

**BRITISH CRIME CINEMA**  
EDITED BY STEVE CHIBNALL  
& ROBERT MURPHY PG

BRITISH POPULAR CINEMA **R**



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## British Crime Cinema

The crime film is one of British cinema's most important genres, with hundreds of films produced in the last few decades. British underworld films evoke a compelling atmosphere of tough machismo in seedy low-life locales. Even unpretentious B films contain implicit critiques of social conditions and the hard-boiled surfaces of thrillers like *Hell is a City* and *They Made Me a Fugitive* offer a welcome alternative to the cosiness of most British films of their era. Yet, while American noir and gangster pictures are revered as important cultural documents, their British cousins have been given scant consideration. Why has the history of the British crime film been relegated to an underworld below the critical gaze?

*British Crime Cinema* is the first substantial study of this neglected genre. Bringing together original work from some of the leading writers on British popular film, and including interviews with key directors Mike Hodges (*Get Carter*) and Donald Cammel (*Performance*), the book follows the progress of the crime film from its first flourishing during black market Britain of the 1940s, through to the resurgence of the gangster cult in the late sixties, and to more recent examples such as *The Long Good Friday*, *Shallow Grave*, and *Face*.

The contributors trace the influence of the Hollywood gangster picture on its British counterpart, and assess the crime film's relationship to the British New Wave. They also explore how many underworld films questioned contemporary social attitudes, subverted feminine stereotypes, represented particular versions of masculinity, and provided an insight into the shifting gender relations of post-war Britain.

**Steve Chibnall** is Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at De Montfort University, Leicester. **Robert Murphy** is Senior Research Fellow at De Montfort University.

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# British Crime Cinema

Edited by Steve Chibnall and  
Robert Murphy



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# 1

## Parole overdue

### Releasing the British crime film into the critical community

*Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy*

Part of what's good about *The Long Good Friday*, you really did buy that these guys were villains. In our case, you didn't have any choice, because our guys *are* villains

(Guy Richie, director of *Lock, Stock & Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), interviewed by Tom Charity, *Time Out*, 12–19 August 1998)

The crime genre is likely to assume a prominence in discussion of the national cinemas of the United States, Japan and France. Why is it, then, that it plays little or no part in critics' discussions of British cinema? Denis Gifford classifies a monumental 1,336 (26 per cent) of British films released between 1930 and 1983 as crime films, but they have been relegated to an underworld beneath the critical gaze.<sup>1</sup> The coterie of writers who, in the 1940s, did so much to codify the values of 'quality' British cinema (Ellis 1996) largely dismissed indigenous attempts at making crime films as both imitative of American originals and in poor taste. Their views reinforced an ideology of censorship that approached any sordid subject matter with suspicion and viewed an emphasis on criminality as essentially un-British. The felonious crime genre was rigorously excluded from the canon of social realist cinema and imprisoned in the Gulag Britannia reserved for unrespectable elements of British film culture. As Charles Barr (1986:14) has noted, this incarceration received official sanction in 1948 when Harold Wilson, as President of the Board of Trade, condemned 'gangster, sadistic and psychological films', and called for 'more films which genuinely show our way of life'. Ever since, crime films have been the British genre that 'dare not speak its name', largely ignored even in the critical literature on the social problem film (Hill 1986; Landy 1991).

While the American gangster movie and film noir have been feted by scholars, their recalcitrant British brethren have continued to languish unconsidered and unseen by all but a handful of insomniac television viewers. The films have been overlooked in the rush to liberate other British genre offerings for critical re-evaluation. The academic interest heralded by Julian Petley's (1986) call for volunteers to explore the 'lost continent' of British non-realist film may have sent cultural cartographers rushing towards Hammer horrors and Gainsborough costumers, but it passed the crime film by. Lacking the colour and exoticism of the Hammer and Gainsborough

products, the black and white B-movie world of the crime drama remained lost in a limbo between half-baked realism and lukewarm melodrama. Its claims to naturalism were dismissed, on the one hand by a Marxist orthodoxy, which saw no redeeming political merit in tales of individualist adventurism, and on the other by liberal and conservative critics who preferred not to accept an interest in crime as a feature of the national character. For a sentimental student of British identity like Jeffrey Richards (1998), crime represents a hedonistic and aggressive individualism which stands in opposition to the nation's dominant values of duty, service, thrift, restraint, gentleness and concern for others. He sees the crime drama as a carrier of an 'alternative national image' and its popularity as a cause for regret, a symptom of an age of cultural decline in which 'there has come to be greater interest in, and sympathy with, criminals than victims' (ibid.: 21).

