

A TAXONOMY OF AMERICAN CRIME FILM THEMES*

Department of Psychology, Grinnell College

HARRY A. GRACE

A. INTRODUCTION

This study classifies the crime themes of American feature films according to their developmental periods. The purpose of this taxonomic study is to provide greater insight into the American culture by understanding its mass media of communication. The anthropologist has shown the importance of art objects in the analysis of primitive cultures. The sociologist studies the channels of communication as a source of insight into the structure of society. The psychologist may make use of the art products of a people in order to probe the dynamics of their character.

Three criteria are necessary in order to classify the crime themes of the American feature film. The first, most obvious question, is, "Does the theme emphasize the rôle of good or evil?" A cursory study of the film will indicate that themes have fluctuated between these two poles. This question is necessary but not sufficient for an understanding of the themes. A second question focuses upon the central characters of the film and asks, "Do the characters reflect a personal or an impersonal attitude toward crime?" Crime film themes may be classified as to whether characters portray a detached, impersonal manner, or are highly ego-involved in their activities. These two criteria could account for the films up until World War II. Since that time a third value has entered the field and must be included if we are to study the entire history of the film. This question asks, "Are the characters agents or creators of the incidents in which they are involved?" It becomes obvious to a student of the film that there has been a shift from agent to creator status in recent years.

The answers to these three questions classify a theme into one of eight categories. Six of these categories reflect a sequence of crime film themes from the birth of the cinema to the present day. Two categories suggest the possible future development of these themes.

In the following sections we shall present each category, discuss its time

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period, cite examples from representative films, and summarize the major values covered by the category. Of basic importance for an understanding of the dynamics of each category will be the analysis of the transition from one category to the next. Finally, we shall summarize the taxonomic approach we have taken and indicate the future development which might be expected.

B. THE IMPERSONAL AGENT OF GOOD

The time is prior to World War I. The Victorian Era was extended into the early narrative film largely through the efforts of D. W. Griffith. The star who epitomized this tradition was William S. Hart. His major vehicle was the melodramatic western. Douglas Fairbanks' many characterizations belong to the later stages of this era. The hero moved through his actions without passion. More correctly, he was moved as a pawn of "good." He was a defender of the faith who acted without reward of any personal kind, although he usually did receive a reward. Good was behind the scene at all times. In a crisis good, not the hero, won the day. The guilty confessed of their own accord, the innocent were cleared of all implications of guilt. While the hero was a symbol, perhaps of Sir Galahad, the villain also showed a spark of godliness. The war was with evil conditions and was fought by good forces of which the hero was but a part.

C. THE TRANSITION FROM GOOD TO EVIL

World War I impinged upon the cinema in no uncertain way. The "Hun" made a good target for the camera and the era of prohibition ushered in a convenient theme for presenting the forces of evil. Women play an important part in the transition from good to evil. It is much the same as the fall from the Garden of Eden. The shift in emphasis from good to evil is accompanied by a change from male to female leading characters.

D. THE IMPERSONAL AGENT OF EVIL

There really were no villains, but only conditions which lead one astray. The individual's behavior was offensive, but he was not so himself. He was bewitched. We were called to strike at a world which allowed such things to arise, but to preserve the persons who were merely the vehicles of crime.

Prostitution and infidelity played the greatest rôles in this category. The direction of Eric von Stroheim in *Greed*, *Foolish Wives*, and *Blind Husbands* portrayed the theme most cogently. Gloria Swanson acted the prostitute's rôle in *Queen Kelly* and *Sadie Thompson*. Edna Purviance showed

the problems of a misled girl in Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris*. Pola Negri, the vamp, portrayed the same theme in *Forbidden Paradise*.

The period lasted from World War I until the early 1930's. During this time many of the great women stars emerged in these rôles; Constance Bennett, Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, to mention a few. The very title, *They Gave Him a Gun*, indicates the blame for criminality to be in society (they) and not in the individual. The major character acted mechanically, without pleasure, relief, or any major sign of emotion.

E. THE TRANSITION FROM IMPERSONAL TO PERSONAL BEHAVIOR

By 1930 many factors were affecting the cinema. We had entered a depression, economically and psychologically. Sound had become popular and movies had to appeal to this new sense. The star system had been established and we wanted to see familiar faces again and again. Prohibition was over and could be autopsied. Finally, from the standpoint of the internal cinema world, macabre films had been emanating from Central Europe and had challenged America.

With the influx of these ghoulish themes to America, crime themes underwent an important transition from an impersonal to a personal emphasis on behavior. We continued our interest in evil, but now the criminal took a personal delight in his crime. Excluding the world conditions which we have mentioned, and which may well have been the basis for the macabre European themes, let us mention some of the foreign films of this age.

