Generic Hybridity, Style and Film Noir in Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995)

Luis M. García Mainar
Universidad de Zaragoza
lmgarcia@unizar.es

The essay attempts to prove that one of the critical advantages of the crime film macrogenre is its capacity to reveal the intrinsic hybridity of its texts, which is argued to be articulated through emphasis on visual and aural style. Film noir is then chosen as a case study for its formal complexity, whose roots are to be found in its aesthetic and ideological ambiguity towards modernity. Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995) is analysed as an example of a contemporary crime film that updates the stylistic and thematic concerns of classic noir. The result is a generic combination that channels ambivalence towards postmodern social change regarding masculinity.

Keywords: genre; hybridity; style; film noir; Michael Mann

El artículo es un intento de demostrar la utilidad del *crime film* como macro-concepto genérico capaz de sacar a la luz el carácter híbrido de los filmes, expresado mediante el estilo visual y sonoro. El análisis se centra en el estudio del cine negro, cuya complejidad formal nace de su ambigüedad estética e ideológica hacia la modernidad. *Heat* (1995), dirigida por Michael Mann, aparece así como un *crime film* contemporáneo que actualiza las coordenadas estilísticas y temáticas del cine negro. El resultado es una combinación de géneros que da voz a una cierta ambivalencia acerca de los cambios sufridos por la masculinidad en la época postmoderna.

Palabras clave: género narrativo; hibridación; estilo; cine negro; Michael Mann

One of the waves that seems to periodically resurface in the study of film genre is the proposal of broad generic concepts, sometimes called modes or macrogenres, that attempt to shed light on an often dark area of cinema by suggesting the underlying similarities that lurk behind a certain number of genres. Thomas Leitch has proposed his notion of the crime film macrogenre, which he has defined as those cinematographic narratives that exhibit the dilemmas existing around the concept of individuality and the law in modern societies, that is films which formulate two paradoxes: firstly, that the individual is socially constituted as both free and subject to the regulation of the law, and, secondly, that the law both prevents and embodies violence. Thus the crime film works by first setting the positions of criminal, avenger or victim and then exploring the ways in which transitions between those positions are possible, in moves that point to the founding dilemmas of the macrogenre by expressing ambivalence towards the individual, the law and violence. It relies on the moments when victims finally muster enough courage to become avengers by rebelling and taking the law into their own hands, or when criminals become victims of themselves before being finally eliminated by society, or when crime

©Universitat de Barcelona

in the form of corruption at the core of the paradigmatic avengers, the police, is exposed (2002:14-16).

Despite their advantages, macrogenres bring with them a series of problems to genre analysis. Firstly, they risk homogenising what is actually different, as they tend to stress the similarities underlying traditionally distinct generic configurations. For example, as Schaffer has pointed out, Leitch's crime film is such a broad generic notion that it comes close to the concept of classical Hollywood cinema, which could also be generally described as narratives in which injustice is resolved through action (2004). Secondly, they implicitly construct hierarchies for films, organised through categories of decreasing scope that range from macrogenres or modes to genres, subgenres and, finally, to cycles. And thirdly, they are prescriptive since they impose criteria about which films belong to the macrogenre through the application of a top-down definition. However, this is not the way films work: for one thing, they are much more discrete and individualised forms than these genre theories grant them. Their relationship to specific genres is always partial and incomplete, as films tend to borrow from the stock of available generic conventions in a piecemeal fashion, picking conventions and representational motifs associated with different genres here and there, according to their needs, production circumstances, and sociohistorical contexts. As Rick Altman has suggested, the result resembles more the look of superimposed cartographical maps than that of tight-sealed boxes (1999: 49-82). Although Altman originally formulated his notion of the generic map to account for the diachronic development of genres, it also proves useful to study films synchronically since it contemplates the possibility that films simultaneously borrow from several generic maps of differing scope and origin. Here, genre stops being defined as a group of films to become a series of abstract conventions available for the films to use at a certain historical period. Films do not belong to genres but borrow from various generic maps, thus becoming hybrid texts.