Nor have British crime films garnered much sympathy from feminist critics who tend to avoid their apparently patriarchal values, unsavoury portrayals of women and celebrations of unreconstructed masculinity. Only among the cinephiles of the 'lads' press do home-grown underworld dramas find much favour and here a few classics of the genre have been elevated to an exalted status. Mike Hodges' *Get Carter* (1971)<sup>2</sup> is revered as the ultimate expression of 1970s masculine cool, its hard-boiled script supplying a nostalgic litany of lines for a generation of post-feminist men. And John Mackenzie's *The Long Good Friday* (1981) is lauded, not as a diverting gangster fantasy, but as 'a frighteningly realistic film...real gangsters, real London, real violence' (*Empire*, November 1997). These films are not considered merely the pick of a second-class and derivative genre, but as great moments in British cinema. The staff at *Empire* magazine voted Mackenzie's film 'the finest British movie ever made' (ibid.). In Jack Carter's cold machismo and Harold Shand's blustering and beleaguered patriarchy, the male viewer finds co-ordinates to map the cultural upheavals created by women's aspirations and by economic change. In an age when, as Richards (1998:25) puts it 'a third of young men under thirty have criminal records', the crime film ceases to be vicarious escapism and becomes, instead, a means to understanding the world.

For extra-mural cinephiles, then, the British crime film has already been rehabilitated into society. It is now time that academic critics at least granted it parole. It has, after all, been doing time longer than Reggie Kray. Once it is out in the open, we will be able to explore the tensions it exhibits between realism and melodrama and see to what extent it is an important genre for investigating issues of class and gender. In exposing the flip side of workingclass respectability and male gentility, it may provide crucial insights into shifting social conditions and changing masculinities since the Second World War.

Our concern in this book is not with the crime genre in its entirety, but with that part of it that we might term 'underworld films'. Although outnumbered by the murder mysteries and espionage thrillers that are such a familiar part of British popular fiction, films in which the activities of professional criminals feature significantly or which are set in an underworld milieu constitute a substantial crime sub-genre, and one with strong claims to social relevance.<sup>3</sup> Grouping together such



Figure 1.1 *The Strange Affair* (1968): Hippy chick Susan George tempts policeman Michael York from the straight and narrow

Source: British Cinema and Television, Research Group archive, De Montfort University

films—*They Made Me a Fugitive* (Cavalcanti, 1947), *Brighton Rock* (John Boulting, 1947), *Noose* (Edmond T. Greville, 1948), *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950), *The Criminal* (Joseph Losey, 1960), *The Frightened City* (John Lemont, 1961), *The Small World of Sammy Lee* (Ken Hughes, 1963), *The Strange Affair* (David Greene, 1968) *Performance* (Donald Cammell and Nic Roeg, 1970), *Get Carter*, *The Long Good Friday*, *Stormy Monday* (Mike Figgis, 1987), *Face* (Antonia Bird, 1997)—might not produce a genre with the coherence of the Hollywood gangster film, but distinctive patterns can be traced and common characteristics discerned.

Thematically British underworld films have different emphases from their American cousins. They are rarely about the rise and fall of a gangster: *Joe Macbeth* (Ken Hughes, 1955) fits the template but it is entirely set in America. *Villain* (Michael Tuchner, 1971), with its Ronnie Kray-like protagonist, comes close but it digresses into bungled robbery, sexual aberration and political corruption. *McVicar* (Tom Clegg, 1980) and *A Sense of Freedom* (John Mackenzie, 1981) although based around the lives of real criminals, are essentially prison dramas, and *The Krays* (Peter Medak, 1990) is more of a family melodrama than a gangster film. *The Criminal* and *He Who Rides a Tiger* (Charles Crichton, 1965) which look dispassionately at



the lives of their underworld professionals and refrain from moralising are more authentic and significant. Very few films are about the police infiltrating a gang (the two interesting exceptions are *Offbeat* (Cliff Owen, 1961) and *i.d.* (Philip Davis, 1995). And only in *The Informers* (Ken Annakin, 1963) and *The Strange Affair* is police corruption an important element—though the figure of the corrupt policeman as chief villain (not uncommon in television crime series) made its cinema debut in *Face*.

