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‘Frighteningly real’: Realism, social criticism and the psychological killer in the critical reception of the late 1940s horror-thriller

ABSTRACT

The article explores the changing meanings of psychological themes in the 1940s. In the early 1940s, these themes were largely disparaged by film critics and associated with horror but, by the late 1940s, psychological themes became highly valued through their association with realism. However, while this process increasingly distinguished the realist thriller from horror, the latter becoming largely associated with Gothic fantasy, critics also became disenchanted with the supposedly ‘realist’ thrillers of the late 1940s. If realism was valued in the extent to which it was part of an analysis of social problems, and offered a form of constructive social criticism, film critics increasingly came to see the realism of many Hollywood thrillers as merely stylistic or aesthetic. Ironically, the one feature that they continued to celebrate were the psychologically disturbed killers featured in many of these films, killers that were the point of continuity with the 1940s horror cycle of the early to mid-1940s.

KEYWORDS

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In the first half of the 1940s, commentators claimed that they were witnessing a major new cycle of horror films that were 'fresh psychological efforts' (that often featured psychological disturbed killers) and included films that are not commonly identified as horror today but as examples of the paranoid woman's film, film noir and the thriller (Stanley 1944: X3). Consequently, during this period, the horror film and the psychological film were almost interchangeable as terms so that there was a strong sense that 'psychological' themes were associated with horror and vice versa. For example, in its review of *Phantom Lady*, the *New York Times* stressed the significance of its director, Robert Siodmak, and his background, a background in which he was described as 'a former director of German horror films' or 'the old German psychological films' (Crowther 1944: 15).

However, at this point, these psychological films were not seen as positive but were often attacked as pretentious or as unconvincing explanations for implausible behaviour (Jancovich 2010). For example, in its review of *I Wake Up Screaming*, the *New York Times* complained that the film 'pretends to be more serious and portentous than the matter justifies' (Crowther 1942: 13), and uses dubious psychological claims to explain the behaviour of its 'psychopathic' killer, a figure whose 'motivation is quite far-fetched'.

However, in the mid-1940s, there was a shift in the evaluation of psychological films. During this period, these films gained greater legitimacy as they began to be distanced from an association with horror and Gothic fantasy and came to be increasingly associated with the values of cinematic realism. Today, the shift in critical values that led critics to champion cinematic realism is often associated with the release of Rossellini's *Open City* (see for example Staiger 1992), but it was clearly evident at least a year earlier in responses to Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend*, a psychological study of alcoholism that was overtly identified as horror on its release in the United States (Jancovich 2007, 2011).

It was not only psychological themes that became increasingly distanced from horror. As we have seen, the horror cycle of the mid-1940s clearly included a series of films that would not be identified as horror today but as examples of the thriller and this is because, during the early to mid-1940s, the horror film and the thriller were not seen as separate genres but as virtually interchangeable terms (Jancovich 2009). Indeed, in 1946, Siegfried Kracauer wrote an article about the 'horror-thrillers', a term that he used interchangeably with the 'terror film'. In this way, he clearly classified films that would be identified as thrillers today under what he regarded as a broader category: horror (Kracauer 1946).

It was only after the release of *The Lost Weekend* that the horror film and the thriller began to become distanced from one another. As critical tastes shifted, critics began to dissociate the thriller from Gothic fantasy, and to identify it with contemporary settings and notions of realism. Furthermore, as the thriller began to represent one side of this distinction, horror started to represent the other: it became associated with the realm of Gothic fantasy in a way that was not only new but also inherently unstable. The separation of terms was never complete and the distinctions on which they were based were not secure.

If this celebration of realism was problematic, it was not simply associated with naturalistic attempts to replicate the phenomenal features of an objective reality. On the contrary, at this point, the critics who valued 'realism' were advocates of social criticism, and praised films such as *Open City* for their 'frank

and uncompromising' depiction of social reality, depictions that were 'likely to prove shocking to sheltered American audiences' (Crowther 1946b: 32). In other words, realism was claimed to expose difficult issues and shock people out of complacency; and while it may seem strange to discuss Rossellini's film within the context of 1940s horror, Siegfried Kracauer overtly referred to it within this context in his article on the 1940s horror cycle. Kracauer was, perhaps predictably, highly critical of these 'horror films', 'terror films' or 'horror-thrillers', which he claimed were simply designed to incite terror in their audiences. For Kracauer, these films were therefore defined in opposition to 'realist' films such as *Open City*, whose shocks, he claimed, were not designed to simply thrill the audience but resulted from a serious attempt to diagnose and so change the problems of social reality: fear can only 'be exorcised [...] by an incessant effort to penetrate it and spell out its causes' (Kracauer 1946: 111). In other words, the 'shock' of Rossellini's realism was directly associated with the terror of the 1940s 'shockers', even if figures such as Kracauer saw the terrors of Rossellini's film as infinitely superior to those of the Hollywood horror cycle.

