A Descriptive Analysis of Police Corruption in Film

By

Joseph L. Gustafson

Northeastern University

For the past fifty years, police corruption films have granted the public an intimate look into a very low-visibility and mystifying phenomenon, shaping the way people think about the police and their deviant behavior. In this article, I content analyze a chronological sample of twelve American corrupt cop films and develop a typology for classifying them into a unique category. I first define corrupt cop films as movies where the main problem that needs to be solved by the protagonist is pervasive police corruption and then differentiate between corrupt cop films and the vigilante cop films with which they are often confused. I next identify some of the key characteristics of police corruption movies and their major themes of moral battles, due process vs. crime control, paranoia, and redemption. Thereafter, I discuss the construction of the corrupt cop film hero, explaining why he is as an outsider on the inside and how Hollywood has managed to make him likable, even as a rat. Finally, I outline a practical methodology for analyzing crime films and discuss the value of descriptive analyses of crime films from a social science perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Police corruption films have been almost entirely overlooked as a genre by academics. While the major works on crime films (Clarens, 1997; Leitch, 2002; Rafter, 2006) devote at least one chapter to the cop film, corrupt cop films rarely receive much more than a few sentences or short paragraphs of attention – a neglect especially striking when one thinks of the coverage action cop films have enjoyed (Brown, 1993; King, 1999; Gates, 2004). Retailers and online movie databases, too, fail to recognize corrupt cop films as a unique and significant category. For example, a search for corrupt cop films on the popular Internet Movie Database turns up a mishmash of titles including *Natural Born Killers (1994)*, *The Hurricane (1999)*, and *Batman Begins (2005)*. Several corrupt cop titles appear as well, but some of the most important, such as the 1973 classic *Serpico*, are conspicuously (and inexplicably) absent. The lack of attention cannot be explained by lack of material, for Hollywood has been producing films about police crime for over fifty years now; many have been box office hits, and some have even been acknowledged with Academy Awards.

Corrupt cop films are best defined as a type of cop film in which the main problem that needs to be solved by the protagonist is pervasive police corruption within his (as yet, rarely her) department.[1] They present cops, ex-cops, or feds as both heroes and antagonists. The hero is a

solitary figure who personifies the ideals of police work.[2] He accomplishes his goals lawfully; if and when the rules must be bent, he will tend to break only procedural rules, drawing the line at active violation of the criminal law.

In his rectitude, the corrupt cop film hero differs appreciably from the protagonists of vigilante cop films, although the two are often confused. A vigilante cop film hero disregards the procedural safeguards of the law and circumvents the criminal justice system in order to catch or otherwise incapacitate street criminals, often by employing violence, whereas the corrupt cop film hero pursues criminal cops.[3] The basic distinction lies in the identity of the antagonists: cops battle criminals in a vigilante cop film, whereas cops battle other cops in a corrupt cop film. Both vigilante and corrupt cop film heroes fight the "bad guys," of course, and both may resort to similar tactics,[4] but in a corrupt cop film the traditional good guys (cops) become the bad guys with whom the hero must contend.

The aim of this study is to clearly define the corrupt cop film through an examination of its characteristics, themes, and heroes. A second aim is to work toward establishing a more scientific, methodologically rigorous way to categorize and study types of crime films. What makes this research unique (and takes it a step beyond the typical film studies paper) is its application of some basic social science research methods to the study of a specific category of crime film.

METHODOLOGY

To take an overview of police corruption films, I began by searching academic databases (e.g., Criminal Justice Abstracts, Expanded Academic ASAP Plus, Google Scholar) for any relevant literature on them, only to find that nothing substantive had yet been written. I then conducted a series of topic searches to establish a universe of cases, primarily through the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) search engine. I also explored other online film listings, including lists of films for rent and for sale,[5] and gathered additional titles from books on crime films (especially Parish, 1990 and Rafter, 2006) and through recommendations by friends and colleagues. Film descriptions gathered from these sources were read to determine which movies would potentially fit into the category of police corruption films.

This process enabled me to identify approximately forty American dramas about police corruption (see Appendix for a complete listing).[6] From this universe, I selected twelve for close analysis, following two selection principles: 1) fame (I wanted to discuss films with which readers would most likely be familiar);[7] and 2) date of release (I wanted to be able to follow the development of corrupt cop films over time). The final sample includes: *The Big Heat (1953)*, *Magnum Force (1973)*, *Serpico (1973)*, *Prince of the City (1981)*, *Witness (1985)*, *Internal Affairs (1990)*, *Cop Land (1997)*, *L.A. Confidential (1997)*, *The Negotiator (1998)*, *Training Day (2001)*, *Dark Blue (2002)*, and *Insomnia (2002)*. *Insomnia* provides a particularly interesting example, casting Hilary Swank as Ellie Burr, the only female hero in the genre so far, and Al Pacino – one of the genre's earlier heroes in *Serpico* – as corrupt detective Will Dormer.

