The Art of Crime: A Review of *The BFI Companion to Crime*

By

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Author: Edited by Phil Hardy; Foreword by Richard Attenborough
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It was with eager anticipation that I sat down to read the esteemed British Film Institute's (BFI) *The BFI Companion to Crime*. This eagerness was prompted by the marriage of two phenomena, crime and film, that are the core of my research interests. Often such a strong sense of anticipation is bound to disappoint, but I am happy to report that this book despite some minor difficulties does not disappoint. It even exceeded expectations by prompting me to reflect on the relations between crime stories and criminology.

The foundation of the book, laid out in the foreword by Richard Attenborough and the introduction by Phil Hardy, is based on a number of reasonable premises: that crime is a universal and trans-historical fact of recorded human history; that stories of crime have always accompanied empirical crime; and that crime stories, in particular filmed stories about crime, can provide the consumer of these crime stories with an interesting and unique understanding of themselves and others. Hardy and the various contributors to this work set out to survey and classify the main types of crime narratives in film to provide a resource for those interested in crime films.

A few thoughts about the methodology utilized in the choice of films to be included are pertinent before reviewing the results of the survey. Survey is a key term here, because an exhaustive examination of crime narratives would be a monumental, if not impossible, task. Some readers may have a more difficult time with the fact that Hardy deliberately does not define the crime film genre and instead aims to loosely define the genre by the results of the work. Defining key terms is difficult, especially the term genre, but always necessary. Without a common frame of understanding, even if flawed, scholarly investigations drown in a sea of rhetorical battles.

Hardy justifies this decision by claiming that an act (or acts) of crime is an indispensable theme in many Horror films and Westerns, but that they are in fact different genres (p. 11). Yet, if horror films and Westerns are definable as genres, then why are crime films not definable? More problematic than the question of what is a crime film is the inability to at least loosely answer: What is not a crime film? How are crime films different than, or are they even different than, other genres of film? How is such a comparison even possible without operationalizing the terms, distinguishing each genre? If narratives containing themes of crime are wider than the films selected and labeled "crime films" by these investigators then surely the significance and

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fascination with stories of crime is deeper and broader than the films included in this survey. The larger issue is that one only has to give a cursory examination of all sorts of fiction to see that crime plays a prominent role in every genre of fiction; in fact, it seems to transcend genre. For instance, one can see in the Greek tragedies (i.e., Sophocles' *Oedipus* trilogy) that crime is an indispensable element of the tragic genre. As Aristotle theorizes on the nature of tragedy in *Poetics*, there is no tragedy without a crime or a crime being averted by a character's recognition of the mistake they are about to make (Murnaghan 1995).

While Hardy does not formally define the crime film genre he does informally tie it sociologically to the development of professionalized police forces. He then asserts that our growing cultural fascination with crime stories originates in this phenomenon. It is the organized, social reaction to crime that provides both the entrance into the crime film genre and the reason for its growing popularity with the public. This assertion may carry some weight because the construction of a professional police force coincides with the creation of the immensely popular investigative fictions of Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Edgar Allan Poe whose character, C. Auguste Dupin predates Holmes, while briefly acknowledged in the body of the text, gets short shrift in the creation of the crime investigation genre). Yet, operationalizing the crime story genre in this manner, while reasonable, does not seem satisfactory. This framework, in my mind, leads to the survey being over-weighted with films about the social reaction to crime. Indubitably, this is a crucial element (sub-genre?) of the crime film but only one angle of view. A reliable survey should provide a well-rounded snapshot of the crime film genre with films representing the many facets of crime (e.g., the point of view of the victims of crime, the criminal, and the society). I suspect that the picture drawn from this survey may be out of balance. Incidentally both the changing social reaction to crime and the popularity of crime fiction coincides with the advent of the motion picture. Certainly the change in representational technology must also play a role in the rise of the crime story because motion pictures present stories in action and crime for the most part is action.

With these difficulties in mind, the reader may notice films omitted that he or she would have included in the book and others that he or she may have excluded. I, for example, was surprised that a film such as Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* was not included and a film such as *The Great Muppet Caper* (!) was included. I suspect, however, that despite the difficulties noted above that the breadth of the films included in the book will in fact impress the reader.

