterogeneity over homogeneity, contamination over purity. Further, these films embrace incongruity and incidents that “just come out of nowhere”, they verge on disorder and chaos. They may be regarded as not just disorienting, but as destructive and nihilistic, which may support the notion that genre quotation, mimicry, mingling, and parody signal an exhaustion of creative energy—an inability to conceive much that is new or original, to think or feel deeply, to break through genre discourses to life itself. A more positive spin, though, might stress that unsettling, disorderly, and absurdist aspects of hybrid cinema faithfully reflect as well as influence contemporary life.⁶

While Jaffe’s primary focus is on hybridisation in contemporary Hollywood cinema—he examines, for example, such films as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Fargo* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996) and *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999), which mix (respectively) gangster, noir and war genres with farce, comedy, melodrama, horror, crime caper and tragedy—he also spends time looking at what he calls global parallels, or international hybrid films, for example *Shijie / The World* (Jia Zhangke, 2004, PR China), which he maintains is evocative of Ozu Yasuhiro’s *Tokyo monogatari / Tokyo Story* (1953, Japan) among other films. He acknowledges the process of distribution and exhibition by which US filmmakers (and audiences) benefitted from exposure to new waves of films from Asia, Europe and Latin America from the 1960s onwards, and how while the genres in these imported films were familiar, the way foreign filmmakers ‘mixed and shifted stylistic and generic directions was not’,⁷ which leads to a discussion on the influence of overseas films and styles on such

⁶ Ira Jaffe, *Hollywood Hybrids: Mixing Genres in Contemporary Films* (Lanham, MD and Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), pp. 5-6

⁷ Jaffe, p. 13

directors as Tarantino and Altman. But he does not consider international co-productions, nor the hybridisation of two national traditions of a single genre.

Fredric Jameson has a slightly different, and perhaps more subtle, view of hybridisation, which he likens, in a not altogether successful analogy, to genetic engineering. Hybridisation, he argues, is like taking a single characteristic fragment of a gene and inserting it into another one, creating something new and different to either of its 'parents'. It is not, however:

... some synthesis between races or traditions, not some middle or mediatory term in which traits from both sides of the border are selected and combined. Nor is it the situation of multiple personalities or the polyglot, in which we pass effortlessly from personality A to personality B and back.⁸

The process acknowledged by Jaffe by which overseas films became accessible in the US is described in more detail from an Asian context by Davis and Yeh, who contend that the reception of Asian cinema moved in well-defined stages: from domestic consumption to Asian diasporas, positive reception by 'connoisseurs', and finally unlimited distribution through video, DVD and new media.⁹ This movement can be made even more significant if we combine it with Hedetoft's ideas of transnational influence:

In the real world of politics and influence, certain nationalisms, cultures, ideas and interpretations are more transnationally powerful, assertive and successful than others [...] The more powerful ones (actually or in the making) [...] tend towards a universality of meanings, impact and acceptance, as their national-cultural currency becomes transnationally adopted, mixes and mingles with more long-standing cultural legacies, syncretises with them, is explicitly welcomed as a positive admixture to the culture and identity of other nations, or is treated as an admirable (role) model for emulation.¹⁰

⁸ Fredric Jameson, 'Globalization and Hybridization', in Ďurovičová, N. and Newman, K., eds., p. 316

⁹ Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, *East Asian Screen Industries* (London: BFI, 2008), p. 115

¹⁰ Ulf Hedetoft, 'Contemporary Cinema: Between Cultural Globalisation and National Interpretation', in Hjort, M. and Mackenzie, S., eds., *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 280

As we saw in the previous chapter, Japan's increasing confidence and global economic and cultural influence from the mid-1950s makes it a strong candidate for such a role. Despite American misgivings of its economic power in the 1980s which led to, among other things, US films which had a distinctly anti-Japanese flavour, including *Black Rain* (Ridley Scott, 1989) and *Rising Sun* (Philip Kaufman, 1993), Japanese culture, including film and other media, has proved to be an important inspiration for American cinema and wider culture.

While *Black Rain* is certainly a hybrid film coming out of the Hollywood detective and *yakuza* genres, it is not primarily a 'gangster film'—defined for the purposes of this study as those films which centre on the activities of the gangster-hero—and so therefore will not be examined here. Instead we will concentrate on the three films mentioned above and see whether their hybridity fits more with Jaffe's interpretation of a subversive stylistic and generic mix, or Jameson's genetic (and generic) manipulation.

The Yakuza: a film of pairs

The initial screenplay by Paul Schrader, his first, was based on a story by his brother, Leonard, and was sold for a then record of US\$300,000.¹¹ Despite this, Schrader and Sydney Pollack had fundamental disagreements over the original script, with Pollack eventually sacking Schrader and bringing in Robert Towne to rework it.¹² Although Pollack initially said that the original screenplay suffered from 'inexperience',¹³ the real source of this disagreement seems to stem from the type of film each wanted to make: he later emphasised the difference between Schrader's and Towne's treatments, saying the new script, 'moved it a little bit out of the

¹¹ Janet L. Meyer, *Sydney Pollack: A Critical Filmography* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, 1998), p. 73

¹² Richard Thompson, 'Screen Writer: Taxi Driver's Paul Schrader', *Film Comment* 12:2 (April/May, 1976), p. 10

¹³ Sydney Pollack, quoted in Larry Salvatore, 'Sydney Pollack Interview', *Millimeter* 3:6 (June 1975), p. 9

genre film that it was. It's remained a genre film, but it got a little more preoccupied with the ideas in the movie and a little less preoccupied with the violence'.¹⁴ Schrader concurs, but felt that the result was a flawed film:

Pollack directed against the grain of the script. I wrote a violent, underground film about blood, duty, and obligation. He made a sort of rich, romantic transcultural film. Either of those films would have been interesting if fully realized, but the final product fell between those two stools; neither film was made. It didn't satisfy the audience that came to see the hard gangster world.¹⁵

Flawed or not, the resultant film was much more of a hybridisation as discussed above, with Pollack going so far as to (unwittingly) use Jaffe's language of subversion:

I think I was a little bit subversive [...] What the studio saw was a martial arts picture [...] that would be a mainstream down-the-middle picture with a lot of guns and explosions and violence, and I didn't want to lose that aspect of it, but I got interested in other aspects of it [...] What I was interested in was the extraordinary cultural difference between the two traditions.¹⁶

And it is these differences, together with the concepts of code, honour and duty—or myth—that the film explores so relentlessly.

The film concerns ex-cop and all-round fixer Harry Kilmer (Robert Mitchum) returning to Japan after twenty years to rescue an old army buddy's daughter, who has been kidnapped by *yakuza oyabun*, Tono (Okada Eiji). The kidnap is a result of Kilmer's friend, George Tanner (Brian Keith), reneging on a deal to supply guns to Tono's gang. Kilmer and Tanner were part of the US occupation forces, and it was during the occupation that Kilmer met and fell in love with Eiko (Kishi Keiko), a survivor of the Tokyo fire bombings that killed more people than the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Even though Kilmer and Keiko lived together with her daughter Hanako (Christina Kokubo), she refused to marry him, and in 1951, just before the end of the occupation, Eiko's brother, Tanaka Ken (Takakura Ken), returned

¹⁴ Sydney Pollack, 'Commentary by Sydney Pollack', *The Yakuza DVD Special Features* (Warner Bros., 2007), 0:05:39

¹⁵ Paul Schrader, quoted in Thompson, p. 10

¹⁶ Pollack, 'Commentary', 0:45:57

from the war—as a soldier in the Imperial Army he had been hiding out in the Philippine jungles for five years after the war finished. Tanaka was devastated and humiliated to find Eiko living with a *gaijin*, but at the same time he was bound by *giri* to be permanently in Kilmer's debt for protecting his sister. At the end of the occupation, Kilmer and Tanner returned to the US and Tanaka became a ruthless member of the *yakuza*.

When Kilmer returns to Japan in the present day he visits Eiko and asks her where he can find Tanaka. Even though Tanaka has now left the *yakuza* (unknownst to Kilmer), his obligation dictates that he help Kilmer rescue Tanner's daughter, which they do, killing two members of the Tono-gumi in the process. They are now both marked men and Kilmer is in Tanaka's debt. In an attempt to discharge this debt, Kilmer asks Tanaka's estranged brother, Goro (James Shigeta), a sort of *yakuza* boss of bosses (although most contemporary reviews and studies describe him as an important businessman or high-level politician),¹⁷ to protect him. Goro explains that the only way to ensure Tanaka's safety is to kill Tono—something that honour dictates Tanaka can only do with a *katana* but which Kilmer (as a *gaijin*) could do with a gun. Kilmer refuses, but postpones his planned return to the US. In the meantime, despite their differences, Tanner and Tono decide to continue working together. It emerges that Tono had planned to usurp Goro as boss of bosses, hence the need for the guns, but before they can proceed they must eliminate both Kilmer and Tanaka. There is a failed assassination attempt on Kilmer, ordered by Tanner, and a separate attack by Tono's henchmen results in the death of Hanako, Eiko's daughter. We then discover that rather than being Eiko's brother, Tanaka is, in fact, her husband, and therefore Hanako's father. The scene is therefore set for final revenge: Kilmer kills Tanner, and then he and Tanaka invade Tono's hideout, with Tanaka using his *katana* to dispatch the evil *oyabun* along with large numbers of his gang.

¹⁷ See, for example, Meyer, p. 75

The film ends with both Tanaka and Kilmer atoning for the hurt they have each caused—Tanaka by killing his brother's son, a Tono-gumi *yakuza*, in the climactic fight scene; and Kilmer for his relationship with Eiko as well as Hanako's death, for which he feels responsible—by committing *yubitsume* (cutting off the tips of their little fingers) in classic *yakuza* penitence.

Schrader acknowledges that his screenplay repeats the conventions of *ninkyō yakuza-eiga* which he had identified in his *Film Comment* essay (see Chapter 1, note 2), saying that, 'it was almost a program script in those terms, using all the genre elements'.¹⁸ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the film includes eight of the eighteen 'set pieces' he outlined (see Chapter 3, note 31). This does not include the first set piece, 'The protagonist comes out of prison', but it could be argued that Tanaka's retirement from the *yakuza* and his subsequent re-involvement serves the same function, as could Kilmer's twenty-year exile from Japan. I do not intend to dwell on the set pieces that are included in the film as they are unambiguous; however, the film also includes many of the shared characteristics (or generic deep structures) of 'classic' Hollywood gangster and 'golden age' *yakuza* traditions discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4: the gangster-hero is outside of society as an initial situation; vertical and lateral relationships; and the heroes' sense of code. While discussing these narrative characteristics, we will also consider the stylistic hybridisation of the film.

Symbolic frames

The Yakuza is a 'film of pairs':¹⁹ Kilmer and Eiko; Eiko and Tanaka; Kilmer and Tanner; Kilmer and Dusty (Richard Jordan: Dusty is Tanner's young bodyguard who accompanies Kilmer to Japan, ostensibly to back him up, but in reality to spy on him for Tanner); Dusty and Hanako; Tanner and Tono; and Tanaka and Goro. The main pair, though, is Kilmer and Tanaka. Both

¹⁸ Schrader, quoted in Thompson, p. 10

¹⁹ Pollack, 'Commentary', 1:13:22

men start the film as outsiders: Kilmer is in Los Angeles, a retired cop tending dying plants on the balcony of his beach-front house; Tanaka is also retired, running a *kendo* (Japanese martial art using bamboo swords) school in Kyoto. Pollack describes them as ‘dinosaurs’, men who, ‘refuse to change, to accommodate, to the changing morality of the time [...] They remain true to a set of standards and ethics and morals that has existed for them all of their life. They have never bent with the fad of morality that changes constantly’.²⁰ The three main characters, Kilmer, Tanaka and Eiko are each introduced within a frame. As highlighted earlier when describing the scene between Tsukamoto and Kamiyama in *Japan Organised Crime Boss* (see Chapter 4), frames within frames is a common visual motif in Japanese cinema—used extensively, for example, by Ozu in *Tokyo Story*—and evokes Japanese architecture and design—the grids of a *shoji* screen, which opens into a garden, for example. Japanese house design traditionally uses the simple 2:1 proportion of *tatami* mats, *shoji*, and so on (with all measurements based on the *tatami* mat—180x90 cms). The consistent use of these proportions creates an overall harmony within the space, and this tradition can also be seen in framing in Japanese cinema.

We first see Kilmer in close-up looking at the dying plant and framed by the balcony struts and plant pots. The phone rings and he picks it up: it is Tanner asking him to go to Japan to find his daughter. Our point of view changes to a shot from inside his house looking out to Kilmer on the balcony, framed by a French window with the ocean in the background. The camera pans down to a framed black-and-white photograph of a Japanese woman dressed in a traditional *kimono*, who we later find out is Eiko. We first meet Eiko, again wearing a *kimono*, when Kilmer visits her upon his arrival in Japan. She is closing her coffee shop / bar, ‘Kilmer House’, which he bought her with money borrowed from Tanner before he left at the end of

²⁰ Sydney Pollack, in...*Promises to Keep, The Yakuza DVD Special Features* (Professional Films, 1975), 0:17:07

the occupation. As Kilmer opens the bar door, we see a point-of-view shot of Eiko through the leaves of a houseplant, providing a link between her and our first view of Kilmer. She is facing the camera in a medium shot framed by the leaves of the plant. Tanaka is introduced when Kilmer visits him in his *kendo* school in Kyoto. We see two rows of students dressed in traditional *kendo* outfits, including visored helmets, practising drills. The drills stop and the two lines of students face each other with swords raised forming an arch. Tanaka is centre screen, framed by the swords of his students, kneeling on the wooden floor with his sheathed *katana* placed in front of him. Through their frames, we see the circumstance of the three protagonists: Kilmer, soon to be crossing the ocean we can see from his balcony; Eiko, the unsullied *hana* (flower)—Kilmer gives her a single white rose like the one she is holding in the picture we saw in his house; and Tanaka, the traditional warrior. Each is trapped within their frame, by the debts they owe—Kilmer to Tanner for the borrowed money; Eiko to Kilmer for her life; and Tanaka to Kilmer for protecting Eiko—as well as their situation and the ethics and morals that Pollack referred to.

The framing and proportions mentioned above not only apply to the interior space, but also to traditional Japanese architecture; for example, the *torii* (the gate of a *Shinto* shrine) which seems to frame the shrine itself when the worshipper approaches. In a scene following the rescue of Tanner's daughter, Tanaka argues that Kilmer should take Eiko and Hanako to America to protect them. It is night and as they are walking they pause at a shrine: Kilmer leans against the *torii* and lights a cigarette, but Tanaka walks through it. The two men are framed by the *torii*, and in turn frame the shrine. A soft yellow light, suffused by the paper *shoji*, comes from inside the shrine and illuminates the two men's faces. A traditionally dressed woman rings the shrine bell and claps her hands in prayer, at which Kilmer says, 'She's waking up the gods, isn't she?' Their relative positions and conversation show that while Kilmer has a deep appreciation and understanding of Japanese culture, he remains on the outside—he is

literally a *gai-jin* (outside person)—whereas Tanaka is steeped in the culture and the ‘way’. He physically enters the very heart of indigenous Japanese culture and identity, and tries to persuade Kilmer that as a result, he alone is responsible for dealing with the aftermath of the rescue—it is part of his sense of *giri* and the debt he owes Kilmer. Kilmer, however, now understands his own debt to Tanaka, and when the former says (from the ‘inside’), ‘Kilmer-san, believe me, it is unnecessary for you to stay. Really. It’s not necessary,’ Kilmer simply replies, ‘Maybe not for you.’

Tanaka and Kilmer: a lateral relationship

As mentioned above, theirs is the relationship at the centre of the film, and can be compared to that of the rivals who develop a deep respect for each other in *ninkyō-eiga* (for example, Tetsu and Shooting Star in *Tokyo Drifter*): they end up being blood brothers in everything but name. Their initial rivalry encompasses not only their clash of ethics and cultures but also Eiko. While it would be wrong to suggest either man is ‘sexually ambiguous’ in the same way as the heroes of the ‘classic’ Hollywood gangster films, and Haneda and Tetsu in ‘golden age’ *yakuza* films, they are both sexually emasculated by the other’s relationship with Eiko: Tanaka has been cuckolded by Kilmer, who in turn has been denied by Tanaka’s return from the war and then the revelation that he is Eiko’s husband. Neither can have the woman he loves. It is, however, the ethical and cultural clash between Kilmer and Tanaka, and their growing mutual understanding and respect, which forms the backbone of the film and makes it a ‘dual-focus’ narrative. This can most clearly be seen in a number of fighting episodes. Following the failed assassination attempt, Kilmer goes alone to kill Tanner. We see him enter an office building and get in a lift. We switch to inside the lift and follow him out along a dimly-lit corridor. This is only one of two shots where Pollack uses a handheld camera, adopting techniques used in both New Hollywood and by Fukasaku in *jitsuroku yakuza-eiga*. The effect is one of stalking—we are with Kilmer on his hunt for Tanner. He kicks open the door of Tanner’s suite of offices,

killing three henchmen, and then bursts into Tanner's inner office, shooting him six times. We do not actually see Tanner getting shot: instead the camera focuses on Kilmer and each time he fires the camera height and angle change slightly in a series of jump-cuts. The music at the beginning of this sequence is Japanese percussion, a slightly discordant and cacophonous mixture of bells, drums and *hyoshigi* (wooden blocks), and the noise of shooting is emphasised through a loud sound mix. We hear Tanner fall and the camera lingers in a point-of-view shot of where he had been standing behind his desk. The sudden silence takes us to the next shot, a cut to an extreme close-up of a *katana* being unsheathed. All we can see are hands on either side of the screen, one holding the hilt of the sword and the other the sheath. Hilt, sheath and background are black, with the silver of the honed steel in sharp contrast. As the sword is being drawn from the sheath, the camera pulls back so the hands stay in their starting position on either side of the screen. We cut to see Tanaka inspecting the *katana*. He, too, is readying for battle.