After selecting my sample, I moved on to my analysis, viewing the films two to three times each. While viewing, I took careful notes, paying attention to plot structures, character

construction (especially for heroes and villains), major themes, and interactions between relevant characters. After this phase was complete, and all films had been thoroughly content analyzed, I reviewed my notes to determine whether or not any significant patterns existed. Observations were then used to define police corruption films, their narrative patterns, themes, and heroes. I backed up my arguments with specific examples from the films in my sample and made use of films from outside of the sample to help clarify my definitions.

In the sections that follow, I will look at the characteristics of corrupt cop films and the construction of their heroes. I first cover typical narrative patterns and other contextual features before discussing the key themes of morality, due process vs. crime control, paranoia, and redemption. I then trace the development of corrupt cop film protagonists and reflect on how Hollywood has managed to transform these figures, who are after all rats and stool-pigeons, into likable heroes. In conclusion, I outline a sociological methodology for analyzing crime films and discuss the value of descriptive analyses of crime films from a social science perspective.

Narrative, Context, and Key Themes in Corrupt Cop Films

A. Typical Narrative Patterns

The typical corrupt cop film presents an honest or repentant cop as its protagonist. He is confronted with individual-level, small group, or systemic corruption within his department and offered an opportunity by his crooked peers to share in the spoils. Participation in this kind of behavior is framed as normal, acceptable – sometimes even as a necessary part of the job. This initial experience with corruption is the hero's first test. Without much pause, he says "thanks but no thanks" and makes clear his intentions to stay clean. It is at this point that he separates himself both physically and socially from his corrupt counterparts and starts formulating a plan to put a stop to their illicit activities. Meanwhile, the corrupt cops recognize the threat that the hero represents and start plotting against him to protect their rackets.

A corrupt cop film hero ultimately emerges victorious, but not before weathering exhausting moral struggles with himself and his countless enemies. He and his loved ones (partners, friends, family members) are constantly in grave danger. Almost inevitably, one of these people will come to harm, thus crushing the hero's already weakened morale. These struggles represent another test of his mettle. Will one man have the strength to achieve his noble goals in the face of such overwhelming adversity? The answer is a resounding "yes" although sometimes we are not quite sure until the very end that the hero will succeed. What results by the film's conclusion is a restoration of integrity to the corrupt unit, precinct, or department, or sometimes the entire policing profession. Under no circumstances will any corrupt cops, no matter how high or low on the food chain, escape the hand of justice. The lone honest cop is transformed into a dynamic hero during his ordeal, and it is understood that his life will never again be the same. In a grander sense, we also realize that good has won out over evil, that the rule of law will prevail, and that not only the police but indeed the entire criminal justice system can be trusted once again to protect the public – all thanks to the sacrifices of this one good cop.

The hallmark scene of the corrupt cop film depicts the main character reflecting on the reasons he became a cop or the expectations he had when he first came on the job. He will often

share a story about looking up to the police as a young man and being inspired to pursue the same calling. The scene usually takes place while he is in the thick of the central corruption investigation and is beginning to doubt that his efforts will prove fruitful. The honest cop talks of the noble goals he once had for himself, or the family legacy that he had hoped to carry out – all of the good that he wanted to accomplish. It is a chance for him to reinforce his own morality and find the inner strength he needs to carry on. More broadly, it is the moment when he makes explicit the characteristics that epitomize the ideal police officer: honest and principled, with a genuine desire to protect and serve. The corrupt cops are measured against this ideal, a comparison that accentuates their immorality.

B. The Context of Corruption
     Like other police films, corrupt cop films take place almost exclusively in urban settings. In fact, it is unusual to find one that is not linked to either New York or Los Angeles. *Serpico*, *Prince of the City* and *Cop Land* are all set in and around New York City and *Internal Affairs*, *L.A. Confidential*, *Training Day*, *Dark Blue* and *Insomnia* feature LAPD cops. Keeping with this trend, *Magnum Force*, *Witness*, and *The Negotiator* are set in the San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Chicago areas, respectively. *The Big Heat*'s setting is nonspecific, but its scenes too have a metropolitan feel. Big cities provide the most logical backdrop for corrupt cop films since corruption, in real life and in fiction, is associated with large police departments, machine politics, and organized crime – phenomena found mainly in an urban environment.

