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SELLING TRUE STORIES: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MANUFACTURED REALISM IN THE DOCUDRAMA CRIME FILM

Jamie Schleser
DePaul University

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SELLING TRUE STORIES:
A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF MANUFACTURED REALISM
IN THE DOCUDRAMA CRIME FILM

by

Jamie Schleser

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Media, Culture, and Society

Committee Members:

Jay Beck, Ph.D.
Paul Booth, Ph.D.

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Introduction

In the broadest terms, cinema and culture exist in dialogue, each reflecting and shaping the other in an ongoing cycle of mutual feedback that helps determine what viewers expect from a particular film, what the practice of watching films means to individuals and society as a whole, what kind of films are produced, what filmmakers can say in their work, what is considered appropriate and vulgar, and what thematic, technical, and stylistic elements are used in filmmaking at any given time. Critical analysis of the relationship between individual film texts and the cultural climate at the time of their release can provide a more comprehensive ideation of the significance of those texts than genre analysis or structural analysis or auteurist analysis alone because it allows for consideration of the full spectrum of political, ethical, creative, and economic issues that influence Hollywood feature filmmaking and audience spectatorship. By understanding a film as both a product of and influence on culture, it is possible to simultaneously explore that text in relation to the cinematic techniques used to produce it, the style in which it is filmed, the topical content of its narrative, the historical circumstances immediately preceding its inception, the moral code pervading society at the time, the way it was marketed to audiences, the way audiences and critics reacted to it, and any social

message or commentary it may have conveyed. This type of analysis can then be repeated with other texts in order to examine patterns of filmmaking across time.

Using a cultural analysis model, the goal of this investigation is to examine how Hollywood films that spotlight realism through narrative and visual techniques reflect and comment on society in a way that is different from either the prototypical fiction film or the nonfiction documentary. I will argue that these films perform a specific social commentary function. They employ a manufactured aura of believability and experiential familiarity to draw audiences deeper into a narrative that speaks directly to the cultural and political concerns of the day for the purpose of delivering a particular message or moral imperative. This commentary may simply be an attempt to spotlight some perceived flaw in the American system, or it may carry out the instructive task of modeling potential solutions to an existing problem. While the specific goals of each example of this form may differ, they all represent a choice on the part of filmmakers to activate a connection to real life, both aesthetically and narratively, and the purpose of that choice is to inform and influence audiences. While documentaries similarly use verisimilitude to comment on their subject matter, the reach of their message is limited by small audiences and almost nonexistent marketing support from studios and distributors. Fiction films garner broad exposure and significant financial support for advertising campaigns, but are usually too focused on plot development and narrative arcs to delve too deeply into social commentary. As such, in the ongoing dialogue between cinema and culture, these films that make a calculated appeal to real life are far more impactful than any other form thanks to their ability to combine the popular attraction of fiction film with the cultural function of documentary.

Hybridizing elements from the conventional Hollywood feature and the documentary, these films—identified variously as docudramas, semidocumentaries,¹ films in the newsreel style,² “based on a true story” movies,³ and documentary-style productions⁴—exist on a sliding scale between fact and fiction. Some adhere more strictly to documentary-style production techniques—such as location shooting, use of nonprofessional actors, working with available light, eschewing of special effects, and incorporation of actual documentary footage—than others. Some meticulously follow the exact timeline of real events while others paint them in broad strokes, combining inessential characters and jettisoning any plot developments that would digress too far from the primary story arc. While the realization of the form is mutable and there is disagreement over even the most basic decision of how to label them, these films are united by their ability to artfully combine the emotion and standard plot structure of dramatic fiction films with the desire to capture the essence of lived experience on screen that drives documentary films. For the purpose of this study, the preferred term for referring to these fact-fiction hybrids is docudrama,⁵ as it is the most concise of the available nomenclature and its emphasis on drama will continually remind the reader that these films are not the “pure, uncommercial expressions” of documentary.⁶ The semidocumentary moniker places too much emphasis on nonfiction, which functions in the docudrama more as a tool than a strict philosophy, while the other terminology is either inexact or simply untenable for maintaining fluid prose. Having chosen a name, the next

¹ Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, vol. 6 of *History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 10; Carl Richardson, *Autopsy: An Element of Realism in Film Noir* (Metuchen, New Jersey and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992), 2; J.P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns in Film Noir* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 23.

² Sheri Chinen Biesen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 74-6.

³ Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen, *Based on A True Story: Fact and Fantasy in 100 Favorite Movies* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005).

⁴ Telotte, 22.

⁵ Docudrama is a term that is sometimes also used to describe certain made-for-television movies; however, this study will focus exclusively on its application to Hollywood feature films.

⁶ Richardson, 2.

step is to sketch out some of the defining characteristics that set docudramas apart from other films.

At its core, docudrama is about delivering a compelling story, though purposefully informed by the narrative details of some set of documented events that actually happened to some real person in some real place and enhanced by attempts to recreate the aesthetic texture and tone of real life. While docudrama is unique in its commitment to capturing some sense of the lived experience of human interaction, to buildings that are more than back lot facades, and to characters with sufficient depth that you feel you might encounter them on any street in America, they are fundamentally a for-profit enterprise. In fact, it could be argued that some docudrama feature films are an ideal realization of the commercial product of mainstream Hollywood, as their distinguishing feature, the evocation of reality through both narrative and aesthetics, had become the primary emphasis of marketing campaigns surrounding a number of these releases by the early 1950s: many were, in no uncertain terms, selling reality.⁷ Most importantly, it is essential to remember that docudramas always represent a conscious choice on the part of the filmmakers, as the default assumption audiences have about Hollywood films is that they are fabricated stories, so manufacturing a heightened sense of believability or familiarity or faithfulness to lived experience and explicitly communicating those efforts to audiences must clearly serve some purpose. Elucidating the rationale behind this calculated alternative framing of otherwise conventional commercial Hollywood films is the focus of this investigation.

⁷ For more information and specific examples, see discussion of *The Captive City* (1952) and *The Phenix City Story* (1955) in Chapter 2.

Limiting the Sample: Identifying Texts for Analysis

In surveying the last 70 years of film history in search of patterns of docudrama films that might provide insight into how appeals to real life are executed and to what end,⁸ a number of specific clusters of films stood out: biographies; war films and chronicles of other major historical events; sports films about specific athletes, teams, or championships; and crime films.⁹ The latter category is the most compelling as it includes a long tradition of docudrama beginning with American *film noir* in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, many scholars suggest that the origins and early trajectories of *film noir* and the docudrama crime film were tangled together before they ultimately went in separate directions. Utilizing the “semidocumentary” terminology, Carl Richardson describes how the “the approach toward a union between the two . . . the union itself, and then the rupture that tore the two forms of expression apart, define the whole *film noir* cycle.”¹⁰ Similarly, Sheri Chinen Biesen locates the impetus for both forms—*film noir* and what she calls the films in the “newsreel style”—in the gravity and scarcity of World War II.¹¹ She credits advancements in filmmaking technology developed in service of the war effort, as well as the rationing of lights, electricity, film stock, and set materials and restrictive wartime studio budgets with propagating the starkly lit black and white milieu that we now associate with *film noir*. At the same time, she attributes the defining characteristics of docudrama crime films, visual and narrative emulations of lived experience, to a “graphic, hard-hitting style of realism that . . . sought to emulate war-related front-line news coverage shot with available lighting and

⁸ The scope of the initial research for this project was intentionally limited to the 1940s and later in order to increase the odds that both the film text and primary historiographical sources would still be available and in circulation. Despite the calculated attempt to limit potential problems, the two films from the 1950s analyzed here were extremely difficult to locate as they have long since fallen out of distribution. One of them, *The Phenix City Story*, is finally slated for re-release in July of 2010 as part of Warner Brothers *film noir* boxed set. For details, see Charles Taylor and Stephanie Zacharek, “Summer DVDs: Apaches, Nuns, and a Landlord.” *New York Times* (April 30, 2010), <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/02/movies/homevideo/02stag.html> (accessed May 3, 2010).

⁹ For specific examples of films across these categories, see Vankin and Whalen.

¹⁰ Richardson, 2.

¹¹ Biesen, 76.

translate it to the bigger Hollywood narrative screen.”¹² In addition to saving studios money from a production standpoint, these films benefited from their ability to offer a fresh appeal to audiences thanks to sensationalized “depictions of crime, violence, and sexual topics that were now possible because of lapses in [Production Code Administration] enforcement during the war.”¹³ Inspired by use of similar imagery in newsreel footage, these displays set a new precedent for cinematic appropriateness that would linger long after the armistice was signed. The singular convergence of all of these conditions during World War II set the stage for the development of *film noir* and the docudrama crime film, both as overlapping entities in the 1940s and divergent forms in the 1950s and beyond.

The rich and complex history of the docudrama crime film, particularly in regard to its intersection with *film noir* in the postwar era of the late 1940s and early 1950s, is the focus of this investigation. In order to explore how documentary-style production and narrative appropriation of true events are used as tools to manufacture an air of realism surrounding films that otherwise follow conventional patterns of Hollywood fiction feature filmmaking and why, I will examine a series of docudrama crime films that center on the topic of corruption. By identifying films with the common theme of criminal malfeasance, especially on the part of law enforcement officers charged with protecting the public and politicians elected on the assumption that they will exercise exceptionally sound judgment in governance, it is possible to trace the evolution of how this subject matter is treated over time. Similarly, the selection of films from the 1940s—*Boomerang* (1947) and *Call Northside 777* (1948)—and the 1950s—*The Captive City* (1952) and *The Phenix City Story* (1955)—will provide insight into how the docudrama form itself adapts its appeal to narrative and visual realism and what changing social

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

commentary function these films may perform in the span of time between the recent postwar years and the burgeoning national growth of the latter decade.

Navigating the Minefield: “Realism” and the Bygone Era

There are two primary issues that must be dealt with in order for this project to be successful. Biesen’s use of the word “realism” to describe the aesthetics of the newsreel style that informed docudrama crime films touches on the first. Both scholars and film critics frequently employ this word with little consideration for the marking the specific meaning they intend to convey. As Richardson explains, “the use of the term ‘realism’ poses some very knotty problems that would take space at least equal to the size of another book to resolve.”¹⁴ For his own work, he defaults to an understanding of reality as “empirical, experiential externality,” which he suggests is a nod to the “aesthetic realism” preferred by André Bazin over the “pseudorealism” of passive experience inherent in “psychological realism.”¹⁵ Richardson crystallizes his definition of realism by marking it as the product of restraint. It is commitment to do less—to avoid “using glamour-ridden lighting, cloying make-up, constructed sets, and implausible scenarios,” to use cinematography tricks like filters and narrow lenses sparingly or not at all, and to forego “commissioning an art department to simulate locations”¹⁶—that defines a film’s espousal of realism. To this notion of streamlining or simplifying the final product of the filmmaking process by removing any distracting excesses, I want to further clarify my intended usage of the word with a pair of formal definitions from the lexicon of standard usage: first, realism as “the representation in art or literature of objects, actions, or social conditions as they

¹⁴ Richardson, 4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 5-6.

actually are, without idealization or presentation in abstract form;” and second, realism as “the treatment of forms, colors, space, etc., in such a manner as to emphasize their correspondence to actuality or to ordinary visual experience.”¹⁷ Together, these explications articulate my understanding of realism, as it applies to filmmaking, as something that aspires to be literal rather than abstract, unembellished, and to render a visual *mélange* that approximates what the eye can see. As such, a film that aspires to realism is populated by relatable characters that you could imagine encountering in some aspect of your life and places that seem familiar and believable based on your own lived experience of what it is to be inside a barroom or a courtroom or a residence—or if you have yet to be in a particular location, perhaps a jail or a police station or a country club, it at least matches your expectation of what being in those places would be like.

Beyond simply defining the intended meaning of “realism,” critics often challenge its use to describe the realistic impulse of docudrama crime films in the 1940s and 1950s. The question lies in whether or not the ability of these films to manufacture a believable rendering of real life is impaired by the simple fact that the majority of film production—and in all four of the films examined here—was still done in black and white. Raising the issue of color seems valid upon acknowledging that, barring visual impairment, human beings experience life in a variety of hues: grass is green, the sky is blue, roses are red or pink or yellow, and so on. Yet, at least in the decades before color films became the quotidian, black and white productions were imbued with their own unique appeal to realism. Director Robert Wise captures the emotional essence of this argument, describing how black and white “may not be as natural a look as color film, but

¹⁷ “Realism,” *Dictionary.com*, from *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/realism> (accessed May 28, 2010); “Realism,” *Dictionary.com*, in *Dictionary.com Unabridged*, Random House, Inc., 2010. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/realism> (accessed May 28, 2010).

[it] has the right ‘feel’ for certain stories.”¹⁸ James Naremore offers a more technical explanation, pointing out that from 1941 to 1952, “most of the purely mechanical images in the world—including snapshots, magazine and newspaper illustrations, newsreels, feature films, and television programs—were in black and white,” while color was reserved for the fantastical world of comic books and cartoon strips.¹⁹ He suggests that this fostered an association of black and white with “empirical or documentary truth,” further enhanced by the fact that “the only film genres in which color was not merely acceptable but also de rigueur [during this period] were cartoons, travelogues, and musical comedy.”²⁰ Furthermore, the ubiquity of black and white as the standard of the film industry since its inception marked it as inherently more familiar and “real” in the context of cinema spectatorship. Audiences expected black and white, which made early color films self-reflexively aware that they were in color. As the challenger in the fight, films presented in color had every reason to crow about the one feature that made them stand out from the crowd of options available to moviegoers. Beyond simply advertising their use of color film, these early productions were also wise to exaggerate the costuming and set design of the film to draw the greatest amount of attention to their novelty. As such, despite more accurately portraying what the eye sees in real life, color was functionally less appropriate for achieving a realistic effect on film until it started gaining significant ground against black and white toward becoming the dominant form in the 1960s and beyond.²¹

The second issue that must be addressed is the existence of vast temporal space between this film scholar and the texts selected for analysis in support of my thesis. Without the personal

¹⁸ Robert Porfirio, Alain Silver, and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader 3: Interviews with Filmmakers of the Classic Noir Period* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2002), 125.

¹⁹ James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, Updated and Expanded Edition (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2008), 169.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

²¹ Peter Lev, *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959*, vol. 7 of *History of the American Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), 108.

experience of seeing a film for the first time as others would have when it was released, it requires special attention to avoid applying modern biases to texts of a bygone era. Looking back at films distributed even ten years ago—let alone when twenty or fifty or seventy years have passed—requires more than straightforward textual analysis. It is simply not productive to consider a film solely within the scope of one’s own contemporary understanding of the world because our moral compass, core values, technology, and even what we expect to gain from watching feature films is constantly evolving. To fully locate a film within the overarching cultural dialogue at the time of its release, it becomes necessary to recreate, as much as possible, the context that would have informed it. The foundation of the cultural analysis that will be undertaken here, this includes identifying the major political and social issues of the day, the stories and topics that dominated other forms of mass media, trends in filmmaking that might have influenced the film, as well the initial response from the industry press, critics, and, if possible, individual viewers. Only cobbling together this picture of how a film came to be and how audiences understood it makes it possible to examine what cultural function it ultimately served and to connect it to other films and filmmaking practices across the depth and breadth of cinematic history. The work of contextualizing films is best done through historiographical research—the examination of historical accounts and primary documents, such as newspaper articles, critical editorials, popular magazines, congressional records, legal opinions, marketing materials issued in support of a film, and social scientific studies—to create a composite of what it would have been like walking into a theater and seeing it for the first time with a crowd of one’s peers.²² With a clear understanding of how a film was positioned in its own time,

²² Admittedly, this model of audience spectatorship in the context of theaters is waning today in light of the development of home video technologies, shorter distances between initial release and mass retail distribution, digital streaming technology, and shifts in the cultural significance of watching films, however, I use it here since it was the dominant mode in the 1940s and 1950s when then films I will address were made.

retrospective textual analysis makes it possible to formulate a theory of how that film worked in concert with other films of the period to identify significant trends in the history filmmaking, as well as to extract a deeper understanding of the cultural functions of the individual film and American cinema as a whole.

Selling Reality: A Shifting Paradigm

The docudrama crime film is most compelling because of its mutability. While the fundamental elements of how these films evoke narrative and aesthetic connections to real life remain basically the same, the individual realization of the form and its social message evolve to fit the changing world. In performing a cultural analysis of two sets of films, one from the years immediately following World War II and another from the first half of the 1950s, I will examine how the form is used differently over time. To bridge a connection between a film narrative and real events, docudrama crime films derive their screenplay source material from existing accounts of something that actually happened. Often newspaper articles or magazine features, these accounts can either provide a first-person perspective from an involved party or present a more formal portrait of what happened crafted by a journalist. The action in a film can be based on a single set of events or a composite of similar scenarios repeated over time. The characters can be completely true to the original or their names can be altered slightly and some minor players can be removed or combined for the sake of clarity. Despite this variety of approaches, the essential element of the docudrama crime film narrative is that it must actively promote itself in relation to a known quantity. The notoriety of that story and the extent to which that connection is advertised can change depending on the particular circumstances surrounding each

release but to be considered an example of the docudrama form, each film must make the implicit claim that it is “based on a true story.”

For example, in the 1940s, long before newspapers were overtaken by standardized content from the Associated Press and television networks embraced a syndication model, there was a finite limit of how much information was available nationally. Regional and local coverage dominated all but the most important news about war, politics, elections, governmental proceedings, and international events that directly impacted domestic life in America. Though national magazines like *Life*, *Time*, and *Reader's Digest* were able to introduce some coverage of local events to a wider audience, the inherent limits on distribution of information made it far less likely for national audiences to be familiar with specific incidents of murder or corruption in towns far from their own. This myopic view of the world, combined with the fact that selling reality had yet to prove itself to Hollywood as a reliably profitable commercial ploy, meant that docudrama crime films in the 1940s were often based on accounts of events that had not reached national saturation and that they were subtle in how they drew attention to the actual events underwriting their narratives. Once the box office draw of manufactured realism became evident and national media flourished in the boom years of the 1950s, docudrama crime films were far more likely to tell stories that were familiar to audiences across America and to shout about their affiliation with the “truth,” with bold pronouncements of authenticity splattered all over their marketing materials and repeated endlessly in the press.

The mechanics of manufacturing aesthetic realism in the docudrama crime film are similarly composed of a basic set of standard elements that allow for variation. For all examples of the form, documentary-style production techniques are the foundation of creating a believable atmosphere on screen. From their origins in the 1940s to their full realization in the 1950s,

docudrama crime films depend heavily on location shooting, use of less-renowned actors, casting of nonprofessionals, imposing clear limits on the use of special effects, and the incorporation of actual documentary footage. Furthermore, the costuming and makeup used are restrained, with men most often wearing suits and hats appropriate to the time period and women in demure but unremarkable dresses. Together these elements form the toolbox of documentary-style production techniques that docudrama crime filmmakers continually draw from to ensure that the places in a film seem more familiar and solid, the characters come across like real people rather than stereotypes, the influence of an actor's previous body of work on the reception of the current film is limited as much as possible, and the aura of nonfiction is heavily draped over its conventional fiction film frame. The particular mix of techniques used in any given film can vary, but some combination must always be in play for a film to be an example of the docudrama form.

Though ever present in the docudrama crime film, these documentary-style production techniques are often pitted against a cinematic stylization that would seem to undercut the very sense of realism that they attempt to manufacture. In the 1940s, the intersection of the docudrama crime film and *film noir*, as suggested by Richardson and Biesen, put the evocation of real life at odds with perhaps the most stylized aesthetic form in all of cinematic history. Steeped in visual effects that manipulate the eye, from low-angle shooting and claustrophobically tight framing to high contrast lighting and a working vocabulary of repeated iconography, *film noir* thrives on taking the comfortable trappings of everyday life and turning them into a darkly threatening force. Despite the perceived incompatibility of manufactured realism and the stylized environs of *film noir*, the two actually work in concert. The aesthetic tricks retroactively associated with *film noir* are used sparingly to inform the social commentary

of the film. They act as a tool for highlighting perceived flaws in the American justice system and for painting the misdeeds of the law enforcement officers and politicians during the postwar period in a nefarious light. At the same time, constantly reminding audiences that the story they are watching is based on real events magnifies the emotional impact of the familiar world being transformed into a dangerous, unwelcoming place. With the aura of nonfiction firmly in place thanks to narrative affiliation with real events and the aesthetic conventions of documentary-style production, the stylized milieu borrowed from *film noir* only enhances the unsettling message delivered to audiences in the late 1940s by docudrama crime films like *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777*.

Docudrama crime films of the 1950s had moved away from their shared origins with *film noir*. Though some of the stylized elements of the latter form persisted, such as the manipulation of light and dark and the targeted use of shadows, the docudrama had begun to develop along a different path. As the commercial possibilities of selling reality became more apparent to Hollywood studios and distributors, appealing to real life in docudrama films had become more important than the uncertainty and angst conveyed in classic *film noir*. More scenes were staged using available light and camerawork began to emphasize mirroring what really was rather than contorting it for dramatic effect. At the same time, this desire to push the familiar and “true” to the forefront led the form to lean heavily toward spectacle. Where *film noir* stylization had once threatened to impede the effect of manufactured realism in the postwar docudrama crime film, a shift towards the construction of a “hyperreal” milieu, a cinematic environment that was somehow more real than real life, now seemed poised to overwhelm the usefulness of referencing actual events in the first place. Yet, just as *film noir* aesthetics enriched the social commentary function of early appeals to narrative and visual realism, the turn towards spectacle

merely helped to drive the message of these later films home. With an emphasis on onscreen violence, cinematography technology that enhanced the ability of movies to believably recreate lived experience, and the manifestation of reality as the star of the show, docudrama crime films of the 1950s effectively use hints of excess as a tool to magnify the audience response to manufactured realism. Shocking displays of violence, pulled from the headlines of the actual events that inform their narratives, make the message of these films about the dangers of individual inaction in the face of pervasive corruption even more threatening, as the shadows of prison bars cast across the faces of the innocent had attempted to wake audiences to the potential for miscarriage of justice in the docudrama crime films of the previous decade.

