

UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY

HELL THROUGH THE SIDEWALKS:
THE AMERICAN URBAN CRISIS IN HOLLYWOOD FILM

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Introduction:

The 1960s marked the beginning of deeply turbulent times in the United States. In 1961, crime rates began a sharp climb—150% in the 1960s alone—that continued for the next three decades.¹ By the end of the 1960s, riots had erupted in dozens of U.S. cities, reaching an apex in the summer of 1967. By 1975, more than half of the nation’s urban population told Gallup pollsters that they felt afraid to go out alone at night within one mile of their homes.² City governments seemed ill-equipped to handle the crisis and struggled to maintain basic public services. The “white flight” to the suburbs of the immediate post-war period had robbed cities of the revenue of their most affluent citizens and businesses. Those left behind, segregated economically and racially, became disgruntled and desperate. This made them susceptible to the radical voices of the Black Power movement as well as more likely to be involved in crime, drugs, and prostitution. The sum of these developments left many with the impression that American cities were in a state of decay and on course towards total collapse. Scholars, policymakers, and politicians all stepped forward, offering explanations and calling for action. No obvious or even satisfactory solution was forthcoming. Some called for revamped social spending programs, some for a police crackdown, and others for everything in between. A confused shouting match on Capitol Hill only added to the impression that the authorities were losing their grip.³

¹ J. Edgar Hoover, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Press, 1968, 2.

Patrick L. Gray, III, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Press, 1972, 2.

² George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972-1977*. Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978, 532.

³ Isenberg, Irwin. *The City in Crisis*. New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1968, 72-75.

During this same time, Hollywood underwent dramatic changes of its own. Films of the 1970s began to be more socially conscious. Filmmakers became ever more daring, addressing controversial and troubling topics in ever more gory detail. As William J. Palmer, author of *The Films of the Seventies*, states, "films of the seventies tend more to the political, the historical and especially the self-referentially symbolic."⁴ This was not only possible but necessary, as film audiences in the 1960s and 1970s consisted more and more of young people. The baby-boomers were growing tired of the old Hollywood formula, and studios were becoming increasingly adventurous in an attempt to capture such a fickle and unpredictable market.⁵ At the helm was a new generation of filmmakers better educated in the art of filmmaking. This education exposed them to the dark, existential film noir genre of the 1940s and the more popular western of the 1950s and 1960s.⁶ Both of these genres were all but gone by the 1970s, with Robert Ottoson, author of *A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir*, dating the age of that genre from 1940-1958⁷ and Pauline Kael declaring in *The New Yorker* in 1974 that "A few more Westerns may still straggle in, but the Western is dead."⁸ However, the influence of those films on filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s is undeniable and figures heavily into the urban crisis genre.

This paper will establish what such films have to say about this troubled time in American history and what implications their popularity, both at the time of their release and today, has for American politics and society at large. I will begin by defining and

⁴ William J. Palmer, *The Films of the Seventies*. Meuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1987, 7.

⁵ Peter Lev, *American Films of the 70s*. University of Texas Press, 2000, xvii.

⁶ Friedman, Lawrence S. *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese*. New York: Continuum, 1998, 7-19.

⁷ Robert Ottoson, *A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir, 1940-1958*. Meuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1981.

⁸ John H. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film*. University of Illinois Press, 1985.

providing a brief overview of the urban crisis that occurred in America between 1961 and 1991. This will include discussions on white flight, poverty, riots, crime, and public perception. Having provided the socio-political context, I will then explore how these films build on the western and film noir to create a unique genre of urban crisis cinema. After providing a brief explanation of my methodology for selecting films to study, I will analyze nine films produced during this period that deal with the urban crisis as. This analysis will consist of an examination of the fears presented in these films through the villains and the settings and the solutions presented through the heroes. These films paralleled the political debate over the problems and solutions of the urban crisis, using a style that fused film noir and the western. Finally, I will draw conclusions on what the treatment of the urban crisis in these films means for American social history of the 1970s and 1980s.

Crisis in Urban America

Before the films themselves can be examined, we must first explore the historic events that unfolded during the time of their production and release. The American urban crisis was and continues to be the subject of much debate. How does one define it? When did it start? When did it end? What were the causes? These are the questions scholars and policymakers have asked and continue to ask to this day. Wendell E. Pritchett, in his article “Which Urban Crisis?,” notes that:

In the early 1960s, most urban policymakers believed that the problems of “metropolitan growth”—traffic congestion, loss of open space, and inefficient government—were the most pressing concerns. Notably absent from their discourse was a focus on racial change within American cities. However, urban violence in the mid-1960s shifted attention to the “inner city.”⁹

⁹ Wendell E Pritchett, “Which Urban Crisis? : Regionalism, Race, and Urban Policy, 1960-1974.” *Journal of Urban History* vol. 34 no. 2 266-286 (2008)

Thus, we are faced with a “competing and changing understandings of urban problems.” Additional “growth” related problems could include the threatening of such basic needs as sanitation, food, shelter, and security to such an extent as to cause widespread anxiety in an urban populace. Other indicators of an urban crisis are signs of physical decay such as decrepit buildings, graffiti, and litter. I will define the American urban crisis as the period between 1961, when index crime rates per 100,000 inhabitants began to increase dramatically, and 1991, when those rates finally began to decrease. These index crime statistics are the best empirical indicators of an urban crisis in America. Additionally, these years also represent a time when American cities exhibited, continually or episodically, all the other more qualitative hallmarks of urban crisis.

White Flight

The first domino to fall was an economic one. After the Second World War, a blossoming luxury items market brought a new standard of living to Americans, a standard that included the automobile. Those with even modest means could afford one, some two or more. The automobile offered comfort and convenience that buses and rail lines simply could not match.¹⁰ The rapid increase in ease and affordability in transportation meant that the workplace and the home no longer needed to be physically proximate to one another or linked by mass transit lines. Now that the same objective could be met at further distances, individuals with the means left the city for the cheap, open land that became the American suburbs. Facilitating the increasing proliferation of automobiles was the construction and expansion of the interstate highway system, which began in the late 1950s. This system made it easy to bypass the major city centers for the

¹⁰ Dom Nozzi. *Road to Ruin*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003, 1-2.

open spaces of the suburbs. In the cities, “slum” housing was torn down in the name of urban renewal, providing interstate highway access and parking for those commuting from a city’s periphery.¹¹

The ease and affordability of transportation led to a housing boom that literally paved the way for the exodus of white Americans from the urban centers. New Deal agencies like the Homeowners Loan Corporation, the Federal Housing Administration, and the Veterans Administration placed emphasis on and created incentives for developing land outside the cities. The discriminatory policies built into these new housing developments, both legal and informal, prevented African-Americans from participating.¹² Some cities made laws requiring African-Americans to get permission from whites to move into a neighborhood. When such legal measures failed, improvement associations and protective leagues created race-restrictive covenants and gentlemen’s agreements.¹³ The National Association of Real Estate Boards (now known as the National Association of Realtors) advised real estate agents to prevent African-Americans from living in new suburban white neighborhoods, considering it a form of “blight.”¹⁴ Homeowners associations created yet another check by controlling the details of what sort of housing could be built within their domain. These steps translated into rigid economic segregation. Members of these elite communities not only wished to keep those of more modest means from moving in, but were also very reluctant to pay taxes that went to benefit such persons. Instead, they paid large sums to their homeowners’

¹¹ Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York: North Point Press, 2001, 153.

¹² Eric Avila. “Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight.” *Journal of Urban History* 31 (2004): 3-10, 6.

¹³ Stephen Grant Meyer. *As Long as They Don’t Move Next Door*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000, 30.

¹⁴ Avila, “Popular Culture,” 7.

association, which promised to keep their property values high by blocking undesirable neighbors. Such a system is self-sustaining. Children growing up in such a homogenous environment are unlikely to develop a strong empathy for the underprivileged.¹⁵

With more and more skilled workers living in the suburbs, it was not long until businesses moved with them.¹⁶ The federal government also had a hand in the decentralizing of American industry, providing incentives to businesses to develop land outside major cities.¹⁷ This meant that the vast majority of new jobs created in America after 1947 have been located in suburban areas.¹⁸

Left Behind

Those that remained in the inner city faced tough economic circumstances. As the more affluent population moved en masse beyond the borders of the city, its income and taxes went with it to developing the new territory. Deprived of people, business patronage, and tax revenue for municipal services, the urban cores of American cities began to rot. The new emphasis for city planners was automotive rather than residential. Cities were redesigned to accommodate traffic patterns and parking, the aspects of the city most notable to middle class suburban commuters.¹⁹ Most of those left behind, often African-Americans, fell into the category of “the working poor,” those that, while employed, lived below the poverty line.²⁰ Their jobs consisted largely of menial labor tasks. As more and more of these jobs became mechanized, the demand for unskilled

¹⁵ Duany, *Suburban Nation*, 43-45.

¹⁶ Richard H Stephens. *National Urban Problems*. Washington, D.C.: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, 1975, 9-11.

¹⁷ Avila, “Popular Culture,” 4.

¹⁸ Stephens, *National Urban Problems*, 2.

¹⁹ Duany, *Suburban Nation*, 159-160.

²⁰ Stephens, *National Urban Problems*, 2.

workers diminished.²¹ Not only could the left-behinds not contribute substantially to the tax base, they also represented an increased draw from that system through various welfare programs. Escape from these conditions was a difficult task. Improving one's lot in life required gaining additional skills and education. Even then, the higher-paying jobs were now often located outside the city. With the discriminatory policies and attitudes in the workplace and housing markets, African-Americans that could meet all these criteria were nonetheless barred. The result was inner city slums whose largely African-American population found themselves in an economic snare designed to prevent them from achieving middle-class status that so many of their white counterparts enjoyed.