     Through their collusion, top police administrators and prominent local politicians facilitate corruption schemes. In *The Big Heat*, the police commissioner and a handful of influential city officials play significant roles in the central corruption scandal. Similarly, in *Serpico* and *Prince of the City* the corruption runs all the way up the department ranks and into the office of the mayor. Another example appears in *Training Day*, where rogue cop Alonzo Harris pays cash for arrest warrants from a syndicate of crooked police officials and district attorneys known as the "wise men." The unsuspecting hero is often shocked to learn that his trusted superiors are "in on it" too; *Magnum Force*'s Harry Callahan, *Witness*'s John Book, *The Negotiator*'s Danny Roman, and *Dark Blue*'s Eldon Perry become targets themselves after naïvely confiding their suspicions to a commanding officer.

     The participation of these bureaucrats sets up a David-and-Goliath battle between a single honest cop and a corrupt network of the most powerful people in town. Their involvement also underscores the sense that corruption is pervasive and irremediable, since these higher-ups control the channels of redress. This stacks the odds against the honest cop, making his eventual success seem all the more impossible and, at the film's conclusion, all the more extraordinary.

     The involvement of dangerous underworld thugs in corruption plots further highlights the seemingly impossible nature of the honest cop's quest for justice. In addition to powerful bureaucrats, he must also square off against an entire street gang or organized crime family. *The Big Heat* mob boss Mike Lagana runs the city and its police department; in *Serpico*, officers receive bribes to let local gangsters run numbers without harassment; *Internal Affairs* bad guy Dennis Peck conspires with a local hustler who pays him to turn a blind eye to his illicit business and make contract hits; and *Training Day*'s Alonzo Harris networks with Los Angeles gang members before he is killed by the Russian mafia. Since criminal groups share a symbiotic

relationship with the police, it is in their best interest to prevent corruption from being exposed. The lone cop thus faces a double threat when he decides to stand up for what is right.

Despite the persistence of the characteristics outlined above – urban setting, top-brass collusion, and organized criminal involvement – the context of corruption has certainly changed over time, with a trend toward a more compartmentalized model of police corruption. Early films in the genre depicted large-scale corruption implicating the entire force. The 1950s-era police departments in *The Big Heat* and *L.A. Confidential* are thoroughly corrupt, as are the 1970s departments in *Serpico* and *Prince of the City*. Since then, corrupt cop films have tended to focus on smaller pockets of officers – usually members of specialized units – and in some cases, on just one or two especially bad apples who threaten to spoil the reputation of the whole barrel. The handful of dirty cops in *Witness* and *Training Day* work in undercover narcotics; *The Negotiator*'s main corruption scheme involves SWAT team members; in *Dark Blue*, the elite Special Investigations Squad breaks the law; and Will Dormer, *Insomnia*'s esteemed homicide detective, finds himself alone on the other side of a murder investigation. In these recent films, certain small groups of cops arrogantly consider themselves superior to the average beat cop, and as such, above the law. Moreover, the corrupt cops who work in these specialized units receive very little direct supervision, if any. Together, these attitudes and circumstances create an environment in which corruption can flourish.

C. Themes of Corrupt Cop Films

One typical theme concerns the inescapable moral dilemmas of police work. Police officers are always subject to unannounced tests of their moral fortitude, but these tests take center stage in corrupt cop films. A conflict emerges between the values of the honest cop and the impenetrable blue code of loyalty that he and his fellow officers are expected to honor. Without the tight cohesion of police units and their unwritten code of silence, corruption would cease to exist. Many protagonists wrestle with this conflict between conscience and loyalty, wanting to do what is right but despising the idea of turning rat – or worse, ratting out a close friend.

Heroes must weigh the pros and cons of breaking the code. If they talk, they will become rats, losing respect for themselves and the respect of those around them. At the same time, their actions may incriminate close friends (as in *Prince of the City*, *Internal Affairs*, and *Cop Land*) or even a respected mentor (as in *Insomnia*). Of course, there is always the very real risk that heroes will endanger themselves or loved ones or that any testimony will turn out to be for naught because the corruption runs so deep. However, if they do not talk, they will be no better than their corrupt counterparts and have a hard time looking in the mirror. This internal struggle characterizes what could be termed a deliberation phase that some corrupt cop film heroes endure as they decide to put their values ahead of those of their contaminated departments.

Corrupt cop films pivot on a clash between the due process and crime control models of justice. In Herbert Packer's (1964) famous distinction, the due process model emphasizes individual rights to fair procedures whereas the crime control model calls for results and getting criminals off the streets. Sometimes implied, sometimes explicit, this clash enters into the discourse of police corruption films because heroes and villains fall on extreme opposite sides of the issue.