To perform a social commentary function, even with the aid of stylized *film noir* cinematography or spectacle, the docudrama crime film must tap into the major political and cultural concerns of the day. By referencing contemporary social issues and anxieties that would have been familiar to audiences, the docudrama crime film is effectively activating a second level of appeal to narrative realism. At the first level, a defined connection to a recorded set of events that affected real people in real places makes a story seem as if it is worth telling, but that does not guarantee that viewers will leave theaters having registered the moral or message implied in the film. By tying the narrative into the larger social and political issues affecting Americans, whether through subtle repetition of important themes or explicit references to significant governmental proceedings, the docudrama crime film is able to complete the cycle of recognition. In addition to presenting the tragedy that has befallen some real person, these films carry a distinct implication of “this could happen to you” or “this could be where you live” that is produced by melding the isolated event with the larger concern. In the postwar era, that problem was the miscarriage of justice. Covered extensively in the press, the paranoia-driven hunt to root

out Communism led by the House Un-American Activities Committee was raining down groundless accusations of treason on innocent people and the fundamental rights of citizens—due process and the ability to mount a defense against accusations of wrongdoing—seemed as if they were in jeopardy of being tossed on the scrap heap in order to advance the careers of a few self-interested politicians. In the 1950s, the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce proceedings, one of the first widely televised congressional investigations, had revealed that corruption and vice had become a matter-of-fact occurrence that people were apathetic toward or outright accepting of in towns, large and small, across America. By incorporating the prevailing cultural concerns of the day into the telling of real stories about real people, docudrama crime films were able to contribute pointed social commentary to the dialogue between cinema and culture.

Unpacking the Docudrama

Docudrama exists in the ether between the conventional Hollywood feature film and the nonfiction documentary. Appropriating elements from both traditions, the docudrama combines the commercial impulse and traditional structure of the fiction film with the emphasis on conveying the knowledge or essence of lived experience that dominates the nonfiction form. Ultimately, the docudrama is a commodity, just like any other Hollywood feature, because it does not adhere strictly the philosophy of “truth” that is essential in documentaries. Instead, the illusion of “truth” and manufactured realism are tools that this hybrid form uses to mold the classic narrative into a mechanism for delivering a social message to audiences that comments on the particular political concerns and cultural atmosphere at the time of its production and release. That experiential realism is always a construction, carefully crafted by filmmakers using a

combination of documentary-style production techniques and the forging of a narrative connection between the plot and some set of real events. Once a film is enrobed in the aura of authenticity provided by these visual and anecdotal appeals, the believability and familiarity are further enhanced by drawing it into the larger dialogue between culture and cinema by referencing, indirectly or explicitly, the pressing social issues of the day.

The docudrama crime film provides a ripe opportunity for a case study of the architecture of this form, what purpose such evocations of “truth” purport to serve, and how the form changes its shape and messages over time. In the immediate postwar years of the late 1940s, the docudrama crime film and the American *film noir* gained footing in Hollywood thanks to a confluence of circumstances, including wartime rationing that affected what supplies were available to filmmakers and limited how much money could be spent on production, wide audience exposure to the documentary style and brutal imagery of newsreels that brought the war home, and a change in the cultural climate in the aftermath of the war stemming from pervasive uncertainty and growing pessimism about the state of the world. A shift had occurred somewhere between the outbreak of fighting and armistice that led to a more permissive attitude toward displays of violence and sex, which were beginning to be more accepted in popular culture as realistic reflections of lived experience, and a growing interest in cinematic representations that addressed serious issues and eschewed superficiality.

During this early period, docudrama crime films and *film noir* were locked in a pattern of co-evolution with the former drawing heavily from the aesthetic conventions that would subsequently come to typify the latter. An outgrowth of the docudrama form, justice docudramas like *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777* attempted to expose the corruption of the American justice system and the complicity of greedy, self-interested cops and politicians who allowed

innocent men to be persecuted in service of their own aspirations. Drawn from accounts of the true stories of two men, each falsely accused of committing murder, these films tapped into the cultural zeitgeist of the day concerning fears about the widespread potential for the miscarriage of justice that stemmed from the inquisition to expose an unproven domestic threat of Communist influence led by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Covered widely in the press, this investigatory body's penchant for making loaded claims that carried the potential consequence of personal and professional stigmatization against individuals who had little recourse for defending themselves spawned an atmosphere of paranoia and disdain for the machinery of governance that would saturate popular culture. *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777* were able to capitalize on this by retelling their stories, drawn from published newspaper and magazine accounts, using a combination of documentary-style production techniques and *film noir* aesthetic conventions to create a believable and familiar world on screen that was blackened by corruption, visually threatening, and emotionally resonant.

In the 1950s, the docudrama crime film evolved away from its parallel development with *film noir*. As mass communications expanded during this period, national news coverage was increasingly possible, making ordinary Americans more aware of what was happening across the country. At the same time, the popular success of justice docudramas in the 1940s had proven to Hollywood that films offering a blend of fact and fiction were viable commodities. As a result, docudrama crime films began to make bolder claims of realism and to emphasize their narrative connection to real events more than ever before. With the cycle of syndicate films that grew out of the national fascination with organized crime and corporatized vice that were exposed by the widely televised Kefauver Committee hearings at the turn of decade, the form shifted toward an ethos of realism for realism's sake. A spectacle of violence and technologically enhanced

cinematography, syndicate films like *The Captive City* and *The Phenix City Story* moved away from a cultural function of exposing flaws in the system to a more instructive model of taking corruption for granted and presenting individual apathy as the cause and personal accountability as the solution. Competing with the increasingly popular television medium for audience attention, syndicate films reflect a decisive movement of the docudrama crime film towards the commercial Hollywood end of the fact-fiction spectrum. Unlike the experiment with using “name” actors to increase box office appeal that drew some negative critical feedback for *Call Northside 777*, ramping up appeals to narrative and visual realism with the addition of spectacle in the syndicate film proved commercially advantageous without compromising the integrity of the docudrama form. Being over-the-top did not impair the ability of these films to make the claims to “truth” and authenticity that underwrote their intended social commentary as the baggage of all the other leading roles played by an established actor carrying over into a particular film text had. Additionally, their ability to use a narrative connection to real life events allowed them to stretch the acceptable limits of portrayals of sex and violence by directing the attention of would-be critics to the relative tameness of their depictions compared to the brutality of what actually happened. This was particularly true in the case of the *The Phenix City Story*.

Through an in-depth analysis of these four films, it is possible to trace the initial development of the docudrama crime film, to examine how these texts manufacture an aura of realism through a combination of narrative and visual techniques, and to explore how variations in the realization of the form reflect a shifting cultural function over time. Their use of enhanced realism to shape how audiences interpret what they see on screen, to identify with the characters and situations, and to suggest a prescribed reading of the film that reflects a particular social

message places the docudrama crime film apart from both the conventional Hollywood feature and the documentary, yet it remains a compelling and profitable form of entertainment.

Guilty Until Proven Innocent: Crime, Corruption and the Justice Docudrama in the 1940s

The 1940s were a turning point in America and abroad. World War II had exposed a battery of new threats that undermined a heretofore unchallenged sense of domestic security, including the possibility of international conflict so dire it was capable of churning on multiple fronts, the specter of nuclear warfare, the attempted destruction of an entire population, the realization that human beings were not immune to becoming swept up in service of hateful ideology, and the attack on Pearl Harbor that definitively proved that American soil was not the untouchable sanctuary citizens assumed it to be. In the wake of the fighting, the future was uncertain. A cultural shift had occurred that would change how Americans saw the world and that necessarily trickled down into all aspects of daily life, even something as seemingly nonessential as how they wanted to be entertained. Lighthearted comedies and musicals popular before the war fell away, as did the combat films that had dominated Hollywood offerings during war itself. The Western enjoyed a resurgence at the box office, while a new type of film “centering on the efforts of a vaguely despondent male beset by postwar angst to ‘find himself,’”

which Thomas Schatz calls the “male melodrama,” gained momentum.²³ Yet, the most dynamic new forms to come out of the postwar period were American *film noir*, characterized by a dark and pessimistic backlash against the “five years of enforced optimism and prosocial posturing” that dominated the first half of the decade, and the docudrama crime film, which told stories using a groundbreaking blend of fiction and nonfiction elements.²⁴ While the two overlapped at the start, flourishing in spite of wartime rationing and postwar uncertainty, the latter form represented a calculated step away from the conventional Hollywood feature film, using documentary-style production techniques and narratives based on real events to manufacture an aura of nonfiction and deliver a social message.

In the anxious and difficult times following World War II, real life was challenging and audiences responded to cinematic material that was more ambiguous, more foreboding, and more prone to acknowledging the darker side of human existence. Psychological uncertainty and paranoia were also expanding as the Cold War began to escalate and the espousal of Communist sympathies became the most outrageous crime of the day. Docudrama crime films played to this market by incorporating *film noir* aesthetics into stories that purported to delve into the lived experience of actual individuals who had been falsely accused of and/or unjustly imprisoned for crimes that they did not commit. For example, *Boomerang* (1947) and *Call Northside 777* (1948) each focus their dramatic action on the plight of a man who has been run down by circumstance, pinned with a seemingly indefensible crime, and destined to rot in prison in order to tie up messy loose ends for self-interested, career-minded cops and politicians. Due to their unique preoccupation with the justice system, culminating either in a showy courtroom display or in front of an unsympathetic parole board, I will refer to these films collectively as justice

²³ Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, vol. 6 of *History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 368-70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 378.

docudramas. In light of the ongoing House Un-American Activities Committee hearings to identify the extent to which America was vulnerable to a domestic Communist “threat,” these films were particularly resonant. Their ability to crystallize the fear of false accusation or persecution with little recourse for defense by using the actual suffering of others helped to make their message that the system was in peril or already broken as clear as day.

False Accusations: HUAC Wages War Against Communism

In the years following the conclusion of World War II, the machinery of American popular culture underwent a period of major transformation. After an initial surge in attendance immediately following the return of American soldiers back home from abroad, Hollywood began to struggle under the weight of falling ticket sales, labor disputes, increased scrutiny of studio business practices from the U.S. government, and growing competition for entertainment audiences as television began to gain footing in American households.²⁵ The major studios were trying to negotiate their very existence in the years to come. Financially, they were challenged by accusations of monopolizing film production and distribution chains through theater ownership. Socially, they were unbalanced by shifting moral values as some postwar audiences and critics began to gravitate towards films that were more politicized, more sexually and violently explicit, and more darkly pessimistic than traditionally encouraged under the limitations imposed by the Production Code Administration. Technologically, they were unsure of what their future role might be in the production of television content or how that new medium would ultimately impact cinematic spectatorship as a cultural practice. All of this uncertainty created a system in

²⁵ For a broader history of Hollywood during this period, consult Schatz. For exact figures on the spread of television across the U.S. during this early period, see Gary R. Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 103.

flux that opened the door to experimentation with new types of films and a fundamental alteration of the old Hollywood filmmaking process.

On a larger political front, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)—which had been operating since 1938 as the temporary Select Committee on Un-American Activities (also known as the Dies Committee)—became a permanent, congressionally sanctioned investigative body located within the U.S. House of Representatives in 1945.²⁶ The primary purpose of HUAC, as defined by House records, was to carry out investigations into

(1) the extent, character, and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States, (2) the diffusion within the United States of subversive and un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principle or the form of government as guaranteed by our Constitution, and (3) all other questions in relation thereto that would aid Congress in any necessary remedial legislation.²⁷

As the committee ramped up activity in the immediate postwar years, it would become obvious that its means of identifying what exactly constituted “un-American” activity, as well as the standard of evidence required to permanently taint the reputations of ordinary American citizens by insinuating that they were secretly or blatantly sympathetic to Communist ideals, was as amorphous as the statement of the tasks set before the members of HUAC. Without finite limits to their powers, the formation of HUAC would mark an escalation in political paranoia that would eventually set the stage for McCarthyism in the 1950s.

When the crusade against un-American activities turned its attention toward Hollywood in October of 1947, a group of screenwriters and directors, targeted primarily for their

²⁶ National Archives, “Chapter 14: Records of the Judiciary Committee and Related Committees,” *Guide to the Records of the U.S. House of Representatives at the Nation Archives, 1789-1989* (Record Group 223), <http://www.archives.gov/legislative/guide/house/chapter-14-judiciary.html#HUAC> (accessed March 17, 2010): 14.107.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.108.

unconventionality or outspokenness, was called to testify before the committee. HUAC members were convinced that wealthy progressives in Hollywood were secretly funding the Communist Party or worse, incorporating party propaganda into their feature film releases.²⁸ Upon refusing to volunteer information about their personal knowledge of the Communist Party, ten of those individuals were held in contempt by the committee and subsequently blacklisted from any future work on major film productions. This decisive action came as a group of top Hollywood executives, flailing under HUAC's magnifying glass, desperately tried to stem any hint of impropriety or ideological contamination.²⁹ The "Hollywood Ten," as they became known, were simultaneously robbed of their livelihood, isolated from the majority of their associates, and indelibly associated with Communism in the writing of American history.³⁰ Contrary to the American ideals of individual liberty and freedom of speech, this infamous group was punished, not for committing a crime, but for insisting that they not be unjustly forced to identify their politics to the United States government on demand. Located within the legislative branch, these hearings—despite the power given to HUAC to subpoena witnesses, demand testimony, and hold unwilling participants in contempt—were not impeded by the commitment to due process and assumed innocence until guilt is proven that typically underwrites formal judicial procedures such as trials. There was no opportunity to mount a defense. A failure to submit to questioning became tantamount to guilt and individuals could be pulled into this dark cloud simply because they had attended the same cocktail party decades prior as someone who admitted to having been a member of the Communist party or because another person called to testify before the

²⁸ "Cinema: Command Performance," *Time* (April 2, 1951), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,814555,00.html> (accessed January 27, 2010).

²⁹ "Communists: Pink Slips," *Time* (December 8, 1947), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,9171,934113,00.html> (accessed March 17, 2010).

³⁰ For an in-depth discussion of the "Hollywood Ten," see Bernard F. Dick, *Radical Innocence: A Critical Study of the Hollywood Ten* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1989).

committee had named them as a known sympathizer in order to draw attention away from their own involvement. The consequences of being accused of Communist activity, whether justified or not, were made abundantly clear to readers of popular magazines such as *Time*, which had been covering the political tensions surrounding Communism in Hollywood since as early as 1944 and regularly featured stories about the hearings throughout October and November of 1947.³¹

As *Time* is a nationally distributed magazine with a diverse readership, it necessarily attempts to appeal to a broad audience by covering a variety of topics, including news, political happenings, entertainment, and celebrity gossip. The mainstream nature of this publication makes it all the more damning that many of the articles covering the HUAC proceedings contain a marked criticism of both the investigative body itself and its fiery figurehead, Congressman J. Parnell Thomas. The November 10, 1947 issue of *Time* features two separate articles that illustrate this openly adversarial editorial stance. In the first piece, the author paints the scene at the hearings as a circus-like cacophony of shouting and gavel banging as a “parade of witnesses trooped to the stand.”³² Amidst this madhouse, Thomas is described variously as having his “red neck swelling,” of smashing at least one gavel to smithereens, of producing a red herring witness to testify about an incident of alleged treason only tangentially related to the proceedings because it also happened in California, and of dismissing the carefully prepared statements of a succession of witnesses with only a “hasty, belligerent look.”³³ In contrast, the witnesses are

³¹ See the following articles: “California: The Battle of Hollywood,” *Time* (February 14, 1944), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,9171,885343,00.html> (accessed March 17, 2010); “Communists: Brother Hanns,” *Time* (October 6, 1947), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,9171,779290,00.html> (accessed March 17, 2010); “The Congress: From Wonderland,” *Time* (October 27, 1947), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,9171,854789,00.html> (accessed March 17, 2010); “The Congress: Hollywood on the Hill,” *Time* (November 3, 1947), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,9171,779364,00.html> (accessed March 17, 2010); “The Congress: Fade-Out,” *Time* (November 10, 1947), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,9171,793872,00.html> (accessed March 17, 2010).

³² “The Congress: Fade-Out.”

³³ *Ibid.*

portrayed as calm, rational beings that were either willing to engage in nuanced conversations about politics or calmly resolute in their reasoning as to why they should not have to discuss it in the first place. After suggesting that the hearings were suspended for lack of evidence, the author concludes with the assertion that “most of the U.S. could agree that the fade-out was appropriate.”³⁴ This characterization of HUAC and its tactics, coupled with the author’s boldness in speaking for the majority of Americans, illustrates how negatively the proceedings may have been received by audiences. If viewers were already predisposed to be suspicious and scornful of this kind of behavior by government officials, it follows that they would have been more receptive to the jaded portrayal of the miscarriage of justice and the abuse of power in justice docudramas like *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777*.

The second article takes an even more directly critical tack on the HUAC hearings in the winter of 1947. Expanding beyond the magazine’s own previously documented misgivings, it asserts that the national press “was almost unanimous in its condemnation” and that a “spot survey by the *New York Times* showed that many plain citizens were concerned about the committee’s conduct.”³⁵ While debating the pros and cons of Congressional investigations, the author points out that while they are not directly sanctioned in the constitution, they have been upheld as viable and necessary numerous times by the Supreme Court. Ultimately, the complaint was not with the idea of regulation through Congressional committees, which the author grants had led to essential government reform in the past. Instead,

the real trouble with the Thomas committee seemed to be the committee itself. Instead of buckling down to the problem of Communism where it hurts, as in the labor unions, it had gleefully pounced on Hollywood, where the publicity was brighter. It had failed to establish that any crime

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “National Affairs: Kill or Cure?,” *Time* (November 10, 1947), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,9171,793875,00.html> (accessed March 17, 2010).

had been committed—i.e., that any subversive propaganda had ever reached the screen.³⁶

This clearly alludes to the rash behavior of Thomas described in the first article and reaffirms the general consensus that a pervasive lack of evidence and even the absence of an actual crime had plagued the hearings since the opening gavel. In fact, the author goes so far as to personify the proceedings within the character of the chairman by eschewing the more familiar HUAC designation in favor of referring to them only as the Thomas Committee. This distrust for individuals in positions of power rather than the entirety of the system and the possibility of wrongful accusation perpetrated by officials even at the highest levels of the U.S. government are themes which resonate throughout certain types of films in the postwar period.

Critiquing Crime and Punishment in the Justice Docudrama

These concerns about the potential miscarriage of justice and the abuse of the system by self-serving individuals are particularly salient in the trio of postwar film cycles that Thomas Schatz suggests were gaining momentum after 1946: *film noir*, the docudrama crime film (which he calls the semidocumentary crime film), and the social problem drama.³⁷ While Richardson and Biesen have already drawn attention to the symbiotic early development of *film noir* and the docudrama crime film, Schatz's addition of the social problem drama provides the missing piece of the picture. The progressive politics and informative mode of storytelling characteristic of the social problem drama can clearly be seen as an influence of the social commentary activity of many docudrama crime films. As in all discussions of film style or genre, these cycles did not exist as distinct entities but as fluid elements on a sliding scale, ripe for overlap and

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Schatz, 378.

appropriation of elements. The foreboding darkness of *film noir*—marked by a claustrophobic framing of scenes, use of voice-over narration and flashbacks, and the rendering of a highly stylized visual milieu of darkness and light, nighttime, urban spaces, shadows, neon signs, mirrors, rain-soaked streets, and staircases, all tailored to seem as imposing or outright threatening as possible³⁸—may seem fundamentally opposed to the unmanipulated visual world of the documentary style as it purports to capture the essence of some real event, yet the inference of authenticity or truth can often heighten the disturbing effects of that unfriendly world, as corruption and violence are taken out of the realm of fantasy and plugged into the world we live in. Films that draw tangible ties to a lived reality, whether visually or literally, carry the additional weight of reminding audiences that what they are watching is not just a manufactured narrative or a moral play.

The studio responsible for producing the largest number of these docudrama crime films in the 1940s was Twentieth Century Fox, helmed by Darryl F. Zanuck. According to film historians Alain Silver and James Ursini, Zanuck was known for having always been “interested in liberal political social message films.”³⁹ This is evident in the narrative arcs of any number of films that he green-lighted after the war, including *A Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), which centered on issues of anti-Semitism, and *Pinky* (1949), the story of a biracial protagonist attempting to negotiate her place in the either/or equation of racial division in the 1940s. In addition to this predisposition to “message films,” Schatz suggests that Zanuck had long been a

³⁸ For more in-depth information about *film noir* iconography, themes, and formal elements, see Foster Hirsh, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: De Capo Press, 1981).

³⁹ “Commentary by Alain Silver and James Ursini,” optional audio track, *Boomerang*, Dir. Elia Kazan, Perf. Dana Andrews and Lee J. Cobb, 1947, DVD, Fox Film Noir, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006. As examples to support this assertion, they list the following films: *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), and *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), the last of which was directed by Elia Kazan immediately following *Boomerang*.

proponent of taking dramatic inspiration from the headlines of the day.⁴⁰ This combination of enthusiasm for addressing contemporary social problems and drawing inspiration from real events that happened off screen would lead to a series of docudrama crime films when Zanuck partnered with producer Louis de Rochemont, who had begun his career working on the *March of Time* series of documentary newsreels.⁴¹

Two films born out of this partnership—*Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777*—are particularly rich for examining the cultural function of films located at the intersection of documentary-style manufactured realism, social commentary, and *film noir* aesthetics. Most films that fall within this pattern of filmmaking during the late 1940s only succeed in including elements from one or two of these styles, but these two texts incorporated elements of all three in a productive yet still entertaining way. Even more unusual for the time, *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777* took the docudrama approach to its logical extreme by openly promoting the connection of each film to a set of true events that had received national coverage in newspapers and/or magazines. This represented a calculated step beyond other documentary-style crime dramas of the time that were either evoking realism solely through use of formal elements such as location shooting, use of non-actors, and narration⁴² or combining that mode of production with allusion to true events that were not as overtly familiar to audiences.⁴³ I will argue that these films purposely manufacture a sense of reality on two levels—first, visually, through the use of documentary-style production techniques and formal elements, and then, literally, through the establishment of a narrative connection with real events—in order to convey a particular social

⁴⁰ Schatz, 383.

⁴¹ Schatz, 379. To view episodes from the *March of Time* series, see <http://www.hboarchives.com/apps/searchlibrary/ctl/marchoftime> (accessed February 21, 2010).