Every film analyst who mentions the grotesque or the great in cinema art must begin with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. This film was made in 1919 and is still seen today. It is the ghoulish tale of a man (Conrad Veidt's rôle) who arises from the dead. Veidt never seemed to play another rôle, but rather feebly recreated this one in *The Student of Prague*, *Waxworks*, and the *Hands of Orlac*. In the latter, for example, a pianist has the hands of a murderer grafted in place of his own. This differs little from the Boris Karloff vehicle, *Frankenstein*, produced here in 1931. Frederick March's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* appeared the following year. In each of these we see the delight with which the major character goes about his crimes. In spite of this personal involvement, we are aware that the behavior is not his alone, but that he is a pawn, albeit a willing pawn, of evil. There was purpose in his behavior, there was satisfaction. Freud had replaced Victoria in the cinema.

F. THE PERSONAL AGENT OF EVIL

The emphasis on crime films continued. But evil was now enjoyable. One felt that the criminal could escape his life if he really cared to. There was doubt as to whether the core of the person were actually good, or evil. No longer could one rely upon confession or admission of guilt. The superego was too weak. Cosmic forces were still behind the characters, but the characters had become personally attached to their work. The villain was vengeful; he swore a *vendetta*. It was no longer a matter of cops and robbers, but of a copper and a robber. In fact, the lines were no longer so clearly drawn. No more cowboys and Indians, but cowboys and cowboys, good and bad. This period of a little bit of evil in the best of us paralleled the "debunking" era of columnists and commentators.

Mae West ushered out the mislabeled "flapper" of the 1920's and introduced the hedonistic "moll" of the 1930's. Even so, women rapidly lost their leading rôles to men. Men with their staccato voices, clipped speech, and vulgar characterizations could get much further in this medium.

The list of films which stress the personal agent of evil is so extensive that any sampling of it is admittedly a distortion. Likewise, the actors who rose in this period are among the most valued stars of today. With this selective factor in mind, let us recall a few of these films: *Doorway to Hell* (James Cagney, Lew Ayres, Joan Blondell), *The Big House* (Wallace Beery, Chester Morris, Robert Montgomery), *Smart Money* (Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney), *City Streets* (Gary Cooper, Sylvia Sydney), *Quick Millions* (Spencer Tracy), *Taxi* (James Cagney, Loretta Young), all of 1930-1932. In *Public Enemy* (Jean Harlow, Joan Blondell), Cagney begins the era of roughing up women by pushing a grapefruit in his mistress' face. Edward G. Robinson's portrayal of *Little Caesar* (Glenda Farrell, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.) with his facial contortions and snarling attitude, supported by the staccato fire of machine guns and the screeching of automobile tires was to become the demand of the period. *Scarface* (Paul Muni, George Raft, Boris Karloff, Ann Dvorak), portraying the St. Valentine's Day massacre, was vengeance at its most personal extreme.

These films pictured gangsterism in full and emphasized beyond the shadow of a doubt that crime did pay. Crime was fun, satisfying, passionate, and personal. Early films stressed the isolated criminal, the public enemy. But these later films laid their emphasis upon the gang, the cameraderie of criminals. Perhaps the ego-involvement shown by the criminal in these films was a function of his group affiliation. Criminality was found to lie

at the base of all fields of activity: law (*The Mouthpiece*), the judiciary (*Night Court*), the press (*Scandal Sheet*, *The Front Page*, *Five-Star Final*), sports (*All-American*, *Rackety Rax*). In Adam's fall, so fell we all; the hands of Orlac were upon us.

G. THE TRANSITION FROM EVIL TO GOOD

Late in the 1930's a number of changes were emerging. There had been a general revulsion against the debunkers and the crime-centered films. The depression seemed to be coming to an end as the world began to war. By the middle of World War II the shift from evil to good had come. There had been some indications of this before the United States entered the war. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Gary Cooper), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (James Stewart), and *Meet John Doe* (Gary Cooper) were American films which stressed the good rather than the evil. They were not directly in the field of crime, because the crime of the 1940's was political in nature. The gangster was sterile compared to the resistance hero. *The Moon is Down* was the prototype of the new hero, the resistance fighter of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Gary Cooper, Ingrid Bergman). Women were again important in this transition for many of the themes suggest the defense of womanhood against the rapacious foe, the personal agent of evil.

H. THE PERSONAL AGENT OF GOOD

The Allied soldier represents this characterization. From goods, to hoods, to good hoods is the story thus far. In effect, the film industry "drafted" the gangsters of the 1930's and put them to work on the side of the United Nations. They remained personal in their attacks, they hated the enemy with a vengeance. They employed all of their wiliness, their staccato speech, their cursory dealings with women which had represented their criminal rôles of the previous era. But now they did all of these things legitimately, as part of the good.

