ORGANIZED CRIME

Edited by
Federico Varese

CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN
CRIMINOLOGY

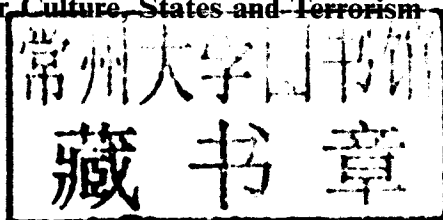ROUTLEDGE

ORGANIZED CRIME

Critical Concepts in Criminology

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

Part 8

POPULAR CULTURE

55

THE SECRET HISTORY OF JAPANESE CINEMA

The yakuza movies

Federico Varese

Abstract

This article explores the interplay among economic imperatives within the entertainment business, the mafia's role in the creation of its own media image, and the production of gangster films. Taking Japan as a case study, the paper shows that, when given the chance to influence the content of gangster movies, crime bosses have portrayed themselves as benevolent patriarchs and a positive force in society, rather the anti-heroes of classic American gangster movies. In Japan, such a choice had, however, the unintended consequence of a decline in audience interest and eventually led to the demise of studio yakuza movies. Ultimately, the paper shows that the mafia control over art can lead to the death of art – something that is bad for the mafia as well.

Introduction

On the night of January 31, 1985, 1,000 members of the Tokyo-based Inagawa-kai, the second-largest Japanese crime syndicate, attended a party in the town of Atami, in Shizuoka Prefecture. They were celebrating the release of a movie based on the life of the syndicate's boss. The two lead actors, later interviewed by police, were duly present at the party. When questioned about his link to the Inagawa-kai boss, one actor described the relationship as "that of a star and a fan".[1] The movie, *A Band of Daredevils* (directed by Yamashita Kōsaku) was released by Tōei, a respected studio that had been at the forefront of the yakuza movie genre since its foundation in the early 1950s.[2] By 1994, it had produced some 252 such titles.[3]

Paul Schrader, the author of *Taxi Driver*, knew a thing or two about urban stories and gangster movies when he penned a now classic essay on Japanese

3

gangster films for the New York magazine *Film Comment* in 1974.[4] With his brother, who had just come back from Japan, Schrader had been working on the script *The Yakuza* (which became a film directed by Sidney Pollack in 1975).[5] Schrader saw the Japanese gangster films as "probably the most restricted genre yet devised", composed of "litanies of private argot, subtle body language, obscure codes, elaborate rites, iconographic costumes and tattoos". Such movies, he maintained, differ dramatically from their American or European counterparts, as they reflect neither the dilemma of social mobility seen in gangster films of the 1930s nor the despair of post-war *film noir*. Yakuza films are instead organised around the conflict between social obligation (*giri*) and personal inclination (*ninjō*). This dialectic, which the good-natured protagonist embodies, drives the standard plot where good and evil, individual inclination and group obligations are clearly distinguishable. Inevitably, the film climaxes in the final sword- or gunfight and the bad guys are defeated.[6]

More than 30 years after Schrader's observations, the 2005 Venice Film Festival showcased 36 films in this genre, released between 1926 and 1978. Spanning several centuries of Japanese history, the selected films trace the local Mafiosi back to their somewhat mythical origins as master-less samurai and chronicle their progression from wandering blind swordsmen (the Zatoichi sub-genre) to unlucky gamblers to post-war gangsters.[7] The Venetian retrospective provides an opportunity to revisit Schrader's take on the yakuza film genre. Furthermore, it allows us to address an important question that lies at the juncture of film analysis and the study of organised crime: what is the relationship between the themes and the style of films and the real gangsters?

Most studies focus only on one side of this question by examining the popular media portrayal of gangsters. David Ruth, for instance, concludes that American media in the 1920s and 1930s invented the 'legend' of the modern gangster in order to give voice to urban anxieties, fostering in the process a moral panic in the public.[8] Scholars often point out that real gangsters differed dramatically from their media image: "The medium makes the legend – writes, for instance, John Dean – and sometimes the medium gets it wrong".[9] Important as they are, these studies consider the gangster as an object rather than an active subject. On the contrary, Diego Gambetta has offered a series of interconnected observations on the Sicilian mafia and popular culture that brings to the fore the role of criminals. His starting point is that violence is a key resource for a mafia group (albeit costly to produce), as such a group's core activity is to offer criminal protection. Only those who can command violent resources sufficient to discourage competitors – and to convince lesser criminals and clients to accept their protection – can successfully operate a protection "firm". Furthermore, violence has a property that other commodities lack: a reputation for effective violence allows the "producers" to save on the actual display (production) of the good itself. Mafiosi therefore look for all possible ways to enhance their reputation for

violence. Since they cannot openly advertise the quality of their services, as the mafia is an illegal enterprise, they rely on a "brand name": the collective reputation of the mafia itself. They guard the value of the brand, as it directly helps them reduce the production of violence when they have to force reluctant victims to pay up.[10] (They also engage in individual displays of violence to impress fellow Mafiosi and local clients.)