Riots

This situation could only persist for so long. In the urban context, the judicial and legislative victories won by the African-American community in the 1950s and 1960s only went so far. While the new laws promised to improve civil rights, de facto segregation and discrimination continued unabated. Worse, they did little to resolve the underlying economic problems of the inner city poor. African-Americans of the inner city continued to struggle with unemployment or underemployment, conditions that greatly reduced an individual's attachment to society, as well as the capacity for a stable family life. To quote Daniel P. Moynihan, "In America, what you do is what you are: to do nothing is to be nothing; to do little is to be little." In 1966, the average African-American earned fifty-eight percent of the average white citizen's income.²²

Between the Birmingham riots in the spring of 1963 and those following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, 239 separate riots involving 200,000

²¹ Isenberg, *The City in Crisis*, 29.

²² Otto Kerner. *The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (The New York Times Edition). New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc. 1968, 252.

participants caused 8,000 injuries and 190 deaths.²³ The Los Angeles Watts riots in 1965 alone destroyed 200 buildings and damaged another six hundred, with total property damage estimated at \$45 million. The Detroit riots in 1967 cost another \$36 million, with 1,300 buildings damaged or destroyed and 2,700 businesses looted.²⁴

A survey of residents from poor neighborhoods in Cleveland just months after riots occurred there in 1966 found that rising expectations about the quality of life, perceptions of deprivation, and downward mobility correlated with approval of protest activities, including rioting.²⁵ In Omaha, seventy-eight percent of rioters arrested after the 1966 riots in that city identified “difficulty and repeated disappointment in seeking satisfactory and continuing employment” as the reason for their behavior.²⁶ These figures are indicative of an urban underclass, many of them African-Americans, that was painfully aware of the disconnect between itself and the white suburbanites.

By the later 1960s, African-American activists, such as Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown, held the ear of these disenfranchised masses of African-Americans. In their speeches, riots became rebellions, and the rioters became freedom fighters. These Black Power advocates did not call for social integration. Instead, they encouraged the idea of maintaining separation from whites. African-Americans did not, in their opinion, need to ask for concessions from whites. Their solution was one of military victory over an enemy.²⁷ This extremist dialogue was exemplified by the words from the head of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Cambridge, Maryland, “Burn

²³ Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America*. Indiana University Press, 1996, 158.

²⁴ Mike Wright. *What They Didn't Teach You About the 60s*. Novato, CA: Presido Press, Inc. 2001., 40-45.

²⁵ Bowen, Masotti. *Riots and Rebellion*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc. 1968, 199.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 238.

²⁷ Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African-American Identity*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, 124-127.

this town down...when you tear down the white man, brother, you are hitting him in the money. Don't love him to death. Shoot him to death."²⁸ SNCC, along with other African-American advocacy groups like the Congress on Racial Equality, took to a more radical line after the Civil Rights Movement failed to deliver on its promises.²⁹ If the African-American community was not being heard by "whitey," then its actions would certainly be noticed.³⁰ These men found a very receptive audience. The normal social safeguards against violent protest were fast eroding. Rioters interviewed after the 1966 Omaha riots had little fear of arrest. Most had been arrested before, and those that had not said they fully expected to be sooner or later. They displayed no faith that orderly social change was a viable option.³¹

Moderate African-American leaders tried desperately to quell the violence. In 1967, the head of the Urban League in Washington, D.C. called the riots a "low form of communication by people who seek to get a response from a society that seems to be deaf to their needs."³² The Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People were the leading moderate African-American advocacy groups. While such moderate voices recognized the plight of the protestors, they also lamented the effects the riots were having, doing most of their damage to African-American neighborhoods and to the African-American image. These groups continued to advocate a peaceful and legal means of obtaining justice for the African-American community. However, the disappointing returns from the Civil Rights Movement turned the tide

²⁸ Isenberg, *The City in Crisis*, 38.

²⁹ Ogbar, *Black Power*, 123.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 25.

³¹ Bowen, *Riots and Rebellion*, 247.

³² Isenberg, *The City in Crisis*, 38.

against the moderates.³³ African-American civic leaders that did voice opposition to the rioting were often respectable members of the middle class and were subsequently accused of being out of touch with the more radical “street leaders” that claimed to be the true voice of the ghetto.³⁴

This sense of disillusion and discontent festered, making America’s cities powder kegs. All that was needed was a spark. Often, as was the case in Detroit, that spark came in the form of police action. One misstep by police forces, the perceived arm of the white oppressors, was all that was needed to stir the disaffected masses to riot.³⁵ Figure 1, appearing in *Newsweek* in August 1967, shows the scope of the rioting in American cities up to that point in time:

³³ Ogbar, *Black Power*, 123.

³⁴ Isenberg, *The City in Crisis*, 38.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 12-16.

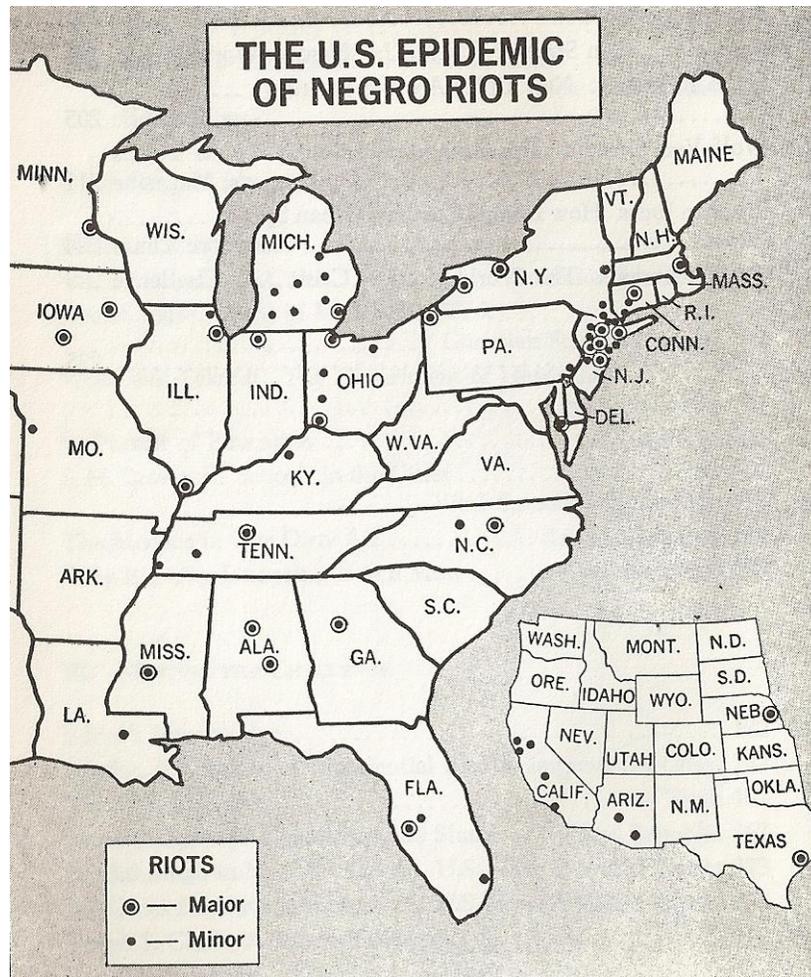


Figure 1³⁶

Crime

In addition to the widespread epidemic of social disorder represented by the riots of the 1960s, smaller-scale crime became a much more endemic and pervasive form of lawlessness in American cities. Long after the fires from the riots died out, crime continued to plague American cities. The 1960s saw a 120% increase in the rate (per 100,000 inhabitants) of what the Federal Bureau of Investigation calls index crimes: murder, forcible rape, robbery, larceny of fifty dollars or greater, and auto theft, with

³⁶ *Newsweek*, 7 Aug 1967.

continued increases until the 1990s.³⁷ American cities of 500,000 or more, while containing only eighteen percent of the total population, accounted for fifty percent of the national crime. The average rate for every index crime (except burglary) was at least double, and often more, for urban areas.³⁸

There were multiple explanations for the increases in crime that began in 1961. The economic situation cultivated by “white flight” to the suburbs certainly created a sharp division between the haves and the have-nots. Increasing affluence resulted in “more goods around to be stolen.”³⁹ The proliferation of small bank branches created more potential sites for bank robbery to occur. Simply put, as Americans accumulated more money and property, there existed more opportunities for criminals to seize money and property.

Another explanation was the increase in adolescents and young adults in the American population. The “baby boomers” were swelling the ranks of an age demographic that is responsible for the lion’s share of criminal activity. According to the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, which made its report in 1969, the increase in the sheer number of adolescents accounted for roughly half of the increases in crime in the first half of the 1960s.

The proliferation of drugs, beginning in the 1960s, offered yet another explanation for the increase in crime in America. By 1970, 1,200 New Yorkers were dying from narcotics or related incidents each year, six times the rate from 1960. This statistic was indicative of more total users. Atlanta saw a tenfold increase in heroin users

³⁷ Hoover, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 4.

³⁸ Robert Winslow. *Crime in a Free Society*. Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc. 1973, 53.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 54-55.

from 1963 to 1970.⁴⁰ It required little imagination to see how drug addiction could lead to crime. Addicts, by definition, needed to obtain and consume drugs. This incessant need could and often did drive addicts to commit crimes in order to procure more drugs.⁴¹

These three theories were just a few of the many explanations for the rampant increase in criminal activity that began in the 1960s and continued until the beginning of the 1990s. Also, the factors that precipitated the civil unrest in the 1960s and 1970s previously discussed also found application here. In addition to spurring mass demonstrations, urban poverty and discontent also served as impetus for smaller-scale crime both during and after the riots of the 1960s.