Gary Cooper fought as a partisan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Paul (Scarface, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*) Muni also played an underground leader. Alan (This Gun for Hire) Ladd became the intrepid espionage agent in *OSS*, the private detective of *Whispering Smith*, the fearless reporter of *Chicago Deadline*, and the officer of *Saigon* and *Red Mountain*. John Garfield gained fame as a gangster in many early films, and became a fighter for the good in *Underground*, *Air Force*, *Destination Tokyo*, and *Gentleman's Agreement*. The pattern is blatant in the cinema career of Humphrey Bogart. After hood rôles in *High Sierra*, *The Petrified*

Forest, and many others, he became the champion of good in *The Maltese Falcon*, *Action in the North Atlantic*, *Casablanca*, *To Have and Have Not*, *Tokyo Joe*, *Sirocco*, *The African Queen*, *The Enforcer*, and *Deadline U. S. A.* The actions of these stars as agents of good did not change in kind from those which they so clearly portrayed as gangsters in their earlier film careers.

When peace came in 1945 these actors and their counterparts continued to play the rôles of good hoods. Now the guise was that of the "private eye." As such one had to work as often against the law as for it. They took their work seriously, and a new crop of Robert Mitchum's (*The Red Pony*), Kirk Douglas' (*Detective Story*), and Richard Widmark's (*Yellow Sky*) vintage emerged. The standard pattern today is for an actor to play a hood rôle, then the rôle of a serviceman, and finally that of a personal agent of good.

He hits where it hurts, below the belt, if possible. He gives no quarter and takes none. He goes out to *find* trouble and may even start it himself. He ambushes, sabotages, spies, cheats, lies, attacks the unarmed and infirm. kills women and children, but he is working for our side. Can we complain? The major private detectives on radio and television today are cinema ex-mobsters of the 1930's: Dan Duryea, William Gargan, Alan Ladd, Chester Morris, Lloyd Nolan, George Raft, Lee Tracy, to mention a few.

I. THE TRANSITION FROM AGENT TO CREATOR

A thin line separates the personal agent from the rôle of creator. The defeats early in World War II and the development of a push-button idea of warfare led us to characterize our enemy as a creator of evil. We may not have liked the *Übermensch* ideas of Hitler, but we did grant him his point. We portrayed him as a superman. The enemy was everywhere. The enemy was uncannily wise. The enemy was all-powerful. Attributes of omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence, which once we had attributed only to God, we now ascribed to a demi-god. The enemy, the criminal, was no longer the agent of evil, of the devil, he *was* evil, the Devil himself.

J. THE PERSONAL CREATOR OF GOOD OR EVIL

The saying goes that "it takes one to fight one," and so we supplied ourselves with *Superman* to fight the *Übermensch*. It is unfortunate that we compartmentalized this concept of a superman to a comic strip character, for in the crime film themes we find these characterizations held by persons whose physical appearance is not at all eerie. We are so close to this trend,

actually in the transitional period between agency and creation, that it is difficult to gain proper perspective upon it.

Citizen Kane (Orson Welles), *All the King's Men* (Broderick Crawford), and *The Third Man* (Joseph Cotten, Orson Welles) are films which attribute to the central character the powers of life and death which were formerly reserved for the Creator. Modern European films also emphasize this rôle. Nowhere is this more poignantly portrayed than in the James Stewart vehicle *Rope*. Here a teacher exhorts his pupils that the intelligentsia should have the power of life and death over others. The students take him at his word and commit murder. The teacher goes unscathed.

It is difficult and perhaps impossible to divorce this emphasis upon a superman from current political developments. Difficult, for the cinema crime themes find their parallel in modern society where men glibly judge their fellows with the ultimate authority of a creator. Impossible, for so many crime films today center about political themes. The creator of evil has shifted from the Devil to Hitler, from Hitler to Stalin, and only the script writer knows whom the next will be. The powers attributed to the characters who portray evil or good are literally phenomenal. The fictitious *Batman-Superman* types have become embodied in flesh and blood humans. Anthropomorphism is one thing, *theomorphism* quite another. Today our crime themes do not stress God or the Devil in man or as man, but man as God or the Devil.

K. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We have presented a taxonomy by which the themes of crime films may be classified. The classifications involve the answers to three questions. The emphasis upon good or evil, the impersonal or personal attitudes of the protagonist, and the nature of the protagonist as agent or creator.

Two categories have not as yet appeared in the themes, the impersonal creator of good and the impersonal creator of evil. These two imply a Greek concept of creation, i.e., an impersonal creator, a general law, in contrast to the anthropomorphic creator of the Hebrew tradition. Only a fundamental change in our values will permit the introduction of these categories into the art of the cinema.

The transitions from category to category have been of particular concern. These transitions parallel very closely the major changes in the American culture over the last half-century. Wars and the depression have had their effects. Changes in themes also occur as a function of changes in the medium itself; e.g., sound in the 1930's. The stature of heroes may change while the

behavior of the actor remains constant, in which case ends and means, content and act become confused. The rôles attributed to the sexes also shift in periods of transition. Many of the changes in film themes entail alterations in sex-typing.

The cinema offers one source of insight into the social dynamics of our culture. The proposed taxonomy suggests some fundamental differences among film themes.

Department of Psychology
Grinnell College
Grinnell, Iowa