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L.A. Confidential: A Review

Director: Curtis Hanson

Writer: James Ellroy

Release Information: Regency Enterprises (1997), 136 minutes, 35 mm

MMPA Rating: R

Set in the early 1950's, at a time when Hollywood's glamour still reigned, L.A. Confidential is a story about two cops -- one all muscle and good intentions, the other all brains and big ambitions -- who are thrown into conflict by a murder case that stretches from an all-night diner where six bodies are found to City Hall. Along the way, viewers are exposed to portrayals of various aspects of policing as well as an interesting story line and exemplary acting. Based on James Ellroy's celebrated best seller, L.A. Confidential is a crime drama with the intelligence, sex appeal, humor, danger, and action to satisfy a wide audience.

The movie begins with the arrest of Mickey Cohen (Harvey Keitel), L.A.'s major mob boss, who is jailed for tax evasion, thus creating a huge gap in the crime world that has many folks scrambling to take over. Los Angeles is facing an unprecedented wave of violence, as members of the Cohen mob are being killed left and right . . . . and then comes the Nite Owl Massacre - six victims, one an ex-cop, are gunned down in the Nite Owl Cafe on Christmas Eve.

Three investigators begin to tackle the case: Bud White (Russell Crowe), known for his use of violence, however necessary or unnecessary; Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey), technical advisor to Badge of Honor, the popular television series about the LAPD, and not averse to taking bribes for highly publicized "busts" from Sid Hudgens (Danny DeVito), editor of Hush Hush tabloid magazine; and Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) determined to do things the "right" way for justice to be served but hated by his fellow officers for snitching when Mexican prisoners are beaten by the police for superficial reasons. Each character represents a different piece of the "murder puzzle" that cannot be solved unless they agree to cooperate with one another. Yet, such cooperation does not come easy, as none of these three cops like each other and none are driven by the same motive. Careerism, love, and a highly-unexpected sense of guilt all come into play, but not before the viewer is exposed to the various (and seemingly unrelated) plot strands.

As the detectives begin to see the story unfold before them, inconsistencies appear and suspicion begins to form in their minds about the quick resolution to the Nite Owl case and the people who may or may not have connections to it. Investigation of the case leads the detectives on a journey through the lower rungs and upper-reaches of L.A. society, which provides the foundation of the movie. [End page 18]

In addition to providing over two hours of intense excitement, L.A. Confidential exposes accounts of various policing issues and the roots of several social problems currently existing in the city. For example, there's rape, police beatings, a police riot, gunplay, racism, prostitution, corruption, betrayal, drug use, fighting, pornographic photos, death, secret alliances, and paparazzi waiting to get that one breakthrough picture -- basically a stroll through the underside of Hollywood. But it's all done in the service of an interesting story through which several policing issues appear.

Adler, Mueller, and Laufer (1994: 564) defined police subculture as a "set of norms and values that govern police behavior, brought about by stressful working conditions plus daily interaction with an often hostile public." According to this definition, examples of the police officer subculture are abundant in L.A. Confidential. For example, the aforementioned beating of the Mexican prisoners and the refusal of several officers to testify against fellow officers involved in the incident (as several officers noted: "I won't testify against my partner or anyone else" and "No thanks. I'm not a snitch") and the subsequent chastising of Exley, who tried to prevent the violence, suggest that the police subculture was "alive and well" in the LAPD during this time. Similar portrayals of the police subculture are provided throughout the movie, including the failure of officers to report several instances involving shakedowns conducted by fellow officers and the general lack of concern amongst the officers regarding Vincennes' "bribe-taking."[1]

Examples of police corruption appear throughout L.A. Confidential, mainly because this was a period when corruptibility and violence were rewarded skills of police recruits, veteran cops were often "promoted" from the beat to the mob, and the LAPD was shifting from a frontier mentality to one modeled on the military. As can be noted in numerous scenes throughout the film, police corruption played a significant role in the LAPD of the 1950's. For example, the aforementioned illegal beatings of the Mexican prisoners, Vincennes' practice of taking bribes, and various violent and non-violent shakedowns all constitute police corruption, as does hanging a District Attorney out of a high-rise building by his feet, framing three African-Americans juveniles, and executing those "in the know."