⁴² Examples: *Crossfire* (1947), *Thieves' Highway* (1949), and *The Lawless* (1950).

⁴³ Examples: *Naked City* (1948), “based on newspaper files,” and *T-Men* (1948), “based on real U.S. Treasury Department cases,” according to Alain Silver and James Ursini in *Film Noir*, ed. by Paul Duncan (London and Los Angeles: Taschen, 2004), 81-91.

consciousness to audiences in the most accessible and meaningful way possible. By activating an existing familiarity with a true story of crime and consequences, even at the subconscious level, and recreating those events in a believable fashion, the resonance of the message being conveyed in these films and its effect on viewers is instantly magnified.

Boomerang and *Call Northside 777*, while certainly exceptional examples of the docudrama crime film form, represent a particular sub-category that I will refer to as “justice docudramas.” Their thematic preoccupation with crime and punishment, as well as corruption and justice, necessarily takes them into the arena of courtrooms and jail cells. Each film follows a similar narrative pattern in which an individual is accused of a crime, an unconventional investigation to assess the guilt of the accused is launched, and the climax of the action is a tension-filled pleading of the evidence, either in an actual courtroom or before an assembly of the state parole board. In both cases, the vindication of the falsely accused man comes down to last-minute theatrics on the part of the protagonist. The solemnity that this legal intonation provides actively exacerbates the atmosphere of paranoia. The constant fear of being unjustly implicated in some kind of un-American plot based on one’s personal politics generated by the HUAC inquest would have been an unavoidable factor in how these films were received by 1940s audiences. That both narratives foreground the theme of false accusation is no coincidence given the social and political atmosphere at the time and certainly would have seemed pertinent to viewers of the day. Furthermore, the decision to activate those existing social and political concerns by relating stories of actual individuals who had been railroaded into giving a false confession or imprisoned despite an unwavering assertion of innocence and then incorporating documentary-style formal elements and production techniques was simply the final step in making the miscarriage of justice seem threateningly plausible to audiences.

Case Study: Boomerang

Boomerang was produced by Louis de Rochemont and helmed by Elia Kazan, who began his directorial career with the social problem drama *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), the story of a young girl coming of age in an impoverished family with an alcoholic father.⁴⁴ This predilection for addressing social issues is a notable constant throughout Kazan's career, as he also directed *A Gentleman's Agreement* and *Pinky* for Twentieth Century Fox before going on to win popular acclaim for films such as *On the Waterfront* (1954), which dealt with labor issues, and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), which examined teenage sexuality through the lens of the late 1920s. Foster Hirsch suggests that this attraction toward socially relevant subject matter was twinned with an aesthetic of "impassioned realism, realism transcending itself as it probes beneath everyday people, objects, places, and situations to uncover a palpitant poetry of the commonplace."⁴⁵ While the collaborative nature of the filmmaking process makes it difficult to argue that thematic patterns of filmmaking by either the producer or the director or any other contributor are always evident in the completed film, the consistency with which social consciousness and realism are incorporated across the filmographies of Kazan and de Rochemont, working both together and separately, would seem to support that connection in this particular instance.

Boomerang tells the true story of two men: a young veteran who is falsely accused of shooting a priest in a small Connecticut town and the State's Attorney who ultimately proves him innocent, Henry L. Harvey. The narrative is based on the experiences of Homer Cummings, an individual who would have been very familiar to audiences, as he was appointed Attorney General of the United States in 1933 and was a popular figure in the print media throughout the

⁴⁴ Michel Ciment, *Kazan on Kazan* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 180-2.

⁴⁵ Foster Hirsch, *A Method to Their Madness: The History of the Actor's Studio* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1984), 336-7.

1930s and early 1940s as a result of his esteemed position in the Justice department.⁴⁶ With the exception of the deceased clergyman, the cast of characters populating this narrative project has been imbued with an unsettling moral ambiguity often found in *film noir*. For the audience and the State's Attorney alike, it is initially unclear if the accused, John Waldron (Arthur Kennedy), is a cold-blooded killer or an innocent victim of institutionalized persecution. The film goes so far as to actively suggest that he may be capable of such an act of violence when a psychologist brought in to consult on his interrogation ominously describes Waldron as a disaffected veteran having trouble readjusting after the war. While Waldron's image is later softened by the suggestion that he is just a simple everyman who fell under suspicion only because he happened to leave town the day the priest was shot, this early seed of doubt helps heighten the drama of the events that play out in the courtroom. It also makes him more sympathetic to viewers when his true character is revealed and draws a loose but meaningful parallel with the frequently groundless accusations volleyed at individuals who were accused of Communist sympathies by HUAC.

The ethics of Police Chief Harold F. Robinson (Lee J. Cobb) are similarly unfixed as he oscillates back and forth between fiercely upholding justice and tossing out the rulebook entirely. While his original instinct is that Waldron is not guilty, he begins to cave in to public pressure to find a scapegoat during the interrogation sequence, allowing the suspect to be denied legal representation and subjected to sleep deprivation and psychological manipulation in order to force a signed confession. Later, Robinson revives his moral convictions, refusing to let a mob of townspeople lynch Waldron before the conclusion of the trial. While this kind of character

⁴⁶ A search of Google News (<http://news.google.com>) for the name "Homer Cummings" between 1930 and 1939 yielded over 3,600 results and included articles on both his professional activity and personal details, such as coverage of his adult son's automobile accident, suggesting he enjoyed a minor celebrity status as a result of his high appointment (accessed May 28, 2010).

ambiguity may introduce more questions than the resolutely “good” and “bad” characters facing off in the final showdown of prototypical Westerns, it is more representative of the shades of gray that inform the real world. I argue that this more authentic sketching of individual motivations that are contingent, constantly evolving, and not always right was more satisfying to postwar viewers who may have been looking for answers about the catalyst behind the sometimes devastating decisions made by those in positions of power in the aftermath of World War II. Furthermore, Robinson’s initial adherence to presumed innocence and careful police work and subsequent reversal make it possible for the film to shine a light on how easy is it for machinery of justice to jump the tracks when the pressure is on, whether it be from the press or public opinion or political maneuvering.

Appropriately, even the protagonist, State’s Attorney Harvey, is imbued with a questionable morality. In a formula that will crop up again later in the discussion of *Call Northside 777*, the bright light of justice begins as a dim bulb. Harvey is initially jaded and uninterested in the plight of Waldron. He goes about his duties in a procedural manner, with little emotion, driven by the mounting pressure placed on him by the press and City Hall. He is even momentarily tempted to subvert justice in pursuit of personal ambition when the big wigs in the Reform party offer him the Governorship, predicated on his successful prosecution of Waldron. It is not until after Harvey meets with Waldron face-to-face across the bars of his cell—a meeting that only occurs because Harvey thinks he might gain some preemptive knowledge of the suspect’s defense—that he begins to have doubts as to whether the evidence is as damning as it appears. No matter which side Harvey falls on, the film makes certain that his motives are unclear. When he shocks the crowd by switching his position on Waldron’s guilt before the court, the judge immediately suspects that his actions were somehow the means to a politically

advantageous end. Of course, when Harvey commits himself to championing justice, he does so with such ferociousness that he becomes the perfect foil for the corruption running rampant in the town. Harvey's moment of moral clarity, his recommitment to truth above all else, is literally written out for viewers in a later scene when the camera zooms in on an open book inscribed with a fictional Lawyer's Code of Ethics: "The primary duty of a lawyer exercising the office of public prosecutor is not to convict, but to see that justice is done."⁴⁷ This explicit statement of the "correct" morality that Harvey was in danger of straying from may have troubled those viewers who practiced the legal profession, however, the majority of audiences would have been unaware that this was not a real tenet governing all lawyers. For them, the location of this code, inscribed as it is inside the jacket of a weighty tome, would have been enough to make it seem believable. They would have no reason to suspect that it was not authentic, so its fictional origins would not have disrupted the manufactured realism at work in the film. It would simply have served as a clearly identifiable marker of the film's moral compass.

The issue of corruption is one that this film returns to again and again in order to illustrate how the pursuit of personal interests can taint not only the individual, but also the system. Throughout the film, the police department and the State's Attorney are pressured to secure a conviction quickly. On one side, the Reform party administration currently in power is pushing for a conclusion to the case in order to appease the public and ensure re-election. One party leader, so focused on achieving these goals, even asks Harvey if the community, which has ostensibly benefited from their time in power, is not worth more than the life of a single man. Another party big wig, Paul Harris (Ed Begley), confronts Harvey in an attempt to coerce him

⁴⁷ This appears to have been fabricated by the filmmakers to emphasize their point that justice should prevail above all other considerations. My research turned up nothing even remotely similar to this quotation. The regulation of ethical practice in the legal profession seems to fall under the umbrella of local bar associations rather than one universal set of rules. Furthermore, those codes of behavior that do exist are certainly never this concise.

into convicting Waldron despite his doubts, first with blackmail, then bribery, and finally a gun. His goal is also to insure the Reform party victory in the coming election, but absent of any facade about concern for the greater good, his motivation lies in the fact that he has invested heavily in a real estate scheme that will only pay off if a certain municipal project gets pushed through by the incumbent council members. The willingness of members of the Reform party, the supposed champions of change, to sacrifice the freedom of an innocent man and the sanctity of the justice system for power and personal gain demonstrates a seriously fractured interpretation of the American democratic system and reveals that they are no better than any previous regime.

On the opposite side of the political system, the local newspaper, funded by Conservatives maneuvering to regain power, showers Harvey and the police with critical headlines meant to enflame public opinion and embarrass the Reform party for not delivering a guilty verdict quickly enough. When the police finally cobble together enough information to tentatively identify a suspect, Conservative party leaders have a backroom meeting to discuss possible strategies for getting that man, Waldron, off the hook, including manipulating public sympathies by playing up his admirable service record. The Police Commissioner, unashamed of voicing his selfish reasons for ignoring his duty to ensure that laws are enforced in a just and thoughtful manner, proclaims that he has “an election to win and the only way I can do that is to make Harvey look bad.” The pervasiveness of corruption in this otherwise idyllic little Connecticut burg is summed up by newspaperman Dave Woods after Harris shoots himself in the courtroom over fear of having his shady dealings brought to light: “It’s always the same. You look around long enough and you’ll always find some guy with his fingers in the till.”

In fitting *film noir* fashion, corruption in *Boomerang* is not the exclusive domain of politicians. Nearly everyone is portrayed as being out for their own interests. The tough-talking, promiscuous waitress at the local diner—the closest thing in the film to the storied “femme fatale” of the genre—is exposed and discredited for testifying against Waldron for selfish reasons: she has already submitted a claim for reward money and it is implied that she is scornful because he repeatedly rejected her sexual advances. Even the public is implicated in the miscarriage of justice, as their frenzied call for requital for their beloved shepherd only added fuel to the fire of corruption. Despite the number and variety of individuals prepared to dismantle the justice system for their own benefit in this one small town, Kazan has been quoted as saying that his early films, including *Boomerang*, represented his belief and a general cultural understanding that “the good in American society will finally win out.”⁴⁸ This theory of corruption, espousing the idea that one rotten apple spoils the bunch rather than acknowledging a pervasive societal problem, seems to stem from a reading of the film in which the Harris character is the only villain. In retrospect, Kazan suggests that he would have portrayed the corruption as having saturated the town more thoroughly, since “actually civic corruption is much more widespread. Not only one villain but a lot of other people would be involved.”⁴⁹ In reality, the director had already succeeded in that goal with the film as it was originally completed.

This emphasis on corruption was only the first outlet for social commentary on the part of the filmmakers. Heavy-handed at times, the pessimism of the film is conveyed through the manipulation of cinematic conventions such as the inclusion of lengthy sections of opinionated narration and the explicit textual conveyance of themes through newspaper headlines and

⁴⁸ Quoted in Jeff Young, *Kazan: The Master Discusses His Films* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1999), 44.

⁴⁹ *Ciment*, 55.

political cartoons, as well as the close-up of Harvey's supposed code of ethics. At the opening of the film, it is the narrator that sets the tone for recognizing the uncertainty of life and the inevitability of turmoil that permeates the film:

It seems incredible but, in your town and my town, these things actually happen. Life is pleasant and a little bit dull. And night after night, we yawn, flick off the radio and go to bed. Then one morning black headlines stare at us. A war is declared, the stock market crashes, or a kindly old man is shot down in the street and the quiet pool of community life is suddenly stirred up. Its waters boil and its quiet current twists in new and devious ways.

While dark, this exposition would have certainly resonated with audiences that were still recovering from the trials of World War II and the Great Depression before that. In addition to drawing attention to the potential for the status quo to be shaken by external forces, the film places equal emphasis on the dangers that potentially dwell within the individual. In light of the masses that had been propagandized into following Hitler's destructive whims abroad and the more pressing issue of spreading paranoia about Communist subversion in the U.S. after the war, the observation made by the narrator that "almost as great a problem for the police as the capture of the murderer was the overzealousness of the public" would have been particularly chilling.

This use of narration to frame the story is a formal element commonly found in *film noir* and documentary films. In the latter, the tone is often clinical and detached, delivering information couched as fact or limited to explaining what is happening on screen. In the former, narration serves more as a running commentary. It is most commonly voiced from the first-person perspective of the protagonist and tends to be tortured, self-deprecating, and extremely personal in tone. Rather than simply conveying bits of information or percolating misgivings from the mind of the maladjusted protagonist, voice-overs in the docudrama crime film fall somewhere in the middle. In *Boomerang*, and later in *Call Northside 777*, the narration was not a

voice-over by the protagonist or any other character in the film. An outside observer, the narrator in each case sees all and seems to know all; however, this body of knowledge is used differently than in documentaries. Instead of providing impartial information, the narration here is the engine of the film's social commentary. Though presented as a source of information outside of the narrative, the narrators in these justice docudramas are far from impartial. In this case, the all-knowing voice directly addresses the audience, speaking in the first-person about "your town and my town" and lamenting how "black headlines stare at us" in an attempt to influence the reading of the film by moviegoers. Not only does the narrator tell viewers how they should be interpreting what they see, the conversational tone and the emphasis on "us" works to draw them into the fold from the very beginning, leaving little time to for the individual to consider whether or not they agree with the social message. Chiming in periodically with sweeping declarations about society as a whole before providing a neatly encapsulated take-away message just before the end credits, the instructive style narration used in the justice docudrama often conveys a kind of duller, less "do-it-yourself" social commentary to audiences. It is more easily accessible and explicit than the unanswered questions generated by the ambiguous loose ends typical of classic *film noir* and social problem films such as *A Gentleman's Agreement* and *Pinky*.

At the end of the film, in typical Hollywood style, Harvey is successful in his fantastically dramatic disassembly of the evidence that had once comprised the "perfect case." Though far from an accurate depiction of courtroom proceedings, the use of a real courtroom, available lighting, and legalese that sounds believable to the untrained ear manufacture the illusion of visual and experiential realism for audiences. With an added twist of Hollywood-style flair, Waldron is released without prejudice and Harvey goes on to reap the rewards of his moral fortitude in the face of adversity. While a happy ending is the assumed default in a majority of

studio films, some scholars challenge this upbeat ending. Attempting to draw *Boomerang* into the pantheon of classic *film noir*, J.P. Telotte implies that unhappy endings were the only acceptable conclusion to films that have been retrospectively categorized as part of this genre. As such, he reads this classic Hollywood ending as evidence of psychological weakness on the part of audiences and pandering on the part of filmmakers. Telotte suggests that the denouement serves as some kind of nepenthe for viewers who want to be reassured that it is a “good world outside” after all, but not because it concludes with justice restored and Harvey being rewarded for his personal triumph of conscious.⁵⁰ He purports that the film implies that there is a “real” killer other than Waldron who is punished for his crime, indicated extra-textually through a close-up of a newspaper clipping where a photo from the death of that individual appears underneath the headline about Waldron’s release. Telotte argues that this visual trick is essentially as means of patching the gap in the narrative left by the fact that the murder of the actual priest remains an unsolved case even today and that it reassures viewers that there is a “providential justice watching over and at work in this world, giving meaning to even the most senseless acts and guaranteeing justice despite our fears of its absence.”⁵¹ Furthermore, he asserts that films of the genre “typically bracketed their disturbing subjects within an unconventionally realistic but reassuring, even melodramatic, format, which has the effect of muting their potentially disquieting voice.”⁵²

While the issue of whether or not audiences may have had some deeply felt need for psychological reassurance that American society was generally decent is beyond the purview of this study and would be difficult to prove without uncovering extensive first-person reception studies from the time of release, Telotte is correct to suggest that the film seems to relent from its

⁵⁰ Telotte, 156.

⁵¹ Ibid., 145.

⁵² Ibid., 151.

otherwise unwavering disaffection with society as a whole in its ending. However, the optimism of the final moments comes across as merely an attempt by the filmmakers to balance over an hour of barely concealed leftist social commentary with an overly pat happy ending and a patriotism that rings false in light of the accusatory politics of HUAC. The soaring orchestral version of “America, the Beautiful” played over the opening and closing of the film and the postscript celebration of Homer Cummings—the real person that the Harvey character was based on—rising to become U.S. Attorney General is not enough to wipe the pervasive cynicism of the remaining eighty-five minutes of the film from the minds of viewers. As for the dubious theory of an alternate killer, I would suggest that subtlety with which the idea is introduced—the priest counseling a disturbed individual in an extremely brief flashback early on and his presence in the courtroom during the trial—and the fact that the brief discussion of the car accident that occurs is immediately followed by the narrator’s proclamation that “this case was never solved” make it more likely a late addition to appease production code enforcers or a nod to political pressure rather than an intentional extra-narrative element included at the behest of the filmmakers.⁵³ Ultimately, the fact that Zanuck would continue making this and other kinds of docudrama crime films at Twentieth Century Fox well into the 1950s suggests that there was indeed a market for films devoid of uplifting pap. Even with Zanuck’s predisposition toward social message films and documentary-style production techniques, it seems unlikely that this cinematic form would have flourished if it was unable to draw profitable box office returns in the face of other films—comedies, romantic dramas, and musicals—that offered rosier outlooks to audiences looking for an unwaveringly happy ending. That is not to say that this particular cycle of films appealed to

⁵³ So subtle were the cues identified by Telotte that they did not register for me, even after multiple screenings of the film, until I read his description and went back to the film to try to piece it together for myself. Unfortunately, there was no mention of this supposed subplot in any of the interviews with Kazan or the other filmmakers involved with the project that I uncovered during my research.

all audiences, just as it would be oversimplifying to imply that all viewers wanted to be sent out of the theater brimming with hope and warm feelings, but that *Boomerang* and films like it offered a fresh perspective to audiences interested in seeing more of their own lived experience reflected on the big screen.

To that end, the manufacture of realism is paramount to the appeal of the docudrama crime film. While some films in this cycle focused solely on producing visual realism through the appropriation of techniques from the documentary style and others were able to forge tentative bonds to reality by crafting a narrative loosely based on non-specific “real events,” only *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777* were successful in making concrete overtures to authenticity on both the visual and narrative levels. A documentary aesthetic is achieved through a variety of production decisions that affect the overall believability of the onscreen milieu, including casting, costuming, makeup, lighting, and scoring. For *Boomerang*, only five professional actors were cast to carry the majority of the important dialogue, while amateurs and local residents played the remaining roles, and only Dana Andrews was allowed to wear makeup.⁵⁴ While these subtle details contribute to the rich texture of the film, the most significant factor in creating the aesthetic illusion of realism is the ability to shoot on location. The sense of gravity and confinement created by filming within the four walls of actual police stations, jail cells, and courtrooms to tell a story about crime and punishment makes a far more dramatic impact, while bustling street scenes ring truer without the superficial falseness of sets populated by buildings that are only facades.

While filming on location was certainly a boon to directors like Kazan that chafed at the restrictions of working under the watchful eye of studio executives, as well as to producers who were responsible for bringing these films in under their already limited budgets, the function of

⁵⁴ Ciment, 55-8.

eschewing back lots and studio sets in the docudrama crime film was beyond simple practical matters.⁵⁵ From the opening credits—which inform viewers that the “story you are about to witness is based on fact. In the interests of authenticity, all scenes, both interior and exterior, have been photographed in the original locale and as many actual characters as possible have been used”—to the final narrated epilogue about the achievements of Homer Cummings, *Boomerang* asserts and reactivates an explicit connection to real events. Of course, that is not to say that this film follows the evolution of the original case verbatim. Hollywood always takes liberties with the facts, no matter how diligently filmmakers try to adhere to them, simply because of the peculiarities of the filmmaking process and the narrative and visual limitations imposed on the film medium by time and space.

For instance, while *Boomerang* repeatedly makes claims about the use of original locales, the movie was actually filmed in a similar small Connecticut town very near to the original.⁵⁶ Yet, as far as audiences were concerned, the effect would have been the same. The illusion of reality in this situation is more important than strict adherence to a set of facts because the ultimate purpose is to forge a meaningful connection between the film and reality and the viewer, to personalize what they are about to see by making it as plausible and relatable to mundane life as possible. When the narrator explains that “the basic facts of our story actually occurred in a Connecticut community much like this one but they could have happened anywhere, in Oregon or Mississippi, Georgia or Utah,” it is an obvious attempt to encourage viewers to imagine the scenario about to unfold as happening in their own town, thereby making the message of the film more resonant on an individual level.

⁵⁵ Ciment, 55. Kazan says that this was “the first film I made in my own way.”

⁵⁶ “Commentary,” *Boomerang*. Silver and Ursini suggest that use of this alternate site was an attempt to avoid any potential objections from involved parties still living in the original locale.

Appeals to aesthetic realism using documentary-style production techniques are only the first level at which docudrama crime films like *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777* employ reality in service of social commentary. Purposefully evoking a connection to real events that would have been familiar to contemporaneous audiences in both advertising materials and within the body of the film constantly reminds viewers that what they are seeing has the added weight of truth and that the rhetorical power of that truth has been effectively transferred to the film itself. Despite the elasticity of facts under creative interpretation, with docudrama refusing to fall entirely under the umbrella of either fantasy or fiction, the goal of these films is to create the perception of truth in service of their social commentary function. As such, both the original events and the source material that gave rise to the screenplay become inextricably linked to the film itself, shaping the message of the film and the influencing what audiences can take away from it. This is particularly true for *Boomerang*, as the location of the narrative within the context of real events carries with it the weight of the unsolved murder of a beloved priest, the harsh lesson about the precariousness of justice with its requisite call for vigilance to prevent such false accusations in the future, and the liberal social commentary that shaded the way the story was presented in the original article about the events in Connecticut that inspired the article that informed the screenplay.