However, while mainstream critics did not share Kracauer's blanket condemnation of the 1940s horror cycle, they did share his enthusiasm for the realism of *Open City*. If this position led critics such as those associated with the *New York Times* (the most respectable and legitimate film critics of the period) to oppose censorship, they still maintained a notion of what was distasteful and sordid. For these critics, realism should not just shock but must also have a purpose, and they opposed films that they simply regarded as seedy or degrading.

The following essay will therefore examine the critical reception of the 'horror-thrillers' in the late 1940s, a time when the distinction between the horror film and the thriller began to emerge. However, while it will explore the discourses of realism from which this distinction developed, it will also demonstrate some of the contradictions inherent in this process, particularly the difficulty of maintaining the distinction between the realist thriller and fantastic horror melodramas. Furthermore, this difficulty also meant that many critics increasingly lost interest in their realism and shifted their focus to the incredible, psychologically deranged killers featured in many of these films, killers who were celebrated despite their lack of convincing motivation and maintain continuity with the 'psychological efforts' of the 1940s horror cycle. To put it another way, while these films had to some extent become distanced from the category of horror by the late 1940s, this distance was far more insecure than it would appear today. Many of these films continued to be explicitly associated with horror in the period (as I have demonstrated elsewhere, Jancovich 2007), and even when they were not explicitly identified as horror, it was their psychologically disturbed killers (one of the key features of the horror cycle of the 1940s) that were often their most lauded feature.

The first section of this essay will therefore examine how critics sought to distinguish the responsible, if shocking, exposé from the merely sordid and seedy, while the second section will then move on to explore critical responses to the wave of documentary-style thrillers that flourished in the late 1940s, films that may have been praised for their visual style but were often explicitly distinguished from genuine realism so that their visuals were frequently claimed to mask their fundamentally melodramatic content.

A similar story has been told by Will Straw, who demonstrates that, although the American left initially saw the 'semi-documentary thrillers' of the mid-1940s as offering a 'welcome promise', this response was soon replaced

1. For example, they shared the left's 'suspicion of glamour and melodrama' (133) so that they displayed a similar distaste for the 'emotionalism' of films such as *The Big Sleep*, films that were seen as 'typical of the "Brute-Cult" of mid-1940s cinema' (p. 139). Consequently, like the left critics on which Straw concentrates, they increasingly claimed that these films merely involved 'a new look for the same of Hollywood hokum' (p. 136).

by a 'growing disenchantment with the semi-documentary project', a disenchantment that reached a head with the anti-communist propaganda of *Iron Curtain* (Straw 2008: 132). For Straw, this film 'constituted a milestone in the post-war unravelling of the progressive coalition' that had dominated the war years (2008: 137) and, as members of this wartime coalition, the critics associated with the *New York Times* shared this dissatisfaction with the supposed 'realism' of the 'semi-documentary thrillers'.¹ Furthermore, they also demonstrated the contradictory values involved in the version of realism celebrated by the American left at the time.

If the left celebrated realism as an investigation into, and exposé of, social problems, a position that placed 'faith in professional knowledge', Straw points out that this position was at odds with its equally passionate concern to represent the everyday lives of 'the common people' (2008: 141). The problem here was two-fold. If the latter impulse was supposed to celebrate the lives of 'ordinary' people, the former largely converted those lives into problems to be solved by external intervention. Furthermore, while the *New York Times* critics shared the left's condemnation of films that supposedly glamorized criminals, they were far more engaged by the psychologically deranged criminals who featured in many of these films than in the 'solemn flatness' of the institutional agents who pursue them (2008: 141).

As Straw notes, the heroes of the realist films were not individuals but institutions, a focus that had the effect of 'flattening of character', a 'flattening' that was central to the 'collectivist vision within the institutional thriller' (2008: 139). If this 'collectivist vision' was a product of the progressive coalition (even if it could be appropriated by 'the militarized Cold War state' as this coalition collapsed), it meant that the psychologically deranged criminals who often populated these films offered a stark contrast to the blankness of putative heroes of these films (2008: 139). Consequently, the third section will therefore examine the ways in which critics expressed a preference for the psychopathic criminals of these films over their stylistic pretensions to realism, psychopathic criminals who continued to demonstrate the debt still owed to the horror-thrillers of the early 1940s (Jancovich 2009).