Perceptions

Perhaps more important is the evidence of the public perception of crime. Polling data from several sources in 1970 points to crime as the worst problem facing America, beating out racism, inflation, and the conflict in Vietnam.⁴² By 1975, a survey of those living in America's largest cities revealed that a strong majority listed crime and lawlessness as the most serious problem in their community.⁴³ The FBI continued to report steady increases in crime rates in these same areas in its annual *Uniform Crime Reports*.⁴⁴ Many books and serial publications used these reports as a source, reinforcing the public's anxiety towards crime. While the methods used to collect data on crime statistics have been subject of much controversy, it is difficult to refute that there was a marked increase in crime beginning in the 1960s. Whether or not the actual crime rates

⁴⁰ James Q. Wilson. *Thinking About Crime*. New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1975, 7-8.

⁴¹ Winslow, *Crime in a Free Society*, 242-243.

⁴² Stephens, *National Urban Problems*, 128.

⁴³ Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972-1977*, 531.

⁴⁴ Webster, William H. *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Press, 1982., 38.

were as bad as the FBI reports indicate, Americans living in urban areas *believed* that they were.⁴⁵ In addition to criminal activity, physical decay of an urban environment has been shown to increase citizens' anxiety over crime. Andres Duany, author of *Suburban nation*, notes that, "When it comes to security, customers demand not just safety but the perception of safety, which means that all potential signs of danger must be eliminated, including graffiti and litter."⁴⁶ Increasing crime rates, along with continuing physical decay of urban areas, created a palpable fear of the urban crisis with implications for the future of America and her cities. This fear was the catalyst that both inspired a wave of urban crisis films and provided a receptive audience for those films.

Summary

The problems listed above were not entirely new, of course. Any time there is a concentrated population of people these symptoms will be present. With an urban crisis, however, these symptoms have become so severe as to create widespread, palpable fear among urban dwellers. In America's cities in the 1960s the dismal economic situation created an inner city populated by the working poor, barely able to pay for food and shelter, much less contribute as a tax base. Those that could contribute, namely the affluent white middle class and businesses, fled to the cheap open spaces of the burgeoning suburbs. And without this tax base, municipal services and basic upkeep of the cityscape began to suffer. This precipitated the riots of the 1960s that caused momentary, localized breakdowns in law and order that paralyzed several large American cities. This same economic environment, as well as a swelling in the ranks of adolescents and rising drug use, fed the enduring rise in crime that made many urban citizens afraid

⁴⁵ Webster, *Uniform Crime Reports*, 128.

⁴⁶ Duany, *Suburban Nation*, 157.

to leave their homes. These are the conditions that defined the 1961-1991 American urban crisis.

Urban Crisis Cinema

This is the socio-political context in which the films I will examine were imagined, created, and released. However, it is also important to examine where these films fit in the context of film history. Palmer identifies two broad genres of film in that decade. One such genre was the blockbuster commercial escapism film, such as *Star Wars* (1977), *Superman* (1978), and later *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). This type of films was marked by an avoidance of its contemporary social-political environment. The second was the disaster film, such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Earthquake* (1972), and *The Towering Inferno* (1975). These films, as Palmer says, “presented a series of images of seemingly safe, solid structures being torn down. Similar, seemingly unassailable structures, like the Pentagon and the Presidency, were simultaneously falling in American society.” While Palmer labels these films disaster films, the qualities of such films he identifies fit equally well with the urban crisis genre I will be examining. These films also brought danger to familiar environments and circumstances. Rather than delivering audiences into a fantastic world separate from their own, these films dealt with powerful and controversial contemporary issues. Hollywood filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s utilized the elements of urban crime, sex, drugs, and decay as major themes in their work to play on audience fears and anxieties surrounding this troubled time in American history. Meeting this challenge were the very American hero archetypes that dominated the popular western genre. In their move to the city, and into a new age, this archetype was combined with elements of film noir, a genre that had dominated film depictions of

the urban environment. Film noir added what Robert Ottoson calls “existential angst.”⁴⁷ This created gritty and complex characters and settings that appealed to American audiences in the throes of such events as Vietnam, Watergate, and the urban crisis. The American urban crisis and the challenges it presented provided heroes, villains, and settings for a new genre of American film that placed the challenges of the urban crisis at its center.

Methodology

In order to identify films influenced by the urban crisis for my analysis, I began with a comprehensive list of film releases from 1960 to 1990. My research indicates that this period encompassed the worst times of the urban crisis. The list was provided by a website operated by Nash Information Services LLC, a source that provides free market data for film industry professionals and investors. From this list, I began selecting films that developed as major themes elements of the urban crisis. These elements included crime, civil unrest and rioting, gang violence, drug use, sex trafficking, poverty, urban decay, and failure to provide municipal services. The films that met these criteria are displayed in Figure 2:

1966	Batman: The Movie	1979	The Warriors
1968	Bullit	1979	Dawn of the Dead
1969	Easy Rider	1981	Fort Apache The Bronx
1971	Shaft	1981	Escape from New York
1971	Dirty Harry	1982	Death Wish II
1971	Shaft	1982	Blade Runner
1972	The Godfather	1983	Vigilante
1972	Shaft’s Big Score!	1985	Death Wish 3
1973	Shaft in Africa	1987	Lethal Weapon
1973	Magnum Force	1987	The Untouchables
1974	Death Wish	1987	Robocop

⁴⁷ Robert Ottoson, *A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir, 1940-1958*. Meuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1981, 1.

1974	The Godfather: Part II	1987	Death Wish 4: The Crackdown
1975	Dog Day Afternoon	1989	Batman
1976	The Enforcer	1989	Lethal Weapon 2
1976	Taxi Driver	1989	Do the Right Thing
1978	F.I.S.T.		

Figure 2⁴⁸

Beyond simply incorporating these issues, the films selected were further scrutinized for social impact. This was determined in a number of ways. Box office revenue and critical acclaim were both important factors. Another positive indicator was the presence of a franchise by way of sequels. Some films even launched entire subgenres of film. *Shaft* (1971) gave rise to the blaxploitation craze and *Dirty Harry* (1971), while not the first “cop film,” certainly precipitated a marked increase in the popularity of such stories in both film and television. The nine films selected for analysis all fit multiple, if not all, criteria. The results of this analysis are displayed in the following table (Figure 3):

Film	<u>Domestic Box Office Revenue</u>	<u>Avg. Box Office per Film that Year</u>	<u>Domestic Award Nominations</u>	<u>Domestic Awards Won</u>	<u>Sequels</u>
Dirty Harry (1971)	\$28,153,434	\$21,076,430	1	0	4
Shaft (1971)	\$7,750,000	\$21,076,430	0	1	3
Taxi Driver (1976)	\$21,100,000	\$31,908,212	4	5	0
The Warriors (1979)	\$22,490,000	\$27,637,346	0	0	0
Escape from New York (1981)	\$25,244,700	\$20,274,454	4	0	1
Blade Runner (1982)	\$32,656,328	\$21,315,156	5	5	0
Robocop (1987)	\$53,424,681	\$16,437,828	8	7	2
Batman (1989)	\$251,188,924	\$21,345,633	11	5	3
Do the Right Thing (1989)	\$26,004,026	\$21,345,633	7	10	0
Average	\$30,511,524	\$22,856,437	40	33	13

Note: Awards won are not counted as nominations.

Figure 3⁴⁹

In addition to this data, there are other signs of social pertinence that are not as easily tabulated. Many of these films were controversial during their theater runs due to

⁴⁸ Nash Information Services LLC, <http://www.the-numbers.com/about.php>

⁴⁹ Nash Information Services LLC, <http://www.the-numbers.com/about.php>, accessed December 14, 2010

their treatment of violence and violent crime in particular. The controversy over these films and the issues they depicted prompted articles in major news publications such as the *New York Times*. These were not routine movie reviews, but rather special interest stories that wrestled with the problems of the urban crisis that these films highlighted and the cultural impact of the films on the real world.

There is also evidence of substantial cult followings for all of these films. After a disappointing initial box office run, the existence of multiple substantially different versions of *Blade Runner* prompted two additional limited theatrical releases, first in 1993 and again in 2007. All of these films are currently available in multi-disk special, collectors, or anniversary editions. Many have also inspired works in other media. *The Warriors* found new life more than twenty-five years after its big screen run as a video game released in 2005. The *Robocop* franchise includes comic books, video games, multiple television shows, and a miniseries. Snake Plissken, the protagonist of *Escape from New York*, was the inspiration for the hero of the popular *Metal Gear Solid* video game franchise and also claims his own comic book series. The incredibly robust marketing surrounding the 1989 release of *Batman* produced too many related products to name, flooding America with products bearing the winged vigilante's logo.⁵⁰

This evidence suggests that these films were and continue to be relevant to popular culture, which makes their creative origins, content, and public reception a rich window on the impact of the urban crisis on American cinema. My analysis of urban crisis films is broken into two categories. First, I will examine the types of fears presented in these films. These are the elements of the urban crisis that trigger the conflict. The second section is an analysis of the heroes that must resolve this conflict. These very

⁵⁰ Burton, Tim. *Batman*, special ed. DVD. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005.

basic plot elements can then be placed into the context of the American urban crisis to determine the broader meaning of these films in American culture.

Fears

Insurrection

During the summer of 1967, when the riots were at their worst, many Americans felt a sense of panic. The federal government seemed powerless to restore order. President Johnson organized a commission, later known as the Kerner Commission, to investigate the riots and made a television broadcast calling for an end to the violence. Federal troops were sent into Detroit. Tanks rolled through the streets as sniper fire from windows was met with bursts of machine gun fire. While Americans watched this shocking scene on television and read about it in *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*, Congress hastily passed a toothless anti-riot bill.⁵¹ Yet the riots continued unabated. From Capitol Hill to Main Street America, there appeared to be a battle raging for control of America's streets...and the authorities were losing.