The bad guys in police corruption films fit with the crime control model because they aim at catching criminals and protecting public safety, irrespective of the costs in terms of individual rights.[8] The fanatical Lieutenant Briggs of *Magnum Force* drives this point home during an ideological bout with hero Harry Callahan: "Anyone who threatens the security of the people will be executed…evil for evil, Harry…retribution!" Such villains view due process as a sluggish, incompetent, and ineffective series of obstacles to real crime control. They criticize the liberal "protections" of the legal system and see the lawmakers, prosecutors, and other suits who defend these ideals as bungling adversaries who cannot possibly understand real police work, or what it takes to keep the streets safe. This ideological stance rationalizes police wrongdoing: if the law handcuffs the police, then the police have no choice but to break the rules to do their job. Consequently, some less principled cops find it perfectly acceptable to rough up a suspect, plant, fabricate, or otherwise tamper with evidence, or even kill in cold blood to put criminals away and protect deserving, law-abiding citizens. When cops lack respect for and doubt the efficacy of formal justice, they are unlikely to feel bound by it, especially if they are well-intentioned and believe the ends justify the means.

On the other hand, corrupt cop films associate their good guys with the due process model. Because they are on the side of law and order, heroes act as the voice of reason, pointing out the pitfalls of overzealous, ideologically-driven law enforcement and the benefits of upholding formal legal principles, despite their inherent flaws. *Magnum Force*'s Harry Callahan asks Lieutenant Briggs "When police start becoming their own executioners, where's it gonna' end?" He then sneers "I hate the God damn system, but until someone comes along and makes some changes that make sense, I'll stick with it." The system may not be perfect, but a world of lawlessness is not the solution either.

A third theme, one that pervades corrupt cop films, is that of paranoia, a sense of impending disaster that affects not only the hero but also his corrupt counterparts. Throughout his quest to stamp out corruption, an honest cop never truly knows whom to trust or approach for help, particularly if a close friend betrays his confidence.[9] He is always looking over his shoulder, with veiled threats from fellow boys in blue keeping him perpetually on edge. *Serpico*'s hero is warned that there are ways of taking care of rats like him: "They can send you in first enough times until finally one day you're gonna walk in the wrong door."[10] Protecting family members or other dependents can also turn into a paranoid obsession for the hero.

As the hero braces himself against an attack, the corrupt cops also grow paranoid and increasingly desperate upon learning that investigations into their illegal activities may be underway. With their cloak of invincibility compromised, they respond by intensifying their threats in a last-ditch effort to keep the hero quiet and preserve their interests.[11] That these corrupt cops want to "take care of" the hero demonstrates their paranoia, for while they are threatening, the hero clearly threatens them. The pressure continues to build, testing resolves on both sides, until the climactic moment when it is clear that the jig is up.

Paranoia is a fitting theme for corrupt cop films because they are set in an atmosphere of constant uncertainty: trust is repeatedly betrayed, adversaries can retaliate anywhere at any time, and traditional notions of good and bad are reversed as cops become the bad guys. In this

situation of moral ambiguity, irrational suspicions begin to seem more rational. Such paranoia isolates the hero, leaving him frightened, vulnerable, and alone. His fears create reluctance to seek help from others and, as a result, he must usually shoulder a tremendous amount of responsibility single-handedly.

Corrupt cop films are also permeated by the theme of redemption through personal sacrifice. In almost all corrupt cop films, an initially suspect character (not necessarily the hero) eventually shows redeeming qualities by helping to dismantle the central corruption plot. This character will either be a reformed corrupt cop or a run-of-the-mill street criminal. *Prince of the City*'s Danny Ciello, *L.A. Confidential*'s Bud White, and *Dark Blue*'s Eldon Perry are corrupt cops turned heroes. *Cop Land*'s Officer Gary Figgis and *Insomnia*'s Will Dormer are corrupt cops redeemed when they save the lives of heroes Freddy Heflin and Ellie Burr, respectively. Although each of these cops has his own sordid past, he is repentant and, having realized the error of his ways, feels compelled to do the right thing. Whether they stand to lose their freedom or their lives, these cops sacrifice themselves to make up for their grave mistakes.

Street criminals too can prove themselves worthy of redemption in a corrupt cop film: *Big Heat* moll Debby Marsh helps hero David Bannion, sacrificing her own life in the process; *Internal Affairs'* Raymond Avilla and *Training Day*'s Jake Hoyt both get help from local inner-city gang members fed up with corrupt cops and their harassment; and petty thief Rudy Timmons helps hero Danny Roman in *The Negotiator*. In these films, criminals play some part in the heroes' ultimate success. Here we see yet another instance of a world where traditional notions of good and bad are reversed as the bad guys now become good guys. These role reversals are unlikely to fit into existing schemas and may create the impression that the world is spiraling out of control. We just don't know what to expect. The stage is set for a hero to emerge and restore order in his quest for the truth.