From *Noose* to *The Long Good Friday*, gang bosses see their criminal empires crumble just when they seem to be at their most successful. Narcy in *They Made Me a Fugitive* and Kinnear in *Get Carter* are brought down, too, but the emphasis is less on them than on the avengers who destroy them, and these films can be seen as prime examples of revenge films where a wronged man, denied access to the law, pursues his own path of justice. John Guillermin's *Never Let Go* (1960) and Michael Apted's *The Squeeze* (1977)—where down-at-heel heroes regain their self-respect by taking on boastful, complacent gangsters—can be seen as bridges between the two types of film. Their villains—Peter Sellers in *Never Let Go*, Stephen Boyd in *The Squeeze*—are smaller-scale operators than the underworld bosses of *Noose* and *The Long Good Friday*, but they are considerably nastier.

Films that focus on actual robberies are surprisingly rare among A features. *A Prize of Arms* (Cliff Owen, 1962) and *Robbery* (Peter Yates, 1967) concentrate on the planning and execution of a robbery (as does their comic variant, *The Italian Job*, Peter Collinson, 1969). But more typical are films like *The Good Die Young* (Lewis Gilbert, 1954), *Payroll* (Sidney Hayers, 1962) and *Face*, which deal more with the tensions and conflict within the gang before and after the robbery.

Only a handful of British underworld films centre upon a tough criminal hero. Shortie Matthews in *They Drive by Night* (Arthur Woods, 1938) has just come out of gaol but he is a small-time crook and innocent of the murder he is accused of. Tom Yately in *Hell Drivers* (Cy Endfield, 1957) is more formidable but he too is determined to go straight and only resorts to violence when provoked. Of the spiv movies of the forties, only in *Brighton Rock* and *Night and the City* is the spiv the central figure and they are both pathetic, doomed figures. Deserters and disgruntled ex-serviceman, who could plausibly involve themselves in the underworld without becoming part of it, were more acceptable protagonists to British film-makers chary of showing too much sympathy for the criminal. When active criminals begin to emerge as protagonists in the early 1960s, they are shown either as men living on the edge who act with intelligence and honour in the harsh world they are trapped within—Johnny Bannion in *The Criminal* and Peter Rayston in *He Who Rides a Tiger*—or troubled gang bosses like Vic Dakin in *Villain* and Harold Shand in *The Long Good Friday* coping badly with the problems of power and responsibility. Michael Caine's Jack Carter is typically ruthless and remorseless but like all such unreformable characters, death awaits him at the end of the film. Stacy Keach in *The Squeeze* (Michael Apted, 1977), Terence Stamp in *The Hit* (Stephen Frears, 1984), even Sean Bean in *Stormy Monday*, are little men fighting against the odds. Robert Carlyle's Ray in *Face*, with his distinguished record in the class struggle, acts

like a contemporary substitute for the ex-serviceman sucked by his disillusion into the underworld.

In the 1930s, strict censorship combined with literary and theatrical traditions of melodrama to move British crime films towards the macabre and the fantastic. Films like *The Terror* (Richard Bird, 1938) and *Dark Eyes of London* (Walter Summers, 1939) borrowed visual techniques from German Expressionism, and *They Drive by Night*, with its rainy roads, glittering dance halls, dismal lodgings and degenerate murderer seems to prefigure American film noir. In the late 1940s, the threatening shadows and asymmetrical framing of *They Made Me a Fugitive*, *Brighton Rock*, *Noose* and *Night and the City* mark them as films noir, though thematically they are quite different from their American counterparts. *Noose* has a female protagonist (Carole Landis) and in *Brighton Rock*, Pinkie's adversary, the loud, blowsy, cheerful Ida, with her indelible sense of right and wrong, is the opposite of a *femme fatale*. *They Made Me a Fugitive* and *Night and the City* have the doom-laden atmosphere of film noir, but as in Carol Reed's more international *The Third Man* (1949), women are suffering victims and steadfast helpers rather than temptresses, and it is the hero's own weakness and naiveté which leads him into trouble.

