

Evan Legaspi

[elegaspi@chapman.edu](mailto:elegaspi@chapman.edu)

3 December 2024

### Fantasies Versus Realities: Privilege and Oppression in Gangster Films

The Gangster genre as a category in cinema spreads along many different communities and towns. You will often find different kinds of stories in the genre based on the culture being explored in the film, but differences can also be attributed to the time period of production. These go hand in hand; the time periods and the cultures are important in the types of stories being told on screen. To highlight this, I will be taking a look at *Menace II Society* (Hughes Brothers, 1993) and *The Gentlemen* (Ritchie, 2019), two films from entirely different eras of the genre, following entirely different demographics. By comparing *Menace II Society* and *The Gentlemen*, we can see how privilege and oppression can shape their own respective pathways into the gangster lifestyle, highlighting that resources and societal support are the most important factors in a gangster's rise to power, as well as the most important factor in a gangster narrative's storytelling.

Taking a look at Robert Warshow's writing in "The Gangster as Tragic Hero", he writes on the pressures of the gangster protagonist: "At bottom, the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil..." (231). I bring this up because these ideas are explored in both *The Gentlemen* and *Menace II*

*Society*, through the characters of Mickey Pearson (Matthew McConaughey) and Caine (Tyrin Turner).

At the base of both, crime exists in their lives so naturally and for such a long time, that it becomes the world that they know best; to fail would mean to die and to succeed would mean to hurt others. This is seen in both films, as Mickey attempts to get out of the crime life and sell his business; his wife Ros (Michelle Dockery) warns him that it could show a sign of weakness, and is proven to be correct. The entire narrative of *The Gentlemen* sparks at the fact that Mickey wants to sell his business, “going soft” as characters in the gangster world would call it. In the case of that film, the end result is Mickey’s overall success, but at the requirements of killing numerous other criminals in the business. However, a key point with his relationship with crime is that it was something he found, and realized he was good at. It is explained early in the film that Mickey was in college when he found a liking to dealing drugs.



On the other end, within *Menace II Society*, Caine is not exactly a criminal by choice. At least, not when we meet him; the opening scene follows him and O-Dog (Larenz Tate) as they hit up a convenience store, this robbery being a simple result of a temper flare from O-Dog, completely unrelated to Caine. After O-Dog shoots the owner behind the counter, Caine appears shocked. Hands on his head, he anxiously makes O-Dog leave, as they hurry out and he narrates

a very important line to the audience: "It was funny like that in the hood sometimes... you never knew what was gonna happen or when." The context offered in the film is that of the riots, as Caine informs us that after the LA riots, the drugs began to enter his world. Mark A. Reid's writing titled "The Black Gangster Film" describes the difference between the two well: "For the most part, African American moviegoers desire the same fantasies as their white counterparts. The sole difference between the two audiences bears on the racial and sociocultural elements that construct the gangster hero(ine)." (559) This creates the base of my argument, as one film follows crime through privilege while the other follows crime through struggle. Immediately, both stories introduce us to the way our protagonists got into the way they live, and *The Gentlemen* makes it a clear portrayal of a choice, while *Menace II Society* informs the audience of a forced lifestyle, both being results of the environment around them.



It's explained early in *The Gentlemen* that Mickey grew up "clever but poor". Regardless, the opportunity to go to a prestigious school still existed for him, creating the avenue for his eventual business. The same opportunity cannot be applied to Caine; ironically, Caine spends the entirety of the film trying to escape the crime world. His time spent drug dealing stems from his

father, and was less of a “vocation” (as *The Gentlemen* calls it) and more of a survival method. In addition, Mickey’s business growth is exponential, as he sells to high class, wealthier people, a demographic of consumers that Caine does not have access to. Using his education and environment as leverage to help him grow, Michael gains status and resources to climb the social ladder, eventually working with Lords and creating an empire in the UK. This access to resources and societal support provided him with the pathway to sustain his status to get to the point he is at when we are introduced to him. It is because of this that the consequences of his actions are easier for him to solve, and his solutions to conflict come to feel strongly convenient.

With that, let’s go back to Caine’s line: “It was funny like that in the hood sometimes... you never knew what was gonna happen or when.” The contrast with *The Gentlemen* is seen through its ending: Mickey and his crew always knew what was going to happen, and when. They had planned out maneuvers for the blackmailing attempt on them; and when their points of vulnerability were attacked by surprise, they had the Coach (Colin Farrell) and his crew to protect them. This is seen as Mickey’s kidnapping ends in the Coach’s crew killing the kidnapers, while Coach himself kills intruders in the home of Mickey’s right hand man, Ray (Charlie Hunnam). To an audience, a lot of it can feel like luck. But it is the societal support that provides Mickey with receiving this “luck”, a support that he built through his privileged opportunities. Overall, Mickey has full control over any situation he finds himself in.

On the other hand, *Menace II Society* showcases Caine in a world of shock and uncertainty. Besides the opening scene, there are many instances where Caine finds himself caught off guard by others. For example, Caine and his cousin Harold (Saafir) find themselves getting carjacked after a party. Here, Harold and Caine act calm, their performances giving off a

feeling of surprise not that it is happening, but that it is happening *to them*. There is no panic in their shock, just an anger behind the fact that it is them on this occasion.