According to posters advertising the film, it is “based upon an article by Anthony Abbot, published in *The Reader’s Digest*.”⁵⁷ A similar line of acknowledgment is repeated in the opening credits of the film, adding that the article had been published in December 1945.⁵⁸ In reality, both references are slightly misleading in that the *Reader’s Digest* piece was actually a

⁵⁷ “*Boomerang* Movie Posters,” *Moviegoods.com*, http://www.moviegoods.com/movie_poster/boomerang_1947.htm (accessed February 7, 2010). Magazine title not italicized in original.

⁵⁸ Anthony Abbot, “The Perfect Case (condensed from *The Rotarian*),” *Reader’s Digest* 47, no. 284 (December 1945), 23-6.

redacted version of an article that appeared in *The Rotarian* in the same month. Though this may seem to be a minor point of contention, the source of the original article deeply reflects its intended message and a specific coloring of the events of the case. *The Rotarian* is the official magazine of Rotary International, an organization of local service clubs in which individuals are guided by the Four-Way Test. This test entails asking oneself four questions before thinking, speaking, or taking action: “Is it the TRUTH? Is it FAIR to all concerned? Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS? Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?”⁵⁹ While the article from *The Rotarian* was slightly more heavy-handed in its presentation of the facts—adding an editorial note about the Cummings story being an exemplification of a man embracing the imperative to “dignify his occupation as a way of serving society”⁶⁰ and a specific reference to another incident of false imprisonment⁶¹—the preoccupation of Rotary International with valorizing the principles of truth and equality as a means of preventing the miscarriage of justice clearly survived the editor’s pen in the *Reader’s Digest* version. I suggest that the presence of this undertone of social consciousness in the source material for the *Boomerang* screenplay certainly must have had an effect on the filmmakers, either in marking the article’s appeal as a potential film topic or in shaping the story that was ultimately told.

The unique combination of manufactured visual realism, a story based on true events, and social commentary offered by *Boomerang* did not escape film critics at the time of release. The response to the film was overwhelmingly positive and it was named to the National Board of Review’s annual Ten-Best-Films List for 1947.⁶² The review in *Time* applauded the realism of

⁵⁹ “Benefits of Rotary,” *Rotary International*, <http://www.rotary.org/en/AboutUs/JoiningRotary/BenefitsOfRotary/Pages/ridefault.aspx> (accessed February 23, 2010). Emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Anthony Abbot, “It was the Perfect Case,” *The Rotarian* 67, no. 6 (December 1945), 14.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶² Schatz, 481. On its website, the National Board of Review, founded as an anti-censorship organization in 1909, describes itself as “the distinctive voice of the individual artist, honoring excellence and supporting freedom of expression in film.” See <http://www.nbrmp.org/about/>.

the film, calling it “an excellent movie of its kind—and its kind is very good and rare indeed” and suggesting that the “most obvious fact about this movie is that it could hardly be improved upon.” The piece also implied that audiences were hungry for films of this kind that aspired to bring more of real life to the big screen, marking the film as the timely and potentially profitable turning of a corner “away from Hollywood’s rather monotonous dreamland, into the illimitable possibilities of the world the eye actually sees.”⁶³ The review in *Life* was similarly positive about *Boomerang*, calling it “vigorous and believable,” while critical of the state of the film industry in general, pointedly suggesting that the story has been “cloaked with a realism unusual for Hollywood.”⁶⁴

New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther gave *Boomerang* the most celebratory treatment of all, lauding it as a “drama of rare clarity and punch” that broke free from the “stale patterns and photography of conventional cops-and-courtrooms films.” He also paid the greatest attention to the social consciousness of the film, discussing both the role of politics and public hysteria in the miscarriage of justice (“local politics became involved and... the public clamor for a scapegoat compelled an arrest and a trial”) and the danger of police corruption (“a truly tormenting representation of the grilling of the suspect is played and fatality of an individual overwhelmed by trumped-up evidence is implied”). Crowther applauded the “triumph of unconventional justice over blind and willful subterfuge” in this dramatic rendering of commentary on “social justice and the integrity of one man.”⁶⁵

⁶³ “Cinema: The New Pictures, March 10, 1947,” *Time* (March 10, 1947), <http://www.time.com/printout/0,8816,886440,00.html> (accessed January 26, 2010).

⁶⁴ “Movie of the Week: Boomerang!,” *Life* (March 24, 1947), <http://books.google.com/books?id=AUoEAAAAMBAJ> (accessed February 21, 2010), 87.

⁶⁵ Bosley Crowther, “Boomerang! A Factual-Style Film of Connecticut Slaying, Opens at the Roxy Theater—Dana Andrews Heads the Cast,” *New York Times* (March 6, 1947), <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9506E5D8103EEE3BBC4E53DFB566838C659EDE> (accessed February 5, 2010).

While Crowther is known for applying a social slant to his reviews—underwritten by a fundamental belief that the “screen can reveal the realities of life” and “films can play a part in shaping filmgoers’ attitudes through the values conveyed within”—other critics located a similar message within the narrative about the importance of defending justice and upholding truth.⁶⁶ The *Life* critic described the film as the story of “how an innocent suspect is railroaded toward execution but finally saved when an honest state’s attorney uncovers fresh evidence and, in defiance of public opinion and political pressure, asks for an acquittal.” The moral of the story, the review suggests, repeating Harvey’s textual code of ethics almost verbatim, is “that a lawyer’s chief duty is not to secure a conviction but to see that justice is done.” Further confirming a liberal perception of right and wrong in the film, the piece included a frame still from the interrogation scene of a police officer forcing Waldron’s head upright. The caption identifies the suspect as “the victim” being subjected to “the third degree” by law enforcement.⁶⁷

An analysis of the critical reviews of the film from when it debuted blatantly contradicts the theory introduced by J.P. Telotte that the film was attempting to insinuate the existence of a “real” killer who had been punished with death in order to provide audiences with a satisfying resolution. The *Life* review describes the film as a “murder film in which the murderer is never found out,” while *Variety* celebrates the fact that “no attempt is made to fasten a phony ending on [the] tale, [the] picture leaving case still unsolved as in real life.”⁶⁸ The fact that these reviewers openly acknowledge that the film, like the actual case that inspired it, does not provide a neat resolution to the murder of the beloved priest provides some insight into how the film might have been received by audiences at the time it was released. Without a catalogue of first-

⁶⁶ Frank Eugene Beaver, *Bosley Crowther: Social Critic of the Film, 1940-1967* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), dissertation abstract.

⁶⁷ “Movie of the Week: Boomerang!,” 87-8.

⁶⁸ “Movie of the Week: Boomerang!,” 87; “Boomerang (January 29, 1947),” *Variety Film Reviews: 1943-1948*, vol. 7 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1983).

person responses to the film from a wide sample of viewers, it is impossible to say with absolute certainty, but the satisfaction that these critical reviews seem to take in the absence of a perfect ending strongly suggests that individuals watching the film in 1947 were certainly capable of recognizing that the social issues presented in this particular film were more important than the question of “whodunit.”

Case Study: *Call Northside 777*

Arriving in theaters just one year later, *Call Northside 777* picked up right where *Boomerang* left off. Like Kazan, *Call Northside 777* director Henry Hathaway had previous experience working under the umbrella of Zanuck and de Rochemont. Though de Rochemont was not the producer on *Call Northside 777*, he worked with Hathaway on two films—*The House on 92nd Street* (1945) and *13 Rue Madeleine* (1946)—that immediately preceded it and were integral in establishing the core elements of the emerging docudrama form, such as “objective voice-over narration, location shooting, use of non-actors, and little or no musical scoring.”⁶⁹ In the opening credits, *Call Northside 777* repeats many of the same promises made by *Boomerang* about the veracity of the story, the commitment to filming in the actual locations, and the narrative weight of the film gleaned from its direct connection with authentic details found in the source material. As in *Boomerang*, this film depends on a narrator that has been rhetorically positioned as an outside observer to convey a variety of information. While the tone adheres more to that of a documentary voice-over, it is hardly objective and trends toward a fiction film casualness, with the speaker referring to characters in the film by their first names and editorializing on what is happening on the screen. The social message of the film is explicit

⁶⁹ Schatz, 379.

each time the narrator provides this kind of liberal color commentary, such as the description given of the flimsy rationale law enforcement used to falsely imprison an innocent man:

“Because of Frank’s confused testimony on insignificant points and his minor police record, he was held as a suspect.”

The film further blurs the line between fact and fiction by incorporating actual documentary footage of police officers at work during a montage leading up to the questioning of their main suspect and his wife. While the result is an imperfect and obvious mismatch of textures, the attempt to mimic the framing and scenery of scenes from the film to that footage demonstrates a desire by the filmmakers to manufacture an aura of realism through whatever means available. Beyond simply creating a believably familiar milieu using documentary-style production techniques, it is obvious from the very beginning that the film intends to draw audiences into a discussion of the potential for injustice to occur under the current system. The framing of the credits over a shooting script for *Call Northside 777* marked “URGENT,” as if to imply that this was a story of sufficient social and political importance that audiences needed to bear witness to it immediately, demonstrates a reflexive awareness on the part of the filmmakers of the potential for cinematic entertainment to also serve as an agent of consciousness and change.

Like Kazan, Hathaway was eager to get outside of the studio lot but starting production would prove most difficult. Contrary to the assertion of Silver and Ursini that Zanuck gravitated toward social commentary in his message films—and seemingly at odds with many of the films produced during his tenure at Twentieth Century Fox—Hathaway suggests that the studio owner shied away from matters of corruption in his films. According to the director, this led to problems with getting go-ahead approval of the storyline for *Call Northside 777*. Hathaway

claims that he originally intended for the district attorney figure to be far more nefarious while Zanuck felt that it was “un-American” to attack the city and the legal system.⁷⁰ As to the inconsistency of this remembered exchange with other evidence of Zanuck’s boldness regarding controversial material, it seems likely that the director’s memory has been colored by the passage of time and the occasionally rocky relationship between the two iron-willed men. It also fails to take into account the likelihood of outside pressure being placed on the studio head from the Production Code Administration (PCA) and HUAC at the time. The PCA was particularly critical of this film, raising concerns that a first draft of the screenplay portrayed the police department in a questionable light.⁷¹ This illustration of how plot development can sometimes be contested by forces outside the control of the filmmakers hints at another advantage and disadvantage to building a conventional Hollywood feature film around a set of true events. On the negative side, there are far more legal concerns when dealing with real people and places and professing the accuracy of the treatment of those entities in a film that blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction. This leads to additional challenges like changing character names to protect the filmmakers from lawsuits and other potential disputes down the line or having to film in a location similar to the where the events actually happened, as was the case in *Boomerang*, or put up with resistance from surviving residents, as happened in 1955 during the shooting of *The Phenix City Story*.⁷² For all the logistical complications, the resounding benefit of a film based on a true story shines through in the protests of the PCA and HUAC. Despite the objection of these formidable forces to the portrayal of official corruption, those elements are still very much present in the final film and that is likely the result of being able to point to the actual events in

⁷⁰ Polly Platt, *Henry Hathaway: A Director’s Guild of American Oral History*, Filmmakers Series, no. 84, ed. Rudy Behlmer (Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 217-9.

⁷¹ Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 108.

⁷² Philip Scheuer, “Facts Shout for Themselves in ‘The Phenix City Story’,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 23, 1955), 2.

order to legitimize their intended social agenda. In effect, the filmmakers would have been able to claim that it was not personal politics but concrete facts that made it imperative to characterize the justice system as damaged and the police and politicians as irresponsible. This would have been true for criticism levied against any docudrama crime film that maintained at least a reasonable proximity to the prescribed course of real events underlying its narrative.

In the final version of the film that was distributed to theaters, *Call Northside 777* depicts the arrest and imprisonment of Joe Majczek and another man for the murder of an off-duty police officer in the backroom of a Chicago speakeasy. Identified in the film as Frank Wiecek (Richard Conte), Majczek served over a decade in an Illinois state penitentiary for the crime and was facing another eighty-nine years until his mother placed a classified advertisement in local paper offering a \$5000 reward—money that she had scrimped and saved from years of work as a scrubwoman—for information that would exonerate her son. Journalist P.J. McNeal (James Stewart) takes up the story with great initial cynicism, regarding it disdainfully as a public interest puff piece, but eventually launches a personal crusade to expose the truth and secure the release of the long-suffering innocent man.

According to the fine print on posters for the film, it was “based on articles of James P. McGuire,”⁷³ but the film is actually based on the tandem work of McGuire and another man, Jack McPhaul, who co-wrote a series of award-winning articles about the Majczek case in 1944 and 1945.⁷⁴ The two contributors are composited into the single character played by James

⁷³ “*Call Northside 777* Movie Posters,” *Moviegoods.com*, http://www.moviegoods.com/movie_poster/call_northside_777_19487.htm (accessed February 7, 2010).

⁷⁴ Gary Houston, “A Real Life Chicago Murder Mystery—Few Stories Compare with ‘Northside 777,’” *Chicago Tribune* (January 9, 1995), quoted in Eric Zorn, “More Follow-Up on *Call Northside 777*,” *Change of Subject: Observations, Reports, Tips, Referrals, and Tirades* (November 6, 2009), http://blogs.chicagotribune.com/news_columnists_ezorn/2009/11/more-followup-on-call-northside-777.html (accessed May 28, 2010). Accolades included winning the Heywood Broun Memorial Award from the American Newspaper Guild, being named best reporting of the year by national journalism fraternity Sigma Delta Chi, and receiving the Outstanding Public Service Award (for the Times) from The National Headliners Club. Many accounts suggest that the series also took

Stewart, a narrative decision likely based in Hollywood conventions that usually call for a single hero for whom audiences can cheer and with whom they can identify. The film's attribution of article authorship to McGuire alone, though not completely accurate, was likely due to his participation as a technical advisor during the script adaptation and filming, while McPhaul was not involved.⁷⁵ This is just another example of how fact and fiction collide in the docudrama. Unlike the documentary, where facts are paramount over plot, the docudrama takes creative license with the details of the source material in order to ensure the narrative maintains a commercially viable organizational clarity and pace. While this might appear to contradict the film's effort to create an aura of realism, that connection to real life is never pure. Realism in the docudrama crime film is always a construction, manufactured by the filmmakers, who are constantly shaping and reinforcing what audiences perceive as "truth" through documentary-style production techniques and cues that remind audiences of that underlying set of facts, such as narration. In this case, just as with *Boomerang* being filmed in a different town despite its claims of using the actual locations, the psychological impact of the appeal to realism was not unhinged by these superficial inconsistencies. Perhaps with the exception of a few individuals unusually versed in the details of the case, such as family members or other involved parties, the perception of a connection to real life would have remained intact through the combination of a glancing familiarity with the events as covered in the press and the film's constant reassurance that what viewers were seeing was an accurate recounting of events. Realism in the docudrama is

home a Pulitzer Prize but I could find no reference to that in the lists of winners to this on their official website (<http://www.pulitzer.org>).

⁷⁵ Ibid. McGuire was also credited alone by the ACLU, which presents The James P. McGuire Award "to journalists whose professional work shines a bright, clear light on society's injustices, advancing the public's understanding of civil rights and civil liberties issues." See the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois (http://il.aclu.org/site/PageServer?pagename=IL_BRC_2009Adams) (accessed May 28, 2010).

not bound by the facts. Instead, “truth” is a tool used to convey a particular social message in the guise of a conventional Hollywood feature film.

While the textual appeals to the source material and the real events seem far more dubious and subtle than those of *Boomerang*, the trailer for *Call Northside 777* is much more explicit. A fast-paced montage of footage is dominated by the narrator’s explanation that “behind this personal column ad that appeared in the *Chicago Times* lies one of the most unusual but factual dramas ever to come to public attention. Because of its impact and great human interest, this story of a brutal killing and unjust conviction was picked up by *Time* magazine and *Reader’s Digest*, bringing it worldwide attention.”⁷⁶ Additionally, a publicity photo of Joe Majczek and his mother standing in front of a towering theater lobby advertising display for the film suggests that the campaign in support of the film played up the relationship to real events far more than the surviving promotional materials suggest: “Chicago’s own strange and startling story. Every biting word... every sensational scene is true!”⁷⁷ These bold proclamations of truth have a dual purpose. On one hand, they are simply a commercial ploy to lure audiences into theaters. On the other, these assertions help to establish a working assumption of authenticity before moviegoers even sit down that helps to maintain an aura of realism in the face of factual digressions, such as the composited leading man in *Call Northside 777*, in the unlikely case that they are noticed by the average viewer. With its essence of believability thus secure, the film can then proceed to expose audiences to its critical depiction of cops and politicians, its concern for the embattled state of the justice system, and its condemnation of systemic corruption.

⁷⁶ “Theatrical Trailer,” *Call Northside 777*, Dir. Henry Hathaway, Perf. James Stewart and Lee J. Cobb, 1948, DVD, Fox Film Noir, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2004.

⁷⁷ “Joe Majczek’s Story,” *Life* (March 1, 1948), <http://books.google.com/books?id=l0gEAAAAMBAJ> (accessed February 21, 2010), 57.

Like his counterpart in *Boomerang*, the crusader for justice in this film, the journalist McNeal, exhibits some initial reticence before fully taking up the cause of the falsely accused. In this case, his reserve seems tied to a lack of social conscious rather than any impropriety of motive. While *Boomerang* teases the audience with the implication that Harvey might be capable of placing his own aspirations to ascend to the Governor's office over the pursuit of justice, McNeal's early inaction stems from his character being too cynical and jaded. He has no innate sympathy for the plight of his fellow man. He assumes that Wiecek is guilty because everyone is guilty of something: everyone is working an angle or hiding the truth or trying to get the jump on someone else. This pessimistic assessment of the human character works twofold: it appeals to audiences worn down by war and dismayed at the atmosphere of distrust and paranoia fueled by HUAC's continuing Communist witch-hunt, while also heightening the drama of the narrative when McNeal ultimately takes up the fight to exonerate Wiecek in earnest. Though McNeal's inertia when first presented with the case of the falsely imprisoned man does reflect a rough characterization of newspapermen that was common in films of the 1940s, both *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777* prominently feature this trope of initial resistance followed by impassioned campaigns to expose corruption. While McNeal is a journalist, Harvey is not, suggesting that this narrative choice is more a comment on the cultural zeitgeist of doubt and distrust that is unique to the justice docudrama—and the docudrama crime film, more generally—than a simple stereotype of a particular profession.

Call Northside 777 touches on the same themes of police and political corruption raised in the previous film, shading them in a darker tone both literally and figuratively. It is made aesthetically darker through the more frequent use of stylized *film noir* conventions, including odd angles, scenes of night in the city, neon signage flashing in the background of street scenes,

shadowy lighting that obscures faces, uncomfortable glare from light fixtures, and confining frame composition. Though it would seem to undermine the manufactured realism of the film, the use of these formal elements typical of *film noir* actually helps sell audiences on its despicable characterization of the police. It is essential that viewers see law enforcement as dangerous, threatening, and blind to justice if they are to read the film as an impeachment of corruption amongst individuals who hold a great deal of unchecked power in contemporary society. As in *Boomerang*, the interrogation of this suspect is aggressive and unrelenting. Wiecek is prevented from meeting with his lawyer by being shuffled through an endless series of stationhouses until the police finally find an inconsistency in his story they can pounce on. A bit of uncertainty over whether he was pitting dates or shelling walnuts while helping his wife bake a cake at home during the time of the murder is all it takes to mark Wiecek as guilty, despite his protests that, “when they question you hour after hour, you’re bound to get mixed up on the little things like I did.” With only the thinnest of evidence, the police bring in the speakeasy proprietor to finger him as the shooter. As Wiecek recalls later from his prison cell, the police captain stood “right alongside her when she picked me out. She was afraid of him,” clearly implying that the officer, more interested in closing the case than finding the guilty party, had threatened the witness, told her which man to pick out, and that none of this was out of the ordinary.

The film is careful to point out that the misbehavior of law enforcement and their disregard for the justice system is not due to sloth or ineptitude on the part of a single individual, but a rogue sense of entitlement that had permeated the entire police force. After all, even the murdered officer was openly flouting the law at the time of his death by stopping into a

speakeasy to have a drink in the midst of Prohibition.⁷⁸ The cops go from bad to worse when the conspiracy to cover up the original railroading of Wiecek leads them to interfere with McNeal's investigation. The police are shown purposefully denying him access to arrest records, forcing him to go through the Police Commissioner to get access to the warehouse where damning evidence is being stored, and withholding the station log book from the time of the arrest so that he must resort to clever subterfuge just to find evidence of the truth. As a result of the public response to the investigation, McNeal and his editor (Lee J. Cobb) are called into the newspaper owner's office to be chided for their handling of the case by the Police Commissioner, someone from the office of the State's Attorney, and an aide to the Governor. They are told "another political party was in power at that time... we're not to blame but the public tars us with your brush," implying that the case should be dropped as to not sully the current regime. Again, politics and personal agendas take precedence over the vigilant defense of justice.

Throughout the film, the denigration of cops and politicians is balanced by an equally enthusiastic adulation for newspapermen and technology. As the film opens, the narrator intones about the tenacity of the press in light of the harsh realities of urban living: "Out of the ashes of that catastrophe [The Great Chicago Fire of 1871] rose a new Chicago, a city of brick and brawn, concrete and guts, with a short history of violence beating in its pulse. That history is on record and that record is kept by the newspapermen who have made Chicago's papers great."