'Noirish' tendencies linger on in the 1950s and are still apparent in *The Challenge* (John Gilling, 1960), *Never Let Go* (John Guillermin, 1960) and the prison sequences of *The Criminal*; but they are balanced by New Wave trends towards location shooting. With the switch to colour after 1965 a sort of dirty realism emerges in films like *The Strange Affair*, *Get Carter*, *Villain*, *The Squeeze* and the *Sweeney* spin-offs. Their location shooting and lack of stylisation adds to their feel of representing a seedy, run-down Britain. *The Long Good Friday* is much brighter and although its glossy New London is exposed as a sham, there is still a feeling of optimism and dynamism about the film. Subsequent British crime films—such as *Stormy Monday* and *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1995)—have reverted to a more stylised, noirish look associated with contemporary cinema's fusion of genre and art film.

Gangster films grew out of the American experience of violent struggles for power among gangsters grown rich supplying the public with alcohol during the Prohibition era. Their exploits very quickly found their way into novels and films. British gangsters kept a lower profile and provided less scope for mythology. Their main source of income came from protection racketeering on the racecourses and the illegal street-betting industry and they tended to be shadowy figures who kept well away from the limelight. In contrast to the spectacular gun battles American gangsters seemed to enjoy, internecine conflicts in Britain were settled with chivs (taped-down razors) and broken bottles. Nemesis for a British gangster was more likely to come in the form of a bottle smashed over his head in a pub toilet than a machine gun attack on his luxury mansion. British gangsters operated with a casual brutality—fifties gang leader Billy Hill (1955:155) cheerfully admits to torturing lesser criminals to make them reveal their secrets—and there are hints of such cruelty in *They Made Me a Fugitive*, *Brighton Rock*, *Noose* and *Night and the City*.



Figure 1.2 Noir tendencies: Jayne Mansfield as the femme fatale and Anthony Quayle as the fall guy in *The Challenge* (1960)

Source: British Cinema and Television, Research Group archive, De Montfort University

But in terms of iconography their style and methods were less easy to adapt for the cinema than the guns, cars and high death counts of American gangsters.

Ironically the underworld itself was an area particularly susceptible to Hollywood influences. A local reporter investigating 'Islington's most notorious café' in 1933 found that: 'Nearly every girl was acting a "hard-boiled Kate" role. Nearly every youth with a very long overcoat and a black hat on the rear of his head, was to himself a "Chicago nut"' (quoted in Napper 1997: 39). Up and coming thirties gangsters like Jack Spot, Billy Hill and Albert Dimes looked to Hollywood films for style guidance and wore smart suits and hats rather than the mufflers and caps worn by gypsy wide boys like Arthur Skurry and older gang bosses like Alf White and Darby Sabini. Eddie Raimo, chivman for Alf White's Kings Cross mob wore black suits and white ties in imitation of George Raft.

British crime films go back to the early days of cinema (the two films about Sheffield burglar Charles Peace in 1905, for example), but British filmmakers attracted to the idea of making gangster films found their task an uphill struggle. As James Robertson shows in [Chapter 2](#), the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC)'s

‘chief fear was that the American gangster dramas would spawn equivalents set in Britain’ (p. 16, this volume) and the censors did everything in their power to stop it. When film-makers turned to more authentic representations of the underworld in Britain, they faced hostile objections to the use of bad language and the depiction of brutality.

The spiv cycle of the late 1940s can be seen as the first surge of an indigenous British underworld genre. In [Chapter 3](#), Tim Pulleine cites three important influences: Neo-realism, film noir and changes within the English underworld. The influence not only of Italian Neo-realism but of a wider realism apparent in British war-time cinema and American documentary-influenced expose films, made the serious study of contemporary society a legitimate subject for mainstream feature films. The underworld was not an aspect of British society it was thought healthy for film-makers to dwell upon, but in the 1940s, it had expanded rapidly as war-time disruption increased demand for prostitutes and gambling, and rationing (which continued long after the war was over) and fostered the growth of a black market. Spivs and racketeers entered the public consciousness and inevitably began to appear in films and novels.