From this point of view, the advantages of the crime film appear in a different light: Altman's concept of genre provides a new perspective from which to approach the crime film macrogenre, since it helps us understand crime films in terms of the interplay between generic maps. Actually, it is interesting that Leitch indirectly defines the genres of crime—that is, the gangster film, the thriller and the cop film—according to the interaction between the three, arguing that this interplay is an intrinsic ingredient of each genre. Thus, the heroic quality of the protagonist in each of the crime genres is based on his/her capacity to shift to the position of the adjacent ones, from criminal to victim in the gangster film, from victim to avenger or criminal in the thriller, and from cop to victim or criminal in the cop film. In fact, Leitch's definition of the crime film according to the shifting positions of its heroes between victims, avengers and criminals reveals the dependence of his notion of the crime film on the interaction between the three generic maps. His concept is useful because it reveals how what have traditionally been considered genres related to crime have always depended on the overlap between several generic maps which have filled them with content, though they have never been pure genres themselves.

In this paper I propose to show how, despite its potential disadvantages, the crime film macrogenre is useful because it facilitates a more detailed analysis of the texts in terms of generic maps, which in its turn helps observe

©Universitat de Barcelona

the mechanisms through which such hybridity is articulated. My thesis will be that in the crime film it is stylistic sophistication, both visual and aural, that structures this combination of specific genres, and that in doing so the crime film accommodates not only those traditionally associated with it, the genres of the gangster film, the cop movie and the suspense thriller, but all kinds of generic maps.

Hybridity and Style

Classical theory on the crime film holds that the pleasure of crime formulas appears in the shape of a possibility of social subversion precluded by the end of the films, which gives way to the socially acceptable pleasure of seeing crime punished. Crime films provide ways for viewers to enjoy fantasies of violence and law-breaking by offering a forbidden pleasure and its chastisement, they offer viewers both transgression and the return to conformity, thus alleviating their anxiety about social norms (Rafter 2000: 153-54). Crime film theory has traditionally pointed to this capacity to deal with social contradiction as one of the defining features of the formula. To Robert Warshow, for example, gangster movies illustrated the contradictions that resided at the heart of US American capitalist society since it glorified at the same time both the democratic nature of the country and its faith in individual self-improvement, and in general both the gangster movie and film noir have been considered to be particularly sensitive to oppositional discourses (2001: 103; Munby 1999: 8, 115-43; Naremore 1998). Leitch's theory takes account of these antecedents, as he argues that by having criminals, cops and victims embody social meanings, and by then shifting their positions, the crime film actually shows ambivalence towards those discourses, becoming a site for the articulation of contradictory ideologies (2002: 305-306).

My hypothesis is that in the crime film this fluidity, its resulting hybridity, and the ideological ambivalence voiced by it, are intimately related to the workings of style. Suzanne Gearhart's ideas about the connection between spectacle and the subversion of power, as formulated by Michel Foucault, provide a useful link between style and these fluid positions regarding crime. According to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, the public spectacle of punishment during the *ancien régime* involved such horrible torture of the human body that it risked threatening both the established social power structure and its main symbol, the authority of the king. The threat originated in the public staging of these punishments before the monarch: the sadism involved in the punitive practices risked turning, to the eyes of the population, the criminal into a victim and the king into a criminal for inflicting such pain on a human being (1995: 9, 61). The king's position of authority was risked to the point that, occasionally, executions were actually stopped by their spectators. Nineteenth-century reformers understood the latent subversive effect of these public spectacles and suppressed the role of the visual in favour of the private restriction of freedom in the prison.

Gearhart interestingly relates this subversive power of the public spectacle of punishment to Foucault's insistence that the image cannot be reduced to discourse and thus its final effect cannot be controlled (1997: 471). It could be argued that today it is crime films, among other cultural artefacts, that

©Universitat de Barcelona

exhibit scenarios of crime through images for public consumption, where the subversive, uncontrollable power of the image can still be found in the spectacle of criminality. This subversion would appear in the fluidity between the several positions operative in the crime film. The visual, and in the case of cinema also the aural, spectacle of crime films would actually bring to the surface their underlying desire to problematise the organisation of the criminal/avenger/victim triad, which entails appropriating representational motifs associated with adjacent genres, or bringing adjacent generic maps to overlap with the original configuration of the film.

