Mafia, gangsters and gangland in the cinema and beyond

M 11.30-3.50pm RTFP 184
Graduate only 11.30-12.00 (My Office), Seminar for everyone 12.00-2.00 (RTFP184).
Screenings 2.00pm – finish (RTFP184)
Instructor: Dr G.S. Larke-Walsh, Office M&P 233, ext. 7327. Email: larkewalsh@unt.edu
Office hours: Mondays 10.30-11.30 Tuesdays 10-12 by appointment

TA:

Course Objectives
This course is split into three sections. Each section will examine aspects of organized crime in cinema. I have not structured this course chronologically, or by nationality. Instead it is a mix of styles and approaches. By completing this course you will be able to identify the components of the gangster genre, the various discourses that define it and the historical and cultural influences behind its development across various industries. You will be able to describe the aesthetics of each film and analyze how these aesthetics reflect cross-cultural mythologies of organized crime.

Course Texts
There is no required text for this course (in that I am not requiring you to purchase a text). Required Reading does appear under each seminar description. All have been photocopied and are available at the reserve desk in the library. It is your responsibility to access and complete those reading assignments.

Your required work for this class includes:

- Two midterm examinations (in class) 25% each
- One final examination (in class) 25%
- One 8-10 page written assignment 25%

Students expecting to do well in this class should read the assigned materials, attend and take notes on all components of the class, including discussions and screenings. You do not need to notify me if you miss class, but it is up to you to get the lecture notes from another student, and/or view the assigned film(s), (most of which will be available at the Chilton Media Center within a day or so after the class meeting). I can almost guarantee you will fail this class if you skip the assigned readings and/or continue to miss lectures and screenings.

Exams will be based on lectures, screenings, readings, and discussions. The final will not be cumulative. The Written Assignment will be a research paper on a related topic (8-10 pages). Details will follow in a separate hand-out. Late papers will be penalized 1 letter grade (10%) per class session. Your Final Grade will thus be based upon three in-class examinations, one written assignment. You must complete each of these components in order to pass the class. Any form of academic dishonesty will result in an F for this course.
NOTE: RTVF classes work with the Office of Disability Accommodation to make reasonable accommodations for qualified students. If you have special needs, please register with the ODA and present me with a written copy of your Accommodation Request as soon as possible.

**BREAKDOWN BY WEEKS AND CLASS MEETINGS**

**Unit 1**

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<th>Week One: Aug 30&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<td><strong>Screening:</strong> <em>Little Caesar</em> (1931) dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 79mins.</td>
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<td><strong>Seminar:</strong> The Classical Cycle</td>
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<td><strong>Screening Notes:</strong> Consider Rico Bandello (Edward G. Robinson) as a hero. Is he an example of ideal masculinity? What makes us sympathize, distance ourselves from him? Consider the possible reasons behind Rico’s actions. What drives him to do the things he does? How is the male body portrayed? Compare this film to others in terms of costume and the male body.</td>
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<th>Week Two: Sep 13&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<td><strong>Screening:</strong> <em>The Godfather</em> (1972) dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 175 mins</td>
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<td><strong>Seminar:</strong> The Postclassical ‘Classic’</td>
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<td><strong>Recommended Reading:</strong> Larke-Walsh, G.S. “Theorizing the Gangster Genre” in <em>Screening the Mafia: masculinity, ethnicity and mobsters from the Godfather to The Sopranos</em>, Jefferson, N.C. McFarland, (2010), pp.58-111.</td>
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Screening Notes:
The Godfather trilogy is deemed a classic and as such it informs all gangster films made since. What themes does it present? (Identity through business; Romance; Ethnic identity for instance)

Consider The Godfather Pt I as a genre film. What conventions does it use that are similar to Little Caesar? What themes or conventions are more developed?

Week Three: Sep 20th
Seminar: Mafia Madness

Required Reading:

Screening Notes:
This film has been largely ignored by critics and reviewers. It is a film about madness and criminality. What does it suggest is at the route of the brothers’ neuroses?

Consider the revelation of the real killer. What does this say about violence and masculinity?

Week Four: Sep 27th
Screening: Donnie Brasco (1997), dir. Mike Newell, 127mins
Seminar: Masculinity

Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:

Screening Notes:
I included this film because it continues the themes of masculinity in crisis, but it also presents itself as an education on Mafia behaviour. This is a popular narrative convention in evidence since The Godfather. What do we learn and how is the information relayed to us?
Unit 2

Week Six: Oct 11th
Seminar: Organized crime in Russia
Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:
Gillespie, David “The Sight and Sound of Russian Cinema” in *Russian Cinema* New York, Longman (??)
Pozefsky, Peter “Russian Gangster Films as Popular History: genre, ideology and memory in Pavel Lungin’s *Tycoon*” in *Studies in Russian and Soviet cinema* v.2 n.3 (2008), pp.299-325

Screening Notes
This is a very impressive film. The violence is brutal, but – as always – it’s the reasons behind the violence and the attitudes towards it) that is interesting not the violence itself.