'THE LOWER DEPTHS': PSYCHOLOGY, EXPOSÉ AND THE SIMPLY SORDID

While the *New York Times* had generally been scathing about 'psychological' films during the early 1940s (Jancovich 2010), the newspaper shifted its criteria after *The Lost Weekend*, and began to judge psychological films on the basis of their social significance. It was therefore largely dismissive of films such as *Smash-Up: The Story of a Woman* and was ambivalent about *Possessed*, which was seen as being motivated by a desire for recognition from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts rather than by any genuine concern for the plight of the schizophrenic (see Jancovich 2007). However, the *New York Times* praised *The Snake Pit* as a brave and serious film that showed a real 'sense of responsibility' and provided 'a trenchant revelation of a crying need for better facilities in mental care' (Crowther 1948c: 29). Even a thriller like *The Dark Past* received positive reviews, and the *New York Times* no longer objected to 'the mating of Freud and films' but was pleased 'to report that "The Dark Past" [...] is one of the brighter results of that long association' (A.W. 1948b: 25).

If psychological themes could now be judged positively through their association with realism and social commentary, it was social commentary rather

than realism *per se* that was the dominant value. As a result, while *Crossfire* featured a psychologically disturbed killer, the film was praised as a commentary on racial bigotry:

An unqualified A for effort in bring to the screen a frank and immediate demonstration of the brutality of religious bigotry as it festers and fires ferocity in certain seemingly normal American minds is due to Producers Dore Schary, Adrian Scott and everyone else at RKO who had a hand in the making of 'Crossfire'.

(Crowther 1947e: 19)

As a result, the film was praised for 'lacing this exceedingly thoughtful theme through a grimly fascinating melodrama' (1947e: 19), so that it was not just its 'advances in realistic techniques' that were at issue but also Robert Ryan's performance as the disturbed killer, a figure that combines the psychological killers from earlier horror films with contemporary realism, and is therefore described as 'frighteningly real' (1947e: 19).

Similarly, *No Way Out* also draws on the psychologically disturbed killers of the 1940s horror cycle in its 'violent, melodramatic study of racial prejudice' (T.M.P. 1950a: 23). In this case, the 'the Negro-baiter' is played by Richard Widmark, whose performance is claimed to have 'an electric quality', even though his character 'is too obviously a psychopathic case'. Once again, the film is claimed to be a 'frightening' one that 'shocked an early morning audience into stunned silence and inspired frequent applause'. However, while there were reservations about the 'obviousness' of Widmark's bigot, and an objection that the film 'does not probe causes deeply or offer any prescription for a world of better understanding', it was seen as 'a harsh, outspoken picture with implications', in which the social commentary marked '“No Way Out” an important picture'.

These reviews can therefore be contrasted with the press response to *The Burning Cross*. While its makers are also supposed to 'deserve a full measure of respect for the courage they displayed in boldly attacking the Ku Klux Klan and exposing its bigotry and brutality' (T.M.P. 1948: 19), the film itself is said to have failed as 'a thoughtful and literate contemplation' on the grounds that it 'misses the deeper evil in the subject'. Certainly it is supposed to be 'by and large an honest attempt to accomplish something worthwhile', but its failure to diagnose the deeper causes of racial hatred meant that the film relied on 'manifestations of barbaric physical violence, tarring and feathering of victims, both white and Negro, and other acts of unconscionable sadism and vandalism'.

Given its promotion of social commentary, the *New York Times* often supported leftist thrillers, particularly those associated with Abraham Polonsky, films that were praised for their atmosphere of terror and despair. For example, *Force of Evil* is described as 'a dynamic crime and punishment drama, brilliantly and broadly realised' (B.C. 1948: 16). Although it does not tackle a clearly defined problem such as 'racial hatred', the film is praised as a more broadly critical study of social corruption that has 'some real things to show about the psychology of crime'. However, despite the film's penetrating analysis, the review actually seems far more impressed by its atmosphere. The *New Republic* described the film as 'frightening' (Hatch 1949b: 23), while the *New York Times* saw it as a dark and fateful story that 'ends in death and despair' (B.C. 1948: 16). As a result, despite its reliance on 'material and ideas'

that have 'long since become stale and hackneyed', the film is praised as one that 'gathers suspense and dread' and creates 'a terrible sense of doom'.