Character Construction in Corrupt Cop Films

The corrupt cop film hero is a literal or figurative outsider. David Bannion becomes an outsider in *The Big Heat* once he turns in his badge and resigns from the force. *Magnum Force*'s "Dirty" Harry Callahan represents a traditional hard loner who sticks out because he dresses in civilian clothes, displays a distinctively sarcastic personality, and earns a reputation within the department for dispensing his own unique brand of justice. Harry's crime-fighting contemporary Frank Serpico differentiates himself from his fellow officers right from the start: he jokes around a lot; grows his hair long with a full beard; wears outlandish disguises for undercover details; takes ballet lessons and listens to opera; and perhaps most importantly, refuses to take money on the job. *Prince of the City*'s Danny Ciello is presented initially as an insider, but, as a bad cop turned good, he quickly separates himself from his corrupt partners by breaking the blue wall of silence and joining forces with other outsiders (here, federal prosecutors). Freddy Heflin is an outsider in *Cop Land* because he is not a member of the NYPD but instead a small-town sheriff. This makes him a geographic outsider as well, as he works and resides in a suburb. *L.A. Confidential*'s Ed Exley is small in stature and wears nerdy glasses. He is not particularly tough and has a hard time getting respect from the other cops who call him "politician" and "college boy." *Training Day*'s Jake Hoyt is an outsider, too: because he is the newest member of an undercover narcotics unit, he has not yet been initiated into the close-knit group of corrupt cops.

In some corrupt cop films, heroes are outsiders due to their membership in some marginal group. *Insomnia*'s Ellie Burr, the only female cop in an otherwise all-male department, is assigned to the least dangerous cases by her paternalistic superiors. The heroes of *Internal Affairs*, *The Negotiator*, and *Dark Blue* belong to racial or ethnic minorities: Raymond Avilla is a Hispanic internal affairs cop, whose colleagues mispronounce his last name and drop stereotypical comments; hostage negotiator Danny Roman is the lone African-American main character; and Chief Arthur Holland is the only high-ranking Black member of an openly racist LAPD. Lastly, *Witness*'s John Book moves from the city of Philadelphia to the Amish community, where he participates in the unique religion and its lifestyle, dressing in traditional Amish clothing and helping to raise a barn.

True to the outsider hero role,[12] corrupt cop film heroes are principled and choose to act because it is the right thing to do. They are compelled by the strength of their character to take action, even if it means risking their jobs, relationships, and lives. The hero acts out of personal conviction, not for recognition or personal gain. He has no ulterior motives, as the only profit he wants to earn is peace of mind. All corrupt cop heroes exhibit the outsider hero quality of bravery through their willingness to stand alone against ostensibly insurmountable obstacles. To freely participate in such an uneven fight, these films show, takes a lot of guts. Integrity, however, is the attribute that most sets the corrupt cop film hero apart from the heroes of other types of cop films. These pure cops know their values are sound, and it is this confidence that allows them to do what their less ethical colleagues could not – break the cycle of corruption. This steadfast refusal to break the law while on the job, grounded in an internal moral code, demonstrates an unusually high level of integrity in a context where honesty is the exception and corruption is the rule.

While the corrupt cop film hero is rugged, he also has a softer side. Unafraid of showing his feelings (or even shedding tears), this tough cop can be charming, gentle, and protective, especially when interacting with women and children: David Bannion of *The Big Heat*, a dedicated family man, tucks in his young daughter and sings her lullabies at night; John Book surprises his youthful charge Samuel Lapp with new toys in *Witness* and then shares a silly dance with the boy's mother; even the weathered Harry Callahan is warm, friendly, and upbeat around his partner's wife and children. To counter any appearance of weakness or vulnerability, corrupt cop film heroes will take measures to reestablish their toughness and masculinity. Bannion goes punch for punch with hardened thug Vince Stone; Book savagely beats an obnoxious tourist who disrespects his new Amish friends; and Callahan single-handedly kills off all four motorcycle cops and the sinister Lieutenant Briggs in a dramatic final fight. Just because the hero is lauded for his emotional qualities does not mean that he cannot hold his own; he remains the time-honored tough guy cop hero.

The corrupt cop film hero is an outsider, but as a sworn officer himself, he is also an insider. This dual status means that, while he may be a more principled breed of cop, he is still entrenched in police culture, with an inside track to privileged information. The hero is the only one capable of making a real difference because, thanks to his intimate knowledge of the force and (initially) good rapport with fellow cops, he can identify the bad guys and secretly gather evidence against them. Police corruption schemes can never be penetrated by mere outsiders, so prosecutors and internal affairs (outsiders) must rely on the hero (the outsider on the inside) for

assistance with their investigations. Outsiders do not have the all-access pass that outsiders on the inside do, given their inability to crack the blue code and infiltrate cohesive groups of corrupt cops. Corrupt cop film heroes can succeed in the midst of such great adversity because their twofold construction combines the qualities of an outsider with the first-hand knowledge and connections of an insider.