The survey

The introduction to the survey presents some observations on the modern history of the crime story and a rough chronological sketch of the shifting themes in these stories. It contains many astute observations, along with many trivial details, to aid our understanding of the crime films. I will only comment on a few that I found particularly intriguing. The depiction of crime at the advent of the modern crime story was of crime as a piecemeal and artistic act, particularly through the characters Sherlock Holmes and Mabuse as they battled wits with criminals (p. 14). Hardy claims that the depiction of crime and the criminal undergoes a change in structure because of social influences, primarily prohibition and the increasing role of crime films, with reporters as screenwriters, being lifted from newspaper headlines. Criminals were now presented as organized and industrial especially with the rise of the gangster films in the 1920's. His

analysis of the structure of gangster films, their rise and fall and rise again in popularity is interesting and informative. Scattered observations on the influence of institutional forces that shaped the production and therefore reception of crime stories, including the role of censorship, is equally helpful to the reader and hint at the intimate relation between the cinema and culture. This is also seen in the changing position of women in the crime film, which he sees as tied to the cultural forces shifting the social roles of women in the wake of World War II (p. 16). Since crime films were primarily a male oriented domain, and for the most part still are, women were depicted as trivial to the story of crime, as mere girlfriends or molls in the gangster films of the 1920-30's. Hardy sees the shift in depicting women most notably in the rise of the Film Noir genre where women take on a more active role than being the simple accoutrements of criminals. Both as *femmes fatales* preying upon naïve and weak willed men and as the active force in rescuing or saving the suffering man, the portrayal of female characters changed. Other analyses include the influence of Sigmund Freud on the crime film (p. 17), the theme of police corruption (p. 22), and the move to character based stories (p. 23).

The main body of the text is structured in the style of an encyclopedia, from *A bout de Souffle* (Breathless) to *Zapis zbrodni* (Chronology of Crime), with the entries presenting brief synopses and commentary on films, filmmakers, writers, crime types, and film styles. The reader is presented with not only clear and concise information on the subject matter, but interspersed throughout the text are evocative, wonderful, still photos from the films. One of the best qualities of this book is that there is a true international flavor with many of the films from countries such as Japan, France, and Italy. Yet there are films omitted such as *Bicycle Thief* (1947) and *Los Olvidados* (1950) that are not only mandatory, in my view, in any survey of crime films, but also represent groundbreaking, critically acclaimed films.

The films included array from the major films, immensely popular and critically trumpeted (*The Godfather*) to the minor and obscure films (*Trancers/Future Cop*). Ranging from sophisticated to simple, the films included approach or frame their understanding of the construction of the criminal and the causes of crime in ways that run the gamut from the psychological (*Rope*) to the sociological (*Mean Streets*) to the social-psychological (*A Clockwork Orange*). There are entries that comment on the depiction and history of major fictional characters in the crime film genre such as Fu Manchu and Sherlock Holmes (impressive is the inclusion of the actors that have played the character, which humorously included Leonard Nimoy playing Sherlock Holmes). There are films represented that present the crime story in a variety of stylistic forms such as realist (*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*) and comedic (*Ruthless People*) to name a few. Aside from the major characters and films there are also entries on major writers of crime films (Joseph Wambaugh), criminals (Jack the Ripper), and sub-genres such as juvenile delinquency and gambling. There is even an entry on crime stories in pornography!

A companion to crime?

As noted earlier this book was not only enjoyable to read (and re-read!), but it prompted me to reflect upon the relation between crime stories and criminology. In particular, I was struck by the title of the book—*The BFI Companion to Crime*. The key word here is companion. How

is this book a companion to crime? Is this a mix up? Don't they mean The BFI Companion to Crime Films? *Webster's NewWorld Dictionary* defines companion as "a person who associates with or accompanies another or others; associate; comrade" (1980, p. 288). Isn't the book supposed to accompany our understanding of crime films? Or, do they literally mean that the book by leading us to significant crime films can accompany our understanding of crime?

What sort of a companion can this book be for a person trying to understand crime? How can it aid our understanding of crime? To what use could a criminologist put these crime stories? While an in-depth answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this review essay, I constructed at least four different functions of crime stories (all forms not just those exemplified in film) that could aid a criminologist[1]. While two of the functions of crime stories are probably more common and familiar to the reader, the other two are most likely not. By no means do I think that these four exhaust all possibilities and I implore the reader of this essay to try and formulate more[2].