Similarly, *Body and Soul* was praised as a film that 'hits an all time high in throat-catching fight films' (Crowther 1947a: 21). While it is claimed to borrow heavily from a range of films, plays and literary fictions, it is also supposed to transcend them due to its realism. It has a 'slashing fidelity to the cold and greedy nature of the fight game', and has been directed with 'an honest regard for human feelings'. However, once again, it is the atmosphere of terror and despair that is supposed to distinguish the story, in which a young fighter finds that 'the fates close inexorably in, until the wraps are torn from his illusions and he finds himself owned, body and soul'.

The shift in critical taste that resulted in this promotion of 'realism' also led to a corresponding derision of fantasy. For example, the *New York Times* dismissed *The Night has a Thousand Eyes* as 'unadulterated hokum' due to its supernatural elements (Crowther 1948g: 38). This film might have been judged to be 'acceptable', if 'the audience were taken aside and told it was just so much nonsense', but in this case the film's crime was supposed to be that 'we are asked to believe that a fellow might really have supernatural insight'. Of course, the complaint is not just about the supernatural elements but also the ways in which they are handled so that the film is accused of trying to 'put over the pretence that it is serious and solemn stuff'. In other words, while both *Force of Evil* and *Body and Soul* were praised for their 'terrible sense of doom' in which 'the fates close inexorably in' on their protagonists, the *New York Times* took exception to the ominous atmosphere of *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes*, a film in which Edward G. Robinson plays 'a figure of tragic proportions, fatefully chained to a crystal ball'.

Even non-supernatural horror-thrillers that featured doomed protagonists were ridiculed if they were deemed to be too fantastic to evaluate in terms of realism. For example, the hero of *D.O.A.* finds himself 'caught up in a web of circumstance that marks him for death' (T.M.P. 1950b: 18). He is 'the victim of "luminous poison", for which there is no antidote' and 'in the few days left him on earth [he] undertakes some remarkable sleuthing to discover the reasons for his impending demise'. This story is described as 'a fantastic tale' that is too 'incredible' to be taken seriously and, despite some 'lively melodramatic sparks', it is therefore dismissed as 'a fairly obvious and plodding recital, involving crime, passion, stolen iridium, gangland beatings and one man's innocent bewilderment'.

While these reviews clearly privileged realism over fantasy, they also make a distinction between those films that had a sense of purpose in their handling of unpleasant materials and those films that were simply sordid, seedy or distasteful. In other words, films that exposed a social problem were justified in using unpleasant materials, while other films were condemned for simply wallowing in the sordid aspects of life with no purpose other than to shock. Of course, there were disagreements over such distinctions and, while the *New York Times* dismissed *Nightmare Alley*, which was said to 'traverse distasteful dramatic ground' (T.M.P. 1947b: 31), both *Time* and the *Nation* praised its daring: James Agee even gained the 'added pleasure of thinking, "Oh, no; they won't have the guts to do that." But they do' (Agee 1947: 510–11). However, even here, it was claimed that this 'hair-raising carnival sideshow' (Anon. 1947b) was only justified due to its 'malign social observation'.

In contrast, there was general critical consensus in the condemnation of *Black Angel*. Certainly, it was explicitly compared to *The Lost Weekend* due to

a character that ‘goes through a couple of drunken bouts of “Lost Weekend” variety’ (T.M.P. 1946: 39). But in this film the drunkenness was supposed to lack purpose and to only enhance an ‘atmosphere’ that is ‘redolent of the lower depths’. Even *The Big Sleep* was described by the *New York Times* as a ‘poisonous picture’ (Crowther 1946: 6) and, for all its tough urban action, it was hardly seen as a realistic film. For some critics, this was not necessarily a problem and Manny Farber clearly relished the film for its ‘surrealist excitement’ and for its ‘fantastic quality’ (1946: 351). Not only did he claim that the film had ‘the feeling of an opium smoker’s fantasy’, but he also continued the identification with horror present in the reviews of the earlier films associated with Chandler, referring to it as a ‘nightmarish affair’ (Jancovich 2009).

The *New York Times* review, however, was a lot less generous, and it not only complained about the seediness of its underworld setting but also claimed that the story made no sense. It therefore wished that ‘somebody had only told us – the script-writers, preferably – just what it is that happens’ in the film (Crowther 1946a: 6), which it described as ‘one of those pictures in which so many cryptic things occur amid so much involved and devious plotting that the mind becomes utterly confused’. It conceded that the writers had managed to capture ‘the tenseness and toughness of Mr. Chandler’s style’ and that ‘the action [is] racy and raw’, but its main complaint was that the film depicts a sordid world that will only be of interest to those fascinated by ‘underworld minutiae’.

