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The Heist as a Popular Culture Genre

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Abstract

The heist has been a neglected popular culture genre because critical literature conflates plots about capers and heists. Capers are light-hearted plots about elaborate crimes; heists are darker tales that focus on betrayals following the aftermath of robberies. In this genre, the criminal becomes the hero who embodies values of workmanship, poise in the face of risk, and individualism.

Keywords: betrayal, capers, heists, robbery

Do-It-Yourself Justice:
The Heist as a Popular Culture Genre

The heist[1] is a dramatic popular culture crime genre that usually focuses on robbery and robbers. There are many studies of popular culture genres in fiction, film, and television, but not all genres have received equal attention. Detective and gangster stories are the genres most relevant to criminology and criminal justice that have received considerable attention (e.g., Cawelti, 1976; Evans, Moore, and Johnstone, 2019; Warshow 1948), whereas the heist genre has been relatively neglected (but see Lee, 2014; Osteen, 2014; Sloniowski and Leach, 2017).

Popular cultural genres are significant because they reveal one of the ways entertainment is tied to the larger culture (Cawelti, 1976). The stories we tell each other about crime or criminal justice both reflect our values and assumptions, and contribute to our understandings of criminality's place in the world. They contribute to the social construction of crime, criminals, and criminal justice. These tales may be forms of entertainment, but they can be recognized as more than simply entertaining. In particular, heist stories depict efforts to construct justice in situations of lawless betrayal.

One reason the heist genre has received relatively little attention is that a criminal is the central figure—the hero, or at least the antihero—in these tales. Popular cultural depictions of crime and criminal justice usually celebrate the detective or others posed against villainous criminals. When criminals are given the central role, they are usually portrayed as either amusing tricksters or rebels struggling against unjust authority. However, heist tales must find a way of depicting committed criminals while still engaging the audience's appreciation.

The literature on the heist as a genre tends to conflate heists and capers: Lee (2014: 1) defines his subject as "The heist film, or 'big caper' as it is sometimes called"; and Sloniowski and Leach (2017: 3) note that "both terms . . . are often used interchangeably." But we can and should distinguish the two: caper plots center on an elaborate or complex theft. Caper stories often involve burglaries, in which the thieves devise clever and elaborate ways of circumventing seemingly impenetrable security systems. Often the team members in capers develop emotional bonds with one another, becoming members of a work-centered pseudo-family (Hickey. 2023). As their name suggests, stories about capers tend to be more light-hearted, more fantastic; caper stories often have comic elements. Think of the intricate series of deceptions and evasions required to steal either $160 million from a Las Vega casino vault in Steven Soderburgh's *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) or the jeweled treasures from Istanbul's Topkapi Palace in Jules Dassin's *Topkapi* (1964). The dramatic tension in caper stories lies in whether the plan's various elements can work. Thus, caper plots tend to focus on the preparation and execution of the theft; its aftermath receives relatively little attention.

In contrast, the aftermath is central to heist plots. Stories about heists tend to be grittier than those about capers. Heists usually involve face-to-face robberies in which the robbers confront, frighten, and force their victims to surrender money or other valuables. Heists may not require elaborate preparation, and the execution of the crime may be brief and straightforward. In stories about heists, the drama centers less on preparations and the actual robbery, and more on its aftermath, on whether the robbers will be able to get away with the crime. Avoiding arrest is of course an issue, but the aftermath of heist plots usually focuses on betrayal as the perpetrators turn on one another.

Both capers and heists emerged in the aftermath of World War II, later than more established genres, such as detective stories (whodunits that focus on discovering who committed a crime), police procedurals (more realistic depictions of the work involved in bringing offenders to justice), and gangster stories

(chronicling the rise and fall of crime bosses). Like gangster stories, caper and heist plots make the criminal their central figure, but focus on the challenges crime poses in planning successful crimes (usually the focus of caper tales), and especially on getting away with it (central to stories about heists).