The pace of this sequence is telling: the explosive violence of the six gunshots takes a mere two seconds; the point of view shot of Tanner's desk is four seconds, but seems longer given the visual and aural frenzy of the previous montage (described by Pollack as 'spastic'²¹); and the unsheathing of Tanaka's *katana* (again in total silence) takes a full 13 seconds. We therefore have a contrast between two very different traditions of violence—the ear-splitting sound and juddering suddenness of gunfire opposed to the silent aesthetic beauty of Japanese swordplay. This key contrast is confirmed by Pollack:

I had to try to find a way of layering the violence which is such a part of both cultures really. The Western tradition of violence—and literally the Western of 'out West' and Western movies, and Western meaning the United States of America—and the Eastern sort of operatic sword-based violence, ritual-based violence. The sword and the gun, such opposite weapons in a way and the

²¹ Pollack, 'Commentary', 1:21:12

methodology in each is so different that they became the kind of touchstone in finding a way to film it.²²

This sensibility to the difference in method and pace of American and Japanese screen violence is extended to the climactic fight scene, where Tanaka and Kilmer invade Tono's hideout—Tanaka armed with a *katana* and Kilmer with a double-barrelled shotgun and automatic pistol. While Kilmer literally smashes his way through closed *shoji* shooting with both barrels and causing maximum destruction, Tanaka moves from room to room in a slow-motion ballet taking on numerous foes at once and dispatching them with a cat-like grace and poise. The fast-paced editing and noise of Kilmer's violence is contrasted with the much longer takes and silence when we see Tanaka in action. Kilmer is surrounded by gun smoke, quite literally lost in the fog of war, while we see Tanaka in sharp relief, all his senses attuned to the task of killing. Pollack explained this counterpoint, 'I kept cross-cutting between Mitchum and Takakura Ken. Mitchum is an absolute bull and Ken is like a matador. They're both doing the same thing, but Mitchum is going about it in a pragmatic way while Ken is more artful'.²³

Tanaka and Kilmer's final conciliation occurs at the end of the film. In a scene shot with a narrow depth of field in homage to Japanese filmmaking style, the two men are in a traditional Japanese garden saying their farewells. Kilmer and Tanaka are in sharp focus, but shot through the branches of trees that are out-of-focus and barely visible; however, they are there like the invisible barrier between the men—Eiko and the now-dead Hanako. Tanaka turns and walks away and we see a close-up of Kilmer, which dissolves to show him in a taxi in the rain, the trees' branches dissolving into windscreen wipers. He is on his way to the airport but realises he still has an unpaid debt: he must return to Tanaka to pay for the pain he has caused, 'in the

²² Pollack, 'Commentary', 0:33:09

²³ Sydney Pollack, quoted in Patricia Earns 'Sydney Pollack', in Lyon, C., ed., *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers* Volume 2 (New York: Perigee Books, 1984), p. 29, cited in Meyer, p. 76

past (Eiko) and the present (Hanako).’ He goes to Tanaka’s apartment, and in a scene set up by Tanaka cutting off the tip of his finger in atonement for killing his brother’s son, Kilmer prepares to also commit *yubitsume*. He does so and in great pain offers the tip of his finger, wrapped in ceremonial white cloth, to Tanaka, who accepts it, saying, ‘No man had a greater friend,’ a sentiment echoed by Kilmer. Much of this scene is shot in close-up profile instead of the more traditional over-the-shoulder shot / reverse shot. Pollack again uses traditional Japanese interior design to provide frames, but this time each man is shot using the ‘short-siding’ technique, where they are not centre screen but towards one side—in fact on the side of the frame they are facing, in other words they are closer together. In some ways, therefore, they are now unbalanced, not centred, are not the same men of unbending tradition that they were at the beginning of the film: they have grown together.

Kilmer and Dusty: a vertical relationship

The lateral relationships discussed in relation to the narratives of both ‘classic’ Hollywood gangster films and ‘golden age’ *yakuza-eiga* are clearly present in *The Yakuza*. The film also explores vertical relationships, but in this case we can see the separate influences of the two traditions. The upward relationships are clearly from the *ninkyō-eiga* convention of honourable and evil *oyabun*. Goro, the honourable *oyabun*, has an expository role: he clarifies to Kilmer (and the audience) the nature of Kilmer’s debt to Tanaka and why the latter acts as he does. He brings the two men together, but also suffers by losing a son. He is threatened by the evil *oyabun*, Tono, who is very much like the corporate and ruthless Danno in *Japan Organised Crime Boss*—he is attempting to take over the underworld and uses others (in this case Tanner) to do his dirty work. Tanner is the turncoat who betrays the hero, akin to Kurata in *Tokyo Drifter*. However, the downward relationship, the relationship between Kilmer and Dusty, is closer to that found in the Hollywood films discussed in Chapter 2, with Dusty as the ‘acolyte’. He is the closest, in culture and background, to the traditional second generation

immigrant American gangster figure (Tanner may work with the *yakuza* but he is also a legitimate businessman, running a shipping company). Tanner describes him as his bodyguard and we see him at the beginning of the film protecting Tanner, hanging around outside his office on the Los Angeles docks and pulling a gun on the *yakuza* go-between, Kato. As we have seen, he accompanies Kilmer to Japan on the pretext of protecting him, but in reality he is Tanner's eyes and ears. However, he soon becomes Kilmer's protégé as he learns about Japan and the Japanese codes of honour and duty. He is the only character in the film who has no understanding of the concepts of *giri* and debt of honour, and it is largely through him that the audience learns of their significance. Early on he is sceptical, and only sees things through American eyes when, before the rescue, he asks about Tanaka and why Kilmer thinks he can trust him. Kilmer replies with a single word, '*Giri*', and when questioned goes on to define it as 'obligation' and confirms that Tanaka feels he owes Kilmer something. Dusty thinks briefly and then provides a Western interpretation on obligation: 'Well, that can work two ways, Kilmer. If you ain't alive tomorrow, he don't owe you shit.'

However, as the film progresses Dusty learns more about Japanese culture, asking about *yubitsume* and watching Hanako perform the tea ceremony. Following the assassination attempt, in what Pollack has described as at the 'heart' of the film,²⁴ he asks Tanaka about *giri*, but whereas Kilmer gives the standard definition of 'obligation', Tanaka translates *giri* as 'burden ... the burden hardest to bear'. Dusty continues to question him, asking what compels him to fulfil this obligation or burden. He asks that if there is no external reckoning, no 'heaven or hell', what do the Japanese believe in that makes them discharge their obligation? Tanaka, like Kilmer before him, provides a one word answer, '*Giri*'. It is then that Dusty reveals to Kilmer that he was sent as a spy, and it is then that he truly becomes Kilmer's acolyte: he now

²⁴ Pollack, 'Commentary', 1:03:10

understands and has accepted the code. Like all acolytes, however, he dies while attempting to protect Eiko and Hanako from Tono's henchmen.

The Yakuza is not merely a synthesis of the Hollywood and Japanese traditions and neither is it a *yakuza* film *per se*. While it concerns itself with the *ninkyō yakuza-eiga* myth of code, honour and duty, it adds to it by including a 'Western' perspective and also, more crucially, explores a clash of cultures, codes and concepts of honour. Because of this added dimension it passes Jameson's test by creating something new out of the fundamental (generic, narrative and stylistic) characteristics of the two traditions, or to put it another way, it 'transcends its genre'.²⁵

Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai: a film of parallels

Like *The Yakuza*, *Ghost Dog* is a study of a clash of codes and cultures. The hybrid nature of the film is captured in its themes: Suárez argues that it is about 'composite identity, quoting as a way of living, and building a text out of preexisting fragments'.²⁶ Peary makes a similar point, maintaining that the film is a 'gangster genre piece filtered through self-conscious French and Japanese reworkings of the American gangster movie, and then brought back to America, still resonant with the foreign trappings'.²⁷ This would seem to be supported by the range of sources Jarmusch acknowledges. At various times, he has cited many different influences on the film, from *Branded to Kill* and *Le Samourai* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1967) to hip hop, *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, *Rashomon*, *Don Quixote* and *Frankenstein*.²⁸ He has even

²⁵ Meyer, p. 79

²⁶ Juan A. Suárez, *Jim Jarmusch* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 124

²⁷ Gerald Peary, 'Jim Jarmusch' (March 2000)
<<http://www.geraldpeary.com/interviews/jkl/jarmusch.html>> [accessed 26 May, 2014]

²⁸ See, for example, Tom Dawson, 'Interview: Jim Jarmusch', *Total Film* 40 (May 2000), p. 137; Tom Ruston, 'Spaced "Ghost"', *Premier* 13:6 (February, 2000), p. 58; and Chuck Stephens, 'Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai', *Film Comment* 36:1 (January-February 2000), p. 75

described it as a 'gangster samurai hip-hop Eastern western'.²⁹ The hybridity extends to the character of Ghost Dog himself which fuses 'gangsta rap's aesthetic of individuality and violence with the samurai code found in *Hagakure*'.³⁰

It could therefore be said that *Ghost Dog* is a hybridisation of three gangster film traditions: the immigrant gangster films of the 'classic' pre-Code cycle and the 1970s and 80s revival (including *The Godfather*, *Mean Streets* and *Goodfellas*—and later still *The Sopranos*); the Japanese *ninkyō-eiga* of *giri*, *ninjo* and the *jingi* code; and the urban African-American gangsta 'hood' films of the early 1990s (including *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society*). Despite their superficial and seemingly overwhelming differences, the 'hood' cycle of films has much in common with the earlier Hollywood gangster tradition: both are concerned with the struggles of an urban outsider underclass—one black, the other immigrant—against establishment discrimination, and their attempts to grab hold of the material vestiges of the American Dream by, as they see it, the only means at their disposal; both feature strong homosocial relationships that are predicated on loyalty but are beset by betrayal; both explore the clash of traditional values and modernity through generational conflict; both exhibit disturbing levels of misogyny; and both utilise alternative culture (hip hop and jazz) to accentuate the alienation from WASP culture as well as speaking to their non-mainstream audiences.

The connection between the two traditions goes beyond the features of the deep structure highlighted here. The filmmakers of the 'hood' cycle knowingly utilised and referenced the older films. Munby points out that in stating 'It's the American way, cos I'm the

²⁹ Jim Jarmusch, quoted in Peter Bowen, 'Character Assassination', *Filmmaker* 8:2 (Winter 2000), p. 100

³⁰ Ingrid Walker, 'Family Values and Feudal Codes: The Social Politics of America's Fin-de-Siècle Gangster', in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., p. 384

G-A-N-G-S-T-A', rapper and star of *Boyz n the Hood* Ice Cube is confirming an 'association [...] with the generic "mythic" gangster of the national imagination'.³¹ This association is extended with the appropriation of James Cagney and Al Pacino as hip hop icons,³² and emphasised in *Menace II Society* through the protagonist Caine's (Tyron Turner) fascination with black and white gangster films—we see him watch a scene involving the shooting of a cop from *He Walked by Night* (Alfred L. Werker, 1948)—which is set against his evident disgust at having to sit through *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) with his grandparents. The connection between the two traditions is apparent outside the text of these films as well. The 'blackness' of the hip hop artists who appear in these films—for example, Ice Cube, Ice T in *New Jack City* and Tupak Shakur in *Juice* (Ernest R. Dickerson, 1992)—and their personal identification with the neighbourhoods in which the films are set and shot matches the previously mentioned ethnic background of the stars of the 'classic' Hollywood gangster films and their upbringing in New York's Lower East Side. A final extra-textual connection is highlighted by Munby, in that the furore that surrounded the 1990s cycle had an uncanny resemblance to the reception of the pre-Code films, which can be explained by how gangsta rap (and by extension the 'hood' films) has

... devoted itself to covering the heated debate and moral panic about the capital (economic and cultural) thug life generates. The gangsta's celebration of material gain at any cost could have been defended as an ironic vision and critique of the American Dream, as the latest version of the American gangster myth,³³

a tradition, as we have seen, that stretches back to the 1930s at least.

Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker) is a hit man who does jobs for Louie (John Tormey), a member of the local mob. This gang is more like the lower echelons of the Soprano family than

³¹ Jonathan Munby, *Under a Bad Sign: Criminal Self-Representation in African American Popular Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 158-159

³² Ibid.

³³ Munby, *Under a Bad Sign*, pp. 158 and 172

Goodfellas—middle-aged and overweight, stupid and bungling and living in the past. Ghost Dog lives in a roof-top shack, tends pigeons (he communicates with Louie via carrier pigeon), and lives by the *samurai* code, throughout the film quoting from *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, an early-eighteenth-century Japanese text.³⁴ Living by the *samurai* code, he sees himself as a ‘retainer’ and Louie as a saviour who he must respect, obey and protect. In a flashback set six years previously, a young Ghost Dog (Damon Whitaker) is being beaten by a gang of youths. Louie, who is driving past, stops and intervenes, killing one of the attackers. As in *Rashomon* we see two versions of this episode from the differing perspectives of Louie and Ghost Dog: from Louie’s point of view the attacker turns and draws a gun on him, so Louie shoots to defend himself; in Ghost Dog’s memory, he is about to be shot when Louie arrives, saving him by killing the attacker.

Ghost Dog is hired by Louie on the orders of Sonny Valero (Cliff Gorman), the gang’s underboss, to kill ‘Handsome’ Frank (Richard Portnow) for carrying on an affair with the boss’s daughter. Ghost Dog carries out the hit but the daughter, Louise (Tricia Vessey), who is not supposed to be there, witnesses the murder. The boss, Ray Vargo (Henry Silva), and Sonny then order Ghost Dog’s elimination on the spurious grounds that Handsome Frank was ‘one of us’. The mob’s inept, but ruthless, attempts to kill Ghost Dog lead to the destruction of his shack and pigeon coop and the killing of all but one of his pigeons. It is vengeance for this act, rather than self-preservation, which leads Ghost Dog to eradicate the gang, with the exception of Louie and Louise. As a counterpoint to the violence and vengeance, we see Ghost Dog’s close friendship with a Haitian ice-cream seller, Raymond (Isaach De Bankolé), who only speaks French (Ghost Dog only speaks English), and his mentoring of a young girl, Pearlina (Camille Winbush), who he meets in a park. He is drawn to her through a shared love of literature:

³⁴ Yamamoto Tsunemoto, *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai* trans. William Scott Wilson (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1983)

they discuss the books she is reading (*The Wind in the Willows*, *The Souls of Black Folk* by W E. Burghardt Du Bois, and *Frankenstein*), and he lends or gives her books (*Rashomon* and, at the end of the film, *Hagakure*). In a parallel to Ghost Dog's attaché case in which he carries the weapons and other tools of his trade, Pearline carries her books in a plastic lunch box. Suárez contends that this twin narrative of violence and friendship is one of the 'achievements of the film' because:

... the peaceful routines do not clash with the violence, and Ghost Dog's asceticism does not seem to contradict his being a killer. This is partly because the film aligns the spectators' sympathies with him, not with his victims, the Mafiosi, who are outrageously bigoted and bloodthirsty, if also hilariously ineffectual. In addition, Ghost Dog's meditative nature flows into the precision and elegance with which he does his jobs, transforming his killings into discrete dances.³⁵

Ghost Dog appreciates that Louie has to avenge his gang's annihilation, and they face each other in a Western-style stand-off (Ghost Dog even says to Louie, 'What is this Louie? *High Noon*? The final shoot-out scene? Well, it's very dramatic.'). As his loyal retainer he cannot kill Louie; instead, like Tsubaki in *Japan Organised Crime Boss*, Ghost Dog empties his gun before facing him. The church clock is striking twelve as Ghost Dog walks towards Louie, throws his gun away and is shot three times. As Louie runs away Pearline picks up Ghost Dog's gun, aims at Louie and pulls the trigger. We see a point-of view shot looking through the sights of the gun at Louie running towards the car. The empty gun only clicks, but Louie still staggers and almost falls. He reaches the car, in which Louise Vargo, daughter of the dead boss, is waiting. She is now in charge. The scene cuts to Pearline, sitting on the floor of her kitchen while her mother tries to work around her. She is reading *Hagakure*, and we hear her voiceover, rather than Ghost Dog's, quoting a passage:

In the Kamigata area they have a sort of tiered lunchbox they use for a single day when flower viewing. Upon returning, they throw them away, trampling them underfoot. The end is important in all things.

³⁵ Suárez, pp. 125-126

But with ending there is new beginning: it is time for Pearline to throw away her childish lunchbox and inherit the way of the *samurai*. She and Louise are destined to continue in what Stephens, perhaps sarcastically, calls a 'feminist future'.³⁶ This conclusion echoes *Battles without Honour and Humanity 2*, which, as we have seen, ends with the promise that in spite of the death of Yamanaka, the *yakuza* battles in Hiroshima will continue.

Parallel codes

This somewhat pessimistic reading of the end of the film can be slightly tempered by the knowledge that there is at least a semblance of philosophical and cultural understanding between Pearline and Louise, based on the shared experience of *Rashomon*. The book links all the main characters, passing from Louise to Ghost Dog, and then to Pearline and finally Louise, and highlights the central theme of multiple interpretations of the world and its values (or codes). As with *The Yakuza*, what on one level appears to be a clash of codes and cultures, on another can be seen as a series of parallels and shared experience. Louise will be a mob boss; Pearline will follow the way of the *samurai*, but as in *Rashomon* they have shared experiences, even though they may view them in different ways. The same is true of Ghost Dog and the mob. They may come from completely different cultural and philosophical places and have totally different codes, but share many characteristics: their myths are entwined. Both, for example, live apart from their communities. The mob hang out in the back room of a restaurant, not Italian but Chinese and, as mentioned above, Ghost Dog lives alone in a shack on the top of an old inner-city apartment block. While he is not completely isolated from his community—there is a clear acknowledgement of and mutual respect between Ghost Dog and local black street gangstas, rapper crews and another lone 'warrior' (RZA)³⁷—he exists

³⁶ Stephens, p. 75

³⁷ RZA is an aficionado of martial arts and a founder member of the rap group the Wu Tang Clan, who took their name from *Shao Lin yu Wu Dang / Shaolin and Wu Tang* (Chia-Hui Lui,

distanced from them. The mob, of course, does not recognise any similarity. When it is discovered that Louise was present at Handsome Frank's killing, Louie is summoned to explain to Vargo, Sonny and the old, deaf Consigliere (Gene Ruffini). The three men sit together at one end of the table, squeezed into the frame. Theirs is a tight, stifling and restrictive code, starved of oxygen and unable to change or grow (as opposed to Ghost Dog's open-air rooftop existence). They quiz Louie about Ghost Dog—they know nothing about him, not even his name—and are ever more incredulous at Louie's answers about the contact through carrier pigeon and the fact that Ghost Dog insists on only being paid once a year, on the first day of Autumn. They are unable to comprehend such a way of doing things. Vargo and the old man are even more taken aback when they learn his name, but Sonny, who considers himself a hip hop aficionado and quotes Public Enemy, reels off a list of rappers' names, 'Snoop Doggie Dog, Ice Cube, Q-Tip, Method Man.' Vargo replies, 'I don't know anything about that. But it makes me think about Indians. You know, think of names like Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, Running Bear, Black Elk,' and then proceeds to bellow like an Elk. The old Consigliere interjects, 'Yeah... Indians. Niggers. Same thing,' reinforcing the clear belief of all three men that 'Indians' and 'Niggers' inhabit a completely different culture from themselves. The absurdity of their delusion becomes apparent when Sonny calls a henchman to get the gang together, 'Johnny. Go outside. Get Sammy the Snake, Joe Rags, Big Angie...'