‘VERISIMILITUDE RATHER THAN REALISM’: PICTORIAL STYLE, MELODRAMATIC ACTION AND THE SEMI-DOCUMENTARY THRILLER

While newspapers such as the *New York Times* complained that the sordid materials of these films had no purpose other than to shock, their position on realism can best be seen through their reception of the documentary-style thrillers that emerged in 1945, the same year as the critical success of *The Lost Weekend*. The first of these films was *The House on 92nd Street*, which was produced by Louis de Rochemont and directed by Henry Hathaway, and it was described by the *New York Times* as ‘a most successful blending of the documentary and conventional techniques’, that proved that ‘realism can be entertaining, too’ (T.M.P. 1945: 24). The film was therefore claimed to be ‘every inch as inspiring and thrill-packed’ as other action films, and to feature the novelty that its ‘story [has been] re-enacted in the vicinity of the actual locales’ while the ‘illusion of reality is further heightened by the fact that the players are mostly unfamiliar’. There were some complaints about the ‘showmanship ending’ but overall the film was praised as one that showed distinct promise: ‘the film is so remarkable in other respects that this shortcoming can be readily excused.’

However, this sense of authenticity soon wore thin and by the second collaboration between Hathaway and de Rochemont, the *New York Times* was already concerned that, despite the ‘authentic look’ of many of its details, there was a general ‘drift into full-blown melodrama after a neat “documentary” approach’, a drift that eventually reached a conclusion that was ‘undisguised “Hollywood” ’ (Crowther 1947d: 30).

Matters were even worse with Louis de Rochemont’s next production, *Boomerang*, directed by Elia Kazan, which ‘used this realistic method to tell the story of a celebrated murder case – or a modernized image of it’ (Crowther 1947b: 36). If the term ‘modernized’ already suggests a reservation,

the *New York Times* ultimately condemned the film for making significant changes to the original historical events on which it was based, changes that 'cannot be lightly dismissed' in a film that 'pretends to be a document of facts'. The filmmakers were therefore warned that they should 'positively remember that a public story is a public trust'.

However, it was *Iron Curtain* that brought matters to a head and, despite an 'honouring of the record' in this particular case, the *New York Times* took considerable exception to the film. *Iron Curtain*, it was claimed, had 'a patent detachment from authenticity', regardless whether it was faithful to details of actual events or whether it 'pretends to tell [its] story [...] in the crisp "documentary" style that has become so popular in topical films' (Crowther 1948f: 31). For the *New York Times*, this 'detachment' was due to *Iron Curtain's* crude anti-communism, which was not only accused of relying on a 'conventional hiss-the-villain style' of filmmaking but of being 'highly inflammatory'. The film was therefore dismissed not only for being 'excessively sensational' but also for being irresponsible and 'dangerous' given the 'the dis-ease of our times'.

By the time of *Call Northside 777*, then, there were severe qualifications about the 'semi-documentary style' and, while the *New Republic* had often shared an enthusiasm for these films, it was becoming much more critical of them. It therefore pointed out that their techniques were 'developed from the propaganda needs of the recent war' so that they were more concerned with 'verisimilitude rather than realism' (Hatch 1948b: 27). In other words, they were not concerned with genuine social criticism but, on the contrary, were powerfully affirmative of society and its institutions, and featured highly melodramatic oppositions between good and evil. It even went so far as to complain, in its review of *Kiss of Death*, that the film was so enamoured with the FBI that although 'Hoover himself never appears [...] his words spill like Holy Writ from the teletype' (Hatch 1948b: 27).

In much the same way, the *New York Times* criticized *Call Northside 777* for the ways in which historical events were changed or rearranged for dramatic impact, and it claimed that the film's makers were too 'overwhelmed by the mightiness of the press' (Crowther 1948e: 29). In other words, the makers of *Call Northside 777* were so in 'awe' of journalists that they presented them in uncritical and idealized terms, and while the *New York Times* acknowledged that the film was 'a slick piece of modern melodrama in anybody's book', and featured a 'vivid, realistic pictorial style', the film was also claimed to feature so many unconvincing details that one should 'try not to reflect upon them'.