Ostensibly one of those fine upstanding journalists, McNeal depends on the other savior of us all, technology, to unravel the web of lies that led to Wiecek's conviction. In fact, a great deal of the narrative depends on machinery and gadgets, from the tiny spy camera he uses to document evidence under the nose of the police to the newfangled lie detector test he convinces Wiecek to

⁷⁸ The 21st Amendment to the Constitution that repealed the 18th Amendment and ended Prohibition was not fully put into effect until December 5, 1933. Steve Mount, "Notes on the Amendments," *USConstitution.net*, 1995-2010, <http://usconstitution.net/constamnotes.html> (accessed March 24, 2010).

submit to prove his innocence to the combination of photo enlargement and facsimile transmission technologies that finally helps him uncover the evidence necessary to exonerate the wrongfully accused man. The foregrounding of technology here is essential to the movement of the plot, but unlike other Hollywood genres that depend heavily on technology, such as science fiction films, the tools utilized by McNeal are real rather than fantastical. Seeing these technologies in action and knowing that they exist and are available for popular use helps audiences connect the events of the film, which began over a decade and a half before, to the present concerns of their own lived experience. In effect, the technology is real so the film seems more believable by association. Furthermore, this celebration of mass media and modernity carries a strong progressive social message about their power to reform a flawed system in which “sometimes the weight of evidence in the record crushes the truth,” as McNeal observes in an impassioned speech before the parole board. McNeal’s comment is fitting, as it is much the same mechanism that determines what audiences read as “truth” in the docudrama crime film: the weight of the manufactured visual and narrative realism smoothes out any wrinkles of inaccuracy that may be caused by deviations from the actual events or locations necessitated by the filmmaking process and the financial and legal concerns unique to the Hollywood feature film. While manipulation of what is real is permissible in the docudrama as long as it enhances the impact of the film’s social commentary, *Call Northside 777* makes a clear statement that it is not acceptable in real life, particularly when, in the hands of corrupt officials, it results in the miscarriage of justice and the imprisonment of an innocent man.

While the murder that got Joe Majczek and his associate sent to prison happened in 1932, the case was featured prominently in the press in the years and months leading up to the release of the *Call Northside 777*. The sequence of events recounted by the film culminated in

Majczek's release in 1945, all of which received national exposure in the press.⁷⁹ Around the time of the film's debut, Majczek made headlines again when a story appeared in *Time* describing the continuing injustice that he was suffering at the hands of the system due to an assemblyman in the Illinois legislature that had demanded a sizeable cut of the money the state had provided as compensation for his decade of wrongful imprisonment.⁸⁰ Both the article about the release of Majczek and his subsequent troubles have a striking tone of disdain for the police and the politicians in charge of the municipal system in Chicago. They point to "Chicago's mildewed reputation" and describe how the "drunken gangland attorney" hired by the Majczek family failed to question the dubious eyewitness testimony of the speakeasy owner who later "admitted the cops had forced her to identify Joe falsely" because he was "unsteady with drink."⁸¹ The most pointed and darkly ominous comment on the battered state of justice in the U.S. in the late 1940s is the author's conclusion that Majczek had no further comment or protest when a grand jury failed to file charges against the assemblyman because he "had already learned about the law."⁸² An obvious allusion to Majczek's false accusation and imprisonment and, the pessimistic commentary on the state of justice in the United States that dominates *Call Northside 777* is echoed here in the article's implication that everyone already understands that justice was difficult to come by during this period.

Some reviews of the film also picked up on the irony of Majczek being victimized by corruption once again. The coverage in *Life* magazine was particularly clever in drawing a connection between the film and the lived experience of the embattled but vindicated man,

⁷⁹ "Illinois: The Reward," *Time* (August 27, 1945), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,792330,00.html> (accessed January 26, 2010).

⁸⁰ "Illinois: Rags & Riches," *Time* (February 16, 1948), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,794183,00.html> (accessed January 26, 2010).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

suggesting that a frustrated Joe took the dismissal of his extortion accusation against the local politician in stride by taking his doggedly loyal mother, the original champion of his innocence, to see *Call Northside 777*.⁸³ Overall, the critical reception of the film was more mixed than for *Boomerang*. Reviews in *Life*, *Time* and *The New York Times* were generally approving, but *Variety*, a trade publication, acknowledged that big name actors might make the film profitable but otherwise panned all aspects of the production itself. *Variety* was particularly dismayed with the documentary aspects of the film, calling the direction by Hathaway “a retreat from the documentary form. Instead of consistent realism, he lapses into a hybrid technique with plenty of hokey melodramatic tones.”⁸⁴ In this case, the negative reaction from *Variety* likely stems from the film’s violation of one of the primary tenets of documentary-style production: the casting of relatively unknown or nonprofessional actors. The only example of docudrama discussed here that uses an established “name” actor, *Call Northside 777* attempts to steer the docudrama form too far toward the commercial Hollywood feature from its middle ground between fiction and nonfiction. The lengthy career of James Stewart, who had already starred in dozens of films, including lead roles in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Destry Rides Again* (1939) and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), unavoidably informs the character and the plot for viewers familiar with his work. This effectively interrupts the seamless connection between the film and real events, with the mere presence of Stewart reminding audiences that the film is a conventional fabrication of the Hollywood imagination rather than a dramatic reenactment of fact.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the writer at *Time* applauded the filmmakers for their efforts to recreate the story of Joe Majczek, arguing that “it takes a lot of integrity and a lot of finely disciplined inventiveness to understand and respect the spirit of a true story, to stay

⁸³ “Joe Majczek’s Story,” 57.

⁸⁴ “Call Northside 777 (January 21, 1948),” *Variety Film Reviews: 1943-1948*, vol. 7 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1983).

absolutely faithful to it, and to give it shape and edge as drama and as popular entertainment.”⁸⁵

This idea of the invoking the “spirit” of the story speaks directly to my assertion that the success of the docudrama crime film hinges on the illusion of realism rather than the literal translation of facts onto film. It is the aspiration to manufacture a cinematic rendering of events that feels “true” or “real” that supports the social commentary function of these films, as audiences are never going to be sitting in the darkness of the theaters taking notes or checking off facts on a list to ensure that a film is strictly adhering to their source material.

Surprisingly little attention was paid by critics to the social weight of the corruption and injustice within the narrative, with only *Life* magazine alluding to it with the suggestion that the film had “a good but unsugared moral (‘I am my brother's keeper’).”⁸⁶ Even Bosley Crowther, the supposed social critic, was generally silent on the matter.⁸⁷ The biggest question about justice was brought up in *Variety*, which rightly points out that the film fails to provide resolution on the fate of Wiecek’s associate, also presumed innocent,⁸⁸ however the similar omission of those details in the coverage of the story by *Time* suggests that the second man simply did not have a compelling enough story to satisfy the need for drama in either medium.⁸⁹ The lack of interest in the plight of this other falsely imprisoned man by a national media outlet such as *Time*, which purports to be a hard news magazine, illustrates that what docudrama crime films are doing—blending fact and fiction to create a commercially successful product—is similar in many ways to the storytelling activity of any other for-profit popular culture enterprise. The second man’s story lacked the intrigue and emotional pull of the first. Without a steadfastly loyal mother who

⁸⁵ “Cinema: New Picture, February 16, 1948,” *Time* (February 16, 1948), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,794250,00.html> (accessed January 27, 2010).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Bosley Crowther, “Call Northside 777,” *New York Times* (February 19, 1948), <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F04E4DF1F28E33BBC4152DFB4668383659EDE> (accessed February 5, 2010).

⁸⁸ “Call Northside 777 (January 21, 1948),” *Variety Film Reviews: 1943-1948*, vol. 7 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1983).

⁸⁹ “Illinois: The Reward.”

spent over a decade on her knees scrubbing floors to finance the hunt for justice for her son to hook audiences and draw them in, the second man was simply omitted from the presentation of facts made to the public, both by the press and *Call Northside 777*.

Conclusion

Taken together, *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777* demonstrate the potential for films that interweave documentary-style aesthetics and narratives derived from true events to challenge the preconceptions of audiences and open their eyes to flaws within society. Potentially controversial social problems like criminal conspiracy, rampant corruption among the ranks of law enforcement and local government, and the willful suppression of justice get incorporated into the entertainment medium of film, rendering them more easily digestible, while the aura of realism imparted through appeals to visual and narrative reality make those issues less abstract and distant from the lived experience of viewers. In the transition years after World War II, these justice docudramas, with their laser focus on issues of crime and punishment, reflect a cultural zeitgeist of uncertainty and pessimism that helped give rise to a cycle of darker, more honest Hollywood filmmaking that would produce *film noir* and the docudrama crime film form. Appropriating the highly stylized milieu now associated with *film noir*, the docudrama renders an imagining of the real world that is flawed and uncomfortable. By shining a light on the fragility of the notions of truth and justice that Americans take for granted, these films spoke directly and effectively to audiences that had been awakened to the imperfection of human beings by a brutal war that had destroyed much of Europe and brought the threat of mortal danger by the hand of unknown foreign enemies to American shores. As that trauma receded in the postwar years, it was replaced by a new and unfamiliar danger, Communism. The crusade to

expose this imagined threat to the tenets of democracy would quickly become almost as fearsome as the blight it was supposed to cure. False accusations based on the most circumstantial or even nonexistent evidence were the bread and butter of the HUAC proceedings. Careers were ended and families were divided over fleeting insinuation and conjecture and it was all allowed to happen under the endorsement of the United States government, which had effectively given this congressional investigation carte blanche to violate the rights of American citizens.

To comment on this unsettling cultural moment and draw attention to the problem of official corruption, the justice docudrama uses realism as the engine of critique. By manufacturing a screen world that is believable and familiar to audiences and telling a story that can be rhetorically positioned as absolute nonfiction, even when it veers from the truth, these films are able to convincingly convey how bleak and unfixed things appeared in the hazy light of postwar recovery and to map the cracks that had developed in the political and legal systems. The illusion of truth is used as a tool to fuel the absorption of the social message that these films were attempting to convey to audiences, and the conventions of *film noir*, instead of working against that impulse, simply made the manufactured realism of the docudrama crime film a more effective tool. As these appeals to visual and narrative realism were still unproven, the extent to which they were successfully employed varied. References to the source material in marketing materials were overly subtle in some formats and bold in others. Experimentation with the form, such as the decision to use a familiar actor like James Stewart in the lead role of *Call Northside 777*, helped to establish the conventions of the docudrama crime film and mark the boundaries beyond which audiences would reject their claims to authenticity. This set the stage for the

coming of age of the docudrama crime film as America grew out of postwar turmoil and into a period of unprecedented prosperity in the 1950s.

When Good Men Do Nothing: Corruption, Spectacle and the Syndicate Film in the 1950s

The fear of Communism that fueled the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation in the late 1940s did not disappear at the turn of the decade. In fact, it can be argued that anti-Communist sentiments blossomed under the steadfast campaign led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, whose egoism and questionable tactics would make him a controversial figure until the day he died. However, Communism was not the only pressing cultural concern of the day. Another scourge was developing in the heart of American towns and cities, spreading along its highways, and growing into a more concrete and violent threat. The influence of national crime syndicates and their dependence on the corruption of politicians and law enforcement agents to achieve and maintain power, a previously unmentionable symbiosis of vice and greed, was laid bare to American public in dramatic style by the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce. Traveling from city to city over a fifteen-month period beginning in May 1950, this congressional investigative body was charged with the task of exposing the criminal element that had been silently pulling the strings behind a vast network of gambling and prostitution rackets. Emboldened by public apathy

toward their immoral activities, these vice operations had gradually abandoned their shadowy back alley origins for a prominent position in the light of Main Streets everywhere.⁹⁰ Sometimes stretching back more than half a century, these criminal enterprises had become a growing threat to morality in American communities, both large and small, as they involved not only gangland criminals but local businessmen and government officials.

Widely covered in both print and television media outlets, these hearings shocked ordinary citizens across the country and sparked a series of films on the topic that have been retrospectively identified as “syndicate films”⁹¹ or “crime syndicate exposés.”⁹² Appropriating the terminology used in the Kefauver hearings to describe this new understanding of the architecture of crime as dependent on the development of powerful regional and national networks, many of these films included the word “syndicate” in their titles. These films were different from classic gangster films in their treatment of criminality as a thriving industry rather than a product of the damaged minds of a few flawed, isolated individuals. Andrew Dickos explains that crime films after World War II abandoned the conventional portrayal of the gangster as a “rebellious criminal personality” because the “mechanized horrors and destruction of the war modified the home-front consciousness to perceive criminal activity in the starker and more ruthless terms of the modern conglomerate.”⁹³ This was likely also motivated by the shifting cultural conceptualization of all financial enterprise as corporatized in an era of booming

⁹⁰ “Kefauver Committee (Postwar America: 1945-1960),” *Digital History: Using New Technologies to Enhance Teaching and Research*, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=505 (accessed May 10, 2010).

⁹¹ Ronald W. Wilson, “Gang Busters: The Kefauver Crime Committee and the Syndicate Films of the 1950s,” in *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, eds. Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 67.

⁹² Andrew Dickos, *Street with No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 202.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

economic growth that solidified the position of the United States as a world power while all of the other nations devastated by the war were struggling to rebuild.

Although all productions that can be categorized as part of this outgrowth of the docudrama crime film form drew inspiration from the highly publicized Kefauver hearings, two in particular stand out. *The Captive City* (1952) and *The Phenix City Story* (1955) both actively attempt to build on the reality of the Senate investigation by incorporating an element of narrative realism provided by stories of actual criminal enterprise plaguing existing picturesque small towns. This connection with reality is then dramatized further through the use of documentary-style production techniques in order to convey a social message about the mundane corruptibility of those in positions of power, whether police officers or politicians, and the complicity of ordinary citizens who do nothing to stop vice from thriving in their communities. Unlike the complex and foreboding milieu of earlier, heavily *noir*-influenced docudrama crime films such as *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777*, notable for the subtlety of their social commentary and often ambiguous endings, *The Captive City* and *The Phenix City Story* manufacture a spectacle of unbridled violence and self-reflexive reality that unquestionably impeaches individual inaction in the face of institutionalized immorality.

While postwar justice docudramas used realism to expose perceived flaws in the system and underwrite a pointed criticism, these later films take corruption for granted. Syndicate films direct their disdain at the individual citizens whose apathy and moral lassitude had allowed vice to thrive in their communities and to corrupt their friends and neighbors rather than the machinery of criminal enterprise itself. Realism in these films is less of a loaded weapon, used only to mirror everyday life for instructive purposes rather than to distort it to its most menacing extreme in an attempt to tear down the traditional structures of power. In the intervening years,

the illusion of cinematic authenticity had come to depend on the accuracy with which these syndicate films recreated events that audiences had prior exposure to in order to deliver a clearly defined social message instead of their ability to encapsulate the emotional or psychological malaise of American society. As such, the conventions of *film noir* began to gradually fall away. With the population moving from postwar uncertainty to the unbridled optimism of the 1950s, impressing audiences was less about thoughtful analysis and more about visceral reactions, simple answers rather than unsettlingly open-ended questions. Appeals to realism, though they had always been financially motivated to some extent, became even more commercial as Hollywood mastered the practice of selling true stories. For syndicate films, advertising a connection to real life was a means of shocking viewers distracted by the offerings of other media outlets, grabbing their attention, and convincing them to pile into theaters, where they could then be shown the error of their ways that had allowed vice to corrupt us all.

Shining a Light on Vice: Kefauver Launches His Investigation

Amidst growing paranoia that crime was accelerating out of control in America following the end of World War II, Estes Kefauver, Democratic Senator from Tennessee, introduced Senate Resolution 202 on January 5, 1950. Citing rumors of the existence of nationwide crime syndicates that had already spurred newspapermen from fourteen papers across the country to form their own syndicate of information sharing, Kefauver insisted that a full-scale Congressional investigation was necessary to understand the extent of the threat posed by the underworld shift toward a corporate model of criminal enterprise.⁹⁴ He also expressed concern that the architecture of legitimate interstate commerce, from highways to communications

⁹⁴ "The Press: The Crime Syndicate," *Time* (February 20, 1950), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,812021,00.html> (accessed January 26, 2010).

technologies, was being misappropriated in service of gambling, extortion, and murder.⁹⁵ It took until May for all of the dust to settle from the torrent of political jockeying that followed the introduction of the resolution, as crime prevention was a perennial hot-button issue from which politicians from both parties could benefit from association. In addition to the predictable infighting between Republicans and Democrats, there was also the issue of Kefauver's low status on the totem pole as a junior senator, which left him exposed to attempts from other legislators to co-opt his investigation or even to push him out of his rightful chairman position entirely.⁹⁶ When all the votes were counted, the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce was created with Kefauver taking the lead, joined by fellow Democrats Lester C. Hunt of Wyoming and Herbert R. O'Connor of Maryland, as well as Republicans Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin and Charles W. Toby of New Hampshire. A victim of its own unfortunate lengthy nomenclature, the investigatory body would quickly become known in the press and in casual conversation as the Kefauver Committee, taking on the name of its charismatic chairman and cementing his position as a rising star in politics. In the next fifteen months, Kefauver and his associates would travel the country holding hearings in Tampa, Miami, Cleveland, St. Louis, Kansas City, New Orleans, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Washington, D.C.⁹⁷

The press latched onto the story almost immediately. Newspapers and national magazines produced thousands of stories each year between 1950 and 1955 on the topics of crime, corruption, gambling, interstate syndicates, gangsters, Senator Kefauver, and the committee

⁹⁵ William Howard Moore, *The Kefauver Committee and the Politics of Crime, 1950-1952* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1974), 49.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60-6.

⁹⁷ Joseph Bruce Gorman, *Kefauver: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 76-8.

itself.⁹⁸ The activity of the committee even made the cover of *Time* in March 1951, accompanied by a lengthy article—written just as the investigation was nearing its end—that neatly encapsulated all of the findings that had captivated readers as they unfolded over the previous months: organized crime was a potential threat to every community, large or small, across the United States; syndicates flourished only with the willing participation of those charged with protecting the public, as the committee exposed “cops bribed, political leaders bought or pressured, sheriffs indifferent or even encouraging, well-meaning officials made helpless by others who worked hand-in-glove with crime;” prostitution and bootlegging had been replaced by gambling as the criminal’s vice industry of choice; and crime in America was dominated by two syndicates, one in Chicago and one in New York, that were supposedly united under the umbrella of the Mafia, “the Sicilian secret society specializing in bootlegging, narcotic smuggling and ‘Black Hand’ extortion.”⁹⁹

One particularly unsettling revelation for the average citizen was the transformation of the criminal from a dark figure “who swaggers about escorted by squads of dark-coated goons with bulges under their armpits” into a “well-charactered man,” indistinguishable from any other white collar American success story, who “lives comfortably but not fabulously in a respectable neighborhood, contributes to charity, hobnobs with café society, is a friend to politicians, sends his children to summer camp and the big kids to college... allows himself a Cadillac... and a

⁹⁸ A search of Google News (<http://news.google.com>) for the keywords “Kefauver” and “crime” between 1950 and 1955 yield over 7,000 results from papers stretching across the country (accessed May 17, 2010). *Time* offered particularly rich coverage. For specific examples, see “National Affairs: This Terrible Lawlessness,” *Time* (May 8, 1950), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,812377,00.html> (accessed January 26, 2010); “Investigations: Crime Hunt in Foley Square,” *Time* (March 26, 1951), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,805911,00.html> (accessed January 26, 2010); “New York: Systemic Graft,” *Time* (February 18, 1952), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,822119,00.html> (accessed January 26, 2010).

⁹⁹ “Crime: It Pays to Organize,” *Time* (March 12, 1951), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,805815,00.html> (accessed January 21, 2010). For an official accounting of the findings, see U.S. Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, *Final Report of the Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce*, pursuant to S. Res. 202 (81st Cong.), as Amended by S. Res. 60 and S. Res. 129 (82nd Cong.), 1951, *Nevadaobserver.com*, <http://www.nevadaobserver.com/Reading%20Room%20Documents/Kefauver%20Final%20Report.htm> (accessed March 15, 2010).

home in Miami” and “never, never carries a rod.”¹⁰⁰ This shift in the cultural imagining of who poses a criminal threat, from easily identifiable hoods without a hint of class to underworld businessman hiding in plain sight under the cloak of respectability, was the definitive outcome of the Kefauver proceedings. While the congressional investigation failed to produce significant numbers of arrests and indictments, the fact that Americans were now looking suspiciously at their neighbors and friends as propagators of criminal enterprise in their own communities would keep organized crime burning in the public spotlight for almost a decade after the hearings wrapped, as fodder for print, television programming, and films. The media savvy and political aspirations of Senator Kefauver would also extend the legacy of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce long after its final report was filed, with the chairman authoring his own book on the subject, writing a series of first-person accounts for *The Saturday Evening Post*, and making numerous public appearances in person and on film leading up to his campaign for president in 1952.¹⁰¹

Crime Comes Home: Television and the Kefauver Committee

It is hardly a surprise that the salaciousness of subject matter, the notoriety of the gangland toughs called to testify, and the pomp and circumstance of the proceedings made the Kefauver Committee’s investigation into interstate criminal networks irresistible to print media outlets. The real revelation, however, was the wildfire popularity of the televised coverage of the hearings. Though broadcasting content did not automatically guarantee that viewers would be watching, the limited competition for the airwaves during the early years of television led to

¹⁰⁰ “Crime: It Pays to Organize.”

¹⁰¹ For works authored by Senator Estes Kefauver, see *Crime in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1951); “Crime in the U.S.: What I Found in the Underworld,” *Saturday Evening Post* (April 7, 1951): 19-21, 71-2, 76, 79; “Crime in the U.S.: I Meet the King of the Underworld,” *Saturday Evening Post* (April 28, 1951): 30, 113-6.

unheralded ratings. Some of the towns visited by the Kefauver road show, such as New Orleans, had only one local network so the decision to air coverage meant that anyone watching television was watching the hearings. Even the luxury of more networks did not guarantee more choices, as both networks in Detroit chose to dedicate their airwaves to live coverage around the clock.¹⁰² Upon moving to New York, the broadcast coverage spread beyond local stations into syndication on networks in more than 20 cities.¹⁰³ Televising the proceedings on such a broad scale was the result of an organic word-of-mouth campaign rather than an active choice on the part of either the committee members or network executives. It started with a single station in New Orleans that planned to dedicate just one hour of airtime to the matter to capitalize on the sheer novelty of it all. Positive audience response led to them to preempt their regularly scheduled programming for the duration of the committee's whistle-stop in the Big Easy. As the buzz grew, networks in other cities were prepared to jump on the bandwagon long before Kefauver's road show even arrived at their door. By the conclusion of the tour, coverage had spread to the very ends of the still incomplete system of coaxial cables that would one day homogenize television into a single nationwide medium for mass communication.¹⁰⁴

The idea of televising something as seemingly mundane as a congressional inquiry was not entirely without precedent, as even HUAC had allowed cameras into its proceedings on rare occasion, but this was the first instance in which the subject matter was sufficiently controversial and compelling that it was made available to the general public on a nationwide scale.¹⁰⁵ Thomas Doherty suggests that the popular appeal of the televised coverage stemmed from the tense

¹⁰² Thomas Doherty, "Frank Costello's Hands: Film, Television, and the Kefauver Crime Hearings," *Film History* 10, no. 3 (1998), 363.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 365.