Both the mob and Ghost Dog live by codes from the past. Just before the final shoot-out with Louie, Ghost Dog tells Raymond, 'Me and him are from different ancient tribes, and now we're both almost extinct. But sometimes you've gotta stick with the ancient ways, the old-school ways.' His use of the synonyms 'ancient' and 'old-school' highlight his appreciation of the similarities and differences between them and their codes. Rice also emphasises this

1983). He also provided *Ghost Dog's* soundtrack, and his involvement demonstrates *Ghost Dog's* continuation of the synergy between the 1990s 'hood' cycle and hip hop.

juxtaposition, 'Though they are opposites in almost every other way Vargo and Ghost Dog do not deviate from their warrior codes. Ghost Dog, however, is the archetypal hero who stands alone in his beliefs, while Vargo's code is also that of the micro-society he leads.'³⁸ As such, Vargo is alone amongst the mob in his understanding of Ghost Dog's warrior code. Holed up in the back of the Chinese restaurant following the slaughter of his pigeons, the mob receives a message from Ghost Dog by his last remaining carrier pigeon, a quote from *Hagakure*. Sonny reads it, "'Even if a samurai's head were to be suddenly cut off, he should still be able to perform one more action with certainty.'" 'What the fuck is that supposed to mean?', to which Vargo replies, 'It's poetry. The poetry of war.' The shot cuts to a tableau of the rest of the gang facing him in silence. They are none the wiser.

Tradition and modernity

Despite this small level of shared understanding, which is later extended to Louise and Pearline, the film generally distinguishes between the validity of the different codes: one, although ancient, is affirming and relevant, the other is moribund. This is confirmed by Jarmusch. He says about Ghost Dog:

A code [is] being true to yourself, thinking for yourself rather than having the world dictate to you how you should think and be. And that's what Ghost Dog does. He follows a code from a different culture and different century, and yet it is valuable because of the way he interprets it and uses it, centers himself and keeps true to himself. The world does not dictate its code to him, he keeps his code and enters the world with it intact.³⁹

On the other hand he argues that the mob, 'may have had a code but it's unravelled. It's outmoded. They came up from the streets in the '50s and early '60s and it started unravelling

³⁸ Rice, p. 122

³⁹ Jim Jarmusch, quoted in Stephen Ashton, 'Conversation with Jim Jarmusch: Cinematic Samurai', *MoveMaker* 37 (January/February 2000), republished (4 February 2008) <<http://www.moviemaker.com/articles-directing/jim-jarmusch-ghost-dog-the-way-of-the-samurai-interview-20080204/>> [accessed 21 May 2014]

in the late '60s and '70s. They are dinosaurs.⁴⁰ Their decay is clear: they cannot afford to pay the rent on the back room in the Chinese restaurant and their homes are all for sale. No-one is scared of them: they are cowed by a young boy throwing toys at them. They live in the past: rather than the modern 4x4 of Tony Soprano, they drive stereotypical gangster vinyl-top Cadillacs and Lincolns dating from the 1970s and 80s, and, in opposition to 1930s Hollywood gangsters, wear clothes that chart decline rather than success (fashions from the 1970s—pink-tinted glasses and wide shirt collars worn over jacket lapels). They know all this and are even grateful to Ghost Dog for allowing them one final chance to live the myth: a dying Vinny (Victor Argo) says, 'He's sending us out in the old way. Like real fuckin' gangsters.' Their violence is random and they are unconcerned about killing innocent people in their pursuit of Ghost Dog—they kill a black man who keeps pigeons just because he is a black man who keeps pigeons and 'could be' Ghost Dog.

Ghost Dog, on the other hand, is precise in his work. A quotation from *Hagakure* immediately before the scene described above, highlights the difference:

According to what one of the elders said, taking an enemy on the battlefield is like a hawk taking a bird. Even though it enters into the midst of a thousand of them, it gives no attention to any bird other than the one that it has first marked.

Although he practices traditional skills—we see him on his roof-top praying at a shrine and practising with a *katana*, the flowing movements accentuated by double exposure which gives the impression of Ghost Dog and his spirit working in harmony—he works with modern technology and up-to-date weapons fitted with laser-sights. Unlike the mob, he is deliberate in his preparations for and execution of every hit. We see him clean his guns and build a silencer. He walks slowly and purposefully. He uses an electronic device to break into and steal the luxury cars he uses to drive to his jobs, always wearing white cotton gloves (a reference to the

⁴⁰ Jim Jarmusch, quoted in Peary

assassin in *Le Samourai*). He only kills those he means to kill—in two hits, those of Handsome Frank and at Vargo's country house when he kills most of the gang, he spares Louise—as he says to Louie when asked if there was a girl at Handsome Frank's, 'I wasn't instructed to eliminate no girl.' And like a loyal *samurai* he always protects his master, even if that means having to shoot him in the shoulder (on two separate occasions) in order to deflect suspicion. In the first, Ghost Dog has killed another mobster who has come to assassinate Louie on orders from Sonny and Vargo; and later following the Vargo house massacre he shoots Sonny again, both saving him and providing an alibi for his survival. At both times Ghost Dog shoots Sonny in precisely the same spot explaining, 'I'm your retainer. I don't mean you any disrespect. Besides, I don't want to put too many holes in you.' This loyalty, culminating in his self-sacrifice, is an embodiment of an 'undercurrent of nostalgia for a heroic past' shared by both Ghost Dog and *Hagakure*. However, rather than rejecting the present, Ghost Dog both 'incorporates and transcends it'.⁴¹ He may use modern weapons, but he uses them as if he were fighting with a *katana*. When he enters Vargo's house he moves from room to room with the ballet-like quality of Takakura Ken in *The Yakuza*, aiming his guns with the sweeping motions of a sword fighter. Once again, Jarmusch combines double exposure with slow motion to make Ghost Dog's movements more graceful. His gun has a silencer, muffling the explosions of the shots to further the impression that we are watching a Japanese swordsman rather than a Western gunman. As he leaves he holsters his gun with the same flowing movement with which he sheaths his *katana*.

As we have seen, the contiguity of tradition and modernity is a common theme running through many *yakuza* films of the 'golden age'. It also forms an undercurrent to *The Yakuza*, with Kilmer looking at a Tokyo skyscraper rising above a traditional Japanese garden, saying,

⁴¹ Rice, p. 109; p. 102

'Everywhere I look, I can't recognise a thing,' to which his friend Wheat (Herb Edelman) replies, 'It's still there. The farmers in the countryside may watch TV from their *tatami* mats, and you can't see Fuji through the smog. But don't let it fool you. It's still Japan, and the Japanese are still Japanese.' Not only does the narrative of *Ghost Dog* explore the issue as outlined above, it also puts it within the fabric of the film. Each episode is introduced by a quote from *Hagakure*, both in voiceover and with an intertitle. The quotes do not introduce the action, but rather provide an underlying sense of the subsequent episode. Thus, on his way to eliminate Vargo, the sequence starts with a long-shot of the Mercedes Ghost Dog has just stolen driving along a country road at dawn. In a short series of jump dissolves, we see the car pulling into a picnic area and parking alongside a station wagon which a family is getting out of. Ghost Dog gets out of his car and walks off screen as the shot of the two cars side-by-side with the family settling down at a picnic table in the background dissolves into an intertitle, and we hear Ghost Dog's voiceover quoting:

It is good to carry some powdered rouge in one's sleeve. It may happen that when one is sobering up or waking from sleep, a samurai's complexion may be poor. At such a time it is good to take out and apply some powdered rouge.

As the voiceover ends the intertitle dissolves back to the previous shot—two cars; family at picnic table—as Ghost Dog walks back into the frame. He has changed from his habitual black into the sharp blue suit he stole the previous night from a drunken businessman, and proceeds to calmly swap the number plates on the stolen Mercedes with those on the station wagon as the family are obliviously eating their picnic only yards away. The suit and the false number plates are his 'rouge': the latter will prevent him from being pulled over by the police, and the former will allow him to blag his way into Vargo's lair as an estate agent.

Concurrent with these (traditional) quotes from *Hagakure* are clips of (modern) cartoons—ranging from Betty Boop, Felix the Cat and Woody Woodpecker, to Itchy and Scratchy out of *The Simpsons*—which also function as commentaries on the action. Scenes of

different members of the mob watching cartoons on television punctuate the narrative, with each cartoon clip related to what is happening in the 'real' world of the film. Just before he is shot, Handsome Frank is watching a Betty Boop cartoon in which she is guiding pigeons into a coop—the following scene starts with Louie and Vinny trying to catch Ghost Dog's pigeon to send him a message. Following the destruction of his shack and death of his pigeons Ghost Dog prepares to face the mob. We see him walking and the camera zooms in on his attaché case which contains his guns and other tools of the trade. We cut to Vargo intently watching a Felix the Cat cartoon, where the mad professor is decrying his inability to destroy Felix and his 'magic bag'. As Ghost Dog is laying waste to his gang, Vargo is watching a shootout between Koko the Clown and an elk. And at the end of the film, after Ghost Dog dies and Pauline 'shoots' Louie, Louise is sitting in the back of her father's limousine watching Itchy and Scratchy pulling increasingly large guns on each other, until they become bigger than the planet: the war, as indicated earlier, will continue.

Hybridity

Suárez argues *Ghost Dog* is part of a tradition of African-American youths appropriating elements of *wu-xia* (martial arts films) in both music and what he calls 'sign repertoire'. He goes on to say that this:

... is not simply a western assimilation of eastern form. It operates on a wildly hybrid genre whose immediate origins are Japanese films (the Jidai-geki genre) and the Chinese *wu-xia*, but their more distant ancestors are the American Westerns and gangster films of the 1930s and 1940s, which influenced Kurosawa, among other Eastern directors. In turn, Westerns and gangster pictures have their own intricate genealogies. In some ways, *Ghost Dog* continues this process of translation, appropriation and combination, and suggests that identity is an accumulation of citations and is inevitably mediated through texts.⁴²

As noted earlier, the film draws from a wide variety of source material. Ghost Dog himself has been described as 'a Don Quixote figure following a code from another century and another

⁴² Suárez, p. 137

culture that his world doesn't respect or understand'.⁴³ And in another literary reference, Suárez is among those who notes that Ghost Dog is the monster to Louie's Frankenstein— Louie has created an 'uncontrollable creature that eventually destroys his world'.⁴⁴ While Ghost Dog reads from the end of the novel to Pearlina she complains that he is giving away the ending; he says, almost to himself, 'the Monster'. He could be referring to the book; but he could also be referring to himself.

Apart from references to Cervantes and Mary Shelly, Ghost Dog's elimination of the gang includes more than a nod to *Branded to Kill*: on one occasion he has to abort the assassination of Vargo, even though he has him in his sights, when a bird lands on the barrel of his rifle obscuring his view; and Haneda's shooting up the basin waste pipe is reprised for the killing of Sonny. These killings not only cite the precise text of *Branded to Kill* but, along with others in the film, share its irreverent and slightly anarchic spirit. Rice contends that 'Ghost Dog's "murders" are choreographed, stylized, and semi-comic events in a fable where the victims are objects of satire rather than real people worthy of pity'.⁴⁵ Despite this, he maintains that Suzuki's influence is overstated:

Jarmusch may have put Seijun Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* on his list of personal thanks because it showed, as Akira Kurosawa said of his *Drunken Angel*, "how silly gangsters can be".⁴⁶ Suzuki uses over-the-top acting and jarring cuts to extend his ridicule of gangsters to the wider business cultures of both Japan and the United States. *Branded's* lead is a hit man, but apart from the killing technique of shooting up a drain pipe and missing a shot when a butterfly lands on his rifle, he has nothing in common with Ghost Dog. Unlike the protective love that Ghost Dog develops for Pearlina [...] Haneda Goro's exclusive self-concern makes him like a child himself.⁴⁷

⁴³ Jim Jarmusch, quoted in Dawson, p. 137

⁴⁴ Suárez, p. 127

⁴⁵ Rice, p. 109

⁴⁶ Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 49

⁴⁷ Rice, p. 159

Rice may be correct that Haneda and Ghost Dog share little except methods of killing, but he is wrong to assume that the two episodes he cites are the only influences from *Branded to Kill*. The city, for example, is decaying. *Branded to Kill* gives us shots of railway sidings and filthy decaying docks which parallel the descent of the hero while in the opening of *Ghost Dog* we see alternating shots of a pigeon flying through the dusk and a bird's-eye view of the city below: docks, rows of parked trucks, a railway, a freeway snarled with traffic, a cemetery, what looks like an abandoned factory, and finally the roof of Ghost Dog's building with its shack and pigeon coop. The rest of the building appears to be boarded up. As the pigeon lands we see a series of shots of the roof-top: the shack, the coop—in reality a chicken-wire lean-to with a wooden roof; pigeons are everywhere and everything is covered in bird droppings. The camera zooms in to a filthy window in the shack; there is a yellowing light shining through it. There is a dissolve and we are through the window. Ghost Dog is sitting reading and the camera continues its zoom until we see the cover of the *Hagakure* in close-up. We hear Ghost Dog's voiceover and, for the only time in the film, we see the words on the page rather than on an intertitle:

The way of the samurai is found in death. Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily. Every day when one's mind and body are at peace, we should meditate upon being ripped apart by arrows, rifles, spears and swords. Being carried away by surging waves, being thrown into the midst of a great fire, being struck by lightning, being shaken to death by a great earthquake, falling from thousand-foot cliffs, dying of disease, or committing seppuku [ritual suicide] at the death of one's master. And every day without fail one should consider himself as dead. This is the substance of the Way of the Samurai.

As we are introduced to Ghost Dog's code, the voiceover continues over a series of still-life shots of the inside of his shack: a table full of dismantled electronics, wires everywhere, with a soldering iron, a machete and two automatic pistols, both with silencers attached; a chest of drawers on top of which is a small shrine, four lit candles and Japanese ceramics and a *butsuzo*—a small statue of a Japanese Buddhist god—all on a white tablecloth; a small bookshelf with a variety of books and a number of African statues; a basin, electric grill and

kettle; a framed picture of a young woman; and another *butsuzo*, flanked by two small lit candles. This is his life, and apart from the flashbacks, is only one of two times we have any indication of a back story or explanation of why he became a hit man. We never find out who the young woman is (or was), but a further hint of some past tragedy is given a little later when he pauses slightly and gives a very brief bow—more of a nod—as he walks past the cemetery.

A further reference to *Branded to Kill* is the birds. Jarmusch has said that the idea of pigeons came from someone keeping pigeons on the roof of the building behind his;⁴⁸ however, the recurring motif of birds, and their death, bears a remarkable similarity to the bird/butterfly motif in Suzuki's film. Much like the bird-death imagery in *Branded to Kill*, the birds in *Ghost Dog* serve as a symbol: on every *Hagakure* intertitle we see *montsuki* (a family crest) of three birds forming a circle to signify nature's cyclical character (this symbol does not appear in the original book). *Ghost Dog* also borrows a visual technique from *Branded to Kill*. When Louie and Vinny send a message to Ghost Dog following the Handsome Frank hit, we see a similar shot of a pigeon flying to that in the opening sequence, although now it is day. This image is intercut with shots of Ghost Dog sleeping on his roof, and the dissolves between the shots, which are never quite completed so we see both images coming in and out, overlay the flying bird on Ghost Dog's face, reprising the superimposed images of butterflies we see in *Branded to Kill*. The film, however, evokes more than just a reference to *Branded to Kill*; it is also indicating a clear spiritual connection between the bird and Ghost Dog—they appear to become one—in the essence of *kami* (the 'spirits' of *Shintoism* which inhabit many living things). Ghost Dog's *kami* is most clearly seen when he confronts, and kills, two hunters (white, but 'blacked-up' in camouflage make up) who have killed a black bear out of season.

⁴⁸ Andrew, Geoff, 'Jim Jarmusch Interview', in Hertzberg, L., ed., *Jim Jarmusch Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001)p. 189

Having killed one of the hunters and wounded the other he says that in ancient cultures bears were considered equal with men, to which the hunter replies, 'This ain't no ancient culture, mister.' We see a close-up point-of-view shot of Ghost Dog, blue sky behind him, pointing the gun at the camera. He answers, 'Sometimes it is,' and shoots. The scene cuts to black.

As we have seen, it is the mob's slaughter of his pigeons, an act of impotent rage because they have failed to hunt down Ghost Dog, that is the catalyst to his vengeance. He returns from meeting Louie to find the coop destroyed and mangled bodies of his birds scattered everywhere. His shack has also been ransacked, with more pigeon bodies on the table and his bed. The picture of the young woman has been smashed and smeared with blood. Ghost Dog looks down. Between his feet is a white dove, covered in blood and laid out with its wings spread out as if crucified. There will be no more peace. As in *Branded to Kill*, flying creatures signify both life and death. And as Rice argues, 'The major thematic conflict is between spiritual and material values rather than good and evil'.⁴⁹

The narrative structure of *Ghost Dog* may appear to be single-focus in that it concerns a single protagonist who links the other characters, and we only usually see the other characters in relation to the protagonist. The *Rashomon* inspired interpretation and reinterpretation of an event is also a feature of single-focus narrative. However, while there are clear elements of the single-focus structure, I would argue that there are also strong components of dual-focus narrative. The characters may not necessarily be linked by predicate (activity), as Altman suggests is the norm, but they are connected by circumstance, their adherence to their codes. Bowen suggests that their codes clash, and the narrative therefore 'becomes the inevitable byproduct of cultural collision'.⁵⁰ However, as I have argued above, the codes should be seen

⁴⁹ Rice, p. 109

⁵⁰ Bowen, p. 85

to be running in parallel to each other and various concurrent episodes within the narrative serve to highlight these parallels, with the cartoons and the quotes from *Hagakure* functioning as the modulations between these episodes. According to Altman's classification, these modulations are best described as *metaphoric*: a non-physical link between the characters. By incorporating both single- and dual-focus elements, *Ghost Dog* subverts the straightforward narrative descriptions proposed by Altman. Likewise, elements of relationships, as discussed with reference to 'classic' Hollywood and 'golden age' *yakuza* films, as well as *The Yakuza*, are present (Ghost Dog and Raymond as a lateral relationship, and Ghost Dog with both Pearl—his acolyte—and Louie as vertical relationships), but are subverted. Despite their inability to communicate through language, Ghost Dog's relationship with Raymond is based on a deep mutual understanding—they think alike and on several occasions echo each other's observations, almost word-for-word, one in French and the other in English. In other films, these relationships mostly arise within the structure of the gang, but as Ghost Dog is a lone warrior his relationships must occur in isolation; they are unconnected with each other.

Like Pollack commenting on *The Yakuza*, Jarmusch describes his film as generically subversive, in that the film is, 'playing with genres and allowing them to be departing points for something that maybe subverts them or uses them in a way that's not necessarily formulaic'.⁵¹ These subversions of narrative form (both in an overall and generic sense) highlight the hybridity of *Ghost Dog*, making it much more than a film informed by a range of influences. Glen concurs, arguing:

Jarmusch takes the standard gangster-movie clichés and raises them to a sublimely absurd level [...] Almost everything in the movie is a genre convention, but Jarmusch never lazily falls back on them—he prods and pokes them, gives

⁵¹ Jim Jarmusch, quoted in Chris Campion, 'East Meets West', *Dazed & Confused* 64 (April 2000); republished as a longer version in Hertzberg, L., ed., p. 204

them truly surprising quirks, and then he sets them spinning wildly to see where they land.⁵²

The film does far more than that: as we have seen, it is a study of myth, tradition, decay, transformation, spirituality and codes.