Critics argued about whether Robert Hamer’s ability to capture realistic detail balanced out the sordid aspects of *It Always Rains on Sunday’s* (1947) low-life milieu, and the mixture of realism and expressionism in *They Made Me a Fugitive* puzzled and alienated them. Arthur Vesselo in *Sight and Sound* (1947:120), admitted that it was ‘horrifyingly well-made’ and that ‘the atmosphere of London’s underworld is all too plausibly conveyed’. But he criticised its director Alberto Cavalcanti—ex-head of the GPO Film Unit and architect of Ealing realism—for ‘morbid burrowings’ and discerned ‘a parade of frustrated violence, an inversion and disordering of moral values, a groping into the grimier recesses of the mind’. Dilys Powell doubly condemned *Night and the City*: not only was it ‘squalid and brutal’ but Jules Dassin took liberties with London’s geographic space, creating a ‘never-never city which does service in the cinema for any capital’ (*Sunday Times*, 18 June 1950). But sneers at *Night and the City’s* Americanisations were mild compared to the outraged reactions to *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (St John L. Clowes, 1948), released two years earlier, which even the *Monthly Film Bulletin* considered to be ‘the most sickening exhibition of brutality, perversion, sex and sadism ever to be shown on a cinema screen’ (1948:47, April). Brian McFarlane in [Chapter 4](#), investigating the furore around the film, discerns two main reasons for critical distaste. First, the relationship between heiress Miss Blandish and her kidnapper Slim Grisson, which disturbed critics by showing a middle-class woman having a sexual affair with a gangster and enjoying it. Second, the slavishness with which *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* models itself on an American gangster film. This was seen as particularly treacherous at a time when British cinema was struggling to maintain the national identity it appeared to have established during the war.

*No Orchids for Miss Blandish* and *Night and the City* were treated with such hostility because they were seen as Hollywood incursions. The spiv cycle had secure roots in the particular circumstances of post-war Britain—despite the fact that *They*

*Made Me a Fugitive* was backed by Warners' and William Hartnell and Bill Owen had been promoted as 'the British James Cagney' —and as Pulleine argues in [Chapter 3](#), *Night and the City* could be seen as an attempt by Hollywood to reclaim its own generic property from the threat of

appropriation by British cinema. By the early 1950s, the trends that had shaped the spiv movies had run their course. From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, the crime rate fell, the police force was built up to its pre-war strength and the underworld settled down as deserters were integrated back into society and full employment and the beginnings of affluence provided alternatives to a life of crime. No doubt the censorship scandal around *Miss Blandish* encouraged the BBFC to keep a tight rein on what was shown, but the dearth of major underworld films in the 1950s seems to have more to do with a studio-dominated insistence on family entertainment as John Davis consolidated his hold on the Rank empire, than a BBFC attempt to screw down the lid on film-makers eager to explore the world of crime.<sup>4</sup>

Robertson claims that, in the 1950s, 'the British film-maker's preoccupation with domestic organised racketeering all but disappeared' (p. 21, this volume). Certainly most of the best-known 1950s crime films—*The Lavender Hill Mob* (Charles Crichton, 1951), *The Ladykillers* (Alexander Mackendrick 1955), *The Long Arm* (Charles Frend, 1956) and *Gideon's Day* (John Ford, 1958)—are either whimsical comedies or celebrations of the Scotland Yard detective rather than serious explorations of the underworld. But Pulleine is not convinced, arguing that although in some ways British crime films re-embraced the status quo, tie-ups with American companies and the import of American stars made the films harder edged than their pre-war counter-parts.

Andrew Clay's filmography reveals that more crime films were released in the 1950s than in the previous and subsequent decade and if most of them are B films they still hold considerable thematic interest. The opening premise of Clay's [Chapter 5](#) on troubled masculinity in underworld films between 1946 and 1965 is that crime films used professional crime and men who became involved in it, 'to express men's contradictory experience of power' (p. 51). He sees two main problems being played out: first, the readjustment of ex-servicemen to peacetime society, explored in films ranging from morbid melodramas like *They Made Me a Fugitive* to black comedies like *The League of Gentlemen* (Basil Dearden, 1960); second, the problem of an unsureness by men about how to deal with powerful (and almost inevitably evil) women.