One very real fear was that the riots were the beginning of an organized rebellion that aimed to topple local and perhaps even federal government. The GOP Coordinating Committee released a statement in 1967 that talked of "Molotov-cocktail factories and national riot-planning meetings" and claimed the United States was "rapidly approaching a state of anarchy." The extremist rhetoric of the more militant African-American organizations only exacerbated this paranoia. Stokely Carmichael made a speech in Cuba where he talked about organizing a "black guerilla movement" that threatened to "turn Detroit and New York into Vietnams."⁵²

⁵¹ Isenberg, *The City in Crisis*, 12, 21, 72.

⁵² Isenberg, *The City in Crisis*, 21-22.

The fear of an organized insurrection is central to the plot of both *The Warriors* (1979) and *Escape from New York* (1981). Both of these films feature African-American villains with ambitions of organizing a criminal army to seize control from the government. In *The Warriors*, a gang leader named Cyrus calls a meeting in Central Park with representatives from every gang in New York. In a highly dramatic call to arms, he proposes forming a coalition, “One gang could run this city! One gang. Nothing would move without us allowing it to happen. We could tax the crime syndicates, the police, because WE got the streets, suckers! Can you dig it?”⁵³ The idea that such a powerful gang army could be raised by a figure like Cyrus was the focus of the film’s advertising. Posters for the film featured a sea of thugs clad in their respective colors going on into infinity. The chilling tagline states, “These are the Armies of the Night. They are 100,000 strong. They outnumber the cops five to one. They could run New York City.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Walter Hill, *The Warriors: Ultimate Director’s Cut*. DVD. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1979.

⁵⁴ Robin Herman. “Ads resumed for a Gang Movie After Sporadic Violence at Theaters.” *New York Times*, Feb 23, 1979.

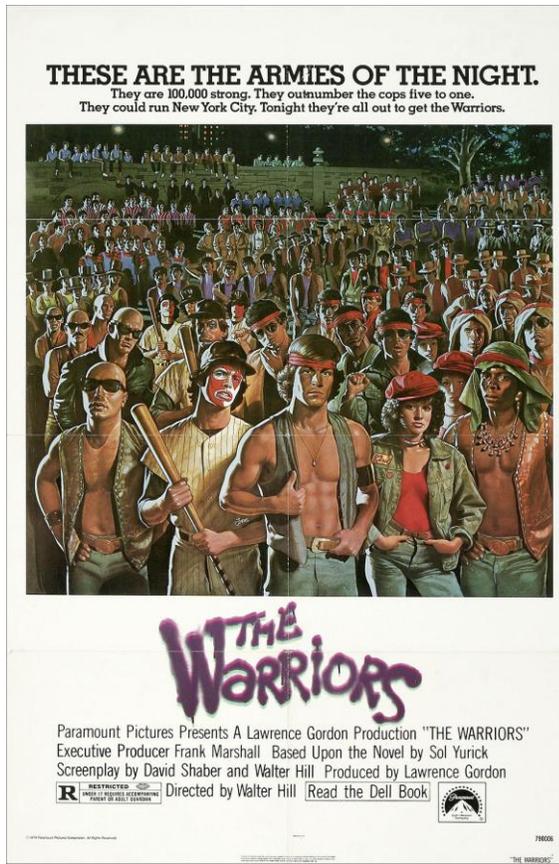


Figure 4⁵⁵

Escape from New York (1981) featured a similar character. The Duke of New York, as the primary antagonist is known, is the most powerful figure on Manhattan Island, which has now been converted into a maximum security prison. The Duke has done what Cyrus proposed to do. He has organized the criminal elements on the island and plans to lead an army off the island with the president as their hostage. One enthusiastic convict imagines the scene with glee, “Oh what a sight...The whole camp rolling right across the bridge, and the president right out in front. Oh that would have been so fine.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Posterwire.com. http://posterwire.com/image.php?img_full=/wp-content/images/the_warriors.jpg&img_title=The%20Warriors%20movie%20poster, accessed 11/22/2010.

⁵⁶ John Carpenter. *Escape from New York*, collector's ed. DVD. AVCO Embassy Pictures, 2005.

Despite the horror presented by mobs and gang armies, they also represent the idea that the underprivileged can still wield power. By banding together, people written off by society in these films issue a challenge to the powers of authority. In his Criterion Collection film *Do the Right thing* (1989), director Spike Lee tells a story of racism in a particularly hot summer day in New York City. Acting on a growing sense of resentment towards a local pizzeria owner, a small group of black youths march in after hours demanding changes to his business. An argument ensues and quickly escalates to violence, prompting a police response that leaves one of the youths dead. Having observed this, one of the pizzeria's black employees (played by Spike Lee himself), precipitates a riot that burns the restaurant down. The film's climactic riot scene is justified for Lee by the death of a black youth at the hands of white police officers.

Responding to the multitudes that ask if the riot was indeed the right thing, Lee responds,

Does a window breathe? Does a window gasp for its very last breath? Any time I had read a review by a critic and they talked about the loss of property...and not one word was written about the loss of life. In their estimation, the life on one black thug...versus white owned property...they see [white property] as more valuable.⁵⁷

This is not the orchestrated violent conspiracy posited in the first two examples. Lee's film depicts riots more accurately as spontaneous outbursts of communal frustration. However, this is not to say that such violence is entirely without direction or cause. For Lee, such violence is not only an act of self defense by an "oppressed people," but a necessary medium through which the urban masses can make their voices heard. He used the controversial riot scene in his film to remind his audience that racism was still alive and well in the 1980s and not something that ended when African-Americans were

⁵⁷ Spike Lee, *Do the Right Thing*, Criterion Collection DVD. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2001

granted the right to vote and segregation officially abolished. Lee was able to more directly address race relations in his film than those previously discussed. The makers of *The Warriors* faced pressure from Paramount to depict the titular gang as multiracial in order to defuse potential racial contention. Ossie Davis, who played Da Mayor in *Do the Right Thing*, attributes this to Lee's operating outside the normal Hollywood environment of political correctness.⁵⁸ This is not to say he did not face pressure from his production studio as well. In a key scene at the film's conclusion, Sal throws his last bit of cash on the sidewalk, telling Mookie to take it and go. The studio urged Lee to have Mookie leave the money, feeling this action to be more heroic. Lee refused, declaring, "No young black kid would leave money on the sidewalk."⁵⁹ Earlier films, fearing public censure and resultant loss in profits, only approached the role of race in civil unrest indirectly. Spike Lee made an exception with his film by resisting such pressure in order to make his brutally honest depiction of race relations.



⁵⁸ Lee, *Do the Right Thing*, 2001.

⁵⁹Ibid.



Police brutality leads to violence in *Do the Right thing*

The first two films play on a very prominent fear that was present in 1960s: that the criminal element responsible for the civil unrest was growing in power and that militant leaders like Stokely Carmichael or Rap Brown could command these forces in a concerted effort to seize control of city centers or even the United States itself. Spike Lee's film views events from a different perspective, seeing riots as a necessary tactic of self defense and representation. While the urban riots of the 1960s caused much terror and sorrow in the U.S., it was also a time when the downtrodden masses of the urban crisis had the attention of Washington and indeed the nation.

The fact that these films were made so long after such fears were relevant has to do with a larger cinematic movement that was gaining momentum in the 1970s. Social historian Morris Dickstein is quoted by Palmer as stating that, "The films of the sixties, unlike the writing of that period, reflected very little of what was then going on...we can say with some justice that the films of the sixties are finally being made in the seventies."⁶⁰ The lack of social disorder in 1960s film is explained as a period where "the movie industry has consciously chosen to ignore social history because that contemporary social history was simply too troubling or too controversial to portray with

⁶⁰William J. Palmer, *The Films of the Seventies*. Meuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1987, 6.

any hope of financial profit.”⁶¹ Thus Carpenter and Hill were finally able to give treatment to the type of social disorder that occurred a decade earlier because the environment of the film industry during their time was more conducive to the subject matter they sought to portray.

Crime

The fear of a master conspiracy from the radical and criminal elements of American society, though plausible enough in 1967, was unfounded and quickly lost its credibility. Americans soon realized that organized, militant armies of thugs would not be marching on Washington, let alone taking over their local metropolis. The more rational and enduring fear was of personal victimization. This was the fear of the criminal other, the sinister figure lurking in a dark alley. In this phobia, the municipal and federal governments were not threatened and could still claim control over most of the city most of the time. However, the criminal element remained, waiting to claim anyone that let their guard down. This was the pervading fear of the urban crisis, and the overriding theme in the majority of urban crisis cinema.

The Scorpio killer, the primary antagonist in *Dirty Harry* (1971), provides a good example of this random criminal bogey man. He is a serial sniper that takes lives from afar without warning. His selection is haphazard and random. His first kill is a beautiful young brunette swimming serenely in her rooftop swimming pool. The Scorpio killer watches her through the scope of his rifle from an adjacent rooftop before putting a bullet through her lungs. Next, he perches above a busy park, choosing for his victim a man enjoying ice cream on a park bench. He grins devilishly, appearing quite pleased with his choice, eagerly awaiting the kill. While he is foiled by a passing police helicopter, he

⁶¹ Ibid, 3.

evades capture and soon a ten year old boy is found shot through the head. After that, the killer targets a Catholic priest as he leaves a late night church function. Later, he hijacks a school bus full of children at gunpoint. None of his victims are in any way connected to him or to each other, except that each was the picture of innocence, each going about his or her own life, oblivious to the brutal fate that awaited them. *Dirty Harry's* Scorpio killer leaves the viewer with the impression that a killer with a rifle can turn a city into a shooting gallery. Anyone is a potential victim, even in places we normally consider safe. The Scorpio killer is the prototypical homicidal deviant: random, brutal, and without remorse.⁶²



A killer takes aim (*Dirty Harry*)

Similar behavior can be seen in *The Warriors*. Cyrus' attempt to unite the gangs of New York collapses when he is assassinated at the conclusion of his speech. The protagonist gang, called The Warriors, is framed for his death by the head of the Rogues, a man named Luther. Luther is a wild-eyed, erratic villain. His motive for killing Cyrus and ending the alliance are never discussed. The viewer never learns why he shot Cyrus or why he chose to pin the blame on the Warriors. Like the Scorpio killer in *Dirty Harry*,

⁶² Don Siegel. *Dirty Harry*, special ed. DVD. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999.