Brother: a film of death

Despite Kitano Takeshi's insistence that he is not inspired by the cinema of the past,⁵³ of the three films explored in this chapter, it is perhaps *Brother* which most clearly takes the myths of American (both the pre-Code and 'hood' cycles) and Japanese gangster films and brings them together. From America we have a classic rise and fall narrative, the iconography of cars and machine guns, clothing and jewellery, hip hop gangsta culture, and the overreaching of the gangster-hero leading to downfall. From Japan we have clan loyalty, *giri* and *ninjo*, tattoos and finger cutting, and ceremony and sacrifice. As well as these surface aspects, *Brother* shares components of a deep structure common to all the texts we have discussed in this study: clear vertical and lateral relationships, tradition and modernity, and an entrenched personal code. *Brother* is Kitano's first international co-production (Warner Bros. part-funded 2012's *Autoreiji: Biyondo / Beyond Outrage*), and received quite mixed reviews: some believing that he compromised himself by, unsuccessfully, trying to meld with Hollywood; while others felt that the film outshone standard Hollywood output and continued in the tradition of his previous *yakuza* films.⁵⁴ Kitano himself maintained that *Brother* is 'something different from what they make in Hollywood',⁵⁵ and that it is 'neither Japanese nor American'.⁵⁶

⁵² Glen Kenny, 'Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai', *Premier* 13:7 (March, 2000), p. 24

⁵³ Martin Scorsese, 'Five questions by Martin Scorsese', *Cahiers du Cinema* 500 (March 1996), p. 69

⁵⁴ Aaron Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi* (London: BFI, 2007), p. 173

⁵⁵ Kitano Takeshi, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 173

⁵⁶ Kitano Takeshi, quoted in Tony Rayns, 'To Die in America', *Sight and Sound* 11:4 (April, 2001), p. 27

The film centres around Yamamoto (Kitano Takeshi, as Beat Takeshi), a *yakuza* underboss who is forced to leave Japan following the assassination of his *oyabun* and the breakup of his gang. Unlike his blood brother, Harada (Ohsugi Ren), Yamamoto refuses to join the Jinseikai-gumi, the gang that killed their *oyabun* and took over their turf; instead, and with the help of Harada, he fakes his own death to escape from Tokyo. He goes to Los Angeles where his young step-brother, Ken (Claude Maki), is living and supposedly studying—Yamamoto is paying for his education. However, when he gets there he finds that Ken is running with a small-time gang of African-Americans and Mexicans, dealing drugs on the street. On his way to find Ken, Yamamoto (literally) runs into a young black man who tries to hustle him out of \$200 to pay for the bottle of wine he dropped when they collided. Yamamoto's response is to shove the broken bottle into his assailant's eye. It turns out that the would-be scammer is Denny (Omar Epps), a member of Ken's gang. When they meet again, Ken persuades Denny that Yamamoto is not the one who attacked him as 'all Japanese look alike' to him.

Following a bust-up with their Mexican suppliers in which Ken is beaten up, Yamamoto leads the gang in eliminating the Mexican family and taking over their turf. At the same time, Yamamoto's *kubon* from Japan, Kato (Terajima Susumu), unexpectedly arrives in Los Angeles, and together they oversee the expansion of the gang and the incorporation of the Little Tokyo *yakuza* mob led by Shirase (Kato Masaya)—Kato kills himself in a show of ultimate loyalty to secure the alliance. Their success brings the gang's attention to the mafia, who demand a fifty percent stake in their business. They refuse and are wiped out, with Yamamoto, having faked Denny's death in an echo of his own escape from Japan, committing figurative suicide by facing the massed machine guns of the mob alone.

The outsider

As with all the heroes examined in this study, Yamamoto is an outsider, but unlike the majority of the others he remains one throughout the narrative. This is true even in the scenes in Japan, which are seen in flashback towards the beginning of the film. Despite being an underboss, Yamamoto observes, he does not join in. However, when he acts he does so immediately without asking permission from his *oyabun*. In a hostess bar that their boss insists on visiting even though there is a turf war in progress, it is Harada who asks the *mama-san* (proprietor) about the new workers, but it is Yamada who recognises the barman as a potential danger and shoots him when the would-be assassin prepares to murder his boss. He also demonstrates his isolation by being more of a traditional *yakuza* than his brothers, berating a member of the rival Jinseikai-gumi for wearing a coloured tie to his *oyabun's* wake, and threatening to kill Harada (significantly with a *katana*) when the latter declares that he will unite with the Jinseikai gang for the sake of his men. Harada presents his severed finger in atonement for joining their rivals, but to Yamamoto this is an unfathomable betrayal, 'I should kill you! You traitor! Call yourself a *yakuza*?' It could be argued that like Tanaka and Kilmer in *The Yakuza* and the mob in *Ghost Dog*, Yamamoto is a dinosaur, following an outmoded and outdated code. Despite this, he is not quite a *yakuza* of the *ninkyō-eiga* who would exhibit humanity by overlooking his blood brother joining a rival gang (*ninjo*), while undertaking his duty by killing the *oyabun* of the Jinseikai-gumi in revenge for his own boss's murder (*giri*). Instead he has what Gerow calls a 'crisis of masculinity' and flees to America.⁵⁷

In America, his otherness is clear even in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic Los Angeles, a city of diasporas as he speaks no English. The film starts with a close-up shot of Yamamoto in dark designer suit, white open-neck shirt and wearing wrap-around sunglasses: his eyes are

⁵⁷ Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 179

invisible; he is anonymous. This cuts to a long-shot at an oblique angle. He is standing alone outside a terminal of LAX, but his manner, in spite of the disorientation implied by the camera angle, suggests he is unconcerned. Being an outsider is normal. The camera angle slowly rights itself and we cut to the interior of a taxi, with the unseen taxi driver asking Yamamoto if he is Japanese. He receives no answer and mumbles, 'Asshole doesn't even speak English.' To further highlight his isolation, the scenes in the taxi and Denny's attempted hustle are replayed from Yamamoto's point of view: we see both men in close up talking to camera but the soundtrack is silent. The dichotomy of naïve alien on the one hand and cool detachment on the other is played out several times over the opening scenes: he over-tips the taxi driver and hotel bell-hop, and he seemingly does not understand when told (in English) that Ken was sacked from the sushi bar where he worked and accepts the deliberate mistranslation that Ken quit; however, as we have seen, he attacks Denny without compunction during the attempted scam. Yamamoto is walking along a litter-strewn downtown street when, filmed from Yamamoto's point of view, Denny deliberately walks into him. A bottle of wine is dropped and breaks, and Denny demands money in an expletive-laden diatribe. There is a cut to point-of-view shot of an impassive Yamamoto, eyes hidden behind sunglasses (Denny says, 'Where the fuck are your eyes, motherfucker?'). Yamamoto picks up the broken bottle and grinds it into Denny's eye. This is also seen from Denny's point of view—we are on the receiving end of Yamamoto's violence. We cut to an objective shot and see him punch Denny in the stomach, doubling him up, and calmly walk off. The sudden switch, or 'violent contrast', from potential victim of a street hustle (having just been fobbed off by the sushi bar owner) to detached but extreme violence is shocking and, according to Richie, a hallmark of Kitano's films.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Richie, *Japanese Film*, p. 222

The action / inaction we saw in Tokyo continues in Los Angeles. Yamamoto instigates the war with the Mexican drug gang and annihilates them, but following this success and as the gang achieve wealth and power—they drive around in an ostentatious white stretch limo and have exchanged their gangsta hip hop clothes for designer suits—he appears to abdicate all responsibility, allowing Kato and later Shirase to make all the running while he sits in their huge new office playing dice and board games. He has his war, just as he did in Japan (when Kato arrives from Tokyo and asks how things are going, Yamamoto merely smiles and says, ‘I’m at war in America, too.’), and he can wait for the inevitable end: death. Gerow argues:

It seems as if Yamamoto has come to America to do what Harada has done for him—help a brother (Denny) by hiding his death—but in a more masculine and Japanese way, one that involves a more meaningful death (Yamamoto’s demise presumably ensuring the secret of Denny’s faked death).⁵⁹

Kitano foregrounds this death even before the gang’s rise through the assault on the Mexican drug family. In a short and very quiet scene that appears to reprise *Branded to Kill*’s flying motif, Yamamoto and Kato are on a roof top and throw a paper aeroplane, which glides slowly down towards the street, the camera following it in a long, almost Zen-like, take. As the paper plane disappears from view they are interrupted by one of the gang members, Jay (Royal Watkins), to let them know that the meeting with the Mexicans has been set up. Even before they rise, they are bound to fall.

Brothers

In an apparent contradiction to his ‘outsider’ position, Yamamoto, like Tsukamoto in *Japan Organised Crime Boss*, is continually referred to as ‘brother’ by his fellow gang members (in both Japan and America); they rarely, if ever, call him by his name. Unlike the earlier film, however, Kitano uses subtle differences in the Japanese and English forms of ‘brother’ to denote different relationships. For example, Harada uses the form *kyodai* (literally ‘sibling’)

⁵⁹ Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 185

which signifies a lateral relationship, while Kato calls him *aniki* or 'older brother' indicating their respective places in the *yakuza* hierarchy, and Yamamoto refers to Ken as *ototo*, younger or 'kid' brother. As Kitano explains, 'The hierarchy of the *yakuza* "brotherhood" has several different degrees. Yamamoto and Harada are equals: 50/50. In the case of Yamamoto and Kato, it's more like 70/30.'⁶⁰ As traditional (or as Kitano says, 'old fashioned'⁶¹) *yakuza* these distinctions are fundamental, something which Yamamoto underlines when Harada begs for his understanding for joining the Jinseikai-gumi. While Harada prostrates himself on the floor having presented his severed finger, Yamamoto sarcastically repeats his plea, emphasising *kyodai*, "'I cut off my finger, so let me join the family that killed our boss. Please, *brother*?" Don't "brother" me!' However, they continue to call each other *kyodai* later when Harada helps him escape to America. *Kyodai* is also used by Kato when trying to persuade Shirase, the boss of the Los Angeles Little Tokyo *yakuza*, to unite their gangs. Having initially been rebuffed, Kato returns to Shirase's office alone, offering him equality, he will be Yamamoto's *kyodai*. Shirase says such an arrangement would be impossible, to which Kato counters that he would stake his life for his *aniki*. Shirase accuses him of sounding like a *yakuza* movie and challenges him to prove it, offering him a gun. Kato takes the gun and puts it to his temple and says, 'I'm counting on you,' addressing him as *ojiki* (uncle), thus reinforcing his offer of an equal partnership (in fact *ojiki* is slightly more distanced, somewhere between *oyabun* and *aniki*, implying an offer of position above Yamamoto). Kato shoots himself in an act of complete loyalty to his *aniki*. His sacrifice works and Shirase is forced, because of *giri* for Kato's life, to unite the two gangs. Significantly he calls Yamamoto *aniki* thereafter.

It is also significant that the non-Japanese gang members follow Kato, Ken and Shirase in calling Yamamoto *aniki*. This is especially true of Denny and, as recognised by Tsutsumi

⁶⁰ Kitano, in Rayns, 'To Die in America', p. 27

⁶¹ Ibid.

Ryuichiro, it is their pairing on which the film focuses.⁶² Even though their connection starts in conflict, they soon see in each other a kinship that ultimately survives all other relationships. Yamamoto asserts his power over Denny early in the film, not only by turning the tables on him when Denny tries to hustle him in the street, but also later through a crooked dice game—a counter-hustle in which Yamamoto is also successful. However, as the film progresses, it could be argued that Denny gradually becomes the American Yamamoto. Even though he is never as brutal—what Redmond calls his ‘inability to perform the role of a gangster’⁶³—there are clear parallels between them. Both are outsiders: Denny may be in his own environment, but as an urban African-American is excluded from the power and wealth we see in the distant skyscrapers and office blocks that form the backdrop of many of the exterior scenes. Redmond argues that even if they are not ‘exactly doubled’ in the film, the fact that Yamamoto and Denny are ‘closely aligned [...] is a recognition of the shared, complicit alienation and disenfranchisement that they suffer [...] in a white-washed America’,⁶⁴ and Kitano talks of ‘people of different ethnic backgrounds getting together and going to war against the big organization or the Establishment’.⁶⁵ This connection between the African-American street culture, the so-called ‘thug life’, and the exiled *yakuza* is central to the film. Even though its setting is very different to the suburban ghettos of *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society* it has clear links to the ‘hood’ cycle, with Omar Epps in some ways reprising his breakthrough role of Q, the street-wise kid turned reluctant gangsta, in *Juice*, in which he starred opposite one of hip hop’s most notorious artists, Tupac Shakur.

⁶² Tsutsumi Ryuichiro, ‘Finding an Alter Ego: The Triple-Double Structure of *Brother*’, *Iconics* 8 (2006)

⁶³ Sean Redmond, *The Cinema of Takeshi Kitano: Flowering Blood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 68

⁶⁴ Redmond, pp. 70-71

⁶⁵ Kitano Takeshi, quoted in Rahul Hamid, ‘“Beat” Comes to America’, *Cinéaste* 26:3 (Summer 2001), pp. 32-33

Like Yamamoto, Denny observes: instead of joining in with the games of basketball and beach football that the other gang members (including Ken and Kato) play, he joins Yamamoto in games of dice and Japanese chess; and Denny and Yamamoto do not attend the first meeting with Shirase, they wait outside in the limo. As part of lavish gift-giving to Denny's family on his mother's birthday, Yamamoto gives Denny a pair of sunglasses similar to his own. And in parallel scenes, both Denny and Yamamoto are faced with hostage situations. In the first, Denny walks into their headquarters to find Yamamoto being held by a rival gang member holding a gun to his head. Yamamoto implores Denny to shoot and after hesitating he does so, killing the would-be hostage taker but also shooting and wounding Yamamoto. In a later scene, Yamamoto is confronted by a gang who are holding his girlfriend, Marina (Joy Nakagawa). Unlike Denny he does not hesitate, shooting the gangsters but also killing Marina.

Yamamoto and Denny's relationship develops into the homosocial bond we see in *yakuza* films of the 'golden age' and 'classic' Hollywood gangster films (and which is also a feature of Kilmer and Tanaka's relationship in *The Yakuza*). As such, it is markedly different to Yamamoto's other relationships: Ken, while being his step-brother, is young and needs looking after; Shirase may be a gang boss, but Yamamoto refuses to shake his hand and slaps him down for smoking; and his relationship with Kato is tinged with homosexual, rather than homosocial, overtones. Kato loves Yamamoto and his sacrifice comes from more than loyalty and honour, it is a manifestation of this love. He also displays jealousy, and not a little incredulity, when Marina is introduced, saying, 'He's interested in women now?', and then makes sarcastic comments about her looks and clothes. This scene immediately follows the massacre of the Mexican gang, and it is the first time we see the limo and the gang wearing their designer suits. The limo is parked waiting for Marina, and like the opening scene is shot at an oblique angle. It is unclear, however, whether the implied discomfort is caused by the gang's new situation or by the imminent (and for Kato, clearly unwelcome) introduction of a

woman. The ambiguity surrounding Marina's death—was she killed by a stray bullet? (previous example of his marksmanship suggest that there are no such things as stray bullets)—implies that it not only Kato who feels that Marina, and by extension all women, has no place in this world.

It is the relationship with Denny which replaces those with Harada, Ken, Marina and especially Kato (without the 'threat' of homosexuality) and perhaps allows Yamamoto to overcome his 'crisis of masculinity'. It also survives and proves stronger than any blood ties: Yamamoto loses his Japanese *yakuza* family; Denny's family, introduced in his mother's birthday party, are killed by the mafia; and Ken abandons both blood and gang brothers only to die on the street.⁶⁶ When Yamamoto fakes Denny's death, he tells him to run away. Denny is nonplussed, and in an attempt to persuade him, Yamamoto confesses to injuring his eye. Denny replies, 'I know, my brother.' It is the only time that the English word 'brother' is used to address someone. Yamamoto and Denny's bond is exemplified by the various uses and nuances of the word in both Japanese and African-American English. The word is the nucleus of the film and highlights the growing mutual respect and recognition of shared interests between the two men, a black would-be gangsta and a Japanese *yakuza*. To African-Americans, the word has been strongly associated with the civil rights and Black Nationalist movements as a form of cultural and racial affirmation against white racism, and has become commonly used (in the form of 'bro') in terms of street gang membership. So its one and only use in English towards the end of film is highly significant and takes their relationship to a different level, one based on mutual (homosocial) love and respect, as opposed to the more

⁶⁶ Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 180

restrictive Japanese forms of the word. As Gerow argues, 'Masculinity and fraternity are united under Japanese dominance.'⁶⁷

Nation and nationalism

This so-called 'Japanese dominance' is a source of controversy, one that is linked to another of the considerations which connect the Hollywood and Japanese gangster traditions: questions of history and ideology. *Brother* was made primarily for the overseas (non-Japanese), especially American, market.⁶⁸ Much of the most extreme violence in the film—Yamamoto's killing of the barman/assassin in the Tokyo hostess bar; his bottle attack on Denny; and the graphic murder, using broken chopsticks, of a hit man in a Los Angeles sushi bar—is shown from the victim's point of view. In other words, it is the (American) audience which is being attacked. The idea of an 'assault on America'⁶⁹ is in part supported by Kitano's own admission of the film's references to Pearl Harbour: Yamamoto, Shirase and Kato are all names of Japanese wartime military leaders who were involved in the attack's planning and execution, and (the film's) Yamamoto's hesitation about confronting the mafia matches Admiral Yamamoto's doubts about the Pearl Harbour attack.⁷⁰ Such an admission has led some to accuse Kitano of nationalistic and even fascist tendencies, and interpret *Brother*, together with many of his other films, accordingly. One aspect of the film which is used to support such an interpretation is the (Japanese-led) multi-ethnic (but distinctly non-Caucasian) make up of the gang. This might be seen to mirror the 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere' which encompassed the territories occupied by Japan before and during the Second World War, and which was set up to ostensibly free Asia of European colonial dominance, but which in reality

⁶⁷ Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 183

⁶⁸ Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 182

⁶⁹ Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 182

⁷⁰ Kitano in Rayns, 'To Die in America', pp. 26-27

was a means of justifying Japanese control and exploitation. Much Japanese propaganda of the period was based on a narrative of non-Caucasians fighting together against powerful white forces.⁷¹ Therefore, the argument goes, that what on the surface appears to be an anti-racist depiction of a group of African-American, Hispanic and Japanese colleagues fighting the establishment is, in fact, a nationalist story of a Japanese-led attack on America which is naturally, but heroically, doomed to failure and death.