The outsider-on-the-inside hero of corrupt cop films is a spiritual savior or Christ figure.[13] He emerges as the lone redeemer, as if he has been called to some sacred duty by a divine power. The hero is the only one righteous enough to defeat the evils of police corruption and readily accepts his fate, well aware that he will suffer as a result of an unwavering devotion to his beliefs. He is forced to endure long trials and tribulations, growing more and more isolated while essentially suffering for the sins of others. Nevertheless, his passionate faith in the principles of law and justice allows him to trudge on. The cross he bears is the label of "rat" or "betrayer." He ultimately sacrifices himself through a symbolic death, as his familiar life comes to an end.[14] Frank Serpico, for example, leaves his job, loses his closest friends, and moves to Switzerland after he decides to rat. With his old life finished and a new life begun, the old protagonist has died, replaced by a new, more heroic version of himself. It is this death that cleanses the corrupt police department of its sins and allows for its triumphant resurrection as an honest institution.

Filmmakers face an interesting challenge when constructing a corrupt cop film hero: making a rat heroic.[15] Rats and informants have rarely been portrayed as heroes. So how have directors addressed this inconsistency? Hollywood has come up with a creative solution to the problem of the rat as hero by differentiating between voluntary and involuntary talkers. A cop is only a rat if he talks because he has been caught in a criminal act and testifies to reduce his punishment; in contrast, a cop who freely offers up information is not a rat precisely because he does so by his own accord. As *Prince of the City*'s hero Danny Ciello explains in his defense, "A rat is when they catch you and make you inform; nobody caught me, this is my setup, my action." Involuntary or self-serving rats include Van Stretch (William Baldwin) in *Internal Affairs* and Will Dormer's partner Hap Eckhart in *Insomnia*. Both bow to pressure from internal affairs to protect themselves (e.g., get a reduced sentence), making them rats, as compared with the typical hero, who always talks voluntarily. Every hero in my sample willingly chose to rat; none were forced to talk or benefited as a result. This element of self-determination helps make the corrupt cop film hero believable.

In conclusion, the corrupt cop film hero is quite complex. He is an outsider hero on the inside of the force. Brave, self-sacrificing, and full of pride, his superpowers are integrity and perseverance. While he does have a softer side, he is still just as tough (if not tougher) than the average cop. A modern savior and champion of law and justice, the hero is admirable even when bending the rules or playing the despicable role of rat. The corrupt cop film can manage the difficult feat of making an official hero appealing because its protagonist, on account of his differentness, is himself a bit of an outlaw (Rafter, 2006). His complexity keeps him interesting and likable, even as a good guy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Grant (1986: xi) describes genre movies as "those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations." In this article, I show that police corruption films meet this definition. Across my diverse sample of films produced over more than a half-century, consistencies in narrative, themes, and hero construction emerge that clearly distinguish the corrupt cop film from other categories. Police corruption movies are thus quite unmistakably a unique and significant category – a genre, in and of themselves, albeit one that has not previously been recognized.

While the primary goal of this research was to examine police corruption films, a secondary goal was to provide a practical methodology that might be used to categorize other crime films for sociological analysis. My methodology involved taking ten steps:

1) Identifying a group of films about a given social phenomenon which might form a category;
2) Searching for literature on the topic;
3) Searching databases, books, to establish a universe of films;
4) Reading film descriptions to identify those films which will potentially fit within the category;
5) Setting manageable parameters (e.g., American, dramas, famous, no straight to video) and selecting a sample;
6) Observing each film two to three times, taking notes on plot structures, character construction, major themes, and interactions between relevant characters;
7) Reviewing notes to ascertain patterns, in the grounded theory tradition (Glaser & Straus, 1967);
8) Using observations to clearly define the film type, its narrative patterns, themes, and heroes;
9) Illustrating patterns with specific examples from the sample;
10) Using films outside of the sample to test hypotheses and clarify definitions.

Once a category of films portraying a particular social phenomenon is isolated and described, it can then be analyzed in greater depth. Using the example presented here of police corruption films, future researchers can test my hypotheses to support or dispute my patterns or compare the films to police realities or established sociological theory.[16] They can perform cultural analyses to determine the effect of how police are portrayed on real-life perceptions of them (the social functions of these films). Researchers might also compare how films portray police with how other media portray them (books, television, and news sources) or establish and compare additional categories of cop films. Together, these efforts may eventually help social scientists develop and test a theory of police corruption in film.

Film, as one element of popular culture, plays a crucial role in criminology. For many, it is through film that ideas about crime, criminality, and agents of social control are transmitted. The difference between entertainment and reality is not so clear anymore (e.g., Sherwin, 2002), which makes it all the more important for social scientists to study the intersection of criminal justice and popular culture, and to study it in a methodologically rigorous way. This article provides a start toward this end.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Joseph Gustafson is a third year doctoral student and a member of the inaugural Ph.D. cohort at Northeastern University's College of Criminal Justice in Boston, Massachusetts. In addition to police films, his research interests include diversity in the police workforce and theories of police deviance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Correspondence concerning this article can be sent electronically to j.gustafson@neu.edu.