Luther reveals little in the way of motive or reason. He relishes disorder. When the Warriors finally make it back to their Coney Island home, the Rogues are waiting. They cruise menacingly down the street in a black hearse covered in graffiti. Luther clanks glass bottles together, calling out to the Warriors, “Hey Warriors...come out to play-ay.”



Luther taunts the Warriors

Actor David Patrick Kelly, who played Luther, based his performance on a street thug that lived near his Manhattan residence. The iconic, haunting taunt performed by Kelly at the film’s climax was actually an impersonation of that individual, who used to chant Kelly’s name in the same way when he left his apartment. *The Warriors* is rife with examples of the influence of the fear of random street crime, intentional or otherwise. The original actor cast for the role of Cyrus was a genuine New York City gang member. Days before the shoot, he mysteriously disappeared. His exact fate was never known. Executive producer Frank Marshall was obliged to consult the NYPD Gang Unit to discuss when and where the crew would be safe to shoot. The cast was advised to remove their costumes whenever they were away from the set for fear that the real gangs would

react violently to foreign “colors.” Such circumstances make it difficult to dismiss the film as stylized violence completely detached from reality. The filmmakers were forced to deal with some of the same urban problems they were depicting in their film.⁶³

Perhaps the most famous story of random street crime is the origin story of Batman. Originally developed by creator Bob Kane in 1939, Bruce Wayne became Batman after watching his parents murdered in a botched mugging. However, since the 1950s the once dark character of Batman had become commercialized and bland. Tim Burton, drawing on the comics by Frank Miller, brought the character back to his darker roots for the 1989 film version. This includes an explicit scene of the murder of Bruce Wayne’s parents. In a flashback, Bruce recalls how the three of them left the theater late one night, their footsteps ringing loud and hollow in the dark alley. They are confronted by a pair of young men in long, dark coats. The first grabs Mrs. Wayne’s pearl necklace. A struggle ensues and a shot rings out, followed by another. The broken necklace falls to the wet pavement among the spilled popcorn. The gunman lowers the smoking revolver to aim at Bruce. “Tell me kid, have you ever danced with the Devil in the pale moonlight?” asks the gunman, flashing a wide joker’s grin. His partner entreats him to leave, and the pair withdraws to the shadows from whence they came. Bruce is left in the dark alley, standing bewildered between the bodies of his parents.⁶⁴

⁶³ Hill, *The Warriors*, 2008.

⁶⁴ Burton, *Batman*, 2005.



The Waynes' killer (*Batman*)

Sin

The anxiety wrought by the urban crisis was not always of such a violent nature. Another key element was the perception of moral decay, the fear that Americans were losing their souls in these urban cesspools. Of course this was not a new fear. Cities have long been renowned as centers of immoral behavior. The urban crisis that began in the 1960s simply stimulated a renewed emphasis on these concerns in the minds of American citizens. At the heart of this growing anxiety was the explosion of hard-core drug use that accompanied the beginning of the post-war urban crisis. Coupled with the prolific sex trade, both legitimate and illegitimate, the scene that pedestrians saw in Times Square after dark in 1976 was a disturbing one indeed. The moral recoil such a sight elicits is at the center of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). Travis Bickle, the film's protagonist, takes a job driving a New York City cab at night, where he promises to "drive anytime, anywhere." But soon the seedier aspects of the New York nightlife begin to trouble Travis,

Each night when I return the cab to the garage, I have to clean the cum off the back seat. Some nights, I clean off the blood...All the animals come out at night - whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.

Travis eventually befriends a twelve year old prostitute named Iris. He attempts to rescue Iris from her immoral life, simply telling her “You can’t live like this...A girl should live at home.” He offers to give her the money she needs to leave the city and return home. Iris appears receptive to the idea, telling her pimp Sport that she wants to quit. Sport, a smooth-talking heroine addict, romances Iris and robs her of her conviction. It is a scene that plays on the fears of many urban parents, the idea of a very young girl being emotionally trapped in a seedy world of sex and drugs. Ed Koch, mayor of New York City from 1978 to 1989, praised the film as an accurate portrayal. “Times Square,” he recalled, “was squalid, crime ridden, porno stores everywhere.” This is the world of *Taxi Driver*, a fictional story in a very real New York. This is Travis’ world. He is a man trying to make sense of the abhorrent behavior he sees from his fellow man on a nightly basis. Scorsese’s film takes the viewer along for Travis’ steady descent into madness. His journey ends in a bloodbath, a crusade against the moral decay he perceives all around himself.⁶⁵

In *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese*, Lawrence S. Friedman identifies a close parallel between this story and *The Searchers*, a John Wayne film that heavily influenced Scorsese. In that film, Wayne plays Ethan Edwards, a confederate veteran still struggling psychologically with the loss of the American Civil War. The title refers to Edwards’ quest to rescue his niece Debbie from a Comanche chief that has kidnapped her. Travis Bickle is the Ethan Edwards of his time, a Vietnam veteran seeking to rescue a young

⁶⁵ Martin Scorsese. *Taxi Driver*, collector’s ed. DVD. Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2007.

prostitute from the pimp that holds her prisoner (or at least Travis believes this to be true). Both men struggle obsessively to restore innocence in their world through the act of delivering young girls from the clutches of sin and returning them home.



Sinful world of *Taxi Driver*

The Warriors also includes scenes that caution against sexual temptation. On their journey home, the protagonist gang is twice confronted with sexual temptations. While traversing Riverside Park, a Warrior named Ajax parts ways with the gang to “make it” with a young woman sitting on the park bench. By this time, Ajax has already shown a propensity towards recklessness in their confrontations with other gangs and arrogance in his challenging of the de facto leader Swan for control of the gang. Unbeknownst to Ajax, the woman is an undercover police officer. When Ajax starts to become a bit too aggressive, she handcuffs him to the bench and blows her whistle. Ajax is arrested and never seen again. Meanwhile, three of the Warriors, separated earlier during a brawl with the police, have arrived at the designated rendezvous point at Union Square subway station. A group of attractive women catch their attention and invite them back to their apartment. While hesitant at first, the trio soon let their guard down and begin dancing

and carousing with the women. That's when The Lizzies, as the female gang is called, turn on the members of the Warriors, drawing knives and guns with full intention of killing the three men. In both instances, the pursuit of sexual pleasure leads to grave and even mortal trouble. Swan does eventually romance a young woman named Mercy, but it is clear that Swan puts his duty to the gang ahead of his desire, making this a "good" romance. In the other instances, the pursuit of carnal pleasure is portrayed as a dangerous moral pitfall.⁶⁶



Lust leads to trouble in *The Warriors*

In the 1980s, a new twist on an old vice began hitting American streets. Crack-cocaine represented an industrial revolution in the drug market. This highly addictive, concentrated form of cocaine quickly became a major concern in the U.S, writing a new chapter in the war on drugs. The creators of *Robocop* (1987) acknowledge the anxiety caused by this development in the form of Clarence Boddicker. Clarence is the ruthless and violent leader of a Detroit gang. The bank heist he perpetrates at the beginning of the

⁶⁶ Hill, *The Warriors*, 2008.

film is used to finance his real ambition: an assembly-line plant to produce and package cocaine rapidly and efficiently. Director Paul Verhoeven stated that the cocaine packing plant was meant as hyperbole, but he was shocked to learn after the film began playing that the assembly-line drug packing plant he created was in fact very close to the type of facility being used to package crack-cocaine. This was a new take on America's drug problem. Clarence is not a sloppy street corner dealer. He is as cold and shrewd a businessman as anyone on Wall Street. He is a heartless capitalist with an addictive product to sell and no concern for the repercussions. This vice is not just associated with street-level pushers. The film also features a young cutthroat executive who, riding on the success of the Robocop program, makes an enemy of a more senior, and more ruthless, company executive by the name of Dick Jones. Just before the younger executive is killed by Boddicker, who is on Jones' payroll, he is celebrating his new found success with a pair of prostitutes and a table full of cocaine. The scene is a comment on the runaway success of the nouveau riche of corporate America. He is depicted as reckless and arrogant, indulging in an opulent lifestyle while ignoring the potential pitfalls. His self-celebrating party of drugs and women is rudely interrupted by a street-thug assassin, tearing asunder his pretensions of invincibility.⁶⁷

Both of these films depict the graphic, violent aspects of the urban crisis. However, they attach the violence in society to the crumbling of America's moral foundation. Sex, drugs, and violence are intertwined, kindred spirits of malice that degrade not just the political institutions of law and order but the very souls of American urban dwellers.

⁶⁷ Paul Verhoeven. *Robocop: 20th Anniversary Collector's Edition*. DVD. Los Angeles: Orion Pictures, 2007.