It is at this point in Gambetta's argument that the study of organised crime intercepts the study of popular culture. Movies serve as a primary (although unintended) vehicle: they can enhance the reputation of the real mafia. Veteran film critic Tullio Kezich reports a conversation he had with a film production manager when he was involved in the shooting of *Salvatore Giuliano* (dir. Rosi, 1961). The producer, he recalls, "explained to me that organised crime does not mind movies about the mafia; on the contrary it considers them with a dose of pride, as something that can shed an appealing light [on them], especially if a boss is played by a popular actor".[11] Similarly, Japanese director Fukasaku Kinji said: "they [the yakuza] liked those movies because it made them look good. It was good for their image".[12] As Special Agent Joseph D. Pistone was on his way to give another testimony against the Bonanno crime "family" in New York, a defendant who knew that a Hollywood movie was in the making (*Donnie Brasco* 1997) asked: "Hey Donnie, who is going to play me in the movie?"[13] The mafia has gone a step further, providing a fascinating example of the circular borrowing of symbols. Real Mafiosi, Gambetta shows, borrow mannerisms and lines from movies (and from popular culture in general) in order to better intimidate their victims. The Mafioso invokes fiction to make people believe he is real.[14]

This process is not exclusive to mafias or the modern age. In medieval Europe, aristocrats emulated the actions they had read about in literature. As pointed out by Joan Haahr, "the so-called rules of chivalry [. . .] were largely self-conscious borrowings from the fictional world of romance. Real knights [. . .] delighted in assuming the arms and the identities of their Arthurian heroes at festivals known as the Round Table".[15] When an institution capable of certifying identities in an unambiguous manner does not exist, imitating art is the surest route to convincing a sceptical audience.

Gambetta's perspective is focused on the unintended actions of the film industry: the film industry does not actively promote the mafia's corporate image. It just uses good stories from the underworld to make a profit at the box office. The argument advanced by Gambetta also suggests that the mafia rationally seeks an association with elements of popular culture that help promote its image. The case study discussed in this article focuses on a further, as yet unexplored question: how would the mafia portray itself if it had the choice? If it were to behave rationally and had control over its own image, the mafia would promote depictions of itself that would resonate with the public and foster its menacing image. Still, plots may differ dramatically. An avenue would be to embrace the anti-hero of classic gangster films. As

suggested by Schrader and others after him, the gangster is depicted in movies such as *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* as attempting to move upward socially: "the typical gangster film presents a steady upward progress followed by a very precipitate fall".[16] In such stories of one man's career, the morally impure hero struggles with unsympathetic institutions and is ultimately crushed by a petty and vindictive social order. How would a real life boss like such a depiction of his own world? Arguably, if the cinematic gangster were crushed with the entire criminal organisation, the message would end up being self-defeating for real life mobsters. If, on the other hand, the organisation that crushes the anti-hero were the mafia itself, bosses would come across as evil. Alternatively, mafia bosses could refrain from encouraging filmmakers to embrace classic gangster plots and opt instead for stories that portray their film equivalents as benevolent patriarchs and their organisation as ultimately doing a public service.

Drawing upon the available evidence, this paper suggests that Japanese organised crime, the yakuza, had a direct say in the production of studio movies about itself. The paper also argues that plots of yakuza movies follow the latter plot model discussed above, namely they tend to portray bosses as benevolent patriarchs and the organisation as a positive force in society. Such a choice of themes had, however, an unintended consequence, as it led to a decline in audience interest and eventually to the end of this production line. Virtually no studio yakuza movies were released in theatres in the 1990s. The best form of mafia advertising, this paper concludes, is indirect. Significantly, a brief period of transition in the studio system in the late 1960s and early 1970s allowed some directors, such as Satō Junya and Fukasaku Kinji, to produce a small number of cinematic masterpieces that embrace some elements of the classic gangster movie genre and resemble the work of some of their American contemporaries, in particular Martin Scorsese. If left free, I argue, yakuza movies would have evolved in a manner very much like that of American gangster movies. Rather than culture, it was the structure of the Japanese entertainment industry, and in particular the proximity of real gangsters to the studios, that led to such a different stylistic outcome. This article explores the interplay among economic imperatives within the entertainment business, the mafia's role in the creation of its own media image, and the production of yakuza films. Ultimately, it seeks to show that mafia control over art can lead to the death of art – something that is bad for the mafias as well.