Crime stories as pedagogical tools

The first way to use crime stories, and familiar to readers of *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, is in the classroom. In this mode of use the crime story functions as a companion to subject matter covered in other forms (data, research, theory, biography and so on). Teachers use films in the classroom for a variety of reasons. Sometimes a crime story can present difficult to understand material in a more digestible form. Or the crime story may highlight the themes or complexities of criminological research and theorizing. In other cases, the crime story could be used as a counter-point, a sounding board to the other material covered in the hopes of producing a more critical interpretation of the causes and control of crime. Whatever the rationale for their use, the function of crime stories in this form is as a cognitive tool in developing a better understanding of crime.

Crime stories as cultural documents

Another common way to use crime stories is as a source of data. In this mode of use the crime story functions as a companion to the practice of researching crime. There are two forms in which work in this vein is typically done. In the first form the crime story functions in a strict empirical sense. The assumption is that the crime story can provide the researcher with a basic understanding of how the person (or persons) who produce the crime story and those that consume the crime story view the phenomenon of crime. Investigators can try to answer questions such as how have the stories of crime changed over time, or how do the stories differ cross-culturally. One can, for example, trace out issues of gender and race/ethnicity and crime stories. Others may focus on how do these stories depict the causes of crime and the control of crime.

The second form views the production and consumption of crime stories as an ideological and political process that conforms to, is a companion to, the dominant ideology of the empirical world. More infrequently, this form of investigation fleshes out how certain crime stories may subvert the dominant ideology. In this case the crime story functions as cultural data that tells us

something about the outside of the story. For some who use this approach the crime story can inform us about the creator (or creators) and their relation to the social world. Others look at the crime story and it's reception by consumers as indicatative of how these consumers view and operate in the world and how this is or isn't aligned with the master patterns of social control.

Exploratory and explanatory fictions

The last two functions of crime stories as aids to understanding crime are somewhat off the beaten path for those of us engrained in the social scientific discipline. However, their ability to aid our understanding of crime may be significant and should not be ignored. In what follows, I will briefly sketch out the positions of two eminent literary scholars and how crime stories may be a companion to a scholarly understanding of crime. Their work is complex and this truncated version of their main ideas should not be substituted for a careful reading of their work[3]. However, both scholars share the conviction that fictional stories are a unique mode of knowledge emerging from narrative action that can aid our understanding of humans.

Wolfgang Iser: Staging the inaccessible

Why do we need fiction? Or, put in our context, why do we need crime stories? This question of the function of literary fictions is one in which the literary scholar Wolfgang Iser has relentlessly investigated during his distinguished career. Iser (see 1993; 1989) claims that since literary fictions have more or less accompanied humans from the beginning of recorded time, its presence must serve some anthropological need. This function, for Iser, is that literature allows us to actively shape the world and ourselves by bringing us in contact with something that we cannot know or experience consciously. They are modes of knowledge that allow us to come closer to what some situation might be like or how it may be approached.

Iser constructs a unique argument about the role that fiction plays in human life. Building off the work of the philosopher Nelson Goodman (e.g., *Ways of Worldmaking*), Iser claims that there can be no ontological definition of fiction. The standard hard line division between reality and fiction does not hold up to careful scrutiny. The assumption that there is a clear cut difference between the two, reality and fiction, implies there is a position beyond, external to either where we could judge; instead, Iser asserts that we can only look at the uses of fiction. In an interesting analysis, Iser demonstrates that fictions are part and parcel of reality and not just something that artists construct for our pleasure. Iser shows that fictions are present in the form of presuppositions, hypotheses, anticipations, and worldviews. In other words, fictions seem to play a vital role in the activities of human cognition and behavior. For Iser, fictions step in where knowledge leaves off. However, literary fictions differ from these other modes of fiction. A literary text reveals its fictionality; whereas non-literary fictions do not. In Iser's view this is a crucial difference. A literary fiction does not function as an explanation; rather, it operates as an exploration of the world. It is a tool to overcome the determinacy of the world. This act of revelation is what allows literary fictions to have a unique power by combining the actual and possible to stage what is unknowable by other means.