Decay

Whatever common themes emerge in these films, the greatest common denominator emerges not from the plots but from the settings. These films, either through accident or at much expense, seek to create an environment that the viewer will recognize as the urban crisis. Doing so allows the filmmakers to elicit certain emotions, primarily fears, which Americans attach to these decrepit, urban environments.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is widely known for its elaborate depiction of a dystopian Los Angeles of the future. Scott was attracted to futuristic, urban film noir settings. To him, "The landscape is a character,"⁶⁸ and he spent an enormous amount of effort to create his vision where Los Angeles was heading. Scott and artist Sid Meade, who was instrumental in designing the sets, sought to create the very near future of urban development. The film acts as an extension of current urban problems into the future. Buildings are built up to the edge of the sidewalk to give a claustrophobic feeling. The windows are patched and screened to create a dreary effect. His bold vision initially met with box office disappointment. As actress Sean Young put it, "When it first came out it was too intense to let in; the darkness and the poverty and the projection of what life would be like in 2019."⁶⁹ However, it did not take long for audiences to see how relevant Scott's uncomfortable vision of the future was. Said one English critic, "What are they trying to say? It's all filth, rain, millions of people everywhere. Then I walked out into Leicester Square...into *Blade Runner*."⁷⁰ Executive Producer Hampton Fancher saw *Blade Runner* as a story tackling "real world, current concerns...ecological concerns,

⁶⁸ Scott, *Blade Runner*, 2007.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

pollution and overpopulation.”⁷¹ Scott’s Los Angeles is indeed a principal actor in the film, one that even steals the show. The excruciating detail in every shot fills the streets with stimuli in the form of huddled masses of people, ballets of vehicles, and collages of neon lights. This is the same feeling cultivated in traditional film noir but extrapolated and projected into the future rather than the past or present. The novelty of *Blade Runner* is that the future loses the shining *Star Trek* feel and replaces it with what Scott calls a “grungy world” with “wet, dirty pavements.”⁷² Scott imagines a future that has been overwhelmed by the urban crisis rather than liberated from it. This complex urban jumble created an eerie and even terrifying world whose most frightening quality was its resemblance to the troubled American cities of that time.⁷³



Blade Runner

Such a scene is not exclusive to Los Angeles or relegated to the future. The New York depicted in *Taxi Driver* contains all the hallmarks of Scott’s Los Angeles: the bright lights, the crowded and filthy streets, and prolific vice markets. Director Martin Scorsese recalls, “We shot the film during a very hot summer and there’s an atmosphere at night

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ridley Scott. *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*, special ed. DVD. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007

⁷³ Scott, *Blade Runner*, 2007.

that's like a seeping kind of virus. You can smell it in the air and taste it in your mouth; ... a strange disease creeps along the streets of the city."⁷⁴ Scorsese did not have to work hard to create this vision of New York; *Taxi Driver* was filmed during a 1975 garbage collectors strike, all the better for setting his story about the dirtier aspects of New York City life. The New York depicted in *Taxi Driver* was hardly movie magic. Mike Chapman, director of photography for the film, views *Taxi Driver* as a "documentary of New York in 1975. It's at its nadir, scummy and awful. We just turned the camera on the city."⁷⁵

When John Carpenter was looking for a similar look for the title city in *Escape from New York*, he found his muse in a burnt out section of waterfront in St. Louis. To add to the sense of disorder he hired a small fleet of dump trucks to ferry in loads of junk from the local landfill to fill the streets with everything from car bodies to washing machines and everything in between. Carpenter was also assisted in creating his vision of New York by a recent advance in film technology that allowed him to film in lower lighting. This meant that he could now film Snake Plissken roaming the city streets or inside a deserted World Trade Center with small fires as the sole light source. This gave the film's graffiti scrawled, garbage strewn urban landscape a very dark and foreboding atmosphere.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Friedman, *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese*, 72.

⁷⁵ Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*, 2007.

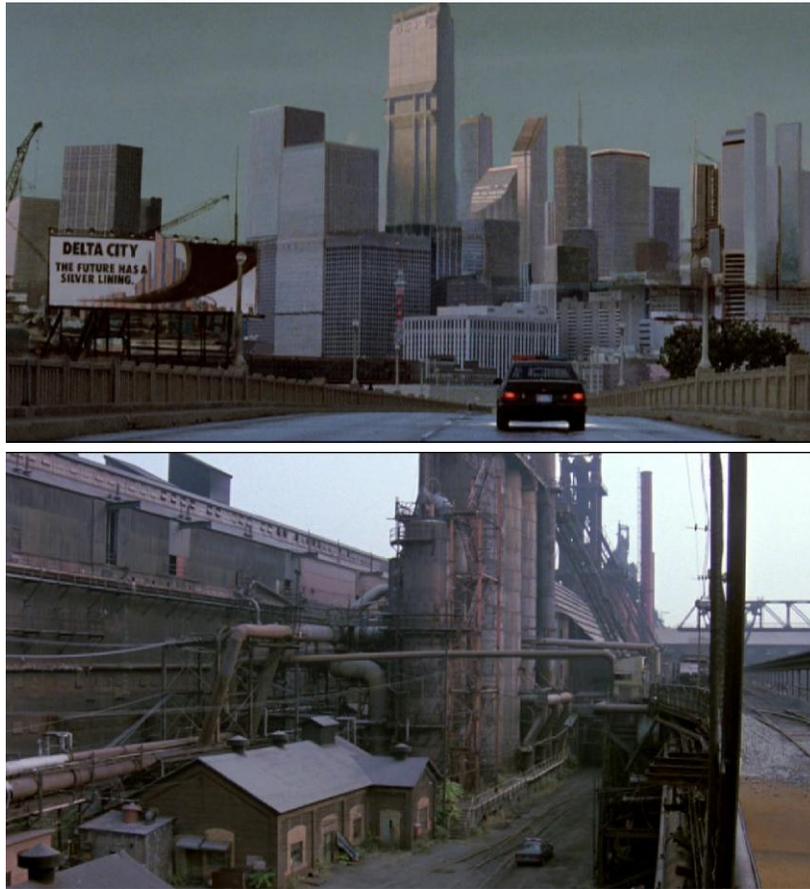
⁷⁶ Carpenter, *Escape from New York*, 2005.



Escape from New York

Paul Verhoeven filmed *Robocop* in two very different locations to highlight the two sides of Detroit depicted in that film. This duality is used to highlight the differences between the clean and pristine business areas of American cities and the neglected and deteriorating residential and industrial sections. The film takes place in Detroit, a city that has come to represent the death of America's manufacturing industry. "New Detroit" was filmed in Dallas to give it a shining, futuristic feel. It was meant to represent the high-rise home of the mega corporations that had become the principal villain of the working class in 1980s America. Old Detroit is represented by a film location at a derelict Pennsylvania steel mill, which serves as Boddicker's hideout as well as the setting for the film's climactic battle. Compared to the gleaming high rises of downtown Dallas, the steel mill represents the decaying manufacturing industry that was so integral to American life during the post-war manufacturing boom. The location has a sad gravity to it, a graveyard of working class dreams. The film crew arrived to find abandoned lunch boxes and personal messages written on the walls from the workers that had been laid off. Executive Producer Jon Davison remembers the steel mill as a representation of "the end of the rust

belt economy.” Director Paul Verhoeven utilized the two locations, one in the decaying rust belt and another in the modern city of Dallas, to elicit two very different emotions from his settings. It’s not hard to understand why the decrepit steel mill becomes the lair of the film’s villain and the location for the grisly death of the hero, thus representing the worst aspects of the urban crisis.⁷⁷



New Detroit (Delta City) and Old Detroit (*Robocop*)

Gotham City, home of Batman, was inspired by Bob Kane’s early years spent on the streets of New York. Gotham, however, had gone the same way as its most famous citizen and become campy, lighthearted, and even comical. This stigma proved difficult to shake, especially when comedic actor Michael Keaton was cast in the titular role.

⁷⁷ Verhoeven, *Robocop*, 2007.

Only after headlining actor Jack Nicholson was cast as the Joker did the film get serious attention from Warner Brothers. With the studio reasonably assured of the film's commercial viability, Burton was set to create a darker Batman story that fit the ongoing urban crisis. To achieve this, he relied on the work of famous comic writer Frank Miller. When Miller began writing for the Batman comics in the 1980s, he realized that Batman's fictional Gotham City had become too tame since its original inception to justify the extreme behavior of Batman. Miller found his muse in the ongoing urban crisis of the 1980s in New York, "All I had to do was look out my window. The '80s were a scary time." This is the same sentiment conveyed by director Tim Burton, who decided to use Miller's comics as source material for the 1989 film, calling his Gotham "New York City in a parallel dimension, what would've happened if New York had gone the way it was going in the early '80s, you know, where everything was going worse and worse." Burton's Gotham is dark and foreboding, a thinly disguised stand-in for New York where criminals can and do lurk in every shadow.⁷⁸ Miller and Burton's desire for a darker, meaner Gotham is quite clear in the opening lines of the script by Sam Hamm,

The place is Gotham City. The time, 1987 -- once removed. The city of Tomorrow: stark angles, creeping shadows, dense, crowded, airless, a random tangle of steel and concrete, self-generating, almost subterranean in its aspect... as if hell had erupted through the sidewalks and kept on growing. The pulsing heart of downtown Gotham, a neon nightmare of big-city corruption, almost surreal in its oppressiveness. Hookers wave to

⁷⁸ Burton, *Batman*, 2005.

drug dealers. Street hustlers slap high-fives with three-card monte dealers.⁷⁹



Gotham City (*Batman*)

Summary

The settings examined here fit into Palmer's analysis of disaster films mentioned earlier. The difference is instead of terror being brought to familiar places by a specific event like an earthquake or a fire, here fear invaded familiar places gradually and is now endemic to places once considered safe. Taken in this context, the urban films I have examined here represent a different sort of disaster that was no less frightening: the breakdown of the basic pillars of society in urban America. Unlike disaster films, these films took on a decidedly political flavor. Disaster here can be widespread (*The Warriors*, *Escape from New York*) or personal (*Dirty Harry*, *Batman*). Both serve to bring terror to normally secure and comforting environments and at the same time immersing the audience in the socio-political struggles of its day.