Evolution of the yakuza movies genre

As Japan emerged from World War II, four studios that had operated in the pre-war period – Tōhō, Daiei, Shintōhō and Shōchiku – regained control of the industry. In 1953, sensing the existence of a gap in the market, Ōkawa Hiroshi, a railroad and truck transportation magnate, founded Tōei with a

purely commercial agenda oriented towards making "conventional period film".[17] Such movies were either set in the Edo period (1600–1868) or in the more recent past (1890–1930). They portrayed one-dimensional good samurai-yakuza torn between obeying the criminal code of conduct and helping ordinary people harassed by authorities and other criminals.[18] Plots reinforced the virtue of absolute duty towards one's gang, and, more generally, towards the yakuza code. They showed the gangster as a compassionate human being: whenever he does evil, he is doing so because corrupt yakuza take advantage of his devotion to the code. Ultimately, the good yakuza kills the bad ones and re-establishes the honour of the organisation.[19]

In 1961, Shintōhō studios went bankrupt, opening up a significant portion of the market for its competitors (Daiei would go out of business ten years later).[20] In order to acquire shares of the market, Tōei decided to increase production exponentially by introducing triple features that allowed theatre managers to offer a chance of billing every week. Such a decision led Tōei to form a new company (New Tōei) and give its assistant directors a chance to make their own movies.[21]

The young assistant directors working at Tōei had grown up in violence-riddled post-war Japan, where anti-American feelings were pervasive.[22] Two of the filmmakers that were to change the genre forever, Satō Junya and Fukasaku Kinji, had direct experience with the vast underground black market that supported Japan's economy and had seen the related gang conflict. They had also witnessed – and at times taken part in – student demonstrations, such as the massive protests against the renegotiation of the US Security Treaty with Japan in 1959.[23] Documentary filmmakers had captured on video this social unrest.[24] What is most astonishing for today's viewer is how much this Japanese "new wave" resembled, and in many ways anticipated, its American counterpart – particularly in regard to the style of directors coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, such as John Boorman, Robert Altman, Warren Beatty, and, above all, Martin Scorsese.

Satō Junya had just graduated with a degree in French literature from the prestigious Tokyo University when he was offered a job at Tōei in 1956. As part of the studio system, he had to work in rotation with different directors until he got the chance to direct his first feature film, *Story of Military Cruelty* (1963). Under pressure to mass-produce movies, Tōei allowed Satō to explore the senseless militarism that brought the country to war. Satō's movie looked at the horrors experienced by military recruits during training. The film poster, which shocked the nation, showed a close-up of a suicidal recruit with a large bayonet in his throat.[25] By 1967, Satō had turned his attention to the yakuza genre and injected it with a dose of realism. Set in post-war Japan, Satō's yakuza films portrayed bosses as manipulative and greedy, often consorting with right-wing politicians (*Organised Crime 1* and *Organised Crime 2*, both 1967). His third feature, *Organised Crime 3: Loyalty Offering Brothers* (1969), follows a war veteran (played by Sugawara Bunta) who

becomes a lower-ranking yakuza. The movie opens with Sugawara defending a Japanese woman from American soldiers who try to rape her, and he later marries her. Despite his initial good deed, Sugawara is no better than the Americans: he joins other yakuza and sets up prostitution rings, stealing young women from U.S. -run brothels. Sugawara teams up with a greedy sociopath (played by Andō Noboru) with whom he starts to run a protection racket. Their gang even sets up a torture chamber for "debt collection" from reluctant businessmen. At the film's end, the outrageous behaviour of both characters leads to a gang war.[26] As in American gangster movies, the hero is selfish and morally impure and, ultimately, a sick loner.[27]