¹⁰⁴ Ron Garay, "Television and the 1951 Senate Crime Committee Hearings," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1978): 472-477.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 472.

political atmosphere of the day, with the simple black and white moral equation of pitting vice against virtue that drove the Kefauver hearings functioning as a welcome respite for audiences when compared to the complexities and vagaries of the HUAC proceedings that had recently picked up again after being shelved in 1947.¹⁰⁶ Though this psychosocial reasoning would be difficult to prove because comprehensive reception studies were not done at the time, the Senate investigation of interstate crime certainly caught the attention of the American viewing public. As television was a still-developing medium, Hollywood had long been the sole provider of moving picture coverage of current events like this one via newsreels shown in theaters prior to or between features.¹⁰⁷ A watershed moment in the history of visual news, the decision to broadcast the bulk of the testimony given before Senator Kefauver and his colleagues, uncensored and unedited, to affiliate markets beyond the local coverage area would alter the trajectory of both television and motion pictures in terms of the content, aesthetics, and temporality of the information and entertainment that they provide to this day. Of course, that is not to suggest that the change happened immediately or overnight. Evocation of real life in cinema is nothing new, as the earliest motion pictures were nothing but photographic recordings of average people doing average things, but how realism is defined and how it is used varies widely. As I discussed earlier, justice docudramas such as *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777* had already proven that the particular blend of fact and fiction found in the docudrama crime film form had the potential for popular appeal in the postwar era. The unfolding controversy surrounding the Kefauver Committee hearings simply accelerated the evolution of both this genre of films and the wider mass media landscape.

¹⁰⁶ Doherty, 361.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 359.

The decision to allow television cameras into the local courtrooms in which Kefauver and his team set up shop during their national tour was not automatic or universally popular. Critics raised a variety of concerns, including whether compelling witnesses to testify before a national audience was a logical extension of the concept of public hearings or an invasion of privacy, whether they should be subjected to the technical imposition of bright lights and noisy cameras in tight quarters, whether the solemnity of governance was being compromised by mediation, and whether allowing networks to sell advertising to subsidize the expense of the extended broadcasts was an affront to the perceived impartiality of the process.¹⁰⁸ Fortunately for television as a medium and crime-obsessed Americans as a viewer demographic, Senator Kefauver was uniquely aware of the potential power of television, suggesting that it provided “the public with a third dimension which helps in interpreting what actually goes on.”¹⁰⁹ As chairman of the inquest committee, he was in a position to guide the debate and actively worked to allow television cameras by summarily dismissing any and all objections that were raised during the proceedings as inconsequential. Despite the initial resistance to the idea, the coverage of this probe into the underworld ultimately won Senator Kefauver a special achievement Emmy award for “outstanding public service on television” from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in 1952.¹¹⁰

Beyond the initial magnetic attraction to their television screens, there is much uncertainty among scholars about the lasting impact of these proceedings on viewers or the revelations about the seamy underbelly of American life that they produced. On one hand, Kefauver biographer Joseph Bruce Gorman asserts that any shortcomings of the Committee in

¹⁰⁸ Garay, 475-476; Doherty, 362.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Doherty, 362.

¹¹⁰ Bernard M. Timberg, *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002), 246; Garay, 484.

generating new and concrete evidence against criminals or deceitful politicians is a minor quibble when held up against “the incredibly effective manner in which it managed to arouse an interest among great masses of people in the nature and scope of the problem of organized crime and its relationship to political corruption.”¹¹¹ Ron Garay sums up the opposing view in a smooth turn of phrase, suggesting that an individual “has only to turn his awareness of crime on and off by the twist of a simple control knob.”¹¹² The implication is that, though engrossed, viewers did not experience any kind of unprecedented moral awakening that might send them marching out into the streets to launch a reformist campaign against purveyors of vice and crooked bureaucrats. Instead, Garay argues that the Kefauver Committee broadcasts were simply another dramatic program competing for the attention of audiences who were just beginning to turn to their television screens as a primary source of home entertainment. Attorney Thurman Arnold goes even further, calling it “unquestionably the best show of the year,” before launching into a derisive screed about how the senators on the council were only asking questions to which they already knew the answers, tailoring their inquiry to topics that promised the highest shock value, and dredging up decades old crimes for dramatic effect.¹¹³ Writing in the immediate wake of the proceedings, Arnold allowed for zero possibility that society may have benefited from the syndicated broadcast of the inquest. In his estimation, the entire production was, at best, a contrived caricature of the legislative process and, at worst, a miscarriage of justice of epic proportions.

The only available reception study from the period, performed by psychology lecturer and media industry researcher G.D. Wiebe, suggests that Garay and Arnold were likely correct in

¹¹¹ Gorman, 78.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 486.

¹¹³ Thurman Arnold, “Mob Justice and Television,” *Journal of the Federal Communications Bar Association* 12 (1951-1952), 5.

their doubts about the long-term productivity of the hearing broadcasts. Of course, extrapolation from Wiebe's findings is necessarily limited by his small and demographically uneven sample group—with its notable, though not historically surprising, overrepresentation of white men with white collar jobs who were under 40—and the fact that only a single trial was conducted in New York City, the epitome of Eastern urban life. Even with these flaws in the experiment design, this accounting of actual subject interviews conducted within six to nine weeks after the conclusion of the local Kefauver Committee proceedings does provide some useful context regarding the lived reality of this documented cultural phenomenon. Overall, the sample group was unanimously positive about the live broadcasts as they aired, but many reported that they were increasingly unsure of how to enact change after the television had been turned off, even when they were adamant to do so. Furthermore, less than half of the respondents indicated that they believed that the information-gathering mission had the potential to generate any concrete advances towards controlling vice and eradicating corruption on either the local or national level.¹¹⁴ Wiebe argues that this mixed response is the result of “Social Impotence,” a psychological condition triggered by a sense of powerlessness among politically like-minded groups of individuals that “share both a feeling of protest regarding leadership behavior and an overriding conviction that the problem will not be solved.”¹¹⁵ Despite the psychological discord experienced by viewers suggested by this study and the absence of quantifiable change beyond a relatively inconsequential number of corrupt politicians and criminals who lost their jobs or went to jail, or both, ratings for the hearings achieved landmark levels, with some markets experiencing daytime viewership ratings that were nearly twenty times larger than average.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ G. D. Wiebe, “Responses to the Televised Kefauver Hearings: Some Social Psychological Implications,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1952), 180-6.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹¹⁶ For ratings figures, see Doherty, 369.

In response to the popularity of the televised hearings, Fox Movietone News, a newsreel producer, cobbled together a 52-minute package of existing footage for theatrical release as *The Kefauver Crime Investigation*. The old guard of Hollywood was supremely confident that the swell of hype building around the proceedings in print and on television would send waves of viewers, who either had been unable to see the coverage the first time around or were so enthralled that they wanted to relive the experience, into theaters across the country. Though clearly an exercise in self-aggrandizement, insider estimates by some motion picture industry bigwigs predicted that as many as 50,000,000 people would line up to see their version of the footage—edited, enhanced, and compressed by expert technicians into an easily digestible film. A prologue and epilogue starring Senator Kefauver were added to the existing footage in a calculated attempt to imbue the film with the illusion of greater authenticity and to position it as somehow more legitimate than the in-the-moment broadcasts.¹¹⁷ Upon release, however, the production failed to capture the cultural zeitgeist surrounding the investigation. It could not compete with the raw uncensored immediacy of the televised footage. The technical savvy of Hollywood, with its visual tricks and seamless editing, was ultimately responsible for its discomfiture when faced with audiences that had quickly become accustomed to the thrill of live broadcasting. While television was too new to be fully regulated, the motion picture industry was limited by the restrictive rules of appropriateness maintained by the morally conservative Production Code Administration since 1930.¹¹⁸ Unable to adapt to the changing social mores of the early 1950s, the Hollywood film version of the proceedings simply could not compete with the bawdy testimony and uncertain procession of events that had electrified the real-time programming that millions of viewers had already experienced. For this reason, the fervor

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 372-3.

¹¹⁸ Lev, 87-9.

surrounding the Kefauver Committee effectively cemented the position of television in American households and put Hollywood on notice that moviegoers were increasingly interested in material that reflected the aesthetics of real life. The unmitigated popularity of these broadcasts definitively demonstrated that previous assumptions that audiences would respond negatively to content that openly acknowledged sex and violence as part of the human experience, rather than a moral scourge from which all viewers needed blanket protection, were no longer an accurate reflection of society. As a result, if there was a way to capitalize on the congressional investigation of interstate crime syndicates, the struggling motion picture industry had yet to stumble upon it.

Shocking But True: Syndicate Films Bring Kefauver to the Big Screen

Hollywood did not flounder for long. The syndicate film was the natural extension of this impulse to capitalize on the unprecedented popularity of the live television coverage of the Kefauver proceedings. Corruption and criminal behavior had been fodder for Hollywood since early films like *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903.¹¹⁹ By combining these tried-and-true narrative elements with the discourse of moral outrage borne out of the broadcast hearings, the motion picture industry was finally able to formulate a recipe for box office success. Beginning with *711 Ocean Drive* (1950), released only months after the first of the Kefauver Committee hearing was called to order and long before television got involved, Hollywood pumped out a decade-long flood of films that touched on this corporatized conception of organized crime, gambling, and corruption, including *The Racket* (1951), *The Enforcer* (1951), *Hoodlum Empire* (1952), *The Las Vegas Story* (1952), *Kansas City Confidential* (1952), *The Big Heat* (1953), *The Miami Story*

¹¹⁹ Tim Dirks, "The Great Train Robbery (1903)," *AMC Filmsite*, <http://www.filmsite.org/grea.html> (accessed May 10, 2010).

(1954), *The Chicago Syndicate* (1955), *New York Confidential* (1955), *New Orleans Uncensored* (1955), *The Houston Story* (1955), *Inside Detroit* (1956), *Miami Expose* (1956), and *Portland Exposé* (1957). Many of these films were simply hoping to capitalize on a tentative connection with current events to draw audiences into theaters. Their focus on large cities, often pulled directly from the headlines in reference to locations where the Kefauver Committee had held its hearings, ensured that the threat of organized crime seemed distant to the vast population of Americans dwelling outside the limits of contemporary urban life. Two films stand out for their ability to bring home the reality that corruption is just as much of a threat to smaller, less urban communities: *The Captive City* and *The Phenix City Story*.

The Captive City focuses on the idyllic town of Kennington, where newspaper editor Jim Austin (John Forsythe), and his wife, Marge (Joan Camden), once enjoyed a comfortable life thanks to press privileges and country club membership. Things turn sinister when critics of the local gambling industry suddenly begin to turn up dead under suspicious circumstances. When the police quickly sweep the untimely deaths under the rug, explaining them away as either accident or suicide, Austin launches an investigation that gradually reveals how vice has undermined the authority of both law enforcement and the town leaders. By the end, Austin and his wife find themselves desperately running for their lives, pursued by goons hired by the out-of-town criminal organization that had taken over the local bookmaking operation, as they make their way to Washington, D.C. to testify before the Kefauver Committee.

The Phenix City Story recounts the story of Phenix City, a small town in Alabama located just across the state line from the U.S. Army's Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia, in which gambling and prostitution had set up shop on Main Street for over 50 years. As the violence associated with the gambling operations and brothels escalates, an honest lawyer and lifelong

resident of Phenix City, Albert Patterson, becomes convinced that he must ignore the personal danger of retaliation from the town's criminal element in order to lead the way to reform. He campaigns to become the next State's Attorney of Alabama on a platform of cleaning up the notorious town. Though he wins the election, despite the best attempts of the vice industry to bribe or bully voters, he is assassinated before he is ever sworn in. Like a modern day Sodom and Gomorrah, the town is deemed beyond salvation and taken over by military police until the public outcry sweeps Albert's son, John, into the State's Attorney's office to continue his father's reformist crusade.

Beyond their equalizing focus on the criminal element in life outside of American's urban centers, these two films stand out as exemplars of the syndicate film cycle for their deft manipulation of realism to heighten the emotional impact of the subject matter for audiences and to convey a clear social message about the dangers of letting vice open doors into one's community. By layering the public awareness of corruption and interstate crime made possible by the high profile coverage of the Kefauver Committee proceedings with narratives that evoke real events, *The Captive City* and *The Phenix City Story* deliver a message of "this could happen to you" more powerfully than any of the simple exploitation films that make up the bulk of this subgenre. The social commentary function of these syndicate films, and of the docudrama crime film form as a whole, depends on upon the successful manufacture of an aura of realism around the framework of the conventional Hollywood feature film. Both films are based on published accounts of crusades against vice that actually happened in small town America.¹²⁰ Though this hybrid of visual and narrative realism was used effectively in postwar justice docudramas like *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777*, these later films use the illusion of authenticity to different

¹²⁰ John Beaufort, "Plea for Citizen Action Implicit in 'Captive City,'" *The Christian Science Monitor* (April 3, 1952), 8; "The Phenix City Story Movie Posters," *Moviegoods.com*, http://www.moviegoods.com/movie_poster/the_phenix_city_story_1955.htm (accessed February 3, 2010).

effect. While all of these docudrama crime films draw from the same set of basic documentary-style productions techniques—location shooting, use of less-renowned actors, casting of nonprofessionals, imposing clear limits on the use of special effects, subtle costuming and makeup, and the incorporation of actual documentary footage—they build upon them in various ways. For example, while the earlier films incorporated existing documentary footage, *The Captive City* and *The Phenix City Story*, more self-reflexively aware of their unabashed commercializing of reality, actively produced documentary content for their films. *Call Northside 777* attempted to seamlessly integrate footage of police officers raiding a home into the moment where the innocent man is taken into custody, but the monologue by Senator Kefauver used in *The Captive City* and the interviews of actual townspeople by a news reporter from *The Phenix City Story* are simply stuck onto those films at the end or before the film even starts, respectively. This illustrates the change in how realism is utilized from the origins of the docudrama crime film in the 1940s to its full realization in the 1950s: subtlety and opacity have been replaced with a raucous transparency. The early justice docudramas felt obliged to convince audiences that what they were saying was a reflection of some “truth” while the newer syndicate films naturally assumed that they would believe the hype.

The social commentary produced in the docudrama crime film evolved similarly over time. Manufactured realism, the creation of the illusion of “authenticity” and “truth,” was still essential to the delivery of the social message in the docudrama crime film, but the tone had shifted from angst-filled societal introspection to a more commercial hybrid of a more elementary type of moral contemplation with a greater emphasis on entertainment. The films of the 1940s were focused on exposing corruption and pointing the finger at politicians and cops who let their personal greed eat away at the foundation of American life. *The Captive City* and

The Phenix City Story treat corruption almost as if it is old news. In both Kennington and Phenix City, vice had existed openly for decades, with little meaningful resistance from the local residents, and its sullyng effect on local governance had always been conditionally accepted as long as it did not disrupt everyday life. Here the blame is lifted from the shoulders of the corrupt and placed squarely on the backs of the individual. Instead of showing viewers that society is irrevocably flawed, with crusaders for justice like *Boomerang*'s State's Attorney Harvey and *Call Northside 777*'s J. P. McNeal positioned as exceptional visionaries, *The Captive City* and *The Phenix City Story* implied that audiences are already aware of the problem, accusing each individual of implicitly supporting immorality by looking the other way, whether out of apathy or fear. This updated social message, potentially unpopular because it implicitly pointed the finger directly at its own viewers, was rendered digestible by the spectacle of reality that was constructed around it.

According to Andrew Dickos, these films—with special emphasis on *The Phenix City Story*—utilize their topical focus on the underworld to craft a “vision of modern American life as a totally corrupt construct that consumes the powerless individual,” a dark representation of society that attempts to place the syndicate film firmly within the *film noir* tradition.¹²¹ Though the visual elements of *film noir* are used to varying degrees across this body of films, they are often a watered-down rendering compared to the docudrama crime films of the postwar era. They depend more on narrative details to deliver shock and discomfort to audiences than on cinematography tricks. The characterization of the disenfranchised individual suggested by Dickos seems inappropriate here. It is much more suited to the falsely accused victims of the system in *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777*, who were powerless against an irredeemably corrupt system, than the townspeople of Kennington and Phenix City, who were knowing

¹²¹ Dickos, 218.

participants in the manufacture of the burden they now suffer, if only through inaction. Rather than a bleak prescription for inevitable failure, the syndicate films of the 1950s represent an evolution away from the tenets of classic *film noir*. While they certainly still acknowledge that the system is broken, hopelessness has been replaced with a call to arms, an emphasis on personal responsibility for one's own destiny appropriate for a nation standing on the precipice of a period of unprecedented growth, where the American dream could finally flourish again after almost a decade darkened by wartime sacrifice and postwar transition.

This thematic shift is mirrored in the visual milieu of the syndicate film, as *film noir* aesthetics, while still present to some degree, are typically overshadowed by spectacle. Peter Lev identifies the resurgence of spectacle in film during the 1950s as a means for Hollywood to combat increasing competition from television and the resultant precipitous decline in theater attendance in the postwar years. He implies that the goal was to emphasize the visual and dramatic force of films made for the big screen in hopes of undercutting the gaining momentum of the small screen and setting an aesthetic standard it could never hope to match.¹²² Spectacle would certainly prove an essential component of the syndicate film cycle, as it was their only hope of capitalizing on the popular appeal of the televised coverage of the Kefauver hearings, which Thomas Doherty attributes to the “live quality of the hearings—the electric sense of beholding events as they happened, of sharing experience in time across space.”¹²³ While spectacle and manufactured realism seem incompatible, they actually meld together to form a powerful sense of “hyperrealness.” In effect, true events were being translated onto the big screen with the intention of creating a cinematic world that was somehow more real than real life. From the production side, technology became paramount to the effort to re-brand motion

¹²² Lev, 107.

¹²³ Doherty, 370.

pictures as the pinnacle of screen entertainment. Studios experimented with new techniques, such as Technicolor, 3D, multi-channel sound, and Cinemascope. Filmmakers turned to new hardware like the Hoge lens, developed for *The Captive City*, which was “capable of capturing the minutest detail at five miles as readily as at five inches,” producing “a quality of realism bordering on the third dimension,” and rendering “motion picture action exactly as the eye might see it.”¹²⁴ These technical developments would play a key role in turning appeals to realism into the star of the show, played up for their commercial value instead of hidden behind the curtains as merely a tool for delivering a social message. Unlike the attempt to increase box office draw using recognizable actors, as in *Call Northside 777*, which had drawn some critical resistance, the magnification of manufactured realism into a full-blown spectacle of reality did not prove troubling to audiences. In fact, it was the ideal way to expand the commercial appeal of the docudrama crime film, a prerequisite for all conventional Hollywood films, without negatively impacting the effectiveness of the social commentary function of the form. Audiences and critics alike had already definitely demonstrated that they responded to depictions of real life in film and now it was a race to see who would be the most “real” of all.

Spectacle in the syndicate film was not limited to cinematographic technology. The most distinct element of spectacle in *The Captive City* and *The Phenix City Story* was the overt recreation of real life. Building on the fact that the topics of crime and corruption were inherently exciting for audiences who were unlikely to encounter nefarious elements in their daily lives, the titillating effect of exposing this fractured world of vice was then purposefully magnified by graphic depictions of violence and sexuality that strained at the outermost limits of the production code. The relationship of the films to real events was emphasized in all aspects of the

¹²⁴ Lev, 108-20; “New Lens is Used to Film ‘Captive City’,” *Miami Daily News* (May 20, 1952), 25, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=71XFh8zZwT8C&dat=19520520&printsec=frontpage> (accessed April 26, 2010).

marketing materials that accompanied them.¹²⁵ Reviews drove the point home to viewers with redundant discussions of each film's origins, as well as applause for their commitment to creating a realistic milieu by shooting on location, employing unknown actors, and incorporating real people who had either been party to the events in the film, all of which fall under the umbrella of documentary-style production techniques that I have previously discussed. The use of purposeful inclusion of people who had witnessed the events—such as brothel madam, 'Ma Beachie,' who appears as herself in the *The Phenix City Story*—or could act as an expert authority on the subject of corruption—as in the case of Senator Kefauver, who appears in the epilogue to *The Captive City*—was a dynamic variation on the use of nonprofessional actors that helped further reinforce the established connection between the film narrative and its source material.¹²⁶ The aura of authenticity provided by the true stories underlying the narratives of these two films—a connection to reality of which viewers were constantly reminded as the reels turned, either through explicit references or implicit visual cues—combined with shocking displays of violence and sexuality to produce a perfect storm of controversy, timeliness, and spectacle that critics loved and audiences presumably would not have been able to resist.

¹²⁵ For examples of marketing materials, see "The Phenix City Story Movie Posters"; "The Captive City Movie Poster," *Moviegoods.com*, http://www.moviegoods.com/movie_product_static.asp?master_movie_id=32831&sku=434819 (accessed February 3, 2010); John McElwee, "Is Yours A Captive City?," *Greenbriar Picture Shows* (October 5, 2008), <http://greenbriarpictureshows.blogspot.com/2008/10/is-yours-a-captive-city-captive-city-isnt.html> (accessed April 26, 2010).

¹²⁶ For specific examples, see the individual discussion of films or consult the bibliography for a full listing of reviews cited. Regarding 'Ma Beachie,' see Stanley Rosenbaum, "Opens at Shoals Today: *The Phenix City Story* is Arousing Excitement." *The Florence Times* (October 23, 1955), 11, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=ie8Y0QrpMWAC&dat=19551023&printsec=frontpage> (accessed April 26, 2010).