The depiction of what could be termed national characteristics also feeds into this nationalist interpretation of the film. America is seen as an open space—Yamamoto spends time on roof-tops; the gang plays on the beach; they rent a large open-plan penthouse office with huge arched windows; and the film ends in the Californian desert. The open space would usually be thought of as a positive reference to the American myth, but in fact it leads to the gang's destruction. They were safe at the beginning, holed up in a small ground floor room with no windows and conducting their business at night in underpasses and beneath freeways, but success literally brings them into the light where they can be seen and hunted down. Some of the gang are shot by snipers through the large windows of their office; Ken dies on wasteland in daylight; and Yamamoto is killed under the fierce desert sun. The gang's visibility is contrasted with the facelessness of the mafia—we only see them from the shoulders down as they stand over a dead gang member or as they machine-gun Yamamoto, and in a scene reworked from *Sonatine* much of the gang is wiped out by the mafia in an underpass at night (Kitano called the original, itself based on the scene from *The Public Enemy* in which Tom attacks the Burns mob, 'pathetic'⁷²). We only see the flashes of the guns and, through a strobe effect, Yamamoto's gang members getting shot, but never the mafia gunmen. The scenes of the gang at play and relaxing could be interpreted as decadence, and the multi-ethnicity of Los

⁷¹ See Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 183

⁷² Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 175

Angeles (racial weakness) is contrasted with overt racism—the taxi driver, and one of the Mexicans (thinking he will not understand) who calls Yamamoto a ‘fuckin’ Jap’ (he does, and shoots him).

Compared to America, Japan is seen as a country of homogeneity, tradition, ceremony, discipline, duty and sacrifice. A scene set back in Japan mid-way through the film seems to do little to advance the narrative except accentuate these virtues. Harada is now fully integrated with the Jinseikai-gumi and has become one of its most successful underbosses, a situation not universally popular with every member of the gang. A dinner is arranged to celebrate Harada’s success, presided over by the *oyabun* of Jinseikai (Watari Tetsuya). The dinner is held in a private room of a traditional Japanese restaurant: a dozen or so underbosses sit on the *tatami* floor in two rows facing each other with the *oyabun* at their head. A number of *kubon* are in attendance to light the underbosses’ cigarettes and pour *sake*, and each man sits behind a small individual table on which there are various dishes of Japanese delicacies—all-in-all a very traditional banquet. The cinematography is also quite traditional, mostly consisting of long static full-facing shots with the subject centre screen. The one exception is a tracking shot of the *oyabun*, dressed in traditional *kimono*, visible through open *shoji* screens walking behind the kneeling underbosses. He enters and sits; they all bow. As the *oyabun* congratulates the underbosses on their successes and warns against intra-gang rivalry, one of them, Matsumoto, who objected to Harada’s acceptance in the first place, questions his loyalty as ‘an outsider’, saying, ‘it’s hard to tell what he’s hiding inside him’. Harada immediately instructs his *kubon* to fetch a knife, and offering to show Matsumoto ‘what’s inside my stomach’, commits *seppuku* on the spot. The *oyabun* watches on impassively, but once Harada is taken away, demands atonement from Matsumoto for tarnishing the celebration. Matsumoto immediately commits *yubitsume*. Harada’s ritual suicide, together with those of Kato and Yamamoto, emphasises a death-wish in the main Japanese characters and has been likened to the *kamikaze* spirit—the

willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for Emperor and nation.⁷³ As Kitano says, ‘Yamamoto is simply looking for a place where he can die as a *yakuza* [...] He’s looking for a better way of death, a better place to die’.⁷⁴

Gerow cites Umemoto Yoichi’s disquiet about possible fascist tendencies in *Brother*.⁷⁵ His particular concern is that Kitano defines the *ma* (‘lack’ or ‘vacuum’) he says is at the centre of this, and many other of his films—something that has a certain previously unstated beauty. The term *ma* usually refers to absences, gaps, silences or negative spaces that, when not filled in, draw attention to an essential ‘lack’ in positive spaces. In other words, *ma* exposes that which is experienced as incomplete and as meaningful only in relation to something else, something not positively provided.⁷⁶ Umemoto goes on to evoke Michel Foucault’s condemnation of the nostalgic *La mode rétro* films in the 1970s which, Foucault argued, were part of the French Right’s belief that it was ‘entitled to produce a new version of its own history’.⁷⁷ The word, according to Umemoto, that Kitano has inserted into this ‘lack’ is ‘Japanese’, and by doing so, and equating it with beauty and an evocation of a glorious past and culture of sacrifice, is being dangerously nationalistic. Umemoto is specifically referring to the penultimate scene in the film. Having faked Denny’s death, Yamamoto waits for his own in a diner in the desert. The diner is stereotypically American with the exception of the owner, an old Japanese-American. He asks Yamamoto (in Japanese) ‘Are you Japanese? Are you here on

⁷³ Rayns, ‘To Die in America’, p. 26

⁷⁴ Kitano Takeshi, ‘Interview with Cast and Crew’, *Brother* DVD Special Features (Park Circus, 2010), 0:01:21

⁷⁵ Umemoto, Yoichi, ‘Umerareyo tosuru kuhaku no fukei’, *Cahiers du cinema Japan* 31 (2001), cited in Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 184

⁷⁶ Cazdyn, p. 64

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, ‘Anti-rétro: entretien avec Michel Foucault’, *Cahiers du cinema* 5-15 (July-August 1974), 251-2, trans. David Wilson, ed., *Cahiers du cinema, 1973-1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle IV* (London: Routledge/BFI, 2000), p. 161.

business?’ Just like in the taxi at the beginning of the film, Yamamoto, his eyes still hidden behind sunglasses, fails to answer other than with an enigmatic smile. The old man looks down, turns away and mumbles (in English), ‘You Japanese are so inscrutable.’ Yamamoto looks out the window to see a number of limousines pull up outside. He gets up, goes to the counter and gives the old man a wodge of money, ‘for the damage’; he draws his gun and steps out the door, closing it behind him. The camera remains on the closed red door. There is a pause, and then we hear the cacophony of machine-guns and see bullets ripping holes in the door. Umemoto’s argument is that the cliché, ‘inscrutable Japanese’, followed by Yamamoto’s suicide—at once fulfilling his own death wish and securing Denny’s safety—provides a narrative of heroic sacrifice which can be traced back to Mishima, *kamikaze* pilots, and the *Bushido*. Just as the pre-war militarists evoked a glorious past, with terrifying consequences, so too is Kitano intent on recreating the Japanese myth.

An alternative argument is that the cliché is just that: a cliché; a joke. That fact that this joke is delivered by an old Japanese-American in one of the great Hollywood icons, a diner, just adds to the irony. Martinez argues that the idea of the ‘inscrutable Japanese’—someone who is impenetrable to the outsider, especially the Western (and even more especially the North American) outsider—constitutes a national identity constructed by Japanese national leaders after 1970, and is itself a response that plays on the racist stereotypes of US anthropologists and historians studying Japan during and after the war.⁷⁸ It is certainly possible, therefore, that it is being used here as a reaction to Orientalism as a discredited academic discipline, while also ridiculing—through the person of a Japanese-American—the artificiality of a constructed Japanese identity which serves the ‘official’ national discourse of both Japan and the United States. As noted above, Kitano is presenting us with an ‘old-fashioned’, outmoded view of the

⁷⁸ D.P. Martinez, *Remaking Kurosawa: Translations and Permutations in Global Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 7-8

yakuza, a far cry from the gangsters of *Sonatine* and *Hana-bi* (1997), or even those of the *jitsuroku* documentary style films. The *yakuza* in *Brother* are a throwback to the *ninkyō-eiga* of *giri* and *ninjo*. Even here Kitano plays with the form. For example, the two *oyabun* appear to be reversed: traditionally, Yamamoto's boss would be the 'good' *oyabun*, but Kitano depicts him as stupid and lecherous—even after the failed assassination in the hostess bar, instead of going home he visits his mistress where he is ambushed and gunned down; the boss of the *Jinsekai-gumi*, traditionally the 'bad' *oyabun*, is seen wearing *kimono*, hosting a traditional banquet, and demanding atonement from wayward underbosses. If anything, Kitano's depiction of Japan is *too* Japanese: he is resorting to stereotypes. But this is not a case of going to Los Angeles to 'become more Japanese', as Rayns quips;⁷⁹ and neither is it just a ploy to appeal to an American audience unversed in Japanese culture and cinema. Redmond argues that instead of presenting the homogenised Japan of nationalist myth, throughout his films Kitano depicts a multi-layered view of Japan and the Japanese that is far from 'at one':

The idea that Japan is a cohesive, inclusive nation-state is constantly challenged in his films. The marginal, oppositional status of his characters, the rather kitsch use of Japanese iconography, and the largely metaphorical attempts to leave Japan [...] forcefully dislocate nationalist sentiments. The Kitano film does not believe that the national can be recuperated, and neither do his films suggest that they should.⁸⁰

In fact, it could be argued that the character of Yamamoto stands for both the national, with his Japanese affectations, and the transnational—not just as a *unifying* force, but also as a benign *differentiating* force that can allow for individuality. He integrates the disparate members of the gang—black, Latino and Japanese (both diaspora and the exiled)—thus creating a harmonious transnational and transcultural group of racial and socio-economic outsiders. He not only saves Denny's life at the end of the film, he also, through his almost disinterested mentoring, saves him from the life of a two-bit hustler and small-time hood,

⁷⁹ Rayns, 'To Die in America', p. 26

⁸⁰ Redmond, p. 69

instead offering him a route to greater self-awareness and wisdom.⁸¹ Therefore, rather than an essay on a Japanese invasion of America, the Pearl Harbour references and the friendship with Denny, as exemplified by their uses of the word 'brother', discussed above, could indicate, as Gerow contends, a forgiveness of Japan and an ending of its pariah status.⁸²

The nationalist or radical debate is reinforced by the film's recurring theme of distorted or disrupted vision, whether that be the near-blinding of Denny, the shooting of Jay through the eye, Yamamoto's sunglasses, the invisible enemy, or the 'attacks' on the audience. *Brother* invites conflicting interpretations dependent on how one sees things. In many ways, it is a traditional(ish) *ninkyō yakuza-eiga*, but set in Los Angeles rather than Tokyo or Osaka. It draws on many of the myths of *yakuza* cinema (down to the casting of Watari Tetsuya from *Tokyo Drifter* and *Graveyard of Honour* as the *Jinseikai oyabun*) and, like all the films discussed, focuses on the notion of code and vertical and lateral relationships. But it can also be seen as subversive. In this interpretation, it plays with the myth it is portraying and does so with humour and a knowing wink. Seen from this perspective, it is therefore radical rather than nationalist. It also, far more than any other Japanese film we have discussed, draws on the Hollywood gangster tradition, from the urban street gangs of the 'hood' cycle of the 1990s to direct references to *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*—for the first time Kitano uses a loud sound mix for the machine gun sequence in the underpass. There are also references to *The Big Sleep*: the shot of the diner door being riddled with bullets (pointed out by several commentators);⁸³ and Shirase's disparaging reference to Kato sounding like 'something out of

⁸¹ These ideas are influenced by Cazdyn's discussion of Oshima Nagisa's film, *Max mon amour* (1936), pp. 82-83

⁸² Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*, p. 182

⁸³ See, for example, Gerow, *Kitano Takeshi*

a [...] movie', which echoes Philip Marlow's (Humphrey Bogart) comments to several over-dramatic characters in the earlier film.

The film also plays with the 'classic' theme of a distorted American Dream through the standard iconography of clothing and the city backdrop. Davis contends that clothes and appearance are central to the film:

Brother repeatedly depicts men sizing each other up on the basis of external details. Clothes, sunglasses, race, and language: all these are employed as hermeneutics of intimidation [...] Their gold chains and baggy hip-hop wear are soon exchanged for tailor-made Yamamoto Yohji. This is less a signal of Japanese ascendancy over American or Italian [design] than more of a notion of would-be legitimacy, the highly sought-after status of businessman over gangster.⁸⁴

Brother is also a film about death: the death of the characters and the death of myth—both national and *yakuza*. The film is explicit on this point, although it does not seem to have been commented on in most analyses. On abandoning Yamamoto and Denny, Ken returns to their office to take money from the safe. The remaining gang members have all been killed, and their bodies have been arranged in the shape of the *kanji* (ideogram) 死 *shi* (death).

Conclusion

A discussion of hybridity needs to also address the issue of national, transnational and transcultural cinema. At the beginning of Chapter 3, I argued that the *yakuza* films of the 'golden age' could be seen as products of a 'national cinema'. At that point I defined national cinema in fairly simplistic terms of the type which Choi argues are used in discussions of the 'false dichotomy' between national and transnational cinema—locally funded and produced, and made by native filmmakers for an indigenous audience.⁸⁵ Choi dismisses a 'territorial'

⁸⁴ Darrell William Davis, 'Therapy for Him and Her: Kitano Takeshi's *Han-Bi* (1997)', in Phillips, A. and Stringer, J., eds., p. 286

⁸⁵ Jinhee Choi, 'National Cinema: the Very Idea' in Carroll, N. and Choi, J., eds., *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 314

account of national cinema (a film is categorised by its nation of origin) as outmoded given the increasing internationalisation of film financing and production. She also rejects a 'functional' account (what a film embodies about national identity at a textual level, and how it differs from other cinemas, including—or especially—Hollywood) as limiting the function of national cinema to a vehicle for promoting national identity. Instead, Choi supports a 'rational' approach by which national cinema can be viewed in terms of, and indeed 'oscillates between', a supra-category (something that 'encompasses both the nation-bound and the transnational film practices which filmmakers on a nation state engage') and a sub-category (a film 'which is formed when combined with other filmic categories such as genre or filmic code'). Therefore, national films in the supra-category may be made primarily for a domestic audience, but may also be produced for both domestic and international circulation, especially, but not exclusively, when made by internationally recognised filmmakers (for example, in the Japanese context, Kurosawa and Kitano). Genre is only one of several ways to explore the concept of sub-category. In national sub-genres, the 'national' label can 'piggy-back' on the generic label; for example, to those not in the know *yakuza-eiga* would be labelled Japanese gangster films, which are distinct from Hollywood gangster films or Hong Kong gangster films. Each (on the surface at least) retains identifiable 'national' characteristics, which is also the case of films in the supra-category.⁸⁶ So, if films are largely identifiable in terms of the 'national', why does Choi say that the national / transnational debate is a 'false dichotomy'? She sets out to show that the notion of national cinema continues to be valid and, contrary to recent perceptions, is not a dated term. While she presents a convincing argument that national cinema can still be quantified and recognised, she still manages to confirm that national cinema and transnational cinema are inextricably entwined. The logical conclusion of Choi's argument, therefore, is that in terms of production, distribution and reception in the

⁸⁶ Choi, pp. 314-315

21st century (not to mention such areas as form, narrative structure, genre and the influence of other national and international filmmakers), all cinema is transnational.

However, rather than viewing these hybrid films as transnational, it is worth exploring a slightly different interpretation, that they are transcultural. Martinez and others make the point that, as with Choi's interpretation of the relationship between national and transnational cinema, the global and the local are interwoven. Martinez draws on the work of Appadurai, who posits that in an era of disjunctures, if we examine areas he calls "scapes"—ethnological, media, technological, financial and ideological—we can see that there is no such thing as a worldwide 'global structure', and nor is there a single, all encompassing culture; rather, any 'global structure' always produces local responses.⁸⁷ Iwabuchi makes a similar point when he argues:

Transnational cultural power does not operate as the absolute symbolic centre but is deeply intermingled with local indigenizing processes in a way in which cultural diversity is organised through globally shared formats rather than through replication of uniform cultural models. The world is standardized through diversification and diversified through standardization.⁸⁸

That is not to say that there is no such thing as shared human experience. Writing about the ethnographic documentary films of David and Judith MacDougall, Taylor argues that film is unique in that it 'evokes experience through the *re-presentation* of experience. And the "shock" of film's transculturality [...] is that *through* its particularity it evokes *universality* of human experience—experience [...] that transcends cultural boundaries' (original emphasis).⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' in Appadurai, A., ed., *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), cited in Martinez, *Remaking Kurosawa*, p. xvi

⁸⁸ Iwabuchi, Koichi, 'Cultures of Empire: Transnational Media Flows and Cultural (Dis)Connections in East Asia' in Chakravartty, P. and Zhao, Y., eds., *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), p. 148

⁸⁹ Lucien Taylor, 'Introduction' in David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, ed. by Taylor, L. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 19

The demonstration of this universality of experience through film and other visual media has the effect of undermining stereotypical perceptions of national identity and in doing so, highlights the inadequacy of nationalist discourse.⁹⁰ This is just as true of narrative film as it is of documentary film, and shows that rather than resulting in films that are homogenised in order to appeal to an international and multicultural audience (see this chapter, notes 3, 4 and 5), transcultural films have the ability to ‘build bridges and then proceed to burn them while retaining some memory of the connection’, thereby helping us ‘understand something about human nature’.⁹¹ So, while we can define the hybrid films discussed in this study as ‘international’ and ‘transnational’ they are also, most importantly, transcultural. And far from being examples of ‘national’ cinema, the same can be said of the American and Japanese gangster films we have examined by virtue of their shared deep structure and myth. As we have seen, the bridges built by the shared gangster and *yakuza* myth have been burnt by the subversion of the of the hybrid films. They have achieved this by unpicking the shared cinematic gangster myths of Hollywood and Japan. In doing so, they have utilised components of both the surface and deep structures proposed in this study including, at least in the case of *Brother*, exploring questions of history and ideology, one of the genre’s preoccupations. By appropriating these elements of form and function, even while exploding the generic myths, the films both place themselves firmly within the generic canon and at the same time subvert it—a function, as we have seen, of hybridisation.

The three films go about this subversion in different ways: *The Yakuza* pairs a protagonist steeped in the Japanese code and myth with an outsider, both emerging with greater understanding of their similarities and codes; *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* explores the parallels that exist between two seemingly very different codes, one Japanese

⁹⁰ MacDougall, p. 261

⁹¹ Martinez, *Remaking Kurosawa*, p. xix

and the other Italian-American; and *Brother* examines the Japanese national myth of sacrifice and death as embodied in the *yakuza* code. In all cases the narratives are predicated on a clash of American-Japanese codes (ideologies, philosophies, histories); in all cases there is an understanding and coming together; in all cases there is sacrifice; and in all cases the protagonists are, to borrow Sydney Pollack's phrase, dinosaurs. The myth is dying, if not already dead. Or is it? Kilmer discovers the meaning of *giri* and learns how to discharge it; Pearlman and Louise will perpetuate their 'ways'; and Denny and Yamamoto both learn from each others' cultures as exemplified by the word 'brother'. The myth may therefore not be dead, but it is changing; and this takes us back to the discussion of the work of the Russian Formalists and their ideas of the historicity and process-like nature of genres and generic regimes (see Chapter 1, note 44). Jauss notes the dynamic character of genres identified by the Formalists when he discusses how:

... the historical alteration of the dominating genre manifests itself in the three steps of canonization, automation, and *reshuffling*. Successful genres [...] gradually lose their effective power through continual reproduction; they are forced to the periphery by new genres often arising from the 'vulgar' stratum if they cannot be reanimated through a restructuring (be it though the playing up of previously suppressed themes or the taking-over of functions from other genres).⁹² (my emphasis)

While the Formalists and Jauss are discussing literary genres and Neale is applying their ideas to Hollywood genres, I think they are equally valid to the transcultural hybrids discussed here. The clash of codes has resulted in something new and different, as demanded by Jameson (see this chapter, note 8), and the generic hybridisation seen in these three films is matched by a hybridisation of the myth.