The boundaries between capers and heists are not always clear. Some heist stories can center around elaborate schemes (e.g., the theft of gold bullion from a cargo plane in David Mamet's *Heist* [2001], the jewelry store burglary in Jules Dassin's *Rafifi* [1955], or the burglary of a customs house in Frank Oz's *The Score* [2001]). Still, these remain plots in which the execution of the complex crime is prelude, less important than its dark aftermath—they fall into the heist genre.

Another complexity: in most heist stories, the hero—or rather the antihero—is the robber. The key issue is whether the crime will lead to a successful outcome. If the audience is to root for the robber, then the villains of the piece must be deplorable victims (ex-Nazi collaborators or others who can be understood as deserving to be victimized), even less admirable criminals (because they are treacherous, whereas the antihero lives by a code), or perhaps corrupt police. Other heist tales center around how the robbers are brought to justice—and the audience's sympathies may be with the police, or sometimes they are invited to simultaneously sympathize with both the robbers and the cops (e.g., *Heat* [Michael Mann, 1995], *Takers* [John Luessenhop, 2010], or *Hell or High Water* [David Mackenzie, 2016]).

There is no authoritative list of heist tales; so it is impossible to develop a representative sample of the genre. This paper draws upon three sorts of literature. First, it compares the genre to sociological and criminological studies of robbery, in particular analyses of the methods robbers use to manage what are inevitably difficult encounters in which reluctant victims are forced to surrender their valuables. This paper compares these scholarly analyses to portrayals of heists presented in popular culture, to explore how fiction adapts fact. Our second set of sources comes from crime fiction. Here, I lean most heavily on the well-regarded, highly influential novels about the professional thief named Parker, written by Donald E. Westlake under the pen name Richard Stark.[2] Third, I examine a broad variety of films with heist plots. This paper draws its examples from books and films that appeared throughout the decades after World War II, to demonstrate the long-term consistency of the genre.

This analysis will address two central themes in heist stories. I begin by examining the drama of the heist proper—the preparations and the actual theft—before turning to the complexities of betrayal that shape the aftermath of the crime.

Preparing to Steal

Caper plots often begin by assembling the crew that will be needed to commit the crime. Often, these are individuals with specialized skills and diverse backgrounds, and caper films may involve long sequences is which the different members of the crew are introduced and given opportunities to display their talents. Thus, in Soderburgh's *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), Danny Ocean assembles an eleven-member team that includes a financial backer, an explosives expert, an acrobat, a pickpocket, and so on. In other cases, the focus is on the crew members' motivations: what are the various reasons people have for joining a criminal enterprise? In *League of Gentlemen* (Basil Dearden, 1960), Hyde finds his crew by identifying British veterans of World War II who are having various difficulties adjusting to civilian life. The preparation stage—planning the crime, and assembling the people and equipment needed to complete it—often receives lengthy attention in caper stories.

In contrast, heist stories typically assume that the crew consists of professional thieves who operate in a criminal underworld (Sutherland, 1937; Einstadter, 1969; Letkemann, 1973). Of course, someone—often the

hero or antihero—needs to plan the robbery; in some cases, the target has been identified by an outsider who tips off the criminals; sometimes this outsider has even planned the robbery. More often, the antihero draws on his contacts with other professionals to recruit a team who often must be contacted through intermediaries. The robbers in Stark's novels specialize in robbery: when asked, "What are you, a burglar?", [Parker's colleague] "Grofield shook his head, 'I'm in the heavy'" (Stark, 1969a: 50). Individuals within this world have reputations for reliability, and decide whether to participate in a particular crime based upon their confidence that they can count on the other members. To be sure, the plan may require specialists, especially drivers (e.g., *The Driver* [Walter Hill, 1978], *Drive* [Nicholas Winging Refn, 2011], *Baby Driver* [Edgar Wright, 2017]) and safecrackers or others specializing in overcoming security measures (e.g., *The Asphalt Jungle* [John Huston, 1950]; *Bellman and True* [Richard Loncraine, 1987]). And there are other supporting roles; in Stark's novels, Parker gets financing from apparently respectable businessmen who advance cash for expenses in return for double the amount to be taken off the top from the proceeds of the crime; he then purchases vehicles and guns from people with sidelines of supplying criminals.