---

[1]Not all films that depict corrupt cops are corrupt cop films. For example, the police corruption in *The Untouchables (1987)* is almost in the background. Hero Eliot Ness is called upon to investigate organized crime in Chicago once it is learned that the entire police department is corrupt and taking bribes from local gangsters. Even though police corruption is a theme here, Ness's ultimate goal is to catch Al Capone; he is not necessarily concerned with rooting out corrupt cops. Therefore, this film is not a corrupt cop film, according to my definition, because defeating corruption is not the main goal of Ness and his men.

[2]Although the hero of corrupt cop films is invariably isolated, morally and psychologically, he can have helpers. These tend to be workplace partners who are also close and trustworthy friends, but help may come from other criminal justice system figures, private citizens, or common criminals.

[3]The differences between corrupt-cop and vigilante-cop film heroes are vividly exemplified by the first two films in the "Dirty Harry" series. In *Dirty Harry (1971)*, Harry Callahan is a vigilante cop, side-stepping the law and using violence to carry out his own brand of justice against the Scorpio killer and a handful of low-level street thugs. He uses vigilante tactics to get the traditional bad guys. Conversely, when Harry hits the streets again in *Magnum Force (1973)*, he is a corrupt cop film hero because it is fellow cops that he is after. He faces off against a unit of murderous (extreme vigilante) motorcycle cops who have been executing local criminals. The first film is a vigilante cop film because Harry battles criminals; the second is a corrupt cop film because Harry battles other cops.

[4]A hero may use vigilante tactics to wipe out corruption in a corrupt cop film, but this vigilantism has to be directed toward the goal of bringing down other cops. With that said, vigilantism is generally inconsistent with the qualities of a corrupt cop film hero and any vigilante activity will typically involve only a minor bending of the rules, rather than a blatant disregard for them.

---

[5]In addition to the Internet Movie Database, I also searched catalogs of films available for rent at the top two video store chains in the U.S. (Blockbuster and Hollywood Video) and for sale at major DVD and VHS retailers like Amazon.com and Best Buy. My searches incorporated terms like "corrupt cops," "police corruption," and other relevant variations. The plot summaries of any resulting titles were scanned to determine their appropriateness.

[6]To keep my sample manageable, I had to place two limitations on its parameters. First, foreign corrupt cop films were excluded from this analysis. Nonetheless, it is important to note that about 30 foreign corrupt cop films have been made worldwide in countries like Australia, France, India, Japan, Spain and Venezuela. These movies (and this topic) are clearly popular outside of the United States as well. Second, my analysis is limited to well-known cop dramas. I excluded comedy/action/buddy (*Lethal Weapon 3*, *Exit Wounds*, *Walking Tall*), science-fiction (*Robocop*, *Minority Report*), and straight-to-video corrupt cop releases.

[7]The fame of a film can be measured quantitatively through box office and rental figures, available for most films through the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

[8]Some corrupt cops take the crime control model to the extreme by perpetrating acts of vigilante street justice. For this reason, the term "street justice" is synonymous with the crime control model in these movies.

[9]The heroes in *Magnum Force*, *Witness*, *Cop Land*, *The Negotiator*, and *Dark Blue* are betrayed by life-long friends (who also happen to be their superiors on the force) after confiding in them about suspected corruption plots. Moreover, viewers often do not know who is good or bad throughout the better part of corrupt cop films. Many of these movies have a specific "a-ha!" moment when we are surprised to learn that someone is corrupt, usually someone we believed trustworthy up until that point.

[10]The threats of other cops are even scarier than those from the most hardened criminals because cops can easily cover their tracks and make anything look like official business, especially when there is a network of corruption firmly in place.

[11]The corrupt cops always know that someone has ratted them out because they have eyes and ears all over the city (thus someone is always watching, listening, or tailing the hero). At the same time, they are often surprised to learn that they are not as untouchable as originally thought. The protagonist and internal affairs may be watching their every move, too. This suggestion of omnipresent surveillance contributes significantly to the atmosphere of paranoia.

[12]Corrupt cop film heroes may be referred to as outsider heroes, a term that emphasizes their differentness without implying illegality (Rafter, 2006).

[13]Religious imagery is popular in corrupt cop films: David Bannion references the Bible; Serpico has been called the "hippie saint" (Parish, 1990); *Magnum Force, Internal Affairs, Cop Land,* and *The Negotiator* depict police funeral ceremonies; Detective Harris prominently displays a large gold

crucifix on his necklace throughout *Training Day*. This imagery serves to suggest that everyone must eventually face their judgment day, including criminal cops who believe that they are above the law. The law, like the watchful eye of God, is inescapable. These images also serve to elevate the hero to sainthood.