Case Study: *The Captive City*

Released almost one year to the day after the conclusion of the Kefauver Committee road show, *The Captive City* was based on “an original story by Alvin Josephy, Jr.”¹²⁷ A feature on Josephy by *The Pittsburgh Press* describes the film as a “documentary story” that drew from both his personal experience of being threatened for printing the truth and all of the stories that he wrote about corruption as a newspaperman working in small towns near Los Angeles in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As the author of the source material and co-author of the screenplay that adapted that material onto the screen, Josephy was able to ensure that his original vision remained relatively intact.¹²⁸ The film reflects both his concern that, despite widespread coverage in the press of the ongoing local and national investigations, gambling would continue to plague towns across America unless individual citizens took action, and his warning that “there is too much indebtedness to criminal elements at top political levels,” which was yet another endorsement of grassroots action.¹²⁹

Though each print advertisement and poster features an attribution to Josephy’s story and numerous reviews note this connection, *The Captive City* plays up its relationship to the Kefauver hearings even more.¹³⁰ Given that the original stories of corruption that Josephy was covering in print were localized to readers on the West Coast, the decision to incorporate references to both those articles and the congressional investigation, while placing greater emphasis on the set of real events that had attained national awareness, was shrewd. Building a psychological connection to the Congressional investigation was also how the filmmakers began

¹²⁷ See McElwee, black & white advertisement on left of page.

¹²⁸ Josephy’s co-author was Karl Kamb, a minor screenwriter from 1939 to 1954. For more information, see IMDB (<http://www.imdb.com>).

¹²⁹ “Public Apathy Breeds Crime, Says Co-Author of Movie: Collusion Also Blamed for Rackets.” *The Pittsburgh Press* (April 9, 1952), 12, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=djft3U1LymYC&dat=19520409&printsec=frontpage> (accessed April 26, 2010).

¹³⁰ Beaufort, 8; “Topical Crime Drama,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* (September 11, 1952), 9, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1L5f5cZgq8MC&dat=19520911&printsec=frontpage> (accessed April 26, 2010); Donald O.J. Messenger, “Star’s Path to ‘Captive City’,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (April 2, 1952), n.p.

to position the film as an irresistible spectacle. The one sheet poster features a prominent icon, visually similar to a ribbon one might win at the state fair, that informs viewers, “Sen. Kefauver Says: ‘I urge you to see it!’” A shadowy figure lords over a town that only comes up to his knees, holding a gun in one hand and a fistful of puppet strings that place everything in his sight line under his control. Next to him, bold text promises that the film “pulls no punches about who pulls the strings” of violence, vice, and corruption.¹³¹ Other advertisements for the film repeat this foreboding imagery, including one that is mocked up to resemble a *Time* cover, an obvious attempt to capitalize on Josephy’s position there by declaring it “the true, uncensored story by a fearless editor of *Time*.”¹³² This same advertisement features another quote from Senator Kefauver, who decrees, “when a film courageously, honestly and accurately shows for the first time the REAL cause of ORGANIZED CRIME, RACKETEERING, and GANGSTERISM in this country, this becomes a PICTURE I urge YOU to see!”¹³³ This emphasis on “you,” notable because it speaks directly to Josephy’s statement about the danger of individual apathy toward crime, is repeated in another advertisement that is comprised primarily of text warning readers that “there’s a killer walking the streets of this town this very minute with a slug in his silenced automatic marked for an innocent citizen who doesn’t even suspect it! That citizen may be YOU!”¹³⁴ This second example tweaks the individual appeal slightly from “you must know this” or “you must act now” to “you better watch your back,” a loaded statement given the cultural paranoia about unknowable attacks growing out of the escalation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Of course, textual and visual spectacle was not limited to two-dimensional advertising, as some screenings of the film were staged as all-out sensory

¹³¹ “*The Captive City* Movie Poster.”

¹³² The stories behind *The Captive City* happened while Josephy was writing for newspapers in California, but he became an editor at *Time* in the early 1950s. See “Public Apathy.”

¹³³ McElwee, emphasis in original.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

overload events. When moviegoers arrived at film's debut at the Criterion Theatre in New York City, for example, they were further bombarded by marquees plastered with signs for the film, lobby displays of confiscated gambling equipment, actors dressed as inmates holding signs with cautionary messages, and a personal appearance by Josephy.¹³⁵

When the film begins, real events are thrust to center stage once again. The credits roll over a static shot of a desk with a large manuscript in the center, similar to the focus on the shooting script in the credits of *Call Northside 777*. Here, the document is the first volume of transcripts from the Kefauver Committee hearings, followed by a quote from the chairman: "Ordinarily, Americans don't think much about the existence of organized crime. They know vaguely that it is there and they let it go at that... UNLESS PRODDED BY SOME UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES." The credits also alert audiences that there will be "a special appearance by Senator Estes Kefauver" while assuring them that payment for his services "has been contributed to the Cordell Hull Foundation for World Peace." This legitimizes the film with the appearance of the leading authority on interstate crime and rhetorically positions Kefauver's appearance as an act demonstrating his commitment to making the public aware of the dangers of corruption rather than a self-serving act to extend his own fifteen minutes of fame. The next sequence is a montage of shots of everyday life in an idyllic small town overlaid with narration, similar to the opening sequence of *Boomerang*. Just as in the justice docudrama, these establishing shots of enviable locales serve the dual purpose of establishing the setting of the film as a place where viewers can imagine themselves living happily and paving the way for their subsequent shock when they realize that it is not such a great place after all.

One of the film's lingering ties to *film noir*, the narration, actually makes the Austin character more likable for audiences, as his personal tone and amusing tendency toward self-

¹³⁵ Ibid.

deprecation position him as an affable everyman. The voice-over continues throughout, as the bulk of the film is told in flashback under the guise that Austin is recording his tale for posterity on a tape machine in the bowels of a police station while waiting for armed officers to escort him and his wife the rest of the way to testify in Washington, D.C.¹³⁶ The most telling line that Austin delivers at the beginning of this tale—“this isn’t a pretty story or even a new one... and what the moral is, well, right now I don’t know”—suggests that corruption is nothing new and that he is not sure whether his taking a moral stand against it will lead to the end of vice or simply the end of his own life. Of course, in the penultimate scene of the film, audiences see the editor and his wife arrive safely just as the Kefauver Committee hearing is called to order, demonstrating that his tenuous moments of peril would indeed benefit the greater good. The use of a narrator that is actually a character in the film marks a departure from the use of the first-person voice in *Boomerang*. While this approach was used as a ploy to breed familiarity and align audiences with particular interpretation of events in the earlier film, hearing the voice of Austin throughout the film describing what he saw and how he felt about what was happening to him represents more of an appeal to emotional realism. Audiences are being encouraged to go along for the ride with Austin rather than manipulated into the preferred reading of the text. This approach assumes that viewers will come to the desired conclusion of their own accord after “experiencing” the events unfolding on screen, which is made possible through the heightened illusion of reality created by the film’s use of documentary-style production techniques and its assurance to viewers that the story they are being told is true.

As Austin’s monologue suggests, the film does not treat corruption with the same level of disdain as do earlier films that dealt with this topic. Crooked cops and scheming politicians have

¹³⁶ Flashback is another common *film noir* narrative device. For more on the use of narration and flashback in *film noir*, see Dickos, 177-81.

become par for the course. In *Boomerang*, police are shown interrogating suspects until they can no longer keep their eyes open and party leaders are seen sitting in backrooms cracking jokes over the value of a man's life. In *Call Northside 777*, law enforcement actively works against the crusading journalist, changing records and hiding evidence, while representatives of the local government pressure him to shelve his crusade for truth rather than risk jeopardizing their chances for reelection. The actual labor of corruption is absent in this film. While Kennington's Police Chief Gillette (Ray Teal) is described in the dialogue as being "more crooked than a fishhook" and Nelson (Hal K. Dawson), the private investigator who sets everything into action, tells Austin that the cops "don't want me investigating... because they get a cut," the only specific accusations leveled against law enforcement in the film are that they overzealously issued parking citations and that they may have had a role in pushing through paperwork to have Nelson's investigator's license revoked. Even so, the audience never sees any of that actually happen, save when Austin's letter of inquiry about the licensing matter shows up on the Chief's desk. In the end, the police are essentially held up as heroes for ensuring the safe transport of Austin and his wife to their audience with Kefauver and his colleagues. A review from *The Christian Science Monitor* touches on the portrayal of the police, describing Gillette as "a basically competent and efficient officer who has compromised with the kind of enforcement Kennington seems to want" and is the force behind the "obstructionist movement."¹³⁷ The language used here suggests just how tepid the treatment of police corruption was in the film, with their primary sin being characterized as getting in the way rather than openly flouting the law, passive negligence rather than active criminality.

Similarly, the portrayal of political corruption has evolved from a conspiratorial machine, driven by an unquantifiable desire for power and posing an imminent threat to the American

¹³⁷ Beaufort, 8.

ideals of truth and justice, into an informal alliance between businessmen and criminals, united only by their mutual greed and dangerous only when lax morality begets physical violence if their income streams are threatened. *The Captive City* is held captive by men in suits—"the Police Chief, the Mayor, the City Council, even some of our own friends," as Marge points out to her husband—who know that the dark shadow of the Mafia, embodied by out-of-towner Dominic Fabretti, has taken hold of Kennington but do nothing to stop it. Rather than gathering in shadowy back rooms to strategize a plan of action, most of the support for the town's gambling wire comes through individual rationalization of immorality. When Austin challenges Chief Gillette for not doing more to stem the influence of Fabretti, the top cop protests that he can only keep the town as clean as his superiors want it. When profiteer Murray Sirak (Victor Sutherland) feels that Austin's investigation is a threat to his take from a long-standing local gambling operation, he attempts to bribe Austin and his partner at the newspaper to turn a blind eye. He offers to buy a surplus of advertising in order to funnel the pay-off through a legitimate business transaction. Though they rebuff him, Austin's partner does not seem to agree with the decision. When a cub photographer is attacked in the newspaper office while developing the photos of Fabretti that he and Austin had schemed to capture, Austin's partner implores him to "be a little reasonable, won't you? Every town's got a larceny streak in it. What do you want to do... reform the world or something? Fabretti wasn't bothering you. Leave him alone and he'll leave you alone." His reluctance to take a stand, even in the face of one of his staff members being physically harmed, captures the essence of the film's assertion that vice has become a fact of everyday life and that most people would rather selfishly stay out of the path of destruction rather than fight to keep criminals from profiting at their peril.

The Captive City delivers its comment on the state of corruption in America with clarity and resounding force thanks to the spectacle of violence and realism that it constructs. The consequences of inaction are clear: a seemingly harmless local pastime opens the door to outside forces of evil, vice mushrooms out of control, and then innocent people get hurt or killed. Even taking action can be dangerous when you wait too long, as the private investigator and the profiteer's ex-wife discover. When Nelson approaches Austin with information about corruption and vice taking over the town, the newspaperman scoffs at his concerns, dismissing him as a paranoid case. Like the cinematic crusaders for truth that preceded him, Austin does not immediately leap into action, though his inhibition stems more from naiveté in his belief that the cops could never be involved in something so untoward as hassling a citizen in service of a out-of-town vice peddler, rather than the moral ambivalence of Harvey in *Boomerang* or the unrelenting cynicism of McNeal in *Call Northside 777*. Unfortunately, Nelson pays the price for Austin's reticence—and, perhaps, for his own delay in drawing attention to the problem—when he falls victim to a vicious act of violence. Hounded by faceless thugs in a dark sedan with Florida plates, Nelson finds himself alone at night in one of the few *noir* scenes in the entire film. Pursued, he turns down an alley, only to find himself trapped in a dead end, surrounded by imposing industrial warehouses whose brick and glass block facades offer no means of escape. In a heart-racing montage that creates the illusion that if it shows everything when in fact it shows nothing that the Production Code Administration might object to, Nelson is shown caught like a deer in the headlights of the mysterious sedan just before it accelerates toward him, ostensibly crushing him between the chromed steel bumper and the solid expanse of brick. The police, of course, dismiss the incident as a tragic but accidental hit-and-run. Mrs. Sirak, estranged wife of profiteer Murray Sirak, suffers a similar, if less graphic fate, when Austin

deposits her, hysterical and thoroughly intoxicated, at her apartment just after she has finally agreed to testify against Fabretti. She turns up dead the next morning, the victim of a supposed suicide, though it is never shown on screen.

The violence is only magnified by the manufactured realism of the film. Drummed into the heads of moviegoers by advertising and publicity surrounding the film, the connection of the narrative to both the lived experience of journalist Alvin Josephy and the rampant criminality splashed across the media as a result of the Kefauver Committee proceedings is supplemented visually through the use of documentary-style production techniques. Director Robert Wise proudly attests to the fact he did all of the shooting for the film, inside and out, on location in Reno, Nevada. The effect of doing nothing in studio, even process shots, was to achieve maximum realism at minimal cost, satisfying the important goal of drawing audiences into a believable milieu while still working within the budgetary restrictions for a non-prestige film of this type.¹³⁸ The visual texture was further enhanced by the use of the Hoge lens, which produced a wide-angle shot with unparalleled depth of field and lack of distortion for the time. This technology allowed the filmmakers to capture every detail of the real buildings and thoroughfares and transfer that to the big screen without losing the impact of such a believable atmosphere, producing an enhanced authenticity that pleased critics.¹³⁹ Like most films working to create a documentary feel—with the exception of *Call Northside 777*, which starred the always recognizable James Stewart—*The Captive City* included a cast made up of character actors and fresh faces, allowing audiences to take in the narrative without the jarring contextual cues introduced by actors who have been typecast by their previous roles. In the case of John

¹³⁸ Porfirio, Silver and Ursini, 129.

¹³⁹ Bosley Crowther, "'Captive City,' in Which Editor Upsets Town's Bookmaking, Opens at the Criterion," *New York Times* (March 27, 1952), <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9800E7D6133AE53ABC4F51DFB5668389649EDE> (accessed April 26, 2010).

Forsythe, for whom playing the Austin character was his first time as a leading man, the film producers “wanted somebody not already too familiar to film audiences, someone who could play ‘just an ordinary guy’ with whom those seeing the film could easily identify themselves.”¹⁴⁰

Reviewer John Beaufort notes the importance of imparting an authenticity to the locales and the characters in the film, as “there are small cities like Kennington all over the map of the United States. And the people who live in them are not so very different from the people of ‘The Captive City’.”¹⁴¹ *Los Angeles Times* writer Philip Scheuer similarly acknowledges the value of using unknown actors when attempting to maximize the perceived realism of a film.¹⁴²

With the audience emotionally involved in the plight of the people of Kennington, the film delivers its last punch of reality, a monologue from Senator Kefauver. Though gimmicky and certainly not an original trick—both the failed studio repackaging of hearing footage, *The Kefauver Crime Investigation*, and the early syndicate film, *The Enforcer*, included appearances by the chairman of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce when released the previous year—the impact is still quite powerful.¹⁴³ Imagine having just watched this film recreate the utterly believable downfall of a cozy town in Middle America from the perspective of a moviegoer in 1952. Bombarded by media coverage of the recent inquest proceedings, audiences knew that scenarios like this had played out in communities all over the nation. On screen, they had witnessed the violent attacks launched on innocent people by Fabretti and his men. After the tense denouement of the film, when Austin and his wife have just entered the doors of Kefauver’s chambers, this highly respected government official, so deeply connected to the topic of organized crime by over a year of

¹⁴⁰ Messenger, n.p.

¹⁴¹ Beaufort, 8.

¹⁴² Philip Scheuer, “Crime Syndicate Fought by ‘Captive City’ Editor.” *Los Angeles Times* (May 17, 1952), 8.

¹⁴³ Wilson, 76.

fevered media attention, looked directly into the camera to deliver a personal message about the dangers of vice—even seemingly harmless local gambling—and placed the burden of stamping out the problem on the individual viewer with a resounding “It’s up to you!” It seems unlikely that moviegoers could have missed such a clear social message. While they still may not have been motivated enough to effect real change, they would likely have left the theater feeling its impact. Though rhetorically separated from the film by its position as an addendum, the “realness” of Kefauver in the flesh after the heart-racing ride that audiences had been taken on in a film focused entirely on the topic of organized crime that he had come to embody over the past year and a half would have been an incredibly powerful means of driving home the idea that people only had themselves to blame for corruption plaguing their communities.

For their part, reviewers got the message loud and clear. Unlike the somewhat contradictory opinions produced by justice docudramas like *Boomerang* and *Call Northside 777*, critics almost unanimously embraced *The Captive City* for its realism and its comment on individual responsibility. John Beaufort, emphasizing the importance of Kefauver’s epilogue, explained that the film “bears little resemblance to most other crime melodramas. What it tries to do is to show how a normal community can be lulled into cynical or fearful tolerance of a certain amount of corruption. Apathetic disinterest, lack of information, and criminal self-interest are the partners in this sort of crime.”¹⁴⁴ *Chicago Daily Tribune* film critic Mae Tinée reached the same conclusion, describing how in the “showdown between the big gangsters who control [vice] and the local men appointed to preserve law and order, the lawless usually win, thanks to the general apathy of most citizens, in or out of office.”¹⁴⁵ The only dissenting voice belonged to Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times*. Though often remembered for his particular interest in social

¹⁴⁴ Beaufort, 8.

¹⁴⁵ Mae Tinée, “Movie Without ‘Name’ Stars Tells City’s Fight on Crime,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 11, 1952), B11.

issues, Crowther overlooked the call to end individual apathy and inaction in the face of pervasive criminality, instead focusing on what he viewed as an unforgivable flaw in the narrative: the way that Austin handled the information he received about the gambling syndicate in Kennington. He returned to this issue repeatedly, first criticizing the fact that Austin did not just publish the story because an editor should not need “more pertinent and shocking evidence to lay before the public than a sequence of local crimes—the death of the private investigator, an attack upon a newspaper man who had photographed the ‘big shot’ in the city and the murder of a woman witness who was about to ‘talk’,” then attacking the screenwriters for turning to Kefauver to wrap up the story after they have “overlooked the factor of public opinion and have let their editor behave as though he could not tell his story, though publishing a paper every day.”¹⁴⁶ Crowther seems to have missed the point here, as Austin is isolated by the fact that everyone in a position of power that he might turn to has either been implicated in the vice racket or is willing to look the other way out of concern for profit or personal safety. Austin’s lack of confidence that merely publishing the truth will spark a public outcry seems utterly justifiable in light of the years of apathy on the part of the townspeople, most of whom seem to regard small-time gambling as a right and pleasure of contemporary life rather than a foothold for a nefarious underworld of gangsters and violence. To a certain extent, Crowther’s unbending belief in the power of the press to police immoral behavior represents an enduring naiveté about the well-documented depths of corruption, both in law enforcement and politics, and the negligence of the public in addressing the larger implications of local decisions, both of which have been exposed by the Kefauver hearings and reinforced through the spectacular realism of syndicate films like *The Captive City*.

¹⁴⁶ Crowther, “‘Captive City’.”

Case Study: *The Phenix City Story*

When *The Phenix City Story* hit theaters in the fall of 1955, much of the initial fervor surrounding the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce hearings had subsided. No longer the focus of special television events or daily newspaper coverage, the ties between Kefauver and the vice industry began to loosen. Crime, however, did not go away. In June of 1954, the situation in Phenix City, Alabama, bubbled over into the national spotlight, as a decades-long stalemate between honest citizens and purveyors of sin ended with the assassination of the State's Attorney-elect who had vowed to clean up the town once and for all, Albert Patterson. After more than 50 years of tacit approval of the extremely profitable local gambling and prostitution rackets, a string of violent attacks, arson attempts, and bombings finally forced the citizen of Phenix City to stand up against the homegrown criminal element. When the figurehead of reform was murdered, the town collapsed into chaos until Alabama Governor Gordon Persons ordered National Guardsmen to take control of the town and destroy all the trappings of vice.¹⁴⁷ Just over one year after the tragedy that occurred in Phenix City made national headlines, the film appeared to bring those events to life on the big screen.

While the film certainly owes a debt of gratitude to the cultural awareness of organized crime made possible by the Kefauver Committee's sensational exposé of the nefarious underworld lurking in otherwise respectable communities all over the United States, its temporal distance from the actual hearings and the spectacular nature of the true events on which its narrative is based leads *The Phenix City Story* to depend more on the public awareness of the latter to activate a sense of realism for audiences. The tabloid nature of the unfolding events in

¹⁴⁷ "Crime: The Odds Were Right," *Time* (June 28, 1954), <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,860871,00.html> (accessed January 26, 2010).

Phenix City led national magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, as well as local and regional newspapers, to cover them extensively; however, the film draws its source material from a series of articles in the Columbus Ledger that won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service Journalism in 1955. According to the Pulitzer Prize Board, the paper received this honor because:

its complete news coverage and fearless editorial attack on widespread corruption in neighboring Phenix City, Ala., which were effective in destroying a corrupt and racket-ridden city government. The newspaper exhibited an early awareness of the evils of lax law enforcement before the situation in Phenix City erupted into murder. It covered the whole unfolding story of the final prosecution of the wrong-doers with skill, perception, force and courage.¹⁴⁸

The posters for the film boldly reference both the award-winning “blistering exposé” on which the film was based and the magazine coverage, with one version even including copies of actual spreads from the stories published about the events, including the devastating first-person account written by the murdered reformer’s son, John Patterson, for the *Saturday Evening Post*.¹⁴⁹ To further emphasize the film’s attempt to capture the reality of the small town drama, the posters trumpet that it was “filmed on the spot in the sin town it took the military to subdue” or “filmed on the spot... in Alabama... sin by sin... shock by shock!”¹⁵⁰ The most strident claim of realism, found in a newspaper advertisement for the film posted in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, also makes the same kind of personal appeal found in the campaign behind *The Captive City*. The ad copy speaks directly to “you,” imploring the individual to act, if only by seeing the film and witnessing the consequences of unchecked vice for oneself:

¹⁴⁸ The Pulitzer Prize Board, *The Pulitzer Prizes, 1955*, <http://www.pulitzer.org/awards/1955> (accessed May 17, 2010).

¹⁴⁹ John Patterson, “I’ll Get the Gangs That Killed My Father!,” *Saturday Evening Post* (November 11, 1954), 20-1, 60, 62-4. Article includes photos of a priest standing over Albert Patterson’s sheet-covered body inside the morgue and of men with blood-obscured faces after a beating they received while trying to vote.