⁷⁹ Sam Hamm. *Batman: A Screenplay* by Sam Hamm. 1986, 1.

Heroes

Noble Criminals

The first type of hero encountered in these films is a character held over from the counter-culture of the 1960s. Early films on the list, particularly *Shaft*, *The Warriors*, and *Escape from New York*, depict the criminal as the hero. This does not necessarily relegate the authority figures to the role of villain. These films feature villains that are also criminals themselves, though a much more malicious variety to be sure. The police or military forces are portrayed as secondary villains at best. The implication is that they are a necessary evil and an inconvenience. Both the Warriors and Snake Plissken adhere to a live-and-let-live philosophy with regards to such authority figures. This same ambivalence is indeed shown towards the more malicious criminal villains as well. Private investigator John Shaft has an abrasive but friendly relationship with both the police and some criminals. While he initially has some reservations about working for the Harlem crime boss Bumpy, he agrees to work with both Bumpy and “the Movement” (a black power group) in order to take down the vilified Italian Mafia. This clearly draws a distinction between acceptable criminal elements and sinister ones. The Movement is initially the prime suspect in the kidnapping of Bumpy’s daughter. However, as their leader proclaims, “We don’t do that kinda thing, man.” Bumpy, while not denying his own criminal nature, insists that his daughter “is a straight kid. *She’s going to college.*” Thus, both Bumpy and the Movement are exonerated because they have moral scruples, lines in the sand that they will not cross but that other, less honorable criminals (in this case the Italian Mafia) will.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Gordon Parks, *Shaft*, DVD. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2000.

Again, we may identify a parallel with similar characters found in the western. Snake Plissken is a post-modern outlaw, highlighted by constant allusions in the film to his past heists and misdeeds. The supporting characters that encounter Plissken regard him with a great deal of reverence and awe. He is a legendary figure in a manner reminiscent of Jesse James or Billy the Kid. He and the other noble criminal figures glorified as heroes in these films, like those of the old west, have no revolutionary aspirations. They neither support the establishment nor wish to wholly tear it down. Such heroes suggest a libertarian approach to the urban crisis facing the nation. Ambition and appetite for power are the true villains. These criminal heroes are those that keep to themselves.⁸¹

Renegade Cops

The police heroes in *Dirty Harry*, *Shaft*, and *Robocop* both suggest that the solution to the problem of urban crime lies with changes in police tactics. Harry Callahan, the namesake of the *Dirty Harry* films, rails against the bureaucracy of the San Francisco police force in his quest to catch the Scorpio killer. The film vilifies the judicial red tape that ties police hands. John Milius, who helped write the screenplay for the film, remembers, “People were angry with a certain erosion of justice, an erosion of a sense of the law protecting.”⁸² This sentiment was shared by actor Clint Eastwood who played the title role. “Everyone was so sick of worrying about the accused,” he recalled, “and they said ‘how ‘bout we worry about the victims for a while?’”⁸³ Eastwood’s character in the film, a plainclothes detective, constantly skirts the line of what law enforcement officials are allowed to do. He disregards these rules entirely in his quest for justice. The Scorpio

⁸¹ Carpenter, *Escape from New York*, 2005.

Hill, *The Warriors*, 2008.

⁸² Siegel, *Dirty Harry*, 1999

⁸³ Ibid.

killer takes full advantage of this, leveraging the frustrating technicalities of the law and public opinion against the judicial system to not only escape justice but to lay brutality claims against Callahan. These two characters are offered as clear archetypes of the conservative and liberal movements of their time. In a tell-tale scene, the Scorpio killer is limping out of the courthouse after being acquitted due to illegally obtained evidence. The camera begins the scene on a peace sign painted on the wall, pans to the smiling killer, and slowly closes in on his peace sign belt buckle.⁸⁴



The Scorpio killer goes free in *Dirty Harry*

Shaft makes for a very interesting comparison to *Dirty Harry*. Private investigator John Shaft and detective Harry Callahan have much in common: both have despairing views of the regular police force and show a great deal of animosity to rank-and-file policemen. Both men have the swagger, confidence, and violent skill sets necessary to be considered American heroes. Both are men of the streets and seldom seen in their offices. Shaft is perhaps even closer to the beat of the city than Callahan, frequently interacting with a network of street vendors and underworld informants. *Shaft* presents an intriguing race inversion of typical crime films of the time: the white Italian mafia is making an

⁸⁴ Siegel, *Dirty Harry*, 1999.

aggressive move on the dominant black crime leader. Shaft is able to essentially walk on both sides of the law and by extension race relations in order to pursue justice. Indeed, he is accused at various points in the film by both sides of the race/crime divide, but he staunchly refuses such categorization. He is the black Dirty Harry, a hero who, while tailored to African-Americans, is also easily accommodated by white audiences.⁸⁵

Robocop finds similar frustration in his pursuit of justice. While apparently perfectly able to exercise brutal tactics against common criminals, when Robocop attempts to apprehend an executive at Omni Consumer Products, the conglomerate that has privatized the Detroit Police Department, he finds his programming prevents him from doing so. Where liberal influence in congress and the courts let the Scorpio killer go free, here it is corporate influence that stands in the way of justice. Like *Dirty Harry*, *Robocop* was meant to be a comment on its time. Screenwriter Michael Miner wrote it to be a “product of the Reagan era, ‘80s satire on Reaganomics and the yuppies.”⁸⁶

These films suggest through their heroes that the solution to crime is the elimination of excessive and restrictive regulations. The police (or private investigators, who are still held accountable to city officials) know what needs to be done to achieve justice; they simply need to be allowed to do it. *Shaft* even advocates the utilization of traditionally illegitimate groups such as the Black Panthers in combating the “true” criminals. Rules and red tape come across as the true enemy of justice in these films, even more so than the criminal element itself.

⁸⁵ Parks, *Shaft*, 2000.

⁸⁶ Verhoeven, *Robocop*, 2007.

Vigilantes

Another brand of urban crisis film depicts “ordinary citizens” trying to fix the problems of crime and moral corruption, ordinary meaning only that they have no official sanction or authority to fight crime. In the bloody climax of *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle violently lashes out against the “the scum... the dogs, the filth, the shit.” He purchases a small arsenal of firearms and sets out to eliminate the “scum of the Earth” that hold Iris captive in a life of sin. He begins by getting in shape, exercising his body and even holding his clenched fist over a flame as an exercise in managing pain. While he is still training, a local convenience store is held at gunpoint while Travis is shopping. Travis sees his first opportunity to strike out against the sordid elements he encounters every night. He draws one of his concealed pistols and guns the punk down, much to the delight of the store owner, who professes to have been robbed repeatedly as he begins to exact his own revenge, beating the assailant with a lead pipe. His first kill under his belt, Travis once again turns his attention to “freeing” Iris. He kills her pimp Sport, the landlord that runs the pay-by-the-hour apartment complex, and several other “costumers.” He blames them all for keeping a twelve year old girl on the streets and on drugs. By eliminating them, he is setting Iris free, free of the city and all its filth. Afterwards, his rampage is heralded by the media as an act of heroism. The entire sequence is an incredibly violent and bloody climax, a release of all the tension that has built to this point. It was so bloody in fact that the Motion Picture Association of America demanded the color be toned down to decrease the contrast of the blood. Screenwriter Paul Schrader wrote the ending to be a comment on American morals, a perversion of the violent American vigilante.⁸⁷ Scorsese had a difficult time getting *Taxi Driver* to the screen. Studio executives were

⁸⁷ Scorsese, *Taxi Driver*, 2007.

hesitant to back such a dark and violent picture. It was only after a commercial success like *Mean Streets* (1973) that Scorsese was given the support needed to make *Taxi Driver*. Like the makers of *The Warriors*, he also faced pressure with regards to race in the film. Travis was originally a much more bigoted character, and the majority of his victims were to be black. Despite such concerns, this dark, bloody, and neurotic noir vigilante film found both commercial and critical success.



Travis's vengeance (*Taxi Driver*)

Batman is a similar vigilante figure, lashing out at the criminal underworld he blames for the murder of his parents. The film opens with a mugging styled very similarly to the one that resulted in the death of Bruce Wayne's parents: a family wanders down a dark alley as steam billows out from grates. A pair of muggers corners them. The father is knocked unconscious and the mother and son held at gunpoint by one crook while the other relieves the father of his wallet and the mother of her purse. While the police are nowhere in sight, the Dark Knight is present to dish out punishment to the pair

of muggers. He makes sure to introduce himself to the muggers, ensuring his legend is spread among criminal circles. That is the true strength of the vigilante in this film, the fear that he creates. As a vigilante he is not bound by the poor funding, red tape, or constitutional constraints that handicap the district attorney and the regular police. Gotham City's police and judicial officials, while noble and good, are overwhelmed by a city rife with crime.⁸⁸



Batman inspires fear

The Warriors provides another, less obvious example of vigilante justice at work. When the titular gang is accused of the murder of Cyrus, the Gramercy Riffs put out a bounty on them to avenge their fallen leader. Thus, the attacks from the myriad New York gangs represent an alternative justice system outside the NYPD. The Warriors have

⁸⁸ Burton, *Batman*, 2005.

been accused of murder and the Riffs, though misguided, are out to exact their own form of back-alley justice.⁸⁹

These “ordinary” citizens, like their law enforcement counterparts in other films, express a need to step outside the law in order to protect innocent people from violence and moral corruption. The answer for these heroes lies in dynamic, bold, and violent action. There is, however, an important distinction. They imply a right of *all* citizens to impose justice, not merely law enforcement. Like the noble criminal hero, the vigilante expresses a libertarian sentiment that demonstrates a lack of trust in government to provide security. Travis Bickle and Batman are examples of do-it-yourself justice. This idea has an appeal outside its real-world effectiveness, which would be questionable at best. But the emotional appeal for audiences is quite real. It is not enough for Travis Bickle or Bruce Wayne that just anyone vanquishes the evil they perceive in their worlds, *they* need to do it. These characters serve as a stand-in for movie-goers that are “frustrated and frightened by the level of street crime that had come to be common in the inner cities and was played up in the TV and newspaper headlines of the time.”⁹⁰ Vigilante characters play to the audiences’ fantasies of personal justice. It is not enough that *someone* punishes the thief that stole our car. The much more satisfying fantasy is the one where *we* are the ones that punish him.