[14]This theme of sacrifice is not always limited to a hero. An innocent person almost always dies in connection with the hero's plight: Bannion's wife is mistakenly killed in *The Big Heat* and partners are killed or seriously hurt in *Magnum Force, Prince of the City, Witness, Internal Affairs, Cop Land, L.A. Confidential* and *Dark Blue*.

[15]The theme of ratting is explored throughout corrupt cop films and extends beyond the cop characters: in *Internal Affairs*, villain Dennis Peck is ratted out by one of his many ex-wives; in *L.A. Confidential* a street hood approached for questioning fears that if he talks he'll have to wear a "snitch jacket" on the street once his peers find out; and in *The Negotiator*, Danny Roman's hostage Rudy Timmons (a "rat for the rat squad") is an infamous lowlife snitch who works with Internal Affairs. Later in this film, a second hostage rats out Roman by telling cops his whereabouts during an interrogation.

[16]Incidentally, many of the corrupt cop films I studied are loosely based on or set in the midst of actual corruption scandals: *The Big Heat* debuted during a period of unprecedented interest in organized crime sparked by the Kefauver hearings of the early 1950s (Parish, 1990; Clarens, 1997); *Serpico* and *Prince of the City* are rooted in true stories about real cops (Frank Serpico and Robert Leuci) involved in the Knapp Commission corruption investigations of the late 1960s; *The Negotiator* is based on a mid-1980s St. Louis police pension fund scandal; *Training Day*'s plot mirrors events surrounding the LAPD Rampart scandal in 1998; and *Dark Blue* is set during the Rodney King scandal in the early 1990s.

At the same time, much of what we see in corrupt cop films is supported by sociological theories of police deviance. Scholars have linked police corruption to factors such as crooked police leadership and politicians, organized crime, and policing of public morals offenses for decades. Many police corruption films even delve into deeper issues like the role of the police organization itself in fostering corruption, including critiques of the police subculture and the sometimes negative effects of the police beauracracy (for some examples, see Sherman, 1974; Goldstein, 1975; Kappeler, Sluder, & Alpert 1998; Ivkovic, 2005).

APPENDIX

Universe of potential corrupt cop films:
(* = film selected for final sample)

The Racket (1951)
The Big Heat (1953)*
The Detective (1968)
Across 110th Street (1972)
Magnum Force (1973)*

Serpico (1973)*
McQ (1974)
The Super Cops (1974)
Prince of the City (1981)*
To Live and Die in L.A. (1985)
Witness (1985)*
The Big Easy (1987)
Private Eye (1987)
The Untouchables (1987)
Shakedown (1988)
Renegades (1989)
Internal Affairs (1990)*
Q and A (1990)
Bad Lieutenant (1992)
The Custodian (1993)
Romeo is Bleeding (1993)
Flashfire (1994)
The Glass Shield (1994)
Gang in Blue (1996)
Last Man Standing (1996)
Cop Land (1997)*
Night Falls on Manhattan (1997)
Gang Related (1997)
L.A. Confidential (1997)*
Renegade Force (1998)
The Negotiator (1998)*
Pig (2001)
Training Day (2001)*
Dark Blue (2002)*
Insomnia (2002)*
Narc (2002)
Assault on Precinct 13 (2005)

REFERENCES

Brown, J.A. (1993). "Bullets, buddies, and bad guys: The 'action-cop' genre". *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 21, 79-87.

Clarens, C. (1997). *Crime Movies: An Illustrated History of the Gangster Film Genre from D.W. Griffith to Pulp Fiction*. New York: Da Capo.

Gates, P. (2004). *Cop Action Films*. Retrieved December 13, 2005 from http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/80sCopFilms.html

Glaser, B.G. & Straus, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Goldstein, H. (1975). *Police Corruption: A Perspective on its Nature and Control*. Washington, DC: the Police Foundation.

Ivkovic, S.K. (2005). *Fallen Blue Knights: Controlling Police Corruption*. New York, NY: Oxford.

Kappeler, V., Sluder, R., & Alpert, G. (1998). *Forces of Deviance: Understanding the Dark Side of Policing*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.

King, N. (1999). *Heroes in Hard Times: Cop Action Movies in the U.S.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple.

Leitch, T. (2002). *Crime Films*. New York, NY: Cambridge.

Packer, H. (1964). "Two Models of the Criminal Process". 113 *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* I.

Parish, J.R. (1990). *The Great Cop Pictures*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.

Rafter, N. (2006). *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*. New York, NY: Oxford.

Sherman, L. (1974). *Police Corruption: A Sociological Perspective*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.

Sherwin, R.K. (2002). *When Law Goes Pop: The Vanishing Line Between Law and Popular Culture.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.