Clay investigates late 1940s films such as *They Made Me a Fugitive*, *Noose*, and *The Flamingo Affair* (Horace Shepherd, 1948), where ex-servicemen come up against black marketeers who have done well out of the war. But he also looks at 1950s films where ex-servicemen continue to find it difficult to come to terms with an increasingly comfortable and affluent society. *Soho Incident* (Vernon Sewell, 1956), for example, transforms Jim Bankley, the hero of *Wide Boys Never Work*, the 1930s novel, on which it is based, from a surly, lazy, criminally inclined Coventry car mechanic, into a brave-hearted Canadian airforceman with too many scruples to

thrive in the underworld. He survives, chastened by his experiences, to look forward to a life on the straight and narrow with a good woman. Typically, ex-servicemen seduced into criminal activity by bad women or a sense of adventure (as in *The Flamingo Affair* and *Soho Incident*) get a second chance. Where ex-servicemen team up to use their war-learned experience to commit crime, they pay a heavy price for it. The bands of criminal ex-servicemen in *The Good Die Young* and *A Prize of Arms* all die, as does the psychopathic Jack Havoc in *Tiger in the Smoke* (Roy Baker, 1956) and even the 'League of Gentlemen' looks set for a stint in gaol.

The crime film provided an arena for different types of masculine performance. In [Chapter 7](#), Andrew Spicer argues that one of the reasons why Britain found it difficult to emulate the American gangster film was that there was no British tradition of a tough-guy hero. Instead, British cinema had the gentleman, whose 'métier was restraint, moral authority and the preservation of the status quo' (p. 9). Spicer notes the appearance of tough guys in *Appointment With Crime* (John Harlow, 1946) and *No Way Back* (Stefan Osiecki, 1949), but he points out that the actors who starred in them—William Hartnell and Terence de Marney—became versatile character actors rather than consolidating a tough-guy persona. Trevor Howard's cynical ex-officer in *They Made Me a Fugitive* breaks the rules of society and becomes a criminal (as more innocently does Rex Harrison in *Escape*—Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1948) but he remains a gentleman and his desire to clear his name links back to earlier struggles for redemption by fallen gentlemen played by Ivor Novello in *Downhill* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1926) and John Clements in *The Four Feathers* (Zoltan Korda, 1938).

When established stars like Trevor Howard or John Mills demonstrated an ability to be tough and ventured into the underworld (as Mills did in *The Long Memory*—Robert Hamer, 1953), they did it as a brief holiday from being an officer or a gentleman. Throughout the 1950s, the British crime film relied on minor American stars to play tough guys until robust British actors such as Stanley Baker emerged to take on these roles. Baker, a working-class Welsh actor who found it difficult to fit into the middle-class mould required of British leading men, was cast by American exiles Cy Endfield and Joseph Losey as a sympathetic crook in *Hell Drivers* (1957) and *The Criminal*, but Spicer sees his most significant role as that of Inspector Martineau in *Hell is a City* (Val Guest, 1960), a hard-boiled, disrespectful policeman who can be seen as a progenitor of John Thaw's Inspector Regan in *The Sweeney*.

The status of post-war women and the worries this caused are also played out in crime films, where there is often a contrast between ambitious, materialistic women, whose relations with men are predatory and pecuniary, and loyal, altruistic women who are honest and faithful. In [Chapter 6](#), Viv Chadder examines four films—*Good Time Girl* (David Macdonald, 1948), *Yield to the Night* (J.Lee Thompson, 1956), *The Flesh is Weak* (Don Chaffey, 1957) and *Passport to Shame* (Alvin Rakoff, 1958)—which focus on women. Good-time girls, murderesses, prostitutes, fell outside the 'stereotype of nurturing, caring, femininity' (p. 71). When they became the subjects of films it led to interesting contradictions. In *Good Time Girl* Gwen Rawlings



Figure 1.3 A man, a woman and money: an iconic image. Derren Nesbitt shows Margaret Whiting the wages of sin in *The Informers* (1963)

Source: British Cinema and Television Research Group archive, De Montfort University

defies middle-class norms of femininity—putting pleasure before duty and responsibility—and she is made to suffer for it. But as she is vivacious and likeable and she is pushed along the road to self-destruction by the misguided efforts of an uncomprehending judicial and penal system, she gains our sympathy. *Yield to the Night* is ostensibly an earnest plea for the abolition of hanging but the casting of ‘Britain’s sex symbol’, Diana Dors, and J. Lee Thompson’s intrusive directorial style turn the film into a gripping melodrama. Similarly, *The Flesh is Weak* and *Passport to Shame* are fascinating because of the tension between their desire for journalistic authenticity and their temptation into melodramatic excess.