These fictional practices tend to be more elaborate than the findings in the criminological literature on robbery (Posick, 2017). Thirty years after Sutherland (1937) described norms among professional thieves, Einstadter (1969) interviewed armed robbers and found that few of those norms applied. The social organization of robbers tended to be fluid: Einstadter says "there is little discernible evidence of distinctive leadership roles" (p. 72); a robber interviewed by Letkemann (1973: 94) agrees: ". . . if you're going to rob a bank, you make the suggestion, you're the one who's going to lay the groundwork for it. So, they—well, they just more or less accept you as the leader." The actual crime involves a minimal division of labor: one or more people controlling the people at the scene, as well as one or more seizing the cash, and a driver waiting outside.

The heist genre offers exceptions to these general patterns. In some cases, members of the team may have no criminal background, and there are sequences introducing each character and explaining their willingness to join a criminal enterprise. Thus, in *The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick, 1956), Johnny Clay describes his plan to rob a race track by assembling a crew of amateurs unlikely to be suspected:

> None of these men are criminals in the usual sense. They've all got jobs. They all live seemingly normal, decent lives, but they got their problems, and they've got a little larceny in 'em.

Ideally, the crew members can rely on one another—at least until the crime has been completed. At that point, one or more members (or someone else who knows about the crime) may betray the others and try to steal the loot. But these betrayals must be preceded by the actual crime.

The Dynamics of Confrontation

As a social interaction, the social organization of robbery is straightforward: a robber demands that a victim surrender things of value (Luckenbill, 1982; Nelson and Desroches, 2014; Paes-Machado and Viodres-Inoue, 2017). The key problems the robber faces are to gain control of whatever is being stolen, while maintaining control over the reluctant victim. On the street, armed robbery often involves a single robber confronting a single victim (Katz, 1988), but heist stories tend to move indoors where the take is likely to be much greater, so that a bank or other business is being robbed. These are scenes where there may be several victims and bystanders, and robbery often involves a team of robbers, who may have a plan to divide the labor,

with one or more members responsible for taking the loot, while one or more others maintain control of whoever else is present.

Movies often portray the heist as chaotic, with robbers striking guards, jumping on counters, firing guns in the ceiling, and shouting demands (recent examples include the bank robberies in Mann's *Heat* [1995] and John Hillcoat's *Triple 9* [2016]), although some movie robbers do this with relative good humor, such as the surfer-dude crew in Kathryn Bigelow's *Point Break* (1991). In practice, sociologists' interviews with robbers reveal that some prefer a more low-key management of the scene that keeps the victims calm:

> . . . I'd talk very softly, very quietly, and I'd never raise my voice. I always figure that if you holler and show panic, it would make the people panicky. If you just walk in quietly, . . . it kinda reassures the people that you know exactly what you're doing, and that you mean them no harm. But if you go in there hustling and bustling and firing and shooting, you're going to have people start to scream and everything else. (Letkemann, 1973: 110)

Westlake suggests that there are different approaches, examined in this dialog between two of Parker's colleagues:

> "I always do it gentle, you know? Reassure everybody they're not gonna get hurt, take it easy, don't worry about anything, we're professionals, we're not out to spill any blood, all that stuff. Get their first names, talk to them, easy and calm."
> "Sure," the second one said. "I've done it that way too. But sometimes this is nice. Come in mean and loud and half-crazy. Then all *they* want to do is reassure you." (Stark, 1974: 230).