When the shots fire off on Harold, O-Dog and the rest of the crew realize what's happening. O-Dog says, "They're getting jacked, come on", showing the commonality of this happening in their environment. The film doesn't hide anything about the violence; Harold's body jerks after getting shot multiple times, as the carjackers wipe off blood from the windshield and simply leave the scene. The lack of a musical score or Caine's narration here keeps the scene grounded, and adds to the grit and realism of the events in the film overall. As they enter the hospital with Caine, the shots stay at level with the characters, and sometimes even lower than them, highlighting powerlessness and intimacy with the characters. The shaky camera movements add to the panic felt inside of each character at this point, increasing suspense and panic in the audience. Caine enters shock, the performance viscerally hitting the viewer with truth and up-front rawness of the events. And through all of this, the audience has had it placed in their heads that this is simply just another day for people in this world.

This leads me to my next point, that on the filmmaking approach. Ritchie's style and choice of portrayal in *The Gentlemen* gives a glorifying experience of the gangster world. In Fran

Mason's writing, "The Postmodern Spectacle of the Gangster", he explores the focus shift in the genre over time. He brings in his own examples to explain how films in the genre have turned into a "depthless simulation", as the focus is now on "the surface of the gangster look without apparently examining the ideological, moral or emotional significations that have attached to the genre." (151) Let's expand on this further by comparing the two films. *Menace II Society* is a raw depiction of the lifestyle in the environment in which the Hughes brothers chose to focus on, humbly edited and not straying away from the true nature of the violence and overall crime at hand. *The Gentlemen* does not stray from violence either; the difference is in how the violence in each film hits their audience. In the former, the realism through its handheld camera work and observational cinematography creates emotional stakes within the viewer, and portrays an overall message to look down upon violence. Caine's death at the end of the film feels inevitable, representing the difficulties of escaping that world. These aesthetic choices throughout the film reflect the humble groundings and oppression that shape the narrative in the first place; *The Gentlemen* features violence in a manner of praise. The film begins with a killing, except this one is a moment pulled from later events in the film. Ritchie's choice of non-linear storytelling makes this event create anticipation over violence. With that, the violence is portrayed in a satirical and comedic tone, an example being the death of Aslan (Danny Griffin). Aslan falls off a balcony; again, Ritchie cuts away, leading the audience to anticipate the inevitable death that is waiting in short time. The scene that this cuts to features Ray telling Mickey about the mission being completed, as upbeat music plays and we cut to the accomplishment. Soon after, we get back to Aslan falling off the balcony, but at this point, the music is already playing and we have seen two different scenes in between. What this creates, next to anticipation and satisfaction, is

entertainment. This is one example of how the film desensitizes violence, highlighting Mason's point on a lack of depth, with no emotional significance or ideologies of importance.



The sequence follows with a funny chase scene, overall using the violence as a form of comedy. The aesthetic choice of chaotic editing, high energy music, and the dialogue choices (one being “it was the gravity that killed him”) all make the violence seem passable and normalizing it in a much more fantasized way than *Menace II Society* normalizes it.

There are other aspects within each film that quietly showcase the influences of resources and societal support. In the chase scene that follows Aslan's death, the camera is steady. It

follows, but without the shakiness seen in *Menace II Society*. It is controlled, representing Mickey's life as a gangster. The chaos in *The Gentlemen* is fun, it's made through editing and music; the chaos in *Menace II Society* is up front, it's made through its performances and unsteadiness within the camera. The feelings created within the audience are different because of this, with *The Gentlemen* making audiences safe observers; there is nothing to truly fear for Mickey or his crew. He is "the King", as he monologues in the opening and the ending (further honing in on the gangster fantasy concept), while audiences fear for Caine's life and others multiple times throughout *Menace II Society*.

This deep dive through *Menace II Society* and *The Gentlemen* reveals how privilege and oppression shape not only the pathways of a gangster, but also the style in which these stories are told on screen. Caine's experiences reflect on systemic oppression and survival, told through a gritty story of fear, harshness, and uncertainty in his world. In contrast, Mickey's experiences are based around his access to resources, societal support, and control over many circumstances. These films overall highlight that while the gangster genre often revolves around power and survival, the circumstances of that power and the way it is framed can vary depending on the culture being told within and behind the film. Audiences are invited to not just consider a gangster's rise and fall, but also to take into account the resources and environment around them that create those pathways in the first place.

**Works Cited**

Mason, Fran. "The Postmodern Spectacle of the Gangster." *Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks*, 2002, pp. 141–64. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230596399\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230596399_7).

Reid, Mark A. "33. The Black Gangster Film." *Film Genre Reader IV*, 31 Dec. 2012, pp. 558–575, <https://doi.org/10.7560/742055-036>.

Warshow, Robert. "Chapter Nineteen. The Gangster as Tragic Hero." *University of Texas Press eBooks*, 2016, pp. 223–31. <https://doi.org/10.7560/303757-021>.