In [Chapter 8](#), the easy dismissal of the genre as escapist melodrama supplies the motivation for Steve Chibnall’s defence of the relevance of the crime film to British society in transition. The period in which English New Wave cinema emerged in a blaze of attention (1959–63) also saw the release of record numbers of crime films which quickly disappeared into obscurity. Chibnall argues that, in neglecting these films, critics and historians have over-looked fascinating representations of metropolitan society coping with its passage into the new era of the 1960s.

Although most B movies remained largely derivative of American formulae and iconography, feature films like *Hell is a City* opened up new possibilities for British verisimilitude with location shooting and a fresh honesty about place and underworld politics. Films like *Offbeat*, *The Criminal*, *Never Let Go*, *Piccadilly Third Stop* (Wolf Rilla, 1960), *The Informers* and *The Frightened City* document a host of changes in crime and policing occasioned, in part by legislation such as the Street Offences Act (1959) and the Betting and Gaming Act (1960). Beyond their realistic depictions of crime, however, there is a strong sense of anxiety in which fears about ‘cultural vulnerability, commercial reorganisation and moral deviation’ have been ‘displaced into genre cinema and refracted through its conventions’ (Chibnall, [Chapter 8](#), p. 108, this volume).

In [Chapter 7](#), Spicer sees the use of a ‘generic rather than “realistic” space’ in *Hell Drivers* as important in the creation of ‘a “frontier” world of gravel pits, chalk quarries, roadhouses and repair yards’ (p. 11). And in [Chapter 13](#), Charlotte Brunson argues that ‘we can discern a fluctuating but persistent, articulation of two kinds of space in the British crime film’ (p. 148, this volume). She traces the division between generic space borrowed from Hollywood with the local space of the English location in three films—*It Always Rains on Sunday*, *Night and the City* and *Stormy Monday*. In the narrative of *It Always Rains on Sunday*, the cosy East End community is threatened by the disruptive presence of convict-on-the-run Tommy Swann, but there is also a stylistic challenge to Ealing Studios’ realist ethos, particularly in the last part of the film where Tommy is chased and finally trapped in a railway marshalling yard. *Night and the City*, with its American director and stars, is inevitably more Hollywood orientated and Brunson explores ‘the way in which London is brought to the screen as both a recognisable real city and as a setting for a film noir. *Stormy Monday*, set in Newcastle during ‘America Week’, addresses the theme of overlapping British and American space directly. The American gangster, Cosmo (Tommy Lee Jones), is confounded in his attempt to buy up the Newcastle waterfront and the heroine played by Melanie Griffith renounces American glamour for English authenticity. But in a Newcastle ‘of retro-noir with Hopper colour and a jazz sound track’ (Brunson, [Chapter 13](#), p. 156, this volume), with a protagonist who reads Hemingway and wants to get back to Minnesota, this is only a very limited victory.

Brunson shows that the British underworld film is locked into a permanent struggle with the conventions of the Hollywood gangster genre. Even the period between 1959 and 1963, which might be seen as the heyday of the indigenous British underworld film, is riddled with American influences—Joseph Losey and Sam Wanamaker’s contribution to *The Criminal*, John Crawford’s improbably Mancunian—American villain in *Hell is a City*, the Cassavetes-influenced improvisatory style of *The Small World of Sammy Lee*. Nevertheless, a coherent and sophisticated genre was beginning to emerge when changes in cinema-programming killed the market for B films and destroyed the genre’s foundations. After 1965 it is difficult to find a black and white crime film and even a low-budget exploitation film like Pete Walker’s *Man of Violence* (1970) was made in colour as a main feature.



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