When Darwyn Cooke was adapting several Parker stories for graphic novels, Westlake advised:

> Think of [Parker] like a carpenter. Or an electrician. He's not there to cause a fuss. He's there to do a job. He takes pride in the job he does. He doesn't want any bullshit from anybody. He just goes about his job. (Cooke, 2011: 18)

All this can go wrong, because a member of the team panics and kills someone (thereby raising the dramatic stakes, in that the robbers suddenly become accessories to murder [Mann, *Heat* {1995}]), because the victims fight back (as in Mackenzie's *Hell or High Water* [2016], in which West Texas bank customers draw their open-carry pistols), or because a police officer happens upon the robbery in progress (Albert and Allen Hughes, *Dead Presidents* [1995]). And, of course, the robbers may encounter even greater resistance when they try to exit the scene, such as *Heat'*s robbers' pitched battle with police after they leave the bank.

In most cases, all this occurs within a short period of time. Ideally, a heist should be over in a just a few minutes, so that the robbers leave the scene of the crime before the police can arrive. In a common movie trope, one robber may call out the amount of time remaining before the team will need to leave. A heist that takes too long threatens to turn into a hostage situation, as portrayed in the botched bank robbery in Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) or the caper-disguised-as-a-heist in Spike Lee's *Inside Man* (2006), in which the bank robbers inexplicably fail to try to leave the bank until after the police have surrounded it. Prolonged heists can turn into sieges in which the authorities trap the robbers and negotiations ensue, such as the 1972 Swedish

robbery-turned-hostage-situation that inspired the concept of the Stockholm Syndrome (in which hostages came to identify with their captors).

Some heist movies center on elaborate caper-like crimes, and the examination of the preparation for and execution of the plan may consume a lot of screen time, but however dramatic the crime itself may be, the more important issue in heist stories is what happens next.

Aftermath: The Drama of Betrayal

In heist tales, the robbery itself is only the beginning; the preparations for and commission of the crime are merely a prelude to the aftermath's betrayals. For the most part, Parker's heists go off without a hitch. The problems begin once the robbers escape with their loot, only for Parker to discover that other people on his team can't be trusted. They turn on him, often leaving him for dead. In the original Parker book, *The Hunter* (Stark, 1962) and its film adaptations (John Boorman's *Point Blank* [1967]; Brian Helgeland's *Payback* [1999]), the actual heist and the betrayal that followed (by a member of the heist team and Parker's wife) took place months before the story begins, when Parker, having recovered from his injuries, is on the trail of the people who betrayed him, intent on recovering his share of the loot. Other Parker plots begin with a successful robbery, but within a few pages, one or more members of the crew steal Parker's share, and he begins to pursue them (e.g., Stark, 1969b, 2000; *Parker* [Taylor Hackford, 2013}).

Of course, no one except the original victim has a legitimate right to what's been stolen. This means those who are betrayed have no recourse to the law. Asked why he doesn't call the police, Roy Egan, the antihero of John Irvin's *City of Industry* (1997), responds: "I'm my own police." What's been stolen can be re-stolen and stolen yet again. Members of the crew can betray one another (Sam Peckinpah, *The Getaway* [1972]; Taylor Hackford, *Parker* [2013]). Sometimes, this treachery is quite elaborate: in *Widows* (Steve McQueen, [2018]), the widows of a crew that were betrayed and killed in the aftermath of a failed heist find themselves compelled to conduct a heist of their own, only to discover that further betrayal awaits. There is even the dangerous possibility is that the authorities have infiltrated the heist crew; that there is an undercover officer among their number (Quentin Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* [1992]; Kathryn Bigelow, *Point Break* [1991]).

Some heist films revel in the possibilities of betrayal. Thus, the hero is betrayed by a crew member who expects that this treachery will be unexpected, only to discover that the hero has anticipated and planned for this betrayal, and has prepared a betrayal of his own. Sometimes, there can be a series of these twists, with would-be tricksters being tricked (e.g., Frank Oz, *The Score* [2001]; F. Gary Gray, *The Italian Job* [2003]).