In other words, while these films were seen as displaying some 'social overtones' and even, at times, 'a startling exposé' of justice perverted, they were largely criticized for the superficiality of their 'realism', which was largely seen as being restricted to their pictorial style. These claims were clearest in the review of *The Naked City*, which is described as 'largely superficial, being no more than a conventional "slice of life" – a routine unrevealing episode in the everyday business of the cops' (Crowther 1948b: 17). As a result, while 'the actuality filming of much of the action in New York' might provide 'a definite parochial fascination', the film itself is described as 'a none-too-good whodunit' that culminates in a 'roaring "Hitchcock" end' that is decidedly unrealistic. If the film is therefore supposed to demonstrate its producer Mark Hellinger's 'interest in the seamier side of New York life', this interest is hardly seen as a grim, realistic exposé of social problems but rather as a 'personal romance with the City of New York', a romance that is described as 'one of the most ecstatic love affairs of the modern day'.

In contrast, one film of ‘the documentary-like school of film fiction’ that received a strongly positive review was Robert Siodmak’s *Cry of the City*. If this film was described as a ‘taut and grimly realistic melodrama’ (A.W. 1948a: 32), its distinguishing feature was supposed to be its ‘understatement’, although it was also praised as a relatively unpretentious film in which two men ‘from the same neighbourhood’ find themselves on opposite sides of the law, so that the film is little more than ‘the depiction of a chase through New York’s streets’. Furthermore, if one of these men is a cop, his quarry is another case of pathological psychology, an ‘indomitable and cruel killer’ whose ‘demise [...] is not maudlin but justifiable and plausible’.

If the *New York Times* suggested that *Cry of the City* was superior to other examples of ‘the documentary-like school’, this did not mean that ‘this new “semi-documentary” format’ was considered of no importance (Crowther 1948a: 28). As a result, the *New York Times* was generally complementary about the look of Anthony Mann’s thrillers, although *T-Men* was claimed to follow a ‘pattern [that] is fairly well worn’. If Siodmak was praised for his understatement, Mann was praised for ‘a look of reality not often encountered in such films’ but also for his lack of pretension. Despite its authentic feel, the film was not supposed to be anything more than melodramatic action film and, judged by this criteria, the reviewer argued that Mann ‘has directed the action, of which there is more than enough, with a fine sense of melodramatic timing and a good eye for sharp, severe effects’. As a result, when it comes to action, the film is described as ‘one of the best’.

Similarly, the *New York Times* praised Mann’s uncredited film, *He Walked By Night*, for its “on location” filming procedures [which] contributed more than a modicum of striking realism and authority’, and claimed that one of the film’s key ‘assets’ was its use of ‘the giant pipes of the Los Angeles County Flood Control System as a “set” for the climatic chase’ (A.W. 1949: 15). However, it was even more taken by the film’s ‘coldly scientific killer’, a figure that was strongly associated with the ‘abnormal psychologies’ of the 1940s horror cycle and overtly referred to as a ‘scary killer’ (Hatch 1949a: 30).

PSYCHOS AND SAINTS: FASCINATION, SYMPATHY AND THE LEGACY OF THE 1940s HORROR CYCLE

Consequently, if location shooting and documentary techniques were claimed to contribute to the visual and atmospheric aspects of these pictures, the *New York Times* was often much more interested in their psychologically disturbed killers, killers who represent one of the most significant legacies of the 1940s horror cycle. Indeed, while reviews avoided directly identifying many of these films as horror (although by no means all, see Jancovich 2007), these reviews also provided a more subtle association with horror through the figure of the psychopath. Not only did these figures evoke ‘fright’ and ‘terror’ but they were ‘ghastly’, ‘diabolic’ and ‘eerie’ in ways that ‘chilled’ audiences. In this way, critics also displayed another preference: while they revelled in the exploits of disturbed killers, they objected to those films that started to present criminals as sympathetic. It was one thing to present these criminals as the product of social processes, but they objected to those cases where they were presented as the victims of these processes.

The preference for the killers rather than the realism of these films was particularly clear in the case of *Kiss of Death*. The fact that it ‘was filmed entirely in New York, and mostly in Manhattan’ was said to ensure that its

'atmosphere is authentic' and that it has an 'authority' that contributes to 'the overall effect of the picture' (T.M.P. 1947a: 28). Nonetheless, the review is much more excited by the presence of Richard Widmark, who is described as 'a real find.', and one that 'runs away with all the acting honours'. In the film, Widmark played a 'psychopathic killer', Udo, and the rest of the press shared the *New York Times*' fascination with 'pathological Udo' (Anon. 1947). The *New Republic* relished the 'white, ghastly smile' of this 'slightly built, sadistic killer' (O'Hara 1947: 39), while both *Variety* and *Time* praised the 'fright and suspense of the closing sequences' (Anon. 1947, www.time.com) when the hero and his family 'live in terror' of reprisal from Udo (Fisk 1947: 15).