Danila is a introverted character (hints of a ‘Travis Bickle’ style vigilantism). He emerges from the unknown (war, water) and attempts to find his place back in civilization. What skills does this ‘civilization’ prize the most? Who does Danila connect with?

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Week Seven: Oct 18th
Screening: *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), dir. Joel & Ethan Coen, 115 mins.
Seminar: Narrative and Film Form
Required Reading:

Recommended Reading:
Nolan, W “*Miller’s Crossing*’s Tom Reagan: Straight as a corkscrew, Mr Inside-outsky” in *Post Script*, Winter, v.27 Iss. 2, 2008, pp.48-61

Screening Notes
Based on narratives from Dashiell Hammet’s pulp crime novels of the 1920s, *Miller’s Crossing* owes as much to Film Noir as it does to the gangster genre. However, make note of the use of Mafia mythologies. How is the mafia presented in this film?
Costume motifs, especially hats, are a semi-comic motif in this film. This marks a shift in gangster film aesthetics towards 'performance' as a central signifier of criminality. Note how costume denotes character.

Week Eight: Oct 25th
Seminar: British Gangland

Required Reading:

Screening Notes:
Considered one of the best films about British gangland, this film is an exercise in British politics, class and paranoia. Note the layering of clues and red herrings in this narrative. The intention is to lead the audience down the wrong path, so that the revelation is more chilling at the end.

This film, like Goodfellas, is representative of the excess of the 1980s (Long Good Friday anticipates it, Goodfellas comments upon it). Note the similarities and differences between British gangland identity and images of the American Mafia.

Week Nine: Nov 1st
Screening: Leon/The Professional (1994) dir. Luc Besson
Seminar: Hitmen/Assassins

Required Reading:
Midgley, Henry “Mother to the Man? Rethinking Luc Besson’s Leon” in Bright Lights Film Journal (2007), Nov. p.58 (no pagination)

Recommended Reading:

Screening Notes
I am hoping that you will see Le Samurai (1967, dir. Jean-Pierre Melville) alongside Leon. Besson references many aspects of the classic film.
I am interested in focusing on Leon’s character as a loner. His relationship with his boss and also his relationship with Matilda.


Week Ten: SECOND EXAM: Nov 8th

Unit 3

Week Eleven: Nov 15th

Seminar: Italian Mafia
Required Reading:
Radovic, Rajko “McMafia Rising” in Film International 7.1 (2009), pp.6-11

Recommended Reading:
Small, P “Giordana’s I cento passi: renegotiating the Mafia codes” in Journal of Contemporary Film V.3 n.1 (2005), pp.41-54.

Screening Notes:
This film bares little relationship to Saviano’s book except in its focus on the social environment. Its narrative is much more related to the Hollywood gangster genre and emulating various well-known characters.

Consider the impact of such decisions in the film’s structure and characters. How does this change the film and what does it do to its connection to the realities of life in the Naples area of Campania.

Week Twelve: Nov 22nd

Screening: Mean Streets (1973) dir. Martin Scorsese, 112mins.
Seminar: Scorsese’s gangsters
Required Reading:
It may seem like a huge omission not to screen *Goodfellas*, but I am assuming it is a film everyone has seen. We can still discuss it and *Casino* in class. I want you to watch *Mean Streets* instead and think about the ways in which it responds to *The Godfather*.

Scorsese is quoted as saying he dislikes Coppola’s romanticism. His films are supposedly more realistic. Consider this assertion. In what ways is he right, and in what ways is he wrong?

**Week Thirteen: Nov 29**th  
**Screening:** *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) written by David Chase  
**Seminar:** Has TV killed the Gangster film?  
**Required Reading:**  
Creeber, G “TV ruined the movies”: television, Tarantino, and the intimate world of *The Sopranos*”  
Willis, E “Our mobsters, ourselves” also in Lavery pp. 2-9.

**Screening Notes:**  
It has been suggested that *The Sopranos* has closed the book on Hollywood Mafia narratives for the time being.  
We can only watch a selection of episodes and/or clips in class, but I hope to discuss the series as a whole. If you haven’t seen it all, please read as much as you can. I want to discuss the development of characters and various important storylines.

**Week Fourteen: Dec 6**th  
**Required Reading:**  

**Screening Notes:**  
While this film has been both applauded and derided for emulating Hollywood, I like its narrative styling. It is also, in my opinion, very British in terms of its themes and attention to class and gender.

Consider the main characters. There are not many of them. In what ways is it a film noir? What discourses of masculinity are at play here?

**FINAL EXAM:**