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that this hybridisation is solely a contemporary tendency. The process of hybridisation of the genre has had a long period of

⁹² Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 106, cited in Neale, 'Questions of Genre', p. 60

gestation from the 1930s onwards, as an analysis focusing on pragmatics would indicate that this has affected the films of two distinct cinematic traditions. An early transcultural hybridisation between Hollywood and Japan can most clearly be seen in Ozu's 1930s trilogy of silent gangster films, *Walk Cheerfully*, *The Night's Wife* and *Dragnet Girl*, which were made in homage to the 'classic' gangster films of Hollywood.

6. Conclusion. A Shared Mythology: the Code

This study opened with a simple question: Despite their very different cultural contexts, do Hollywood gangster films and Japanese *yakuza* films share common forms and functions? By answering this question it was hoped that it would be possible to put forward an argument for a cinematic myth that is shared by American and Japanese gangster films. In order to explore these issues and having made an attempt to define exactly what is meant by 'genre' in film, a multifaceted approach to genre analysis has been proposed. This includes an examination and bringing together of a variety of methods of analysing genre films consisting of elements of myth and history together with the films' ritual and ideological functions, in order to identify the motifs, iconography, conventions and themes of these films, as well as exploring their different strategies for dealing with ideological tensions in society. By doing so, the study was able to recognise the films' semantic elements (common topics, shared plots, key scenes, familiar objects, and recognisable shots and sounds) as well as their syntactic elements (plot structure, character relationships, or image and sound montage). To this was added a consideration of what Altman calls a pragmatic approach—the interaction between different agents, including multifarious users (in this case other filmmakers)—as well as the impact the two traditions have on each other.

Examining the semantic and syntactic elements of the films also demands an analysis of their narrative structure. Again, a multifaceted approach has been adopted, by which a structuralist analysis of narrative functions has been complimented by what Altman calls a typological approach, one that recognises common narrative patterns—single-focus, dual-focus and multiple-focus—across a wide range of texts. The aim of this analysis has been to ascertain whether a generic deep structure, which identifies any possible underlying rules, components, and functions shared by the Hollywood and Japanese traditions, could be proposed. Such a deep structure would then indicate that it would be possible to recognise a

shared myth which links the 'classic' Hollywood gangster films of the early 1930s to the 'golden age' *yakuza* films of the 1960s and 70s. After reviewing the evidence for a common deep structure, this conclusion will examine the merits of a proposed shared myth based around the notion of code, and go on to discuss the limitations of this study and the possible consequences of its findings for further research.

The analysis of the first part of our initial question, on the issue of the films' form, has required a fixed and agreed base from which to explore their narrative structure in order to ascertain whether or not there is any level of commonality between the two traditions. The generally (but by no means universally) accepted view that the cycle of three pre-Code Hollywood gangster films, *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*, 'quintessentially define the genre' (see Chapter 2, note 22) indicates that this would be a logical starting point. Following a detailed structural analysis of these films it has been possible to propose thirteen narrative functions which help to define the cycle's narrative structure:

1. Initial Situation: The gangster-hero is outside mainstream society.
2. The gangster-hero craves power.
3. The gangster-hero has low status within the gang.
4. The gangster-hero displays special talents.
5. The gangster-hero embraces modernity.
6. The gangster-hero forms relationships.
7. The gangster-hero is sexually ambiguous.
8. The gangster-hero gains power.
9. The gangster-hero craves legitimacy.
10. The gangster-hero is strong, society is weak.
11. The gangster-hero breaks his own code.
12. The gangster-hero's relationships break down.

13. The gangster-hero dies.

The gangster-hero's position as the subject of these functions confirms also that the narrative pattern of these films is single-focus, in that the narrative follows the hero from situation to situation. Unsurprisingly, and as we have seen, a common trait of the protagonists in single-focus narratives is that they seek to reject the codes of society.

Having defined the surface narrative structure and pattern of the 'classic' Hollywood gangster cycle, it has been possible to map these onto a group of films from the *ninkyō* cycle of *yakuza-eiga's* golden age: *The Flowers and the Angry Waves*, *Tokyo Drifter*, *Branded to Kill* and *Japan Organised Crime Boss*. We have seen that while Paul Schrader has identified eighteen 'set pieces' for films in this cycle, many of these set pieces cannot be compared to the proposed functions for the 'classic' Hollywood gangster narrative. However, an analysis of the narratives of these films clearly indicates that there are striking similarities in many of the elements of structure and themes found in the two traditions. Many of the functions proposed for classic Hollywood also apply to 'golden age' *yakuza* films, and these shared functions have further allowed us to identify what narrative elements the traditions have in common, including a shared focus on vertical and lateral relationships. Both the Hollywood and Japanese films feature the heroes engaged in power struggles within and between underworld organisations, which result in their having to sacrifice their relationships with their gangster- / blood brothers and lovers, and put them in direct conflict with their bosses. Likewise, all the films focus on protagonists who are removed from society, whether that be mainstream or gang society. We have also discovered that while it is not ubiquitous, most of these films share the single-focus narrative pattern with the 1930s Hollywood cycle.

The second part of the initial query—the function of the genre and how it deals with ideological tensions in society—has led us to consider questions of history and ideology. While

many commentators agree that the 'classic' Hollywood films have an element of social commentary at their heart, this view is disputed; instead, it has been argued that the films serve and perpetuate the status quo. However, this study has demonstrated that the films of the rise and fall cycle of the early 1930s form part of a progressive commentary on the state of urban America in the early years of the Depression by drawing on material highlighting the social upheavals caused by Prohibition in the very recent past. Rather than defending the status quo, the films paint a picture of a society in crisis where the forces of law and order are literally powerless to prevent social breakdown, and one in which the American Dream has been shattered or, at the very least, turned on its head. In answer to the accusation that society is saved and the status quo is preserved at the end of the films with the death of the gangster-hero, the study argues that it is the heroes themselves who bring about their own downfall by overreaching themselves and breaking their own personal code: the legal and political establishment are largely bystanders in this drama. Furthermore, gangsterism itself has not been defeated with the gangster-hero's death: it will continue to blight society. This reading is supported by the clearly progressive agenda of many of the filmmakers responsible for the 'classic' cycle, who backed Roosevelt and the New Deal and denounced the social and economic environment which had such a negative effect on the urban poor, and which only served to perpetuate the conditions by which gangsterism could flourish. Despite this, the study argues against placing these films in a false either/or dichotomy in which they either support the dominant ideology or they denounce it. As we have seen, the progressive agenda is tempered by regressive elements, including the treatment of women and the triumph of 'legitimate' society, albeit as a result of the gangster-hero's hubris and vanity rather than as a result of the effectiveness, intelligence or moral superiority of the agents of law and order.

The social commentary credentials of the *yakuza* tradition are not so widely recognised, and some writers express concern about a nationalist or even fascist tendency in many of the

later *jitsuroku* films. As a result it has been important to analyse not only the *ninkyō* films looked at in relation to narrative structure, but also examine two later films, *Battles without Honour and Humanity* and *Graveyard of Honour*, to see if 'golden age' *yakuza* films share the ideologically ambivalent standpoint of the 'classic' Hollywood cycle. The study has traced the upheavals in post-war Japan in terms of its complex and paradoxical relationship with America and other countries in the region as well as the country's politics, economics, corporatism and modernisation—all of which led to the dislocation of internal migration for millions of people and the increased and rapid urbanisation of society. This examination has been used to show how the films not only comment on these developments, but do so progressively by highlighting the corruption in the commercial, political and bureaucratic establishment. We have seen how these films were popular with students and young factory and salaried workers who felt displaced by the rapid changes in Japanese society and had become disengaged from the social, economic and political power bases. This interpretation of the social commentary function of *yakuza* films has led us to speculate whether they fall within Category (e) of Comolli and Narboni's classifications; that is films which at first sight appear to belong to the dominant ideology, but do so in an ambiguous manner and partially denounce it. Any stability within the gang only works for the bosses, and the corruption of the *oyabun* and his allies is a denunciation of the corrupt elite in Japanese society. However, it has also been acknowledged that the exploitation of women in many of the films complicates this issue, and that the progressive commentary on questions of social environment, political and official corruption, corporatist capitalism and the power of the business/political elite is not matched by a progressive attitude to the role of women in society or their treatment by men, thus highlighting the ideological ambiguity of these films.

The examination of the form and function of Hollywood and Japanese gangster films has enabled us to propose a deep structure—which incorporates narrative, thematic and ideological elements—common to the two traditions:

1. At the beginning of the narrative the gangster-hero is an outsider, removed from both mainstream and gang society.
2. The gangster-hero's relationship with his gang boss is beset by betrayal.
3. The gangster-hero's relationships with his gangster-brother(s) and lover(s) may appear stronger than his vertical relationships, but ultimately break down.
4. As a result of the breakdown of his vertical and lateral relationships, the gangster-hero departs or dies: he loses his place in society.
5. The gangster film explores the clash of traditional values and modernity.

The first five elements of the deep structure give rise to a sixth, the ideological component:

6. The gangster film is ideologically ambiguous, containing both a progressive social commentary, including a clear appreciation of the social, political, economic and historical forces which shape the world, together with regressive features, particularly its overt misogyny.

This deep structure has been tested against three hybrid films, *The Yakuza*, *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* and *Brother* to see whether it applies to more recent films as much as it does to the films of the respective 'classic' phases of Hollywood and Japanese gangster films. The analysis of these films was made in terms not only of narrative (the outsider, vertical and lateral relationships, the clash of tradition and modernity, and the cult of sacrifice and death), but also in terms of history and ideology (nationality and nationalism), and even stylistic hybridisation (the adoption of cinematic techniques, visual motifs and styles from different traditions). We have been able to establish through this examination that the films have

subverted the shared cinematic gangster myths of Hollywood and Japan by utilising components of both the generic surface and deep structures proposed in this study.

The shared myth

The deep structure outlined above makes it possible to identify some of the elements that go to comprise the shared myth; however, these do not constitute the myth itself. Rather, and as indicated previously, it is my contention that the myth shared by Hollywood gangster films and *yakuza-eiga* revolves around the notion of code; that is, the personal code by which the gangster-hero lives and dies as well as the overarching code accepted by the closed micro-society of the gang. As was noted earlier, for the purposes of this study the notion of 'code' refers to abiding principles or agreed rules of behaviour, and should not be interpreted in the Barthesian sense in which it is used in the study of semiotics. The individual and group codes may be different, even at odds with one another, and the precise components of the group codes in the American and Japanese gangster myths may also be based on different cultural values; however, this study maintains that code, in its multifarious manifestations, is at the centre of the shared myth, so much so that those who stray from the code (individual or group) are usually, but not always, doomed.

Despite some variations in the specifics of these different codes, the central tenet of all of them is loyalty: loyalty of the gang members to the boss, and of the boss to his men; loyalty between the gangster- / blood brothers; and loyalty to the rules and ethics of the overarching group code itself. But in this myth, loyalty is juxtaposed with violence; and it is when loyalty turns to betrayal, an element of the deep structure as we have seen, that the fate of the gangster-hero is sealed in one way or another. In the 'classic' Hollywood cycle, Rico, Tom and Tony each betrays his respective gang boss, in the pursuit of power in the case of Rico and Tony, and by disobeying orders in the case of Tom. The betrayal is compounded by Tom and Tony's sexual conquest of the boss's lover, at once confirming their greater virility whilst

claiming (at least in Tony's case) a potent symbol of power. It may be the case that Tom does not set out to usurp and cuckold Paddy Ryan, but he himself nevertheless sees this as a betrayal and it leads him to leave the hideout in direct contravention of Paddy's orders, which in turn results in Matt's death and his own subsequent attack on the headquarters of the rival mob—again disobeying orders. As well as betraying his boss almost by mistake, Tom is the only one of the three heroes who is betrayed by a boss, in this case Putty Nose, both after the failed fur-trade robbery and as a victim of the older man's sexual predation. In *The Public Enemy* transgressive sexual behaviour is associated with betrayal and ultimately leads to death, both Putty Nose's and Tom's. The same can be said of both *Little Caesar* (Rico's desire for Joe) and *Scarface* (Tony's incestuous feelings for Cesca). However, much more significant, in terms of the code and therefore the myth, than the betrayal of the boss is the betrayal of the gangster-brother. While the heroes, with the exception of Tom in relation to Paddy, do not feel any enduring loyalty to the boss, their strongest, most stable and loyal relationship is with their male partner. All the heroes betray their gangster-brother; at the same time, both Rico and Tony feel they have been betrayed themselves—Rico by Joe's choice of Olga, and Tony by Guino's marriage to Cesca (in this case, the sense of betrayal is doubled). The breakdown of the male-male homosocial relationship, which until almost the end of each film has been based on mutual loyalty, triggers the fall of the gangster-hero and leads directly to his destruction.

In *yakuza-eiga* the lateral relationship does indeed endure, even when a gangster-brother is ordered to kill the hero as is the case in *Tokyo Drifter*, *Battles without Honour and Humanity* and *Japan Organised Crime Boss*—in the latter, the blood brother, Tsubaki, sacrifices himself rather than betray the code of brotherly loyalty. The lateral loyalty in *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* is not demonstrated by a blood brother but a would-be lover, Manryu, again paying for her devotion to Kikuji with her life. This is reversed in *Branded to Kill*, in which the

lover/wife, Mami, is induced to attempt to kill Haneda, but this is the only instance of lateral betrayal in all the *yakuza* films discussed. In *Battles without Honour and Humanity* the mutual loyalty of the three underbosses, Shoko, Hiroshi and Tetsuya, is continually tested by their *oyabun*, but even though each breaks from his gang and is pitted against his blood brother, they never betray each other. This adherence to a code of loyalty, even to death, is in sharp contrast to that of the *oyabun* who betrays the hero (although in the case of *Graveyard of Honour*, even though the hierarchy of the organisation exiles Rikio and then orders his assassination, it does so only after Rikio has attacked both his own and another allied *oyabun*, thereby violating the code himself). By double-crossing the heroes, the *oyabun* are not only betraying a supposedly sacred personal bond, they are also breaking the *jingi* code of humanity and honour. In the earlier *ninkyō* films this indicated the perfidy and disgrace of the evil *oyabun*—the good *oyabun* and the hero would continue to observe the code. However, increasingly in the *jitsuroku* films, it becomes clear that the code itself is expedient and is only used by the *oyabun* to enhance his power; as soon as it becomes inconvenient it can be abandoned and loyal *kubon* can be sacrificed. Nevertheless, the hero, until the nihilism of Rikio in *Graveyard of Honour* at least, continues to value and act by the code, even if this adherence results in his death.

Such an overarching code which governs the closed micro-society of the underworld, whether or not it proves to be a sham, does not have such an overt or mythological place in the 'classic' gangster films of Hollywood. And as we have seen, if it is referred to, as in *Little Caesar*, it is done so mockingly as in the motto of the Palermo Social Club: 'Friendship and Loyalty'. However, I would argue that there is indeed an accepted code or ethic in these films, one based on loyalty and honour, the transgression of which leads to the gangster-hero's downfall. This code involves not only recognition of the hierarchy of the gang, a hierarchy that (according to the code) is inviolable, but also provides a set of values by which the gangster

lives—he must operate within the structure of the gang and not sell out to a rival and certainly not the establishment forces of law and order. Walker maintains that this is a set of ethics which has been ‘romantically expressed’ in gangster narratives and goes on to quote Scorsese who comments that ‘the reason for those codes—why people live that way—are very strong lessons. The most important reason is survival’.¹ These shared codes are perhaps more central to the mythology of later American gangster films, as we shall discuss below, but are a feature, even if they remain an unspoken one, of the ‘classic’ cycle as well. The gangster-hero contravenes this code by violating the hierarchical structure and therefore creating disunity within the gang. By these actions he invites, either directly or indirectly, interference by outside agencies: rival gangs and the legal authorities. At the same time he breaks his own personal code of behaviour, which not only includes his relationship with his gangster-brother and his boss, but also his ability to act: the gangster-hero loses his status as a *flaneur*; he no longer owns the streets. The result of this is his destruction.

The shared myth and *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas* and *The Sopranos*

How, then, does the deep structure and myth proposed above apply to subsequent examples of American and Japanese gangster films? The focus on family, both biological and gang, shows that the idea of an overarching code is even more central to the gangster narratives of *The Godfather* trilogy and *The Sopranos* than it is to the ‘classic’ Hollywood gangster films. The same is true of *Goodfellas* with its exploration of the outsider; the relationship between Henry, Jimmy and Tommy, and theirs with Paulie, the gang boss; and the violation of gang codes and the question of *omertà*, the code of silence—Constantine Verevis describes it as a film about ‘tribe’.² In discussing these and other examples of the American gangster genre, both John G.

¹ Walker, p. 383

² Constantine Verevis, ‘Way of Life: *GoodFellas* and *Casino*’, in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., p. 209

Cawelti and Martha P. Nochimson attempt to define a gangster mythology. While Nochimson provides a definition which applies to canonical films from *Little Caesar* to *Goodfellas*, what she calls 'classic' films, Cawelti confines himself to proposing elements for a 'new formula' based on the original *Godfather* novel and film. Cawelti's mythology centres around the 'special character of the criminal "family"' and comprises three elements: the character of the crime leader (Boss, Don, Godfather); the Enforcer, the specialised professional and ruthless criminal; and a narrative organised around the planning and execution of an elaborate criminal act or 'caper'.³ Nochimson's wider focus also identifies three essential characteristics: a protagonist who we empathise with to the exclusion of law-abiding citizens; a 'dense social context' which paints a 'panoramic picture of society and its values'; and, unlike Hollywood's more usual emphasis on the individual and personal, the opposing claims of the personal and the social through an exploration of the 'well-articulated hierarchy of colleagues whose relationships may be turbulent but remain crucial to their well-being'.⁴ I would argue that rather than defining the mythology of the American gangster films, these are all (perhaps with the exception of Cawelti's 'caper') elements of the deep structure proposed earlier, and as such also crucially apply to *yakuza* films. It is only Nochimson's third characteristic which approaches my own suggestion of what constitutes a shared myth.