The possibilities for betrayal go beyond the heist crew's members. Even if they all remain loyal to one another, one member may be connected to some other person—a girlfriend (Kubrick's *The Killing* again), an ex-girlfriend (Ben Affleck's *The Town* [2010]), a girlfriend's therapist (Stark 1967), whoever—who will launch some sort of treacherous attack. Anyone who learns about the heist in advance may plot to take the loot away from the heisters. Former members of the crew may turn to betrayal (Michael Mann, *Heat* [1995]; John Luessenhop, *Takers* [2010]). In addition, whoever suggests the target to the crew may intend to betray them (Sam Peckinpah, *The Getaway* [1972]; David Mamet, *Heist* [2001]), as may anyone who had prior knowledge of the heist. And, of course, the crew needs to worry about the police, who may simply be trying to solve the crime, or may be willing to abuse their authority to catch the hero (Hill's *The Driver* [1978]), or even be corrupt and hoping to make off with the money themselves (Stark 1965).

All sorts of other people also may pose threats. In *Charley Varrick* (Don Siegel, 1973) and *The Outfit* (John Flynn, 1973), banks that were robbed turn out to have been fronts for laundering organized crime's cash,

and the Mob sends an enforcer to kill the robbers and recover the money. In the original Parker novel (Stark, 1962), the robber who betrayed Parker had used the money to pay off debts to other members of organized crime, and Parker's quest to recover his money leads to him confronting a series of functionaries in the faceless Outfit who now have his money but refuse to return it.

With these figures in extralegal contention for the loot, most of the violence in heist films typically occurs during the aftermath. Killings, shootouts, chases, plot twists, and trickery—the full repertoire of plot elements found in action movies may be incorporated in the resolution of heist stories. This chaotic aftermath, riven with betrayal and treachery, poses a dramatic problem: with whom are the readers/viewers supposed to identify? Typically, they are encouraged to view a robber like Parker as the hero. The heist hero is independent: he belongs to no formal group, has no boss, and usually no overriding emotional commitments to any other character.[3] He has a code, but it is his own code, not some set of laws established by others. Thus, when Parker enlists a non-criminal amateur to help him, they have a conversation:

> Lindahl said, "Half the time, I was sure, if we ever got it, and I never thought we'd get it, but I was sure . . ." His voice trailed off, with a little vague hand gesture.
> "You were sure I'd shoot you," Parker said. "I know."
> "You could have, anytime."
> Parker said, "You brought me the job, you went in on the job with me, that's yours."
> Lindahl giggled, a strange sound out here. "You mean," he said, "like honor among thieves?"
> "No," Parker said, "I mean a professional is a professional." (Stark 2006: 278)

Although the antihero becomes embroiled in an aftermath filled with treachery, he did not start the sequence of betrayals. He is, of course, a criminal—perhaps bad, but portrayed as better than those he opposes. He decides what is just, and enacts his own justice. Thus, in book after book, Parker acts within his own code during the heist, yet is betrayed by those who violate that code, so that he must work to right those wrongs (*50 Years of Parker* 2018). Of course, restoring what Parker views as justice may involve people—sometimes lots of people—dying, including innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire.

To make the aftermath dramatic, the hero must contend with more powerful forces who have greater numbers, greater resources, and fewer scruples. These become the story's villains—those who seek to take the loot the hero has gained through his hard and dangerous work. Often, the hero struggles against organized crime—variously termed the Mob, Syndicate, or Outfit; when the loot winds up in the hands of organized crime, Parker is relentless in demanding that it be returned (e.g., Stark, 1962, 1974). It seems a very unequal fight, given that organized crime has a large network of informants and enforcers that should be able to squash the hero, yet the hero has advantages—he can be nimble, flexible where the criminal organization is cumbersome. Thus, Charley Varrick (a cropduster who bills himself as "The Last of the Independents") outwits the menacing enforcer (played by Joe Don Baker) sent to recover the Mob's money (Don Siegal, *Charley Varrick* [1973]; see also John Flynn, *The Outfit* [1973]).