If the *New York Times* was relieved that for 'once sympathy is piled on the side of the man who recognizes the error of his ways and is willing to make peace with society', it was clearly far more fascinated by Widmark's killer than Mature's 'stoolie', and the following year it was positively effusive about Widmark's return in *The Street with No Name*:

Ever since Richard Widmark brought a fresh breath of poison to the role of a viciously psychopathic gangster in last year's 'Kiss of Death,' the gun-film cognoscenti have been waiting to catch this boy as another modern desperado with that wicked gleam in his eye.

(Crowther 1948d: 26)

However, it warns those 'who were chilled by this young fellow in his first homicidal exercise' that they may 'be just a shade disappointed in his current appearance', an appearance in which he is 'less malignant, less expressive of lunacy and his previous hoodlum mannerism have been considerably toned down'. The reviewer therefore misses the 'diabolic grimace' and 'eerily sadistic laugh' of his previous performance, although it is noted that the changes were appropriate, given that role that Widmark plays, a role in which he 'has ascended the scale of underworld prestige and authority'.

Interestingly, the review barely mentions that the film 'is done in the currently popular "documentary" style' and is unconcerned by its 'conventional pattern and its melodramatic clichés'. Instead, the reviewer describes the film as a 'vivid and generally suspenseful crime film' that is distinguished by Widmark, who 'still does a colourful job'. Furthermore, if the references to his performances in *Kiss of Death* seemed positive, the review turns positively adoring:

No actor yet has managed to move in the furtive, feline way that this fellow does, and few have shown us such cruelty in the face. His timing and tension are perfect and the timber of his voice is that of filthy water going down a sewer. Hand it to Mr. Widmark; he still manages an interesting mugg.

Furthermore, if the *New York Times* often complained about films that presented criminals as sympathetic, it was clearly far more interested in Widmark's 'clever ruthless gangleader' than with the film's putative hero, a 'Federal agent who worms his way into the mob': Mark Stevens, who plays the hero, barely gets a mention other than the recognition that he 'does a sturdy, flexible job'.

As should be clear, then, the *New York Times* liked its killers to be psychologically twisted, and it is therefore no surprise that the newspaper delighted at the prospect of James Cagney in *White Heat*. It did express concern that

‘its impact upon the emotions of the unstable or impressionable is incalculable’ (Crowther 1949b: 7), but this seems to be a largely tongue-in-cheek response to those who would censor the film. As a result, while the review acknowledged that *White Heat* was a ‘cruelly vicious film’, it could also ‘readily understand’ the ‘eagerness’ with which ‘thriller fans’ will respond to ‘one of the most explosive pictures that he or anyone has ever played’. As the review puts it, ‘there no blinking the obvious: the Warners have pulled all the stops in making this picture the acme of the gangster-prison film’ and, when they called it *White Heat*, they ‘weren’t kidding’ and ‘might have gone several points higher in the verbal caloric scale and still have understated the thermal intensity of this film’.

Again, the focus of the review is upon the psychotic criminal and Cagney’s performance was described as a ‘brilliantly graphic’ one that ‘achieves the fascination of a brilliant bull-fighter at work, deftly engaged in the business of doing violence with economy and grace’. As with Widmark, the review even celebrates the physicality of his performance, in which his ‘movements are supple and electric, his words are as swift and sharp as swords and his whole manner carries the conviction of confidence, courage and power’. It therefore savours his violence and encourages others to do so, too:

If you think Mr. Cagney looked brutal when he punched Mae Clark in the face with a ripe grapefruit in ‘Public Enemy,’ you should see the sweet and loving things he does to handsome Virginia Mayo [...] Or you should scan the exquisite indifference with which he ‘lets a little air’ into the trunk compartment of an auto in which is locked a treacherous ‘friend’.

However, the review is far less interested in the psychological realism of Cagney’s psychopathic killer than its ‘frightening’ effectiveness, and it even referred to his psychologically troubled relationship with his mother as the ‘weakest’ element in the film. While the film presents Cagney’s character as ‘a “mama’s boy” ’ and presents this as ‘the motivation for his cruelty’, the review saw his psychological problems as simply a ‘convenient’ but ‘not entirely convincing’ motivation. However, it hardly seemed to worry about this element, and argued that ‘impeccable veracity is not the first purpose of this film. It was made to excite and amuse people. And that it most certainly does.’ In other words, if the realism of the documentary style was only seen as a surface gloss that usually disguised a melodramatic core, *White Heat* was judged as an unapologetic melodrama that was better for its honesty.