Fukasaku Kinji revolutionized the genre by introducing a new style as well as new themes. Fukasaku had been a studio director for Tōei since 1961. In one year alone he made five movies, mostly short programmes designed to fill out the second half of Tōei triple bills.[28] One of his first movies (*The Proud Challenge*, 1962) had a clear political message: a reporter uncovers evidence that a Japanese company is exporting weapons to Southeast Asia with the complicity of the CIA. The final scene suggests that the entire fabric of Japanese democracy is controlled by American interests aimed at crushing the socialist left (Tōei conservative managers seriously objected to the wider implication of the movie and put Fukasaku on probation for six months).[29] Fukasaku's turn to gangster movies was a product of the Tōei studio's internal organisational structure: the Kyoto branch specialized in period samurai drama, while the Tokyo branch – where he was based – concentrated on yakuza flicks.[30] Still, Fukasaku wanted to make yakuza movies that "had a sense of reality", to move the setting to ruined contemporary cities and slums, and to film tales based on the lives of real mobsters.[31] It was only in 1972 that Fukasaku was given almost total control over his projects.[32] A few years later, he had directed two masterpieces, *Street Mobster* (1972) and *Battle Without Honour and Humanity* (1973).

In Fukasaku's movies, the yakuza is indistinguishable from any other institution of authority, its members greedy and ruthless in their pursuit of power. In his films, the clear-cut struggle between good and evil liquefies.[33] The protagonist of *Street Mobster*, Okita Isamu, is a loser, born on the day Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces, who refuses to pay a cut to the local boss and is eventually killed. He is, however, far from the honourable man: he is instead a dedicated materialist who starts off by raping and selling to brothels young women who have just arrived in town. As he ascends in the criminal world, he strikes up a relationship with one of the women he sold into prostitution, but he is constantly beaten down by the established gang. Although the boss mildly sympathises with Okita's youthful brashness, he eventually makes sure that Okita and his woman are killed, in a masterfully shot final scene. Okita's upward move within the criminal world is blocked by the yakuza hierarchy, which is openly symbolic of the greedy new order founded upon American political and social values.

Fukasaku's *Battle Without Honour and Humanity* opens with the atomic bomb blast, and the gangsters practically appear right out of the dust and smoke of the mushroom cloud.[34] The lead character, Shōzō (Sugawara Bunta), tries to make ends meet in the post-war Hiroshima black market and eventually joins a yakuza group led by Kaneko, a greedy and treacherous boss, and an honourable young captain named Sakai (Matsukata Hiroki). By the end, Shōzō realizes that even the young Sakai is being corrupted by power, but he refuses to kill him. The boss sees to that, catching Sakai while he is shopping for a doll for his adopted daughter. Shōzō goes to the funeral, and the attending bosses panic as he pulls a gun. Instead of killing Kaneko, Shōzō shoots up the funeral altar (where the hypocritical bosses have paid tributes) and leaves, turning his back on the entire yakuza. As in *Street Mobster*, the criminal hierarchy is corrupt and ultimately responsible for the death of honourable people. The protagonist is a lone hero.

In a major departure from traditional films in this genre, Fukasaku's two movies are based on real-life events. *Battle Without Honour and Humanity* draws on interviews with an imprisoned yakuza boss recounting the genesis of several post-war Hiroshima "families", while *Street Mobster* is loosely based on the life of a real gangster from Fukasaku's home district of Mito, Ishikawa Rikuo.[35] The films make extensive use of hand-held cameras, jump cutting, freeze frames and fake documentary evidence. They show old photos, birth certificates, and police documents. Dates and names are introduced onscreen, while climatic moments are shown as stills. Fukasaku said that his style had been influenced by the newsreels shown in cinemas at the end of the 1960s depicting worker and student protests. "That's when I was inspired to begin using the hand-held camera," he explained. "I believe I first came to use it on [*Street Mobster*]. I myself took the camera in hand and ran into the crowds of actors and extras."[36]

The similarities between Scorsese and Fukasaku are striking. Like Fukasaku, Scorsese grew up in a place and time when violence was pervasive: "Every day I grew up in the Lower East Side somebody had a gun. [. . .] You could feel palpable tension, always on the verge of violence".[37] Encouraged by his mentor in film school, Scorsese wanted to make slice-of-life movies that drew on real-life stories.[38] "*Mean Streets* [1973] was an attempt to put myself and my old friends on the screen, to show how we lived, what life was in Little Italy. It was really an anthropological or a sociological tract", Scorsese has recalled.[39] In *Mean Streets*, he uses fake homemade movie footage, and characters are introduced with their name printed onscreen, as they are in Fukasaku's films. Jagged editing, jump cutting, hand-held cameras, and mock documentary style were, of course, common in the 1970s, as the French New Wave and the *cinema verité* movement of the previous decade had used them extensively. Surely, the Japanese directors of the 1960s, in particular Imamura Shōhei and Ōshima Nagisa, also influenced Fukasaku. What remains significant is that, at about the same time, two filmmakers working in very