The heist hero, then, is a cousin of the Western hero—those lawmen and strangers who ride into towns, right wrongs, and then leave, riding into the sunset. But Shane and those other long, tall Western heroes belong to the forces bringing order and civilization to an untamed frontier. The heist hero, in contrast, is in it for himself. As Neil McCauley—the leader of the elite heist crew in *Heat*—says, "Don't let yourself get attached to anything you are not willing to walk out on in thirty seconds flat if you feel the heat around the corner. . . That's the discipline." Reviewers routinely described Parker as amoral. When heist hero triumphs, it is an

individual triumph: he winds up with the loot. The rest of the world remains largely unchanged; even if the hero has defeated organized crime or corrupt cops in this instance, as he drives off into the night, organized criminality and corruption remain behind, although in cases where the hero has been assisted by a civilian—such as a woman who has nursed him back to health after he's been shot—he may arrange to give her a share of the loot (John Irvin, *City of Industry* [1997]; Taylor Hackford, *Parker* [2013]).

In other cases, the hero fails. Prior to 1968, this was a requirement of Hollywood's production code, which insisted that evil be punished—that crime must not pay. Thus, in John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), all the thieves fail; in particular, Doc Riedenschneiter (the mastermind) is captured and Dix Handley (who leads the crew of burglars) is fatally wounded. In Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956), Johnny Clay and his girlfriend are poised to escape on a plane when an accident causes the loot to spill across the airport concourse, just before the police close in. In more recent films, there is no requirement that the criminals be punished, but some heist films do end with the antihero's death. Usually this is because the antihero allows emotions to interfere with his code. *Heat*'s (Michael Mann, 1995) ending harkens back to *The Killing*. Neil McCauley (who is approaching the airport with his girlfriend and his share of the loot) stops to kill Waingro (the man had betrayed Neil's crew), which gives the police lieutenant Vincent Hanna time to catch up and kill him. In *Johnny Handsome* (Walter Hill, 1989), Johnny seeks revenge against the robbers responsible for his friend's death, and is killed in the process.

Variation within the heist genre, then, reflects the many permutations betrayal can take, even if the lessons are familiar: there is no (or at least very little) honor among thieves, and crime (mostly) doesn't pay.

Why Study Heist Stories?

Compared to gangster stories (a rich, tragic genre tracing the rise and inevitable fall of the gangster hero), or even caper plots (which often depict elaborate schemes to steal vast sums from powerful targets), the heist tale may seem to be a minor genre. Their characters tend to live more ordinary, workaday lives, their crimes and the profits they generate are usually smaller, and the moral dilemmas may seem less clear-cut. What then, is the appeal of these tales? The answer is that heist plots invoke central cultural values.

Work

Westlake's suggestion that Parker should be viewed as a carpenter or other workman should remind us that robbery in heist tales is, if not a true profession, is at least a specialized job, a way of making a living. Heists involve people—almost always men—at work. They involve tasks that need to be performed with a certain level of competence: they need to be carefully planned, and then properly executed. A standard trope in movie heists involves one of the robbers—usually someone who is new to the crew, who the hero recognizes as an unknown, potentially unreliable member of the team—who panics and kills a guard or some other victim, thereby raising the stakes by instantly making the entire crew accessories to murder (e.g., Sam Peckinpah, *The Getaway* [1972]; Michael Mann, *Heat* [1995]). The other robbers—especially the hero—are disgusted by this display of incompetence; a properly managed heist should not degenerate into greater violence: "Heists emphasize craftsmanship and expertise over guile and brawn. And though a heist crew explicitly exists to undermine the established institutions of society, their defiance ends up reflecting it. . ." (Hickey, 2023: 64).