If the *New York Times* was happy to celebrate the violent exploits of these vicious psychological killers, it was far less comfortable with the films that presented their criminals as sympathetic or even as simply routine professionals. For example, its review of the prison drama *Brute Force* was unconvinced by the film’s suggestion that ‘the average American convict is so cruelly victimized as are the principal inmates’ in this film (Crowther 1947c: 16), and it scoffs at the idea that the prisoners in the film are ‘all-round good fellows who deserve our more generous regard’ and that the hero ‘is a gent who apparently took to banditry in order to support an invalid sweetheart’. Moreover, if it found the angelic hero unconvincing, it finds the villainous warden laughable: ‘he is a cold and scheming sadist who thirsts for power over men, who beats a prisoner to the tearful strains of Wagner and bears a fearful resemblance to – you know who!’ However, if it

found the ‘inferential parallel [...] to a concentration camp’ difficult to accept, it did see ‘Jules Dassin’s steel-sprung direction’ as a positive feature that ‘keeps the whole thing appropriately taut’. It therefore recommended *Brute Force* as a ‘deliberately brutal film’ that would please those with ‘a fancy for violence and rough stuff on the screen’.

Similarly, *They Live by Night* is claimed to have ‘the failing of waxing sentimental over crime’ and to be ‘misguided in its sympathies for a youthful crook’ (Crowther 1949a: 33). However, these weaknesses are supposedly compensated by its director’s ‘sensitive juxtaposing of his actors against highways, tourist camps and bleak motels [which] makes for a vivid comprehension of an intimate personal drama in hopeless flight’.

However, the *New York Times* was far less positive about *The Asphalt Jungle* and described it as a ‘repulsive exhibition’ (Crowther 1950: 29) that not only ‘enjoins the hypnotized audience to [...] actually sympathize with [the] personal griefs’ of ‘a bunch of crooks’, but also features ‘a double-crossing cop’ as the ‘vilest creature in the picture’, and even relegates the ‘decent’ cops to mere ‘antagonists’. Furthermore, while the review praised the technical aspects of the production, the film was not seen as being motivated by the desire to ‘expose any particular canker of society’. Consequently, the *New York Times* accused its lack of social commentary of not simply being amoral but of being immoral.

CONCLUSION

As we can see, then, the critical shift in values that occurred during the mid-1940s not only privileged realism, but also distanced the thriller from horror. In the process, horror became more associated with the fantastic, while the thriller became associated with realism, although the realism of specific thrillers was often in question, and the ‘semi-documentary thriller’ as a whole was often accused of using visual techniques to disguise fantastic materials. In other words, films were not judged as realistic simply on the basis of their verisimilitude; and realism was expected to involve a serious commentary upon contemporary social problems.

However, while some films were criticized as sensational exercises that had no purpose other than to shock, others films were praised as unpretentious efforts that made no claim to be anything more than mere entertainments. Indeed even publications such as the *New York Times*, which had a considerable investment in realism during the period, were clearly more excited by films that featured terrifying psychopathic killers, figures who were the direct legacy of the 1940s horror cycle, than they were by many supposedly realist films. As a result, while the *New York Times* explicitly rejected films that seemed to replicate the more fantastic elements of the 1940s horror cycle, it was still positively delighted by the figure of the psychologically disturbed killer who had been so central to that cycle, but although they tended to prefer films in which these figures were clearly placed within a more ‘realistic’ context and were not presented sympathetically as the *victim* of contemporary social problems.

Furthermore, this celebration also reveals a tension in the cultural politics of the *New York Times* film critics during this period. If many of the realist thrillers were the product of a ‘collectivist vision’ (in which institutions were the real heroes rather than the individual agents who represented these institutions), the *New York Times* critics demonstrate little sense of engagement with the drama of these institutions and were far more drawn to the

psychologically deranged killers of these narratives. Furthermore, while the *New York Times* had frequently complained that the psychological killers of the 1940s horror cycle lacked any credible motivation, their position had substantially changed by the late 1940s, by which time the *New York Times* critics seemed to have little interest in whether the psychological motivation of these killers was credible. They may have officially supported the 'collectivist vision' around which these narratives were organized but their celebration of these criminals tells a very different story.

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