The type of heroes depicted in these films, namely the noble criminal, the renegade cop, and the vigilante, developed at the nexus of two pre-existing film genres: film noir and the western. “The cowboy is moving into the city,” reports Neal King, author of *Heroes in Hard Times* “The western is dying in popularity during the course of

⁸⁹ Hill, *The Warriors*, 2008.

⁹⁰ Danny Fingeroth. *Superman on the Couch*. New York: Continuum International Publishing group, 2004.

the 70s and 80s and the cop movie...is just coming in to take its place.”⁹¹ Travis Bickle provides a fine example of such an amalgamation of characters. Bickle is very different than a typical John Wayne character. His deeply troubled, brooding nature marks him as a product of film noir as well. *Taxi Driver*’s screenwriter Paul Schrader was a scholar of film noir with extensive writing on the subject. Schrader completed an acclaimed essay on film noir only a year before writing the screenplay for *Taxi Driver*. He remembers how “the darkness of film noir attracted me” while writing *Taxi Driver*.⁹² Director Martin Scorsese is a deep admirer of western films such as *Red River (1948)* and *Rio Bravo (1959)*. As mentioned previously, *Taxi Driver* contains numerous parallels with John Wayne’s *The Searchers (1956)*, a film which “fascinated” Scorsese as a boy.⁹³ Additional examples of this phenomenon abound in the films reviewed. The Warriors wear Native American dress as their gang’s colors. Clint Eastwood personally bridged the gap between western and urban cinema in his career, trading his spurs in for a suit coat on his way to becoming the prototypical American action hero. Robocop twirls his pistol before replacing it in his hip holster, showmanship rooted in the western. What filmmakers of this era did was essentially merge the heroes of these two genres. They retained the dark, brooding self-consciousness of film noir while adding a very American brutality and directness from the westerns to create what would become the archetype of the American film hero.

Unsung Heroes

The majority of the heroes featured thus far advocated unilateral right-wing solutions to the problems of the urban crisis. This approach seeks to treat the symptoms

⁹¹ Siegel, *Dirty Harry*, 1999.

⁹² Friedman. *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese*, 64.

⁹³ Friedman. *The Cinema of Martin Scorsese*, 17, 67.

of the urban crisis rather than grasp at the root causes. The political right advocated harsher punishment for those that commit crimes as the best way to restore law and order in the cities. The noble criminal heroes represented a more libertarian approach of keeping to one's self, which is not really a solution at all. What we do not see in these films are the solutions proposed by the left side of the political aisle or the kind of heroes needed to see them through.

The first tenet of the solutions proposed by the political left is that there are underlying issues that must be fixed in order to remedy the urban crisis. Rioters, criminals, and drug addicts are not lesser human beings, but victims of circumstance. This approach can have strong, individual heroes as well. Potential heroes of the left, such as social workers, district attorneys, and "regular" cops do appear in these films. However, they are portrayed as wholly ineffective. Harry Callahan's new, idealistic partner ends up in the hospital, gunned down by the Scorpio killer in a botched attempt to apprehend that villain. Gotham's mayor and district attorney flounder in city hall, barraged by phone calls. *Escape from New York*'s president is helplessly clueless, a babe among wolves. Time and again, bureaucrats and officials that *should* be fixing the problems of the urban crisis are depicted as useless or even counterproductive.



Escape from New York's president cowers before his captors.

The second principle of the left's answer to the urban crisis is the idea of collective action. In most of these films, community organization is completely absent. In others, the only collective action is that taken by the criminal underbelly of society. The mechanisms of government, itself the ultimate collective, are haphazard, slow, and ineffective. Even if the individual heroes of the left are worthy of their position, they are hopelessly attached to large, complex systems built on rules and regulations that prevent them from righting the wrongs of the urban crisis. Such constitutional protection is what sets the Scorpio killer free in *Dirty Harry*. In *Robocop*, the justice system is corrupted by a high-ranking executive to free his criminal minion. Exceptions to this are found in *Shaft* and *Do the Right Thing*. However, even here there are problems with such collective action. In *Shaft*, the collective action is still undertaken by criminal elements of society, albeit for a good cause. And while Spike Lee ardently defends the riot at the end of his film, the only collective action the community manages to undertake is violent action that leaves the neighborhood charred and broken. In this way, collective efforts are only effective when used by "the enemy." Our own government is too compromised or too impotent to produce any results and even righteous community action ends in disaster. In

order to save the cities and their citizens, the heroes of these films must act unilaterally and outside the normal channels of government.

Conclusion

The post-war urban crisis in America brought a slew of new social concerns to the forefront of American consciousness. The conditions wrought by the flight of the affluent white middle class and the businesses that followed them led to civil unrest, soaring crime rates, and the physical decay of American urban centers. These concerns heavily influenced American films in the 1970s and 1980s. These films show several interesting changes over time. Early films expressed the paranoid theories of organized rebellion that grew out of the riots of the late 1960s. As time went on, this far-fetched fear gave way to a fear of personal victimization by random, violent street crime. This was closely intertwined with visions of moral failings in American society represented by burgeoning vice markets, particularly the trade of illegal drugs and sex. Throughout this change in anxiety there was one constant: the setting. The image of a decaying urban cityscape filled with garbage and filth was used to create a sense of foreboding and fear where the gang armies or serial killers lurked. The last pattern examined was the hero proposed by these various films to solve the problems of the urban crisis. Early heroes were not so much a solution at all. The noble criminal figure was not concerned with changing his world for better or worse, he or she was concerned only with surviving and leaving well enough alone. This character gives way to the renegade cop and the vigilante. Both of these later figures espouse much the same solution to the violent criminals and vices proliferating in American cities. The favored solution is decisive, unilateral, and violent extra-legal action.

This proposed solution rings of irony in the face of actual events. Many of the riots of the late 1960s were triggered by overt police action. In the case of Detroit, it was merely the show of police force. Even the more recent Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992 sprang from outrage over police brutality and race issues, the same set of circumstances that precipitated riots in Watts more than 25 years before. Such brutality, even in the name of law and order, is met not with gratitude or glory but condemnation. Americans understand that we cannot have detectives blasting away with .44 magnums or cyborgs gunning down purse snatchers. But these brutally simple solutions are comforting when depicted in fiction. Joan Mellen, speaking of the film heroes of the 1970s, condemns a Hollywood that has "...turned to a virtually fascist endorsement of the tough cop who will solve all our problems and whose flagrant violation of the civil liberties of those he hunts is glorified as necessary for the survival of the community." Clint Eastwood attributes this hyper-masculinity and favor of individual effort (versus collective solution) to "guilt and impotence over Vietnam and Watergate."⁹⁴ The collective frustration over seemingly insolvable problems at home and abroad, coupled with a dramatic loss of faith in government, fed into the appeal of the strong, dynamic heroes of urban crisis cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. The solutions proposed by these films is best summed up in a statement by David Ayer, writer and director of *Training Day* (2001), speaking on *Dirty Harry*, "*Dirty Harry* takes us to a simpler code of justice, takes us to a world where force works."⁹⁵

This search for a simple solution to increasingly complex problems was partially a reaction to the sea change that occurred in American culture. Issues like civil rights and

⁹⁴ Joan Mellen. *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977., 293-294.

⁹⁵ Siegel, *Dirty Harry*, 1971.

women's rights challenged the status quo at home while Vietnam raised questions about U.S. intervention abroad. Nuclear war, crime, riots, and a counterculture marked by the use of drugs and sexual promiscuity threatened to destroy the American way of life. Such circumstances led many Americans to feel, as Joan Mellon states in her book *Big Bad Wolves*, that "All is awry; only power has a chance of protecting. Effective action is all."⁹⁶ These films represent an unwillingness to confront the complex issues of a post-war, desegregated, sexually integrated, atomic world. It was much more satisfying to treat the symptoms of these issues by demonizing criminals, rioters, "hippies," and other such deviant elements that threatened to change society. When such personas are depicted as evil and subhuman, it justifies the harsh punishment that is dealt to them in these films. Reforming or accepting "the other" is time consuming and difficult. Punishing them, on the other hand, produces immediate, tangible, and satisfying results.

Due to scandals like Watergate and the apparent inability to impose order at home or abroad, trust in government in the United States went from 75% in 1963 to a dismal 25% in 1975.⁹⁷ Clearly, collective action was ineffective and vulnerable to corruption. Strong, confident, hyper-masculine heroes seemed much better suited to meet this dangerous future. Americans were receptive to this type of hero because it removed the doubt and impotency in their world. They wanted to believe that an individual with enough courage and fortitude could carry out a plan that would instantly deliver results.

The makers of these films leveraged the fears and frustrations of the urban crisis through their use of setting and villains to appeal to the concerns of their audiences, depicting all the frustrations and problems of the urban crisis, sometimes as they were

⁹⁶ Mellon, *Big Bad Wolves*, 299.

⁹⁷ Elaine Tyler May. "Anger and Security: How the cold war ended the notion of public good." *The Chronicle Review*, July 16, 2010," B10.

and other times how they might be. They then provided an elegantly simple, and emotionally satisfying, solution with their heroes. In this way, these films embody the fears and the hopes of their time, fears of the American urban crisis and hopes for simple solutions in an increasingly complex and frightening world.

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