Gangster plots focus on crime as a path to upward social mobility; the central figure achieves a pinnacle of great wealth and power, only to have this empire collapse (Warshow 1949). In contrast, heist stories depict

work with more modest, often uncertain rewards; many of Parker's heists wind up failing to pay off, although Parker gets away (*50 Years of Parker* 2018). In *Ryan's Rules* (originally titled *Swag*), Elmore Leonard (1976) depicts two robbers who devise a list of ten rules that should enable them to avoid getting caught. The rules work quite well, but the robbers begin to break first one and then another, until they inevitably ignore all the rules and find themselves arrested. The moral is clear: crime is work, and like all work it demands to be treated seriously.

This explains the importance of betrayal in heist plots. The crew carrying out a heist depends on one another; each does a necessary job; success is a product of their teamwork. Betrayal violates these expectations; it disrespects the work that is being done. And since people who engage in robberies have already stepped outside the law, they have few ties to convention, aside from their commitment to workmanship. Betraying one another breaks their final social bond.

Risk

As work, heists are outside the law; they are inherently risky. Not only will the authorities try to arrest the crew for committing a heist, but they cannot count on the police or any other legitimate figures helping you if anything goes wrong, either during the heist or in its aftermath. Thus, it is necessary for the hero to continually calculate and manage risks. Heists are planned carefully to anticipate potential problems: casing out the setting to know where money is kept as well as arranging to bypass the locks and other obstacles that will need to be overcome; dividing up the labor by assigning some members to manage the people at the scene, while others collect the loot, even as a driver is ready to make a fast getaway; and there may be additional plans (e.g., to switch vehicles in case witnesses can identify the getaway car). The heist itself, then, is reasonably predictable.

In heist plots, it is the risk of betrayal that disrupts these calculations and makes the outcome less predictable (and the story entertaining). Betrayal can come from many directions, from inside the crew, or from anyone who learns of the heist and tries to take advantage. Betrayal creates a whole new set of risks, and the hero must calculate these. A first risk is to one's reputation: it would be intolerable for others to know that you are someone who has been successfully betrayed. Retribution for the betrayal is thus the primary motivation. Obviously, a secondary goal is to recover the loot, but this may prove impossible, especially if the police are closing in, which is why many of Parker's heists ultimately prove unprofitable.

Heist stories celebrate a kind of rationality. Betrayal leads, not to anger or other emotional justifications for revenge, but to a determined calculation to manage risks. Even the most law-abiding consumers of heist plots can admire the hero's cool poise when confronted with betrayal and the terrible risks it brings.

Individualism

Most obviously, heist plots celebrate individualism. They are stories of (almost always) men who work outside the institutional orders, both legal and underworld. Still, these individuals cannot operate completely alone. Their heists are too complex to succeed unless they can assemble a crew or team to fulfill the various necessary tasks, and they may need the assistance of non-crew members to identify potentially lucrative targets or to supply financing. In other words, they need to trust others, even as they try to maintain secrecy about their crimes. If everything goes smoothly, everyone involved—the investors, whoever identified the target, and the crew's members can receive their fair shares of the spoils. But heist plots focus on occasions when these

agreements break down, typically because someone is greedy and sees an opportunity to profit at the others' expense.

In some cases, the hero may find one or two fellow crew members who have also been betrayed, and who are willing cooperate in addressing the betrayal (John Flynn, *The Outfit* [1973]). In other tales, he must enlist the help of someone either outside or on the periphery of the criminal world. This helper may be a woman—his wife (Sam Peckinpah, *The Getaway* [1972]); the widow of a dead crew member (John Irvin, *City of Industry* [1997]); a civilian whose unfulfilled life has made her willing to aid a criminal (Taylor Hackford, *Parker* [2013]), or even someone within the criminal organization who is willing to betray it (Don Siegel, *Charley Varrick* [1973]). But most often the antihero is largely alone in his quest for revenge,