Building off the anthropology of Helmuth Plessner, Iser assumes that humans have an internal gap that arises from the inability of a person to be able to fully know what motivates and drives their actions. That is, humans are unavailable to themselves, so they seek fictions in order to explore themselves and others. Therefore, literature allows humans to experience what is otherwise inaccessible. For example, death is inaccessible, but literature can stage death, can make present what is not accessible. Even more important for Iser, is that this staging of death is boundless; there are an infinite number of alternative ways that death can be staged. This is what he calls a productive negativity and it is the most anthropologically significant feature of literature. By the potential to re-enact life in an endless variety of ways, literature can supplement, interfere with, or even reveal alternatives to the concrete historical, cultural, or psychological forces that determine us. In short, it allows us a temporary, virtual position outside of ourselves to better understand what we cannot see about ourselves.

The claim that literature stages a re-enactment of life that allows the reader to gain knowledge about things that are inaccessible to us by other modes of knowledge is a very strong epistemological claim. If literature opens up otherwise unavailable manifestations of being through the staging of fictional worlds and selves, then this literary knowledge is distinct from any other form, whether personal, or scientific. Iser believes that literature does this and does this best when the limit of our other means to gaining knowledge is met. Anthropologically, this means that literary knowledge would be equivalent to that of any other knowledge because it reveals what the other modes cannot pierce. Fictions become testing grounds for both the author and the reader in the attempt to understand something closed off by other means of knowledge. Therefore, literary fictions are attempts to give reality a new reading.

The idea that literary fiction can bring us into a relationship with that which we cannot know or experience consciously presents an interesting hypothesis. In both the foreword, explicitly, and the introduction, implicitly, of *The BFI Companion of Crime* is the belief that crime stories can provide valuable insight about ourselves and others. Perhaps, Iser's work sheds some light on our anthropological fascination with crime and stories about crime. Crime stories may allow us to see what is not directly accessible to us—the causes and consequences and experience of committing crime or the battle to combat crime. It may also allow us to see ourselves—how we are similar to or different from criminals. While Iser's work provides an abstract theoretical grounding of fiction, a crucial step would be to empirically examine the tangible impact that crime stories have on us. Rather than assuming that literary texts are transparent in meaning, one needs to examine the concrete reader's construction of the story. If in reading literary fiction a person learns about him-or-herself and others, we need to find out what it is that the person learns.

Rene Girard and mimetic desire

Whereas Iser focuses on the potential for literary stories to allow us to explore important phenomena inaccessible by other modes of inquiry, Girard claims that literature, especially great literature, can function in an explanatory mode. In this sense, literature can be a companion to the sciences and aid the scientific study of extra-textual phenomena[4]. Girard argues that only by taking both science and art as serious investigations into human relations can either field

advance. Art and science need each other. It is the interplay of the two modes of investigation that can best shed light on issues of concern.

Girard claims that literary texts are the most profound human creation. Therefore, they reveal to us something unique about ourselves. He also feels that one of the prevailing trends of literary scholarship, the movement in the field to a relativistic approach to texts where the truths of the texts are on par with each other, is not satisfactory. In his estimation, great literature (the classics) manifests an understanding of human nature and relations that is truer than in lesser works. Moreover he is dissatisfied with the idea that these great writers were not engaged in serious research. He felt that too often it is the social sciences (i.e., via Freud or Marx) that interpret art, rather than art interpreting the social sciences. This denigration of the great writers emasculates their intellectual ability and is problematic because the direction of interpretation is given a priori. As Girard demonstrates in his book on Shakespeare (1991), perhaps Shakespeare can teach us more about ourselves than we can teach Shakespeare.

Girard's groundbreaking study (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 1965) of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky led him to claim that these great authors do evince a greater understanding than lesser works. These authors, he argues, in their work demonstrate a superior understanding of human desire because they see human desire as mimetic, as imitative in nature. Girard labels fiction of this type as Revelatory. Lesser fiction, what he calls Romantic, understands human desire in a linear fashion, as simply a matter of a desiring person and his or her desire for the object. By seeing desire as mimetic, triangular, Girard is claiming that to understand desire and human motivation one must add the additional element of the other person who models the desire. The images that excite our desire are of objects that are given to us as desirable by the desire of another. Desire does not reside in the object of desire or in the individual beings desiring; rather it is a state of relations between desiring creatures. Like gravity or temperature, desire does not reside in any one object: it resides in the relationships between desiring humans