Elements of the proposed deep structure and shared myth are clearly present in *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas* and *The Sopranos*. As with the gangster-heroes of the 1930s Hollywood films, at the beginning of *The Godfather*, Michael is an outsider, even while being a member of the (biological) Corleone family. Not only did he join the Marines against his father's wishes, he brings his WASP girlfriend, Kaye, to his sister's very traditional Italian wedding. In *Goodfellas* a

³ Cawelti, p. 65

⁴ Martha, P. Nochimson, 'Waddaya Lookin' At? Rereading the Gangster Film through *The Sopranos*', in Grieveson, L., Sonnet, E., and Stanfield, P., eds., p. 186

young Henry observes the activities of the local mob through his bedroom window; Jimmy and Tommy are not part of the inner circle (neither Henry or Jimmy are pure Sicilian and so can never become 'made' men); and even the supposed acceptance of Tommy is merely a ruse which leads to his assassination over the killing of Billy Batts. Even Tony Soprano, who initially appears to be at the very heart of his gang family, is to some extent an outsider. His panic attacks and subsequent therapy sessions—his own 'I ain't so tough' moment— may have been caused by his disastrous relationship with his mother and the legacy of his relationship with his father,⁵ but they also indicate his own realisation of his inability to control both his biological and gang families. His therapy sets him apart, and the fact that he cannot admit to his treatment, even to his wife at the beginning of the first series, attests to his weak position.

The code based on loyalty underwritten by violence is embodied in the character of the gangster-hero. *The Godfather* films examine the code of loyalty through 'absolute allegiance to family and friendship, individual honour, vision and social duty'.⁶ At their centre is the motif of the sanctity of family; something constantly referred to by Vito, Sonny and Michael Corleone. Michael's rise within the gang family, like that of the pre-Code heroes, is assured by his natural gift of intelligence combined with a ruthless pragmatism. Faced with betrayal and disloyalty he reacts with a merciless efficiency, killing or ordering the assassinations of corrupt establishment figures, rivals, members of his gang family, and even members of his biological family, while reaffirming the sanctity of the family by becoming godfather to his sister's son. However, despite this apparent victory at the end of the first film, Michael's attempts to

⁵ Nochimson, p. 189

⁶ Walker, p. 388

protect and maintain this sanctity are fatally compromised by the corruption, betrayal and brutality of those both within and outside the family.⁷

While reprising many of the themes of *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas* does so from the point of view of the lower-echelon gangsters rather than focussing on the Boss. Therefore, the codes and behaviour of the Don are replaced with the ethos of the street-level gangster.⁸ In this it has much in common with both the Hollywood pre-Code and golden age *yakuza* films. Although from a different perspective, the film nevertheless explores the shared myth of loyalty and betrayal and a rigid code of honour, the violation of which leads inevitably to destruction—prison, exile or death. Tommy's murder of Batts is a violation of the code—a 'made man' cannot be killed—and triggers a series of further violations: Jimmy getting rid of all the gang members involved in the Air France robbery; and Henry turning state's witness against Paulie and Jimmy. As Nicholas Pileggi himself says, 'And while they made a huge, \$5 million score, they all came apart. They came apart on coke, they came apart on greed. They all started killing each other because they didn't trust each other.'⁹ In fact, even within the rigid gang structure, Henry, Tommy and Jimmy continually break the code by bypassing Paulie and working for themselves.

Unlike Vito Corleone, Tony Soprano does not have unquestioned control over either his biological or gang families, and this impotence is his central weakness which leads him to therapy. Nevertheless, he believes in and hankers after a lost (or perhaps mythological) strict code—both the group code of the gang and a personal masculine code of stoicism and inner

⁷ Geoff Fordham, 'A Study in Ambiguity: *The Godfather* and the American Gangster Movie Tradition', in Silver, A. and Ursini, J., eds., pp. 175-176

⁸ Verevis, p. 210

⁹ Nicholas Pileggi, quoted in David Konow, 'A Real Good Fella: Interview with Nicholas Pileggi', *Creative Screenwriting* 8: 2 (March-April 2001), p. 38, cited in Verevis, p. 210

strength (he continually decries his own weakness to Dr Melfi, and wonders whatever happened to 'real men' like Gary Cooper). And like Michael he acts with terrifying ferocity to defend the abiding group code and punish those who break it. One of the most striking instances is in episode five of the first series, *College* (Alan Coulter, 1999), in which he strangles a former DiMeo family member who has turned FBI informant, while his daughter, Meadow, is being interviewed for a college place. The connection between Michael and Tony's almost schizophrenic dual personalities—doting family man and merciless killer—is clear, and can in some ways be traced back to Tony Camonte's (albeit perverse) desire to 'protect' Cesca.

The duality of biological and gang family also touches on the themes of tradition and modernity and the gangster-hero's desire for legitimacy. Michael and Kaye represent modernity at the beginning of *The Godfather* and, like Vito's own wish for his children and grandchildren to become accepted establishment figures, highlight a desire for assimilation into American culture; however, this desire for assimilation is set against a protection of traditional customs and principles which, for Vito and eventually Michael, have a higher and more enduring value. Therefore, like in the earlier films, the tension between tradition and modernity highlights a complex and difficult relationship between the enduring values of the Old World and a desire for assimilation into America—a desire that is unattainable. By the end of the 20th Century the notion of legitimacy or 'normality' has changed, with *The Sopranos* taking the gangster-hero out of the city and putting him in the suburbs. Walker argues that Tony Soprano and his family have become Middle America: it may not be Vito Corleone's longed-for acceptance into the establishment, yet they have managed to achieve a secure integration into American life, at least on the surface.¹⁰ Through his children, especially Meadow at university, Tony may appear to be only one generation away from complete

¹⁰ Walker, p. 390

assimilation, but the gang family with its business fronts of a waste management company and a strip club are still mired in the robbery, extortion, corruption and murder of *Goodfellas* and the 'classic' 1930s films.

With his failure to reaffirm the code, the gangster-hero loses his freedom and power and faces destruction. Michael may have risen to be Godfather but it allows him no freedom and he dies broken and alone in Italy. Henry's rise affords him the status of *flaneur*, a luxury never experienced by the Corleones in their gated and fortified family community. This is most clearly seen in the celebrated Steadicam single-shot sequence when he takes Karen to the Copocabana club past a lengthy queue of patrons, down the stairs and through the kitchens, to a front-row table which is especially set up for them—Henry's seduction of Karen is matched with his own seduction by the lifestyle.¹¹ By the end of the film, and like Rico, Tony, Haneda and Rikio, he is on his own and trapped, this time by the helicopter which tracks him throughout his final day of freedom. Tony Soprano, like Michael Corleone, is also limited in his freedom to act, but in his case the limitation is caused by his own weakness. However, unlike previous heroes it is not this personal weakness which brings him down, it is the overwhelming forces—but once again, not those of law and order, but those of his wider gang family—ranged against him.

If these films share elements of the deep structure and myth with the 'classic' Hollywood cycle and the 'golden age' *yakuza* films, do they also share their ideological functions? As we have seen, Michael (like his father) craves legitimacy, and like Eddie Bartlett before them and Tony Soprano after them, father and son see their activities in terms of business. The films therefore link the practices of the mob with the ethics of corporate capitalism. Glen Man argues, 'On the whole, the trilogy indicts American capitalism for the

¹¹ Martin Scorsese, cited in Verevis, p. 215

rampant materialism within society and subverts the dominant prosocial myth'.¹² And like the *jitsuroku yakuza* films, society is ruled by a hidden alliance of rich and respectable businessmen, politicians and criminals.¹³ *Goodfellas* presents us with a society run through corruption and patronage, where you get ahead and jump the queue because of who you are, not by what you contribute; a society in which the logic of ruthless capitalism results in organisations not only eliminating their rivals but also their partners; a society in which the notions of honour and loyalty are a sham. In other words, a society very much like the one we live in. *The Sopranos* would appear to have similar credentials. Nochimson comments that, like its predecessors, it functions on a level of social commentary:

The Sopranos is clearly an elegiac, self-conscious, tragic-comic meditation on America's lost innocence; but, less obviously, it is also about the otherness of body and family to American corporate culture, and, above all, it is about the undying connections human beings have to each other despite a social system that maintains its hold through a divide-and-conquer strategy. *The Sopranos* may seem to be an inversion of generic tradition, but, in fact, it develops thematic elements that have long been present in gangster narratives.¹⁴

The shared myth in *Drunken Angel*, *Ichi the Killer* and *Yakuza Weapon*

Yakuza films, both before and after the golden age, also explore the myth. While the surface structure of Kurosawa's *Drunken Angel* may be very different from the films of the golden age—for example, we see the myth through the eyes of a doctor, Sanada, the drunken angel of the title—the film contains many elements of the shared deep structure. Set in a bombed-out Tokyo neighbourhood at the centre of which is a foetid pool which the locals use as a waste dump, is a source of disease, and in which the local children play, the film depicts how the local community is controlled by *yakuza*, demobbed servicemen who exploit the very people for

¹² Man, Glenn, 'Ideology and Genre in the *Godfather* Films', in Browne, N., ed., *Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather Trilogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 113, cited in Fordham, p. 172

¹³ Cawelti, p. 61

¹⁴ Nochimson, p. 185

whose honour they had sworn to sacrifice their lives during the war.¹⁵ Such a setting and situation would have been recognised by audiences in 1948 Japan.¹⁶ The local *yakuza*, Matsunaga, is the archetypal *flaneur*: crowds stop and bow as he walks the streets and alleyways of the local market, and flower stall holders willingly allow him to take a flower for his buttonhole. However, in a metaphor for the sickness in society exemplified by *yakuza*, Matsunaga suffers from tuberculosis, and Sanada sees it as his duty to not only save his body—something Matsunaga repeatedly denies him as he is afraid to confront his own weakness—but also his soul. The return of another *yakuza*, Okada, from prison both instigates Matsunaga's downfall as a *yakuza* and also his apotheosis. Okada soon starts to take over Matsunaga's territory with the complicity of the local *oyabun*, even though the boss had guaranteed Matsunaga his protection. The loss of status, coupled with his ever-worsening consumption, is not lost on the locals who no longer bow as he passes and insist on payment for the daily buttonhole; and neither is it lost on his lover who leaves him for Okada. However, Matsunaga acts to protect Sanada's nurse, who used to be Okada's mistress before he went to prison and who he abused dreadfully—his humanity takes over from his duty. In the climactic fight, Matsunaga is literally whitewashed after falling into spilled paint, which signals both purity and death—as we have seen, a motif borrowed in a slightly amended form for Tetsu in *Tokyo Drifter*. Even though he is killed by Okada, he regains his honour, but his adherence to the *yakuza* code which is used by others to control him and also kills him both mystifies and sickens Sanada, the spokesman for both Kurasawa himself (who famously detested *yakuza*)¹⁷ and the audience.

¹⁵ Ian Buruma, 'The Spoils of War', *Drunken Angel* DVD notes (New York: Criterion Collection, 2007), p. 4

¹⁶ David Desser, 'Ikiru: Narration as a Morality Act', in Nolletti, A. and Desser, D., eds., p. 59

¹⁷ Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 314

Two more recent films, *Koroshiya 1 / Ichi the Killer* (Miike Takashi, 2001) and *Gokudo heiki / Yakuza Weapon* (Sakaguchi Tak and Yamaguchi Yudai, 2011), are both based on popular *manga* (graphic novel) stories, but nonetheless continue to explore the myth. *Ichi the Killer* is probably most famous for its extreme and graphic violence, but it also examines questions of loyalty, the outsider, psychological manipulation and psycho-sexual perversion. Dessler argues that in the film the 'yakuza theme of loyalty to one's *oyabun* combines with the [...] motif of sexual desire that is somehow perverted', a combination not uncommon in the films examined in this study.¹⁸ *Yakuza* underboss Kakahara cuts a swathe through the Tokyo underworld, torturing rivals who he believes are responsible for his *oyabun's* disappearance. He does not know that the boss, Anjo, is already dead, murdered in a frenzied attack that has left him and his mistress a bloody and mutilated mess of meat and offal. The perpetrator is a seemingly ineffectual coffee shop worker, Ichi, who is himself a victim of hypnosis by which he has been given false memories of a childhood traumatised by bullies. As a result of his manipulation (the motivation for which is never completely explained) he becomes a perverse avenging superhero—Ichi the Killer—complete with a costume that includes boots with concealed blades which he uses to slice up his victims. Ichi is sexually aroused by watching violence, especially sexual violence, but he can only find sexual fulfilment through committing slaughter. His extreme sadism is only matched by Kakahara's masochism—his face is a mass of scars and piercings—and so Kakahara's pursuit of vengeance becomes a quest to find the sadistic killer, the only person who can complete him. Therefore, Kakahara's code of loyalty to his *oyabun* is co-joined with his personal code of behaviour. Dessler maintains that the film is, at its heart, a 'search for family and fulfilment', but it is also one that explores, as noted above, the deep

¹⁸ Dessler, 'The Gunman and the Gun', p. 132

structural themes of relationships, sacrifice and above all of being an outsider, the 'most terrifying thing of all.'¹⁹

On the surface *Yakuza Weapon* is a much simpler homage to, or possibly pastiche of, *ninkyō yakuza-eiga*. It opens with a voice-over prologue and intertitle explaining the *jingi* code and the virtues of *giri* and *ninjo*; however, it turns into a warning about the dangers of nationalism and militarisation. A young *yakuza*, Iwaki Shozo, returns to Japan to avenge the death of his father, the *oyabun* of the Iwaki-gumi. He is almost killed when he confronts the underboss, Kurawaki, who double-crossed and murdered his father, and wakes up in a secret government facility. His injuries have been treated and he has been turned into a kind of *yakuza* Robocop, complete with a military-grade machine-gun for an arm, and a rocket launcher replacing a leg. With the aid of government agents, Shozo and the loyal rump of his father's gang fight off repeated attacks from Kurawaki's soldiers—Kurawaki was also reconstructed following their earlier confrontation—with the climactic fight taking place in the shadows of a snow-capped Mount Fuji.

In addition to the well rehearsed themes of honour, duty and humanity, loyalty, betrayal and revenge, the film also alludes to other aspects of the deep structure, including the clash of traditional values and modernism. Following his conversion to a walking bionic weapon, Shozo and his girlfriend, Nayoko, argue about what this means in relation to the *jingi* code. He maintains that they 'shouldn't be tied to the past', to which Nayoko responds, 'The *yakuza* way is the way of guns and knives. And chivalry and loyalty are the order. But you've gone the wrong way.' Shozo rejects this but in the end discovers she is right: it is only the traditional virtues of honour and loyalty which have meaning and he ends up declaring, 'I'm my father's son after all'.

¹⁹ Desser, 'The Gunman and the Gun', p. 132

As well as their adherence to the narrative and thematic elements of the deep structure and their exploration of the shared myth of loyalty, these films also share the genre's function of social commentary, by which they offer an ideological perspective that partially denounces the dominant ideology. Even while examining the *yakuza* myth from an outsider's point of view, *Drunken Angel* nevertheless explores vertical and lateral relationships, a clash of values, and the sacrifice of the hero. It does so with a clear comment on contemporary Japanese society: Kurosawa is damning the militarism of the recent past (Okada's exploitation of Matsunaga while citing codes of honour; and Sakada's comment that human sacrifice has gone out of style), while warning of the fragility of a new society (the setting of a rotten and disease-ridden world; Sakada's own alcoholism; and his defence of democratic values by denying Okada access to his ex-mistress, telling him, '... feudal ideas are out of date [...] Women have the same rights as men').²⁰ In viewing *Drunken Angel* as a successful example of a new democratic sensibility on Japanese cinema due to the 'reorientation' of the *yakuza*, the US occupying authorities failed to notice Kurosawa's satirical commentary on the American cultural decadence that was pervading Japan, indicated by the gangster-style clothes worn by the *yakuza* and the American jazz being played in the sleazy bars and night clubs, the hangouts of prostitutes and low-lives.²¹ Schilling maintains that social commentary is at the heart of *Drunken Angel*:

... while defying or ignoring generic conventions, the film documents the postwar world, from its mental climate to its poverty and disease, with impassioned preciseness and inspired symbolism. The film's central image is the filthy pond

²⁰ However, Standish claims that the juxtaposition of Sanada's speech with images of Matsunaga's lover (the 'new woman', whose lifestyle contradicts what he is saying) would indicate to a Japanese audience the desirability of a traditional role for Japanese women. This is because the Japanese viewer comes from a tradition that values action over dialogue: *Myth and Masculinity in Japanese Cinema*, p. 6

²¹ Homer B. Pettey, 'Early Japanese Noir', in Pettey, H. B. and Barton Palmer, R., eds., *International Noir*, p. 103

that stands for what Japan has become—with gangsters being the social equivalent of mosquitoes.²²

More than sixty years after Japan's defeat, the dangers of nationalism are once again a threat. At the time of Prime Minister Abe's government, the first to seriously contemplate repealing Article 9 of the 1946 constitution (which deals with non-aggression), and heightened tensions with both China and South Korea over disputed territory leading to (at the time of writing) minor military posturing, *Yakuza Weapon* presents us with a government agency which uses 'Japan's superior human-weapon technology' to create a 'government certified *yakuza*', with the agents boasting that 'the best of Japan went into [Shozo].' The weaponisation of Shozo leads to an arms race, with Kurawaki becoming an 'atomic *yakuza*'. Their final confrontation ends with Kurawaki's nuclear warhead exploding and a mushroom cloud rising over Mount Fuji. Despite being a comic book fantasy, the message of the film is clear: a new nationalism coupled with increased militarisation has only one possible result, and it will be the same result as the last time Japan embarked on such a policy.

The shared gangster myth discussed here, that of a code based on loyalty but guaranteed by violence, is perhaps unique in cinematic myths in that it is self-perpetuating and crosses over between cinema and society. Not only were the narratives and themes of the 'classic' Hollywood pre-Code films based on newspaper stories of the time, making specific reference to the lives and deaths of real-life Prohibition-era gangsters, the *yakuza* films of the golden age used real occurrences from the Japanese underworld as source material, for example *Graveyard of Honour*, and employed real *yakuza* as consultants and even actors;²³ while of course *Goodfellas* is based on Nicholas Pileggi's *Wiseguy*.²⁴ But the source material is

²² Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, p. 314

²³ See, for example, Chris D., pp. 22-23

²⁴ Nicholas Pileggi, *Wiseguy: Life in a Mafia Family* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985)

not the only connection between the real and diegetic worlds: Tony Soprano and his capos' constant reference to and quoting from *The Godfather* finds echoes in the real underworld, with Mafiosi caught on FBI surveillance tapes speculating whether they are the inspiration for any of the characters in *The Sopranos*;²⁵ and tell-all books recalling how, like Tony and the gang, real-life gangsters look on *The Godfather* as the defining example of idealised gang lifestyle—something with which the fictional wiseguys in *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* would concur. The crossover even traverses the two traditions, from American cinema to the streets of Tokyo and Osaka, where low-level *yakuza* in the 1980s and 90s often sported permed hair in tight 'punch curls' in homage to James Caan's Sonny Corleone.