It is a cliché that American culture celebrates rugged individualism, and the lone antihero's willingness to confront and best those who betrayed him is certainly rugged: he is almost always outnumbered; his response almost always involves violent confrontations, and his retribution is justified by his personal moral code—less an-eye-for-an-eye than you-took-what's-mine-and-I-demand-it-back. Heist plots are about do-it-yourself efforts to find justice in response to betrayal. These confrontations are almost inevitably fatal. Betrayal among those who are already outside the law means that betrayer can never be trusted and will always be a threat that must be eliminated so that the matter is finally resolved. Parker and other robbers strive to calm their victims during the actual robberies so that these confrontations go smoothly; killings during robberies always make things worse, because they lead to more aggressive responses by the authorities. But in the robbery's aftermath when betrayals occur, the betrayed individual cannot turn to the law for help; at that point, killing is the rule, not the exception.

Conclusion

The conceptual confusion that conflates plots centered around heists with those about capers has produced a critical literature that overlooks what deserves to be recognized as a distinctive genre. This paper argues that heist plots are distinct from caper stories, in that the latter focus on the intricacies of a planned crime, while the crime in the heist plot is merely the prelude to the central conflict that emerges in the robbery's aftermath of betrayal. Heist stories allow audiences to celebrate conventional values—work, rationality, and individualism in an apparently lawless environment. Whereas some popular cultural treatments of crime treat criminals as victims of deprivation or other forces beyond their control, heist plots emphasize their robber-heroes' agency.

Notes

[1]The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the origin of *heist* to 1930; however, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* says it was first used in 1865, and suggests it was a variant of *hoist.* Hoist ("To go upon the hoist: to get into windows accidently left open. . .") appears in Grose's (1808) *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. Maurer's (1931: 109) glossary lists "heist (or hoist), n. A holdup or robbery. Largely restricted to the liquor running business." "Heist ("To rob, especially with a gun. . .Also spelled "hoist.") also appears in the glossary of Sutherland's *The Professional Thief* (1937: 238). Monteleone's *Criminal Slang* (1945: 116) lists several meanings: "A holdup (defined separately as "Robbery at the point of a gun" [p. 120]); an increase in price; to hijack (defined separately as "a person who robs fellow criminals" [p. 118]); to oust bodily."

[2]Westlake wrote 24 Parker novels and another four novels under the Stark pseudonym featuring Parker's sometime colleague, Alan Grofield. The first Parker books were published as paperback originals, but the

stories attracted growing attention and eventually began appearing first in hardcover editions. The Parker books have been adapted for several movies, beginning with John Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967); in film, Parker has been played by various actors, including Lee Marvin, Robert Duvall, Jim Brown, Mel Gibson, Peter Coyote, and Jason Statham. Beginning in 2009, the University of Chicago Press reprinted all the Stark titles as quality paperbacks. The graphic artist Darwin Cooke published four adaptations between 2011 and 2013. Websites devoted to the series include *The Violent World of Parker* (2018) and *50 Years of Parker* (2018). Although he did not originate the heist genre, Westlake influenced its development; many other books and films about heists seem to borrow a great deal from him.

[3]There are exceptions. Most heist stories feature, not just male leads but all-male crews. Occasionally, the antihero may take risks to protect or even rescue one of his colleagues (Stark 1966, 1974). There are a handful of movies about heists by all-female crews (e.g., F. Gary Gray, *Set It Off* [1996]; Steve McQueen, *Widows* [2019]). Similarly, there are stories that hinge on the hero's determination to protect some vulnerable person. In *Bellman and True*–both a novel (Lowden, 1975) and a movie (Richard Loncraine, 1987)–a hapless computer programmer has been abandoned by his wife and is caring for her young son. Having stolen digital records for a crew of thieves, he is now compelled to assist them in a bank burglary. Once he realizes that the criminals intend to kill not just him but the boy, and primarily to protect the child, he finds a way to kill the thieves.

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