Girard assumes that humans have a predilection to imitate. He also assumes that humans have no innate way of knowing what to desire. The answer to what a person should desire is found in another person. Thus, a person will take another person, consciously or non-consciously, as a model because that person seems to possess some qualities that the imitating person does not. But in seeking to emulate the model the subject will eventually come to desire the object that the model desires. This may lead to rivalry because two, or even more, persons are converging on one and the same object with the goal of appropriating it. The end result is rivalry unless there is a process of deferral in place. Girard points out many processes of deferral and escalation of rivalry, but for our purposes they can be generically broken down into two views of the relation between subject and model. On the one hand, if one person perceives the other person as being superior to him or her then he or she will give up the object. On the other hand, if one person perceives the other person as being less than or equal to him or her conflict ensues. Viewing desire in this manner has many radical ramifications for the social sciences. The most profound implication (for the purpose of this essay, because there are many) is that if desire is mimetic then we have a unique explanation for human conflict and violence. Since each of us imitate the desires of others, we are bound to desire the same objects and this may bring us into

conflict over those objects. Girard is fond of using the phrase: "Two hands reaching for the same object are bound to clash."

The results of his study led him to take a wider, anthropological perspective and to test this mimetic hypothesis out in an examination of human rituals and myths (*Violence and the Sacred*, 1972), to the Bible (*Job: The Victim of His People*, 1985), and to other theories of human motivation (*Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 1987). The results of his investigations are unique and provocative. Most importantly is the tracing out the primary role that violence arising from mimetic desire plays in generating the social structures and institutions humans have developed over time. In each study, he builds a plausible case for the reality of the mimetic hypothesis. I leave it to the reader to tackle his work and deem how plausible Girard's theory is and the weight one may attach to it. However, the fact that his hypothesis is constructed by a close reading of classical works of fiction is salient. Perhaps, there are other insights, unavailable in any other mode of knowledge, into human relations and their world that are awaiting unraveling. So whether one picks up Girard's hypothesis and extends into other fields to test it's merits[5], or whether one reads/views closely the crime stories, great or small, to see if they offer a theoretical understanding that can aid the sciences the opportunity is there to examine the explanatory potential of crime stories. Equally pivotal is the issue of Girard's methodology where he brings into a common dialogue both art and science. What is the level of fitness between artistic and social scientific explanations of crime? Is there a resonance? Is there a disjunction? These are interesting and important questions that have to date been relatively ignored.

It has been almost a decade since the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* was founded. The general aim of the journal was to provide the academic community a scholarly record of investigations into the intersection of criminal justice and popular culture. As one of the co-founders, with Gregory Howard and Graeme Newman, it was my belief that a serious, interdisciplinary approach to understanding crime and culture could forge a stronger, mutually beneficial, bond between the humanities and the social sciences. Each of the four functions of crime stories outlined above offer a space where the humanities and the sciences can fruitfully meet and potentially extend our understanding of crime. *The BFI Companion to Crime* is a rewarding book for those that want to seriously think about crime and crimes stories, science and art.

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[1] The four functions of fiction as a tool to understanding presented here is unidirectional. I am primarily focusing in this paper on the role that extant crime stories can aid an understanding of empirical crime. That is, the role art could play in science. The converse, where the social sciences shape art is a relatively undeveloped area of interest and could be a fifth function. To that end I am working on an article, "Visual Criminology" that explores how the social sciences could use narrative fiction to model their theories or research as a means for exploring the assumptions, concepts, and causal processes identified as relevant.

[2] A mea culpa: In no way do I discuss or address any flaws or weaknesses in the way that these crime stories could be utilized by scholars attempting to gain an understanding of crime. Nor do I assert any hierarchy of value to these approaches. While these issues are important they are beyond the scope of this essay.

[3] See the special issue devoted to Wolfgang Iser (*New Literary History*, 2000, 31:1) for an introduction to his work. Rene Girard's *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1987) is the best starting point for understanding his approach.

[4] For an interesting example of this approach see Scott Sprenger, "Balzac as Anthropologist," *Anthropoetics* 6, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2000) [www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0601/Balzac.html].

[5] I am currently working on this angle in "Mimetic Desire and Violence: A Theoretical Elaboration of Social Learning Theory," presented at the Annual meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Boston, MA, April 2003.