Critique and final thoughts

In order to conclude the present analysis, it is necessary to consider in summary a number of the key questions it has addressed. It can be argued that it is unsurprising that a common mythic structure has been proposed given the theories of Propp and Lévi-Strauss which hypothesise that such structures are universal and cross-cultural. Also, while the films might well share narrative styles and similar anti-hero-as-outsider story lines, the plots of the stories refer to very different sorts of social charters, leaving one to wonder if we are dealing with the same core ideology at all. To put it another way: the protagonists' characterisations may share some similarities; and the journeys towards death may bear some superficial resemblances (outsiders join the gang, are betrayed, seek vengeance and are killed), but their end messages appear to be very different. In Japan, the death of someone who has acted honourably, even if illegally, is noble but (until the *Godfather* films) this does not seem to be a shared theme with the Hollywood movies where the bad guy has to die for what he has done. It might be said that the shared myth of these two genres is that acting outside the law will end in death in the long

²⁵ Walker, pp. 382 and 402

run, even though there may be rewards in terms of upward mobility, wealth and some sort of status in the short term.

There are several different points here: the focus on the structure and its universality in accordance with Propp and Lévi-Strauss; the clear differences between the traditions that go beyond the superficial generic differences already discussed; and the question of ideology and whether there is a single ideology which can be said to apply to both traditions. These points lead us cumulatively to the key question: is the proposed myth itself valid?

Let us start with the first point—that the claim that there is a single structure linking the traditions is unsurprising given the study's adoption of Proppian analysis and the ideas of Lévi-Strauss. Firstly, I think it important to reiterate that the deep structure proposed in this study is not, unlike universal structure proposed by Propp based his analysis of folk tales, solely narrative in nature; it is also deeply concerned with shared themes and, as will be discussed in detail below, ideology. However, the shared elements of narrative structure—which I think of as far from superficial, but instead appear to be illuminating considering the clear differences in the cultural context within which the films were produced—are based on observations made following close textual examination and the proposition of a set of narrative functions for the pre-Code Hollywood cycle which were then mapped onto the 'golden age' *yakuza* films. That these patterns can also be seen in hybrid films as well as more recent American and Japanese gangster films demonstrates, I contend, their validity. Also important to reiterate, I believe, is the extent to which this analysis follows the models used by Propp and Lévi-Strauss. Rather than recreating their approaches and conducting the analysis on those terms, this study has used them as starting points. Indeed, in many ways this study disputes some of their practices and conclusions and agrees with Wright that Lévi-Strauss's focus on what characters mean at the expense of what they do is faulty inasmuch as it omits a detailed analysis of *narrative*, which was, as indicated above, the first step of this study (see Chapter 1, note 53).

Furthermore, this study has never sought to uncover a universal structure for *all* gangster films, no matter where or when they have been made—its purpose has always been to discover what connections there are between the various American and Japanese traditions; something, I feel, it has been able to do. Again, it has sided with Wright in this point by disputing some of Propp's theses, especially his contentions that functions always appear in a set order, and that all (fairy) tales are of one type in their structure (see Chapter 1, note 105). It is clear, as Wright shows with the Western, that the order of functions is not set and also that there are variation narratives within genres. This study has adopted a narrow definition of what constitutes a gangster film—that is, films that are concerned almost exclusively with the activity of the gangster-hero—which has allowed me to exclude films that focus on the efforts of the legal establishment to defeat the gangster and control gangsterism, and those in which the underworld forms a backdrop to the narrative, rather than provide its protagonist. These are examples of variation narratives within a wider gangster genre, but what I am concerned with here is what could be defined as the 'classic' narrative of the gangster him- (or her-) self, and I feel it safe to assume that any structural analysis of the different variation narratives would result in variations of the narrative functions as well as the deep structure proposed here.

The second point concerns the importance of clarifying differences between the traditions that go beyond the surface generic distinctions already discussed. It is certainly true that there is a major divergence in the traditions' placement of the gangster-hero within their cultures. In America, he is removed from mainstream society because of his immigrant background and/or ethnicity, and he is punished for his temerity in trying to escape the economic and social constraints of his background to achieve something akin to the American Dream through transgressive behaviour and his rejection of mainstream societal norms. On the other hand, the *yakuza* hero may act illegally but also acts honourably by representing and

defending cultural traditions (at least until we get to *Graveyard of Honour*), and so dies a noble death. In many ways, the roles of the American gangster / gangsta and the Japanese *yakuza* are both parallel and reversed: both are bound up in the transitional conflict of tradition and modernity, but while the *yakuza* hero defends notions of cultural tradition against the encroachment of modernism in the form of (both domestic and internationally influenced) corporate capitalism, the American gangster / gangsta takes corporate capitalism to its logical conclusion in an attempt to create a new world for himself while rejecting the status quo (and in the case of the immigrant gangster, the Old World). Both figures are doomed, as the establishment they are fighting against is too powerful: in America, even though the gangster-hero is complicit in his own downfall, a discriminatory establishment would never allow the Other to succeed using extreme capitalist methods (while at the same time celebrating the equally morally questionable methods of 'legitimate' business organisations); whereas in Japan the political, bureaucratic and business elite has a vested interest in the march towards modernity (while creating and perpetuating a national identity based on false notions of traditional national and ethnic exceptionalism—see Chapter 5, note 78). When discussing capitalism in Japan and its relationship with colonialism, nationalism and globalisation, Cazdyn cites those who argue that it is somehow unique—that it is distinct from and cannot be compared with capitalism in the 'West'—a position he calls 'radical discontinuity' and which he contrasts with 'radical continuity':

If the former illustrates a reductive synchronic analysis (we cannot compare what happened before the 1970s with what happened after) or what we may call a reductive syntopic analysis (we cannot compare what happened in Japan with what happened in the West), the latter illustrates reductive diachronic or diatopic analysis (when comparing, all we see are straight continuities across time and space). Of course, we can nuance these positions by recognizing the qualitative differences of different historical moments and geographical places while retaining the similarities they share.²⁶

²⁶ Cazdyn, p. 37

This is very much the position of this study, which recognises the differences between the American gangster film traditions and those of Japan, while exploring and highlighting the similarities they share. So while there are clearly identifiable differences between the characterisations and position of the hero, I continue to assert that overall the argument for a common deep structure in terms of the films' relationship with the issue of tradition and modernity remains compelling.

The question of whether there is a single ideology that applies to all the traditions discussed in this study can, I think, be discussed in terms of myth. As noted earlier, Martinez questions the validity of separating ideology and myth (see Chapter 1, note 78). Starting with the observation that any text—novel, film—can attract multiple readings and interpretations, she argues that this negates the view that a particular film, for example, only represents and supports the dominant ideology. If there are multiple readings, surely a film's ideology can also be interpreted in different ways, either supporting or denouncing the dominant culture. If this is true, she asks, how can films or other media be seen to do both at the same time? Her answer is to offer a definition of ideology in terms of myth. Both myth and ideology admit the existence of another reality. In the case of myth, this Other is represented by the allegorical use of the supernatural or nature; in the case of ideology, the very fact that a dominant ideology needs to be reinforced through school textbooks, for example, automatically presumes that there are other, competing ideologies. Martinez contends that these alternative ideologies are not altogether separate but overlap, just as the worlds of the myth overlap with our own. The problem for ideologies is that the Other can not only become demonised, but can also become romanticised and therefore an object of desire, thus subverting the dominant ideology. Martinez argues:

By this inclusion of the Other through implication, dominant ideologies do not *create* myths so much as *become* myths. They end up by representing the dominant "reality" as somehow alien, alternative, dreamlike, a potential of what

life *might* be like; while somewhere out there, is another place where things are very different indeed. Thus positing that ideology is myth allows us to conceive of ideology as subjective and malleable in a way that other ways of defining it are not.²⁷ (original emphasis)

In the case of the films examined in this study, there is clearly a link between ideology and myth in that ideology is an integral *part* of the myth. But is ideology itself subjective and mythic? Of course ideologies can be interpreted in different ways, as can the ideological content of any film or other piece of art—see the various arguments about the Hollywood gangster film's support or otherwise of the status quo. And yes, ideologies are malleable and can be subverted; however, this surely constitutes part of the history and evolution of any society. But this does not answer the question of whether ideology and myth are one and the same thing. There are clear connections—perhaps ones that are much closer than generally recognised—but if my original definition of myth is accurate, myths teach us about our world through allegorical stories, and many, as Martinez recognises, deal with origins; whereas ideologies attempt to describe and more importantly shape the world as it is now and how it will be in the future.

Despite this, the close connection between myth and ideology can still be utilised. As we saw earlier, myths are sited in times of transition (see Chapter 1, note 50), in this case the transition that is emphasised by the tension between tradition and modernity. This transition necessarily locates the films at a moment of crisis, a time of 'emergency and emergence, destruction and reconstruction, disorganisation, change and repetition, and contingency and necessity'.²⁸ However, not only are these films *located in* times of crisis, they *stem from*—that is they were produced during—times of crisis as well. As we have seen, the pre-Code Hollywood gangster films may have come out of Prohibition but were made in the early years

²⁷ Martinez, *Remaking Kurosawa*, p. 10

²⁸ Cazdyn, p. 38

of the Great Depression, while the social dislocation and economic and political upheaval of post-war Japan had culminated, by the mid-1960s, with the highly controversial debates around the so-called 'Americanisation' of Japan, and was swiftly followed by the 1973 oil crisis which coincided with the maturation of the *jitsuroku* cycle of films. Likewise, the newsreel images of the Watts riots of 1965 over the opening credits of *Menace II Society* and the radio news reports of the ever-widening wealth gap under Reagan at the beginning of *New Jack City* provide backdrops to the urban African-American crisis of gangs, drugs and a racist establishment at the time of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992. Cazdyn argues that crisis is 'wrapped up in the very logic of capitalist and cinematic development [... which] is not to say that capitalist crises will immediately be reflected in crises of film forms; rather, film forms must always be expanding'.²⁹ The almost contemporaneous coincidence of the development of new forms of gangster films in both the US and Japan with crises in the capitalist system shows both an immediate cinematic response to the economic crisis, notwithstanding Cazdyn's implication of a delay, and also a seemingly inextricable link between the gangster film and financial emergency in which the films appear as (albeit oblique) critiques of a flawed capitalist system. This critique is the 'progressive' element of the ideology of these films and when put together with the 'regressive' attitudes to women place them, as argued above, in Comolli and Narboni's category (e). As we have seen, the films are ideologically ambiguous or, to put it another way, malleable.

So what of the proposed myth shared by American and Japanese gangster films—does it merely constitute a warning that acting outside the law leads to death, notwithstanding some initial short term gain in wealth and status; or can a more nuanced myth be identified? The shared myth I am proposing is manifested through the elements of a deep structure that is

²⁹ Cazdyn, p. 39

common to the American and Japanese cinematic gangster traditions as well as the hybrid films we have examined. I have argued throughout this study, and reiterated over the past few pages, that this deep structure encompasses elements of narrative (including the gangster-hero's position as the Other or the outsider, his vertical and lateral relationships, and his exit though death or exile); the transitional theme of the conflict between tradition and modernity; and an ambiguous ideology which has both progressive and regressive components. Both the transitional theme and the ideology link this deep structure to myth, as discussed, and the narrative elements provide a framework through which we can comprehend the myth. The myth is not, I believe, an origin story but one that concerns behaviour—how we interact with others in our society. It is not as simple as 'be good or die', but instead, as argued above, centres on the notion of Code or, to put it another way, social behaviour. It is not a myth about Law as a human (or divine) construct—it does not demand that we blindly acquiesce to laws handed down to us; rather it addresses the need for cooperation, compassion and truth—for 'loyalty'—if society is to be successful. In the films, the (gang) society breaks down and the gangster hero dies or is exiled because loyalty is not maintained—a message, I would argue, of absolute clarity.

This study has in its early stages identified two different types of myth—the primitive myth in which culture is mapped onto nature and/or the supernatural, and the modern historical myth, in which the present is mapped onto the past. Neither of these apply to the myth proposed here; instead I suggest it is a 'social' myth, in which our society is mapped onto the gang society.

The proposal of a common deep structure between American and Japanese gangster films and a shared myth raises one further question: if the hypothesis posed here is true, then why do two traditions which have developed from very different cultural contexts have so much in common on a deep level? Is it simply because the Japanese filmmakers of the 'golden

age' and beyond had seen and were influenced by the 'classic' Hollywood films? We know that the 1930's Hollywood films were released contemporaneously in Japan and while they would have been banned along with all American films during the Second World War, they were available again after the war through cinema exhibition and later on television.³⁰ The available evidence on this point is inconclusive. The sample interviews I have accessed show that there is no explicit indication that Japanese filmmakers cited in this study were specifically influenced by the 'classic' Hollywood gangster films. Fukasaku talks of the effect of American and European films on his work, but this is on a level of style rather than narrative, themes or ideology. When he mentions particular American gangster films, he does not talk of the films of the 1930s but those of the New Hollywood, which he calls 'flamboyant' and 'meant more to entertain'. Instead he feels that 'interesting' gangster films (he cites Japanese and French films) make the audience 'of ordinary people [...] somehow relate to the characters in the film. You have to find a common human thread.'³¹ Likewise, while Ishii freely admits that *A Man from Abashiri Prison* is based on Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958), he denies a Hollywood influence in any of his other films, other than wanting to make a Japanese remake of *Once Upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone, 1984).³² Naturally, the hybrid films discussed in Chapter 5 knowingly reference narrative and thematic elements of the two traditions and in doing so, as we have seen, conform with the deep structure and contribute to the shared myth. To a degree, then, one can argue that American and Japanese traditions developed independently. As a result the common deep structure works at a primary level that transcends the specific national 'readings' of the genre.

³⁰ For example, *The Public Enemy* was released in April and November 1931 in the US and Japan respectively, while the release dates for *Scarface* were April 1932 in the US and March 1933 in Japan.

³¹ See, for example Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, pp. 47 and 50, and Chris D., pp. 24 and 29

³² Schilling, *The Yakuza Movie Book*, pp. 56-68.

This, perhaps, takes us back to Schatz's 'genres of order' (see Chapter 1, note 86) but once again a problem occurs due to his exclusive focus on Hollywood. If we are to discover why gangster films from different traditions share so much, I believe that firstly there needs to be further examination of other cinematic gangster traditions to see whether or not the deep structure and myth applies to, for example, British, French and Hong Kong gangster films. To do so, it would need to be ascertained whether the focus on the outsider, vertical and lateral relationships, tradition and modernity, sacrifice and death, and the ideological function of social commentary are also applicable to French gangster films like *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) or the *Mesrine* films (Jean-François Richet, 2008 and 2009). We would need to discover if British films, including *Brighton Rock* (John Boulting, 1947; Rowan Joffe, 2011), *Get Carter* (Mike Hodges, 1971) and *The Long Good Friday* (John MacKenzie, 1980) centre around a code of loyalty, and whether the deep structure and myth is also true for *Mon gaan dou / Infernal Affairs* (Lau Wai-Keugn and Alan Mak, 2004) and other films from Hong Kong and Taiwan. These, however, are questions for another study and so they must remain, at least for now, unanswered.

We are, though, no nearer to an answer to the question of *why* the two traditions discussed in this study share a common deep structure and myth. It is possible to speculate that criminality has been common to most, if not all, cultures and societies, and that just as mainstream society develops hierarchies and codes of behaviour which at a deep level share many characteristics, for example the sanctity of human life and a duty to protect the society from external and internal threat, so too does the underworld develop its own structures and codes, which likewise have a certain degree of commonality. It may also be possible to argue that the gangster film's deep structure and myth stem from a universal admiration of those who live life by their own rules. The viewer does not do this, and instead projects this desire on

to the cinematic gangster hero. However, it is not in the scope of this study to address such sociological questions.

The Introduction of this study ended with a question posed by Thomas Schatz of whether or not a deep structure for the Hollywood gangster genre exists. If it does, do changes within the genre represent cosmetic changes in its surface structure or do they reflect substantial changes in the deep structure (see Chapter 1, note 124)? I maintain, based on the evidence presented above, that a deep structure can be identified and, as its name and academic derivation implies, it is more-or-less constant, so the evolution in any genre would necessarily be at the level of the surface structure. However, this study has taken Schatz's reflection a considerable stage further by questioning the very premise on which it was made: that the deep structure applies to Hollywood gangster films in isolation from other national traditions. It has done so by examining the claim made by a number of other commentators that the gangster films of Hollywood and Japanese *yakuza* films have little or nothing in common. It has answered this charge by showing that not only is there a connection at the level of both form (common narrative and thematic elements) and function (an ambiguous ideology incorporating a progressive commentary on society alongside regressive elements, including the treatment of women), but that these elements form the basis of a common deep structure. Indeed, it goes on to argue that at an even deeper level American and Japanese gangster films share a modern social myth revolving around the notion of code, the central tenet of which is the concept of loyalty.

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- Hijosen no onna / Dagnet Girl*, dir. by Ozu Yasujiro (Shochiku, 1933)
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- Kumo nagaruru hateni / Beyond the Clouds*, dir. by Ieki Miyoji (Shin-Toho, 1953)
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- Lady Killer*, dir. by Roy Del Ruth (Warner Bros., 1933)
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- L'ennemi public n°1 / Mesrine Part 2: Public Enemy Number 1*, dir. by Jean-François Richet (Pathé, 2009)
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- Little Caesar*, dir. by Mervyn LeRoy (Warner Bros., 1930)
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- M*, dir. by Fritz Lang (Nero-Film AG, 1931)
- Manhattan Melodrama*, dir. by W. S. Van Dyke (MGM, 1934)
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- Menace II Society*, dir. by Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes (as the Hughes Brothers) (New Line Cinema, 1993)
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- The Racket*, dir. by Lewis Milestone (The Caddo Company, 1928)
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- Shao Lin yu Wu Dang / Shaolin and Wu Tang*, dir. by Chia-Hui Lui (Hing Fat Film Company, 1983)
- Shane*, dir. by George Stevens (Paramount, 1953)
- Shijie / The World*, dir. by Zhangke Jia (Office Kitano, 2004)

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- Short Cuts*, dir. by Robert Altman (Fine Line Features, 1993)
- Shurayukihime / Lady Snowblood*, dir. by Fujita Toshiya (Toho, 1973)
- Sleepless in Seattle*, dir. by Nora Ephron (TriStar Pictures, 1993)
- Smart Money*, dir. by Alfred E. Green (Warner Bros., 1931)
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- The Yakuza*, dir. by Sydney Pollack (Warner Bros., 1975)
- Yoidore tenshi / Drunken Angel*, dir. by Kurosawa Akira (Toho, 1948)
- Young Mr. Lincoln*, dir. by John Ford (Twentieth Century Fox, 1939)
- Zatoichi*, dir. by Kitano Takeshi (Shochiku, Office Kitano, 2003)