

5 Gangster Without Glory

I think it might be a pity ... to abandon completely something that was so exciting in the traditional cinema: this play with the protagonist, the so-called central character, the Hitchcockian-Langian play on the phony central consciousness and all that this allows.

Jacques Rivette, 1973³⁴

Once Upon a Time in America is sometimes discussed or presented – particularly by its home-video packaging – as a gangster movie. Yet, taken within this genre, it is surely a very curious and attenuated exercise. The classically wild, euphoric moments of a gangster's escapades – the heists, shoot-outs, daring clinches with cops or rival mobsters – are few and far between, and a number of them, such as the 'payback' murder of Crowning (Gerard Murphy) are the most perfunctory and forgettable passages of the movie. One particular scene – Noodles entering a feather cleaning plant alone to hunt down and kill the last member of a rival gang – indicates most clearly the film's deflationary tone. In a John Woo movie, such a set-up would provide the occasion for a galvanising, kinetic showdown, a climactic, face-to-face combat of warriors. In Leone's rendering, the scene downplays action and excitement, relying almost entirely on a haunted, ghostly atmosphere and texture more akin to Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) than the average criminal saga. Leone was eloquent about what, in this respect, most attracted to him to Grey's novel: precisely the premise it offered of a 'gangster story without glory'.³⁵

It is unsurprising that many commentators on the film are moved to invoke Robert Warshaw and his justly classic, seminal essay of 1948, 'The Gangster as Tragic Hero'.³⁶ Warshaw stresses the gleefully arrested development of the genre's hero figures, whose behaviour 'appeals most to adolescents'.³⁷ And Leone's film at least fulfils this contract of the genre: the fleeting moments of euphoria that Leone allows his two-bit gangsters are almost purely of a boyish, childlike nature. The exchange of children in the hospital (set to the accompaniment of Rossini's 'The



Thieving Magpie') is the prime instance of this, right down to the image of Cockeye drinking gaily from a baby's bottle. From the 20s to the 30s, these gangsters just never grow up.

But, in the course of this story, two members of the gang will die ignominiously, off-screen, and the other two will live to old age – neither destiny a fitting one for gangsters who should go out in a blaze of glory. Even the slow-motion death of gang member Dominic (Noah Moazezi)



A haunted ghostly clinch: Noodles among the feathers; 'I slipped': Dominic's death

in childhood, felled by a bullet in the street, suggests less a sense of grandeur than of waste, confusion, a twist of destiny both painful and incomprehensible to those left behind, particularly to Noodles who dwells until adulthood (in his exchange with Deborah on the beach) on Dominic's odd, last words: 'I slipped.'

So, what strange kind of gangster movie is *Once Upon a Time in America*? Morris gives its 'sprawling' story an intriguing context: 'It is a type of narrative which almost forms a genre in itself as a broken-down version of the nineteenth-century novel-saga of social and personal genesis.'³⁸ In literary terms, this loose genre takes us back to lofty authors who were touchstones for Leone when conceiving the film, such as William Faulkner and John Dos Passos. Today, as Morris notes, the genre is mainly practised by writers of 'high-class potboilers', such as William Styron, John Fowles and E.L. Doctorow – contemporaries whose work has interesting affinities with Leone's.

'Social and personal genesis' implies a certain epic consistency and linearity – a hero who grows from auspicious origins into destined manhood. At the centre of such an action epic there has to be a hero who sees and hears and smells all, who traverses and orders physical space, whose smallest signals register as commands that result in decisive actions – for example, the 'Mr Big' so beloved of gangster mythology and fantasy, from Cagney to Harry Belafonte in Altman's *Kansas City* (1996).

But *Once Upon a Time in America* is not an epic of manifest destiny, like Gance's *Napoleon* (1927) or Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995). It is a film of breakdown and crack-up, of loss and oblivion. Its form resembles a shattered, scattered epic. Contemporary gangster films embody and dramatise, with particular force, the 'crisis of the action-image' that Gilles Deleuze broadly attributes to international cinema in the wake of World War II.³⁹ According to his account, the ritual, ceremonial actions that once happily cohered externally oriented, highly physical forms like the Western, the war movie and the gangster film – actions like hauling a wagon train across the landscape or having a shoot-out – suddenly slow down, become complicated, and often get blocked long before the usual point of completion or fulfilment. Heroes (such as

John Wayne in *The Searchers*, James Stewart in Anthony Mann's films and *Rear Window*) become disturbed, obsessive, frustrated, sometimes literally immobile figures, caught in vain patterns of desperate repetition, barred from the very scenes or stages where they once would have taken such decisive action. And, most importantly, what seemed to be the driving, motor force of these narratives – the hero's own subjectivity, his will and his gaze – is suddenly, rudely ejected from a sovereign seat of power.