Often, when a contemporary movie sets out to be "hard-hitting" in its depiction of corruption, it becomes as crude and venomous as the very thing that it's attacking. By providing an account of a "good apple's" role (Exley) in a corrupt department, L.A. Confidential avoids such a practice, clearly demonstrating the realities of police corruption while managing to avoid a cheap or cynical attitude and refraining from overindulgence. In general, the film's assumption is that although there's small harm in free booze and a little graft, there are some things a police officer simply cannot do and live with himself. Yet, the film's resolution (which could be understood to be that "power corrupts") is not [End page 19] directly addressed. In other words, at the conclusion of L.A. Confidential, particular "bad guys" are identified, yet the entire system has not changed nor has the viewer been given any reason to believe that it will ever change.

L.A. Confidential helps portray the potential "dangers" that can result from a relationship between the police and media that is built on corruption. Garner (1995: 41) notes that "considering the many mutual benefits to be gained from getting along, cooperation (between the police and media) is a win- win proposition for both sides." Problems occur when the cooperation is based upon, or incorporates, unethical, illegal, and/or immoral behaviors. Such a situation is one of the main sub-plots of L.A. Confidential. For instance, the first glimpse the audience gets of Vincennes involves him taking money to arrest two small-time actors on marijuana charges, with the whole scene having been set up by Hush Hush magazine. Out of this deal, Jack receives fifty dollars and is featured in the magazine's next issue, while the magazine gets a famous cop on its cover making an arrest.

While the present discussion is restrained to accounts of the police subculture, police corruption, and the police-media relationship, several other policing issues are apparent in the movie as well. Depictions of how the seeds of racism that would yield riots 15 and 40 years later were being sown are evident, as are portrayals of the lack of diversity within the department (e.g., there were no portrayals of female or minority officers on the LAPD). Similarly, there was limited consideration of officer family-life, which could be a product of the script or an accurate depiction of a problem sometimes faced by police officers.[2] Finally, we see evidence of the "good cop/bad cop" phenomenon. Exley, who is referred to as "college boy" and scores well on the civil service exam (i.e., a "climber" within the department based on his intelligence, who was told that he "had the eye for human politics, but not the stomach"), portrays the model police officer (having won a medal of honor, yet apparently discouraged because "true" justice wasn't served), while White resembles the bad cop, mainly due to his violent behavior throughout much of the film. In general, there are few policing issues that go unrecognized in the film.

L.A. Confidential has been compared to the movie Chinatown, largely because both films have as their basis an understanding that corruption is not extraordinary in its evil, but rather comes about as a series of initial compromises that evolve into greater compromise. Similarly, just as Chinatown used real estate scams of 1930's Los Angeles to enrich its film noir story, L.A. Confidential uses police corruption and mob influence of the 1950's as the basis for crime drama. Yet, others might suggest that, aside from the obvious noir detail and the setting, the only thing the two movies really have in common is that absolutely nothing about the crime is what it initially seems to be. We leave it up to the viewer to decide. [End page 20]

Finally, a brief mention of the film's portrayal of societal disruption in Los Angeles is required. In attempting to understand the underlying cause of such great disruption in Hollywood during this period, one must consider Durkheim's (1897/1951) assertion about the functions of crime. While mob boss Mickey Cohen was alive, there appeared to be "normality" in Hollywood.[3] Police, gangsters, the media, and the public appeared to understand their places and/or roles in society. Yet, with the arrest of Cohen, violence ensued, leading to the disruption of "normality." While the "normality" that existed may not have been visible, just, fair, and/or ethical, nevertheless there was not the disruption, violence or chaos that existed (both within and outside of the LAPD) after his arrest. Such a situation leads to: (1) the question of whether the LAPD would have been better served "leaving well-enough alone" and (2) the need to more clearly define what it means to "serve and protect." L.A. Confidential attempts to address these issues, although it is the nature of policing, and society in general, that fully satisfying answers are not forthcoming.

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Endnotes

[1] While we would like to think that adverse effects resultant from the police officer subculture in the LAPD (and other departments as well) have diminished since the 1950's, the findings of the Christopher Commission and the recent attack upon security guard Abner Louima by New York City police officers would suggest otherwise.

[2] For a discussion of familial problems in policing, readers are directed to Alpert and Dunham (1988), Arrigo and Garsky (1997), and Dempsey (1994).

[3] For the purposes of this review, we refrain from further discussing "normality" other than to suggest that it is those conditions which appear normal or ordinary. For a more detailed discussion of normality, the reader is referred to Henslin (1993).

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