¹⁵⁰ “*The Phenix City Story* Movie Posters.”

Rough? Tough? This picture has to be! You can't tell 'The Phenix City Story' with kid gloves!

The city we show you on the screen is so incredibly wicked you can hardly believe it's real!

Look on the map. Phenix City, Alabama is real all right. Look at its notorious 14th Street, its gaudy-lighted nightspots, its noisy, dark interiors—where every marked card, every false-bottom glass, every taxi-dancer was there to fleece the sucker. You'll see the grafters, the cheaters, the crooked politicians. You'll see how lawyer Albert Patterson bucked the crime ring to run for Attorney General—and was brutally killed before he could take office.

We went to Phenix City, Alabama, to film this picture, under the protection of the State Militia. Some of the people you see in it actually lived through the reign of terror. Other roles had to be played by professional actors because the characters they play are dead, or in jail, or hiding out—viciously waiting to bring mob rule back to Phenix City. We don't think you'll let them—in Phenix City or anywhere else—once you see 'The Phenix City Story' in all its shocking truth!¹⁵¹

Simultaneously capturing the spectacular drama of the original events and establishing the authenticity of the film, this advertisement lets moviegoers know that the places are real, the people are real, and the violence is real, even though the film itself is a reenactment.

Once inside the theater, audiences were drawn further into the realistic milieu of *The Phenix City Story*. For their contribution to the authentic flavor of the film, the casting and production of *The Phenix City Story* were celebrated in both the industry and conventional press. *The Milwaukee Journal* applauds the film's overtures to reality, giving examples of how the it employs the documentary-style production techniques that I have described: "the picture was filmed entirely in the locale in question. Its street scenes and documentary-like filming give it an air of authenticity. The lead roles are played by unknown, or mostly unfamiliar, faces. Many of

¹⁵¹ "Rough? Tough? This picture has to be!" Advertisement for *The Phenix City Story*, *Milwaukee Sentinel* (October 27, 1956), 16, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=wZJMF1LD7PcC&dat=19551027&printsec=frontpage> (accessed April 26, 2010).

the minor roles and almost all the extras are Phenix City people.”¹⁵² Philip Scheuer explains that the film “attains maximum realism by having been shot in Phenix City,” another endorsement of location shooting over the unavoidable synthetic feeling derived from studio set work.¹⁵³

Furthermore, depending on the venue, some screenings of the film included a mini-documentary, approximately thirteen minutes in length, shown before the credits ever rolled.¹⁵⁴ This prologue features broadcast journalist Clete Roberts interviewing various residents of Phenix City, including Albert Patterson’s widow, a Sunday school teacher who had his home bombed while his family was inside, and a Deputy Sheriff whose life had been repeatedly threatened in attempt to discourage him from testifying.¹⁵⁵ Though including the reel was at the exhibitor’s discretion and it was filmed and added well after the film was in progress, much to the dismay of screenwriter Daniel Mainwaring, it would certainly have set a tone of believability for the spectacle of violence to follow for audiences that saw the extended version.¹⁵⁶ The credits play over an artful array of the same magazine spreads used on the posters, then transition to text extolling how the people of Phenix City were able to finally right the ship after almost 100 years of existence as a “modern Pompeii” of vice and corruption. The film begins with the same assembly of narration over bustling suburban imagery previously seen at the start of *Boomerang* and *The Captive City*, except here the voice-over is personal, spoken in first-person by the actor playing John Patterson (Richard Kiley). Though unclear at first, the fact that the story is being

¹⁵² “The Screen: ‘The Phenix City Story’,” 6.

¹⁵³ Philip Scheuer, “Facts Shout for Themselves in ‘The Phenix City Story’,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 23, 1955), 2.

¹⁵⁴ The full-length documentary section is included with most versions of the film available today, including the one used in this study.

¹⁵⁵ Though most critics did not mention the documentary reel at all, the reaction among those that did was mixed. One thought it was “an effective opening in which plain, ordinary people” are given a voice. Another thought the additional footage was an interesting but unnecessary exercise in melodrama. See Mae Tinée, “Documentary Movie Bares Town of Vice,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (July 21, 1955), C8; “The Screen: ‘The Phenix City Story’,” *Milwaukee Journal* (October 29, 1955), 6, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=jvrRlaHg2sAC&dat=19551029&prinstec=frontpage> (accessed April 26, 2010).

¹⁵⁶ “The Phenix City Story (July 20, 1955),” *Variety Film Reviews: 1954-1958*, vol. 9 (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1983); Porfirio, Silver and Ursini, 151.

told from the perspective of the son of the murdered man becomes undeniable when he refers to “his father” as we see Albert Patterson (John McIntire) murdered and resonates most clearly when the film closes with a shot of him speaking directly to the camera from his new office as the Alabama State’s Attorney. The visual similarity of this to the Kefauver prologue of *The Captive City*, with its office setting and direct style of addressing the audience, reflects the fact that this film is also trying to influence audiences using an illusion of authenticity borrowed from the real people involved in the story. Of course, this technique is more muddled here because the speaker is the actor playing John Patterson, not the real John Patterson, yet maintaining the character is a more effective means of assuring the manufactured realism of the film remains intact. Had the film incorporated the actual man in this final appeal instead of the actor, it would have broken the spell in which audiences believed Richard Kiley was Patterson and undone the appeals to narrative and visual realism built into all of the preceding scenes.

The legacy of the Phenix City reform movement, with its untimely but symbolic passing of the torch from father to son, was not predestined. As in the previous three films discussed, Albert Patterson, the leader of this crusade against vice, initially resisted taking on the role. When concerned citizens beg him for answers, he only has questions: “I’m not sticking my neck out. Why should I? Phenix City has been what it is 80 or 90 years. Who am I to try and reform it?” Driven by a skepticism cultivated over decades of failed attempts to stamp out gambling and prostitution in Phenix City, he rejects not only the idea of himself as the catalyst for change, but the possibility of change entirely. Only a string of unmitigated violence would reignite his moral indignation, as the audacity of the criminal element—carrying on in the daylight on a main thoroughfare and indiscriminately terrorizing innocent men, women, and children—forced him to step out from behind his passive defense of conscientious objection. Unlike his fellow

cinematic fighters for lawful and honest living, Patterson's previous involvement with attempts at reform and his subsequent ennui emphasizes the durative power of corruption and vice, even when citizens do take action, and demonstrates just how easily individual greed and apathy can combine to create a moral threat that slowly expands until it overtakes every aspect of daily life. As in *Kennington*, corruption in Phenix City seems to be a foregone conclusion. The police are portrayed in the film as either ignorant or complacent, not actively involved in the violence, but a passive presence that looks the other way and cleans up the messes of those behind the vice enterprise. Instead of participating, they simply disappear at the behest of the criminals actually propagating violence in the town. Their characterization is certainly dark, as they are shown casually playing cards while voters are brutally beaten on their way to the polls, but their crime is painted as dereliction of duty rather than directly implicating them in perpetrating the suffering. The absence of government is notable as politicians and legislators are only discussed incidentally, such as when a desperate John Patterson calls the state capitol for reinforcements after his father has been shot. In place of blaming these two corrupt factions, the real villains in *The Phenix City Story* are the underworld businessmen, lifetime town residents whose families have been in the sin trade for generations, men and women who parade down the sidewalk greeting their friends and neighbors as if nothing were wrong.

Albert Patterson's decision to fight the status quo, even in the face of mortal danger, delivers a powerful counterpoint to the inaction of the majority of the residents of Phenix City, paralyzed as they were by fear or complicity or denial. Unwavering in its delivery, the film was embraced by critics for its important social message. Bosley Crowther suggested that the "brilliance and beauty of it are not in its detail of crime but in its capture of a feeling of real corruption, of civic and social paralysis and a sense of the sacrifice and effort that men must

make to wage a clean-up crusade.” He attributed this to “the characterization of Mr. Patterson,” which is the “heart and core of the film. For it is in the change of the revolution, from refusal to take part in another crusade to clean up Phenix City to acceptance of a charge to head the drive, that the basic quality of decent human nature and courage for the right is revealed.”¹⁵⁷ Philip Scheuer of *The Los Angeles Times* came to a similar conclusion: “what gives the film an even more sinister sense of reality is the acceptance, or at any rate tolerance, of Boss Tanner by his fellow citizens of all stripes as, smiling and calling greetings, he wends his way across town. Corruption, thy name is complacency.”¹⁵⁸ While the write-up in *The Milwaukee Journal* correctly identifies the social comment evident in the plot—describing it as “a crackling good drama about ordinary people, lulled into lethargy by years of living with evil, and the problems they encounter when they attempt to do something about it”—the reviewer rejects it outright, decrying that when the film “climbs on the soapbox, it falls below the level of its material.” Though this rejection of the moral compass of the film in favor of pure entertainment is interesting, it is certainly an outlier from the other reviews regarding reception and support of the imperative to fight immorality by getting involved that is central to *The Phenix City Story*.

The most distinguishing feature of this film—and the facet that separates it from other syndicate films and the bulk of cinematic history leading up to 1955—is the unprecedented spectacle of violence. From start to finish, viewers are subjected to a barrage of beatings and murders that are ripped from the headlines of the actual events in Phenix City. In fact, the recreation of violence in *The Phenix City Story* was so authentic that the *Life* magazine feature referenced in the film posters and credits includes a spread of shot-by-shot comparisons between

¹⁵⁷ Bosley Crowther, “Sin in the South: ‘The Phenix City Story’ Has Debut at State,” *New York Times* (September 3, 1955) <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B07E7DE113AE53BBC4B53DFBF66838E649EDE> (accessed February 5, 2010).

¹⁵⁸ Philip Scheuer, “Facts,” 2.

news photography from Phenix City and stills from the film.¹⁵⁹ The similarity is startling, with the article simultaneously delivering a ringing endorsement for the realism of the film and a tabloid-like appeal to potential moviegoers. Beginning with a tame display, a patron of the town's notorious Poppy Club—run by the local captain of the sin industry, Rhett Tanner (Edward Andrews)—is beat up by the club's muscle for complaining that he is losing because the cards are marked. Afterwards he is dumped out in the gutter where the police arrive to take him to jail for dereliction with a cordial wave to the club janitor, Zeke. The violence escalates to murder quickly when the young daughter of the African-American janitor, who is a friend of the Patterson family, is lured into a car by Tanner's thugs and later dumped on the Patterson lawn with a note to deliver a warning: "This will happen to your kids too." As the car drives off, it never hesitates despite hitting another little boy riding his bicycle. This sequence of events, with its cavalier treatment of innocent children and its implication that the young African-American child is a disposable commodity whose death is justified in service of delivering an effective threat to the Pattersons, makes the ruthlessness of the town's criminal element undeniably apparent. When another reformer attempts to gather evidence that implicates Tanner and his men in the death of the little girl, he turns up dead as well. His body is discarded in a ditch and, though Albert Patterson makes a convincing argument in court that the town's gangsters are behind the violence, the would-be reformer's death is ruled an accident by a jury of townspeople that are either afraid of retribution or financially involved in the vice industry. This unprecedented portrayal of violence, certainly effective in capturing the attention of audiences and shocking them into seeing the dark side of vice, was likely only possible due to the film's connection to a true story. Though the power of the production code was waning in the 1950s,

¹⁵⁹ "'Sin City' Sizzles Again, But on Film," *Life* (September 26, 1955), <http://books.google.com/books?id=uFYEAAAAMBAJ> (accessed January 25, 2010).

the ability to show that all of these violent acts, and even worse offenses, had really happened would have given the filmmakers plenty of ammunition for shooting down any objections.

During Patterson's campaign for State's Attorney, men and women alike are beaten up in broad daylight, bricks are thrown through windows all over town, Patterson's law office is set ablaze, and a bomb is planted in the home of a Sunday school teacher while his family is inside. On voting day, would-be voters are brutally attacked to prevent them from entering polling sites or lured away with prostitutes while the local law enforcement is shown gathered around a table in the back room of the police station for a game of cards. The violence reaches its pinnacle when Patterson is assassinated. Vivid in its cruelty, a startling gun blast is followed by a close-up of his twisted face as blood pours from his mouth. A wide shot of the injured man stumbling into the street before collapsing emphasizes how isolated he is in the darkness and signals the impending change that will result from the vice industry going too far beyond what Phenix City's honest but apathetic citizens can continue to overlook. When John Patterson goes to rescue the girl who tried to warn his father about the meeting of the vice leaders and their murderous plan, she has already become the next victim. When he arrives at the janitor's house, he and his wife have been brutally beaten and John gets into a lengthy physical battle with Tanner, the two men eventually tumbling into a rocky ravine. Patterson nearly drowns Tanner before Zeke intervenes, spouting biblical commandments until Patterson's rage is finally suppressed. The unrelenting nature of the film's violence, the realism with which it is imbued, and its origin in the actual events make it stomach-churning and difficult to watch, even looking back from a contemporary post-Tarantino perspective.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ The films of director Quentin Tarantino, working in the 1990s and beyond, are notorious for their depictions of violence. See *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), or either *Kill Bill* (2003 and 2004).

Critics cautiously embraced the shocking display. Crowther was concise and to the point: “the showing of violence and murders is as strong and ugly as it can safely be on the screen.”¹⁶¹ Scheuer warned viewers that “during its course of vice and violence [the film] rasps many nerves and plays on many emotions, and at the end leaves one weak with rage.”¹⁶² Edwin Shallert was so bold as to suggest “such cruelties dominate this picture as might have been administered by the Nazis in the most sinister days of their rule in Europe. There are no concentration camps, but unbridled license takes over in the community and anyone who goes against its hard, brutal grain is quickly liquidated.”¹⁶³ While these critics acknowledge that the brutality depicted in the film is often difficult to watch, they universally accept it as a necessary evil in order to ensure that the retelling of this true tale on the big screen captures the essence of the real events, with Crowther providing the most rational explanation: “there are those who may feel this vivid chapter out of the recent annals of American corruption and crime to be too ugly to acknowledge. That may sentimentally be. But it is a fine piece of picture journalism—and a tautly made movie to boot.”¹⁶⁴ The phrase “picture journalism” is the boldest endorsement possible of the realistic milieu created in *The Phenix City Story*, its ability to capture the essence of the source material, and its success in blending documentary-style production techniques with a true story to deliver an impactful message to audiences about the necessity of moral fortitude in the face of pervasive vice and corruption.

¹⁶¹ Crowther, “Sin.”

¹⁶² Scheuer, “Facts,” 2.

¹⁶³ Edwin Shallert, “‘Phenix City’ Hits Hard with Violence, Cruelty,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 27, 1955), A6.

¹⁶⁴ Crowther, “Sin.”

Conclusion

The Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce hearings influenced filmmakers and audiences in the 1950s just as HUAC brought paranoia and a fear of false accusation into the cultural exchange between society and Hollywood in the previous decade. While the proceedings of the earlier congressional investigation were tainted by a general furtiveness and a failure to establish solid evidentiary requirements for labeling individuals Communists and traders to their homeland, the exploration of interstate crime was relatively transparent. The Kefauver Committee brought corruption and vice into the homes of average Americans by allowing the foundling technology of television to broadcast live footage as it traveled from city to city in search of the truth. Viewers were transfixed by what they saw.

In order to capitalize on the television's golden moment, Hollywood launched a decade-long cycle of syndicate films that dealt directly with the criminal activity brought into the spotlight by Kefauver and his associates. Though extending out from the *film noir* tradition of the 1940s, syndicate films were less foreboding, less unrelentingly pessimistic, less stylized and less ambiguous in their message. Most were simply built to exploit the cultural zeitgeist surrounding corruption and vice in the wake of the televised hearings, with crime, prostitution, and gambling dangled before audiences who could not resist their tabloid appeal. A few attempted to achieve more, crafting a social message about individual responsibility and the need for bold action to suppress immorality in our communities. Two such examples, *The Captive City* and *The Phenix City Story*, accomplish this by blending documentary-style production techniques that create visual realism with a story based on real events that imparts a narrative authenticity. The impact of the social commentary of these films is only magnified by their manufacture of a spectacle of violent consequences for real world inaction. When presented with these powerful accounts of what can really happen when vice is allowed to insinuate itself into perfectly average towns,

audiences who had been lulled into believing those communities could be their own would have been hard-pressed not to register the call for the end of public apathy toward crime. For their trouble, those who could stomach the violence left the theater both inspired and thoroughly entertained.

Conclusion

The practice of film scholars necessarily takes interpretation to a much deeper theoretical level than an individual exposed to a text a single time under the premise of entertainment, so it would be fallacious to say that all of the information gleaned from subsequently viewings would have registered for original audiences. We owe a great deal to modern technology that allows us to watch films over and over, at our leisure and in our own homes, pausing and rewinding in search of details we might have missed or telling quotations, but establishing a contextual foundation for how viewers originally experienced these films is fundamental to building a theory of their cultural function that remains rooted in lived experience rather than becoming pure speculation. By taking the docudrama crime film back to its origins and examining how it evolved through its first two decades, I have established a baseline of knowledge that will be useful in the future for examining how appeals to narrative and visual reality have been used in both the crime film genre and the docudrama form, more generally, in the interceding decades and extrapolating what social commentary function these texts might serve in contemporary popular culture.

The history of docudrama extends well beyond the confines of the crime film genre and, as such, there are many different interpretations and cultural functions that can be assigned to its different iterations. Biographical films and historical films use real events differently than the docudrama crime film, often focusing more on portraying those happenings accurately and “authentically” without the targeted social message found in the films discussed here. Docudramas can also be found in other visual mediums, such as the made-for-television docudrama, which marks an entirely different shape and cultural usage of the form. Because I intended to focus specifically on the docudrama crime film, I began my study in the period immediately following World War II and traced the changing iterations of the form into the mid-1950s, but the evolution of the form does not end there.

The docudrama crime film enjoyed a resurgence in the 1970s, with films like *Serpico* (1973) and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) that returned to a similar topical focus on the perils of police corruption in light of the revelations of the Knapp Commission concerning pervasive graft and malfeasance within the New York Police Department at that time.¹⁶⁵ Despite their similar interest in crime and corruption, the form and social message of these films break from those seen in both the justice docudramas of the 1940s and the syndicate films of 1950s. Reflecting the rapidly changing cultural atmosphere of the 1970s, these films are different even from each other. While they both portray face-offs between criminals and law enforcement, even within the span of the two years between their release dates, the sympathy of the audience shifts from cheering on the crusading honest cop in *Serpico* to empathizing with the showboating, downtrodden bank robber in *Dog Day Afternoon*. Together, these films illustrate a redoubled effort on the part of filmmakers to use documentary-style production techniques to build a

¹⁶⁵ See Jamie Schleser, “To Protect and Serve?: Imagining Law and Order in *Serpico* and *Dog Day Afternoon*,” unpublished paper written at DePaul University, 2009.

believable milieu on screen, benefiting from subsequent technological advancements that allowed them to be more flexible about camera movement and lighting in order to capture a scene or location as it was in real life. These films also vary from previous iterations by making less of a personal appeal to viewers than the films of the 1950s and changing the way that their marketing materials establish a connection to real events. While these 1970s films represent yet another reinvention of the form and message possible in this genre, they reflect a continuing high level of interaction among all docudrama crime films between contemporary culture leading up to the release of a film and the crime stories that are being chosen to tell. Without fail, the social commentary performance of these films, though changing to reflect the particular issues of their day, all depend on highlighting the truth of those stories.

To fully explore the docudrama crime film, it would be useful to see if and how the form appears in the interim period of the 1960s, as well as to trace it forward to today. From my research, I have found that the docudrama form has moved away from the crime film genre in contemporary mainstream cinema. While films like *Jarhead* (2005) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) compellingly use real events to underwrite the creation of a first-hand experience of modern warfare for viewers, the overwhelming majority of studio feature films that openly activate a connection to real life by asserting a connection to a true story in the last ten years are sports-themed: *Remember the Titans* (2000), *The Rookie* (2002), *Seabiscuit* (2003), *Miracle* (2004), *Coach Carter* (2005), *Cinderella Man* (2005), *Dreamer* (2005), *We Are Marshall* (2006), *Glory Road* (2006), *Invincible* (2006), *The Express* (2008), and *The Blind Side* (2009). Many of these films follow a similar formula of focusing on an individual or a team that must overcome some serious societal or personal challenge—racism, poverty, ageism, or just plain self-doubt—in order to wrap the film up on a heart-warming note that assures audiences that everything always

works out in the end. Disney is responsible for a number of these films and they often reflect the company's family-friendly ethos. Interestingly, a number of them step away from definitively establishing a connection to real events by utilizing the weaker "inspired by" terminology. The rationale behind this change to a minimal level of commitment to creating the illusion of realism would certainly be worth investigating, as inspiration allows for far more interpretation, leading the docudrama farther from the documentary and closer to the conventional Hollywood fiction film. It would also be useful to trace the lineage of "inspired by" to see where it entered the Hollywood lexicon and what kinds of films it has been applied to over the full spectrum of cinema history. This would make it possible to compare and contrast a full range of "inspired by" and "based on" films.

Films that openly reference real life or real events through visual techniques and somehow incorporate true stories into their narratives require more study in the future. Their unique rhetorical position between fiction features and documentaries set them apart from all other genres. They are making an explicit claim that promises audiences some greater sense of "truth" or "authenticity," claiming that they are somehow more socially significant or more emotionally meaningful than fantasy, that the thousands on conventional Hollywood films that appropriate true stories with attribution do not. Because advertising a connection to real events always represents a conscious choice on the part of filmmakers, it must serve some greater cultural function. Otherwise, it would be easier to skirt the potential troubles that stem from representing a commercial entertainment product as a staid portrayal of fact, whether that be legal opposition from involved parties over the way they are portrayed or an increased exposure to criticism from film reviewers or scholars that choose to focus on how the film fails to live up to the reality of what happened. Furthermore, the shifting docudrama form is a ripe source of

insight into our own cultural development here in America as their manufactured connection to real life provides an opportunity to explore the prevailing political and social concerns at the time of each release. In the dialogue between culture and cinema, the docudrama makes very different claims about itself that allow these films to offer a newly enlightening perspective on the conversation.

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