Betrayal – especially betrayal between brothers, or lifelong buddies – has always been a prime motor of gangster stories.⁴⁰ Leone's film superimposes two stories of betrayal, of two very different shades. Noodles betrays Max out of love, out of a desire to save him from himself. Noodles tries to remove Max from the stage of history, but then sees this plan backfire horribly: the grief and pain this error causes him



prompt his own instant and prolonged withdrawal from the world. Of course Noodles does not see, at that moment, what he assumes he sees. He is caught in a frame-up, and in that trap he 'misrecognises' the truth before his very eyes. Like many elegiac mystery stories, Leone's film traces an epic arc from a fundamental moment of blindness to an ultimate act of vision – a vision that finally includes total understanding.⁴¹ It is in part due to this narrative structure that *Once*

The changing times: a party to end prohibition

Upon a Time in America is such a drama of vision – a drama in which so much power and gravity are invested in what characters (especially Noodles) see, and in what Leone 'reveals'.

In his complete and utter act of misrecognition, Noodles becomes a *dupe*. And the story of the dupe is one of the distinguishing motifs of post-war 'crisis cinema', beginning in the days of film noir. From *Mr Arkadin* (Welles, 1955) to *Strange Days* (Bigelow, 1995), male heroes find themselves duped by those closest to them – not merely those least suspected, but those most totally and blindly trusted. This is the larger, more brilliant, and certainly more evil form of betrayal – the betrayal that exploits love, the sweet cheat.

Films in which a central character is duped have, generally speaking, strikingly convoluted or baroque narrative forms. This is because every safe, classical assumption on the part of an innocent viewer – like the assumption that the hero sees and hears all, that he is driving the story, that he is on a straight line heading towards the truth – is thrown completely out of kilter. Suddenly the grandiloquent, reassuring artifice of a certain kind of storytelling is laid bare, and trashed; suddenly, to adopt Rivette's words, the hero is revealed as simply a 'so-called central character', and his subjectivity merely a 'phony central consciousness'. In place of such certainties, we are plunged instead into a universe of malevolent, shadowy forces, of appearances that always lie, of vertiginous traumas and hallucinations born of all-pervasive paranoia – which, cinematically, is rendered in perpetual shifts, inversions and clashes of narrational points-of-view.⁴²

In the gangster genre, the theme of betrayal has often found its privileged form in such an eviction: the hero's loss of control over his own story. For Leone this theft of a life is made even more bitter-sweet by the fact that it is stage-managed by the hero's veritable 'double' or doppelgänger – his beloved brother, his mirror, his killer. This doppelgänger motif is worked out in great detail. From the start, Max is cast as the one who dominates and manipulates Noodles' life – the 'mother' who calls him (as Deborah taunts), the one who literally takes his time away from him (in their youthful manoeuvring over a watch). In



a key 20s scene set at the Lower New York Bay, Max disappears under the water and then appears, in order to taunt Noodles with the proof of his own insane trusting love: 'What would you do without me?'

Much later, Max will be the only person with enough power over Noodles to find him and call him back, this time seemingly from the dead. It is a call that he cannot refuse, and the gradual traces of which he obediently follows. And when Noodles reaches this pre-arranged destination, he will encounter Max's own exact double, his son, sitting on a 'throne' as his father has done, from his very first appearance (on the junk wagon), through his gangster days (where he sports a throne that belonged to a seventeenth-century Pope!). In the mythology of the genre, Max represents a new, sophisticated kind of gangster hero, the upwardly mobile operator who can rise above the 'stink of the streets'. What he



'I'm gonna do something with your time': Whitey, Max, Noodles

(top) Max on his throne



does in the Bay, disappearing and reappearing, he will do later in his criminal career on a much larger scale. He is a trickster, a chameleon, able to reinvent himself to ride the waves of history. He has no sentimental attachment to his origins, and no ties that bind him to his intimates.

In the classic inventory of the gangster hero's possessions – the money, the power, the girl as Tony (Al Pacino) orders them in De Palma's *Scarface* (1983) – we have the perfect list of everything which Max systematically takes away from Noodles. And also his very life, which, as a result of Max's primal act of betrayal, becomes an abject, ghostly state of suspended animation. Max says as much: 'I took away your whole life from you. All I left for you was thirty-five years of grief for having killed me.' Yet Leone will have history turn on Max too. As 'Secretary Bailey' surveys the bank of TV monitors recording the crowd at his party, he drily remarks: 'Rats usually desert a sinking ship. In my case, they appear to be flocking on board.' Like another smooth operator, the gangster hero of Budd Boetticher's *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* (1960), Max's escalating ruthlessness has perhaps led him to lose sight of the most essential trick of manipulation in his repertoire of strategies: as Alice (Karen Steele) remarks wisely in Boetticher's film, 'that was the magic – as long as someone loved you, you were OK.'

Time finally runs out for 'Secretary Bailey'