If we look back to the paradigmatic genres of the crime film we find how a more or less obtrusive style has traditionally been instrumental in shaping the ambivalence at the core of these films, and how this ambivalence has stemmed from the appropriation of motifs associated with the adjacent genres of crime. In one of the classic gangster movies, Howard Hawks' *Scarface* (1932), Tony Camonte's (Paul Muni) flashy suits and the gaudy apartment he proudly shows to would-be flame Poppy (Karen Morley) are used by the text to describe him as an upwardly mobile individual who sees in crime a way out of the ghetto. Style materialises in costume and décor, lending the film ambivalence about its protagonist, both victim-hero who has succeeded in rising above his origins but has death written all over him, and ruthless criminal driven by a compulsive ambition that results in the maniac killings that pepper the story. Similarly, in film noir exemplar *Double Indemnity* (1944), style stands out in the visual recreation of Phyllis's (Barbara Stanwyck) world, in rooms where the venetian blinds block most of the sunlight, which infuses into Walter (Fred McMurray) a certain ambivalence between lawful chap, who at first walks out on Phyllis and her proposal to kill her husband, and criminal, as he finally gives in to her allure. The characteristic noir lighting delimits a space where Walter is out of his depth despite his cocky manner, and where his righteousness is tested and finally defeated, bringing to the character a complex mix of criminal and victim.

Noir **and Michael Mann's** ***Heat***

In the case of film noir, perhaps the crime genre most clearly defined by its obtrusive form, critics have tended to notice both this ambivalence and the aesthetic complexities suggested by its characteristic style. Both Paul Kerr and James Naremore have viewed noir's emphasis on style as a challenge to traditional generic elements and realistic aesthetics that results in hybrid texts, since the black-and-white photography associated with the genre was given legitimacy because it was itself a source of complex resonance: it produced the contradictory effects of gritty realism and aesthetic refinement (Kerr 1996: 120-21; Naremore 1998: 172). To these critics, stylistic emphasis contributes to the hybridity and complexity of noir not by channelling the films' choice of available disparate generic conventions but by articulating the combination of noir with other conventions, in this case the aesthetic modes of realism and stylisation. From this point of view, style would thus be central not only to the intrinsic hybridity of crime films but also to the film noir's general hybridity with other forms of representation.

Naremore's more general argument in his book is that part of the complexity of noir's romance with style resides in its evocation of a traditional

©Universitat de Barcelona

artistic refinement that was viewed to be endangered by the advent of modernity, industrialisation and urbanisation. Film noir thus shows the same tension between aestheticism and modernity that characterised high modernism's ambivalence towards progress. Naremore's conclusion is that, although the term 'film noir' was created by postmodern culture, the values it refers to are deeply modern, and within them this ambiguous rapport with all things modern features prominently (1998: 81-95). In its conflicting but inescapable relationship with modernity, and in the outstanding function reserved to style as both resistance to such modernity and channel for hybridity, film noir becomes the perfect territory to, firstly, analyse the connections between stylisation and generic complexity and, secondly, explore the impact of these connections on cultural representation. To attempt this study, I will now turn to Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995), a postmodern crime film with touches of noir and a troubled relation to the values of modernity.

Christopher Sharrett has labelled Michael Mann the quintessential postmodern director because of the vigorous visual and aural style his films use to convey their sense of the world. Sharrett associates Mann with the introduction into visual culture of "rock video stylistics" and the aesthetic of advertising, especially after the success of *Miami Vice*, the television series he produced in the eighties and which was characterised by slick fashions, pastel-coloured views of Miami, a powerful rock soundtrack and fast editing. His films' connections with postmodern art and architecture have been pointed out, as has been their interest in describing the alienation of the contemporary subject, particularly that of the contemporary man tied up by the demands of postindustrial society. Sharrett has claimed Mann's debt to the paintings of Eric Fischl and David Hockney in expressing the loss of affect which has been said to define postmodern times. His films tend to represent these themes through carefully designed settings reminiscent of the cold compositions of those painters, the same fondness of distance and alienation that transpires through his use of industrial or electronic music (2002: 254). Despite this postmodern style, critics have also tended to approach Mann's cinema as predominantly realistic and basically generic. He has been called the new Hawks for his interest in depicting human groups engaged in a particular professional activity, and the social realist tone of many of his films has been mentioned to prove Mann's attention to the quotidian. Released in December 1995, produced and distributed by Warner Bros., *Heat* was a fairly successful film, grossing over $60 million dollars in the US and over $170 million worldwide, and quickly winning a reputation for cultural chic among critics and reviewers. It originated in a TV movie entitled *L.A. Takedown* that Mann had directed in 1989, which in its turn was based on a script he had already written in 1980. The dates are relevant because they suggest the film's connections with thematic concerns and aesthetic forms of the period between the early eighties and the mid-nineties, when the film was actually made. Set in Los Angeles, the film deals with a well-known topic: the relationship between a policeman, Vincent Hannah (Al Pacino), and a thief, Neil McCauley (Robert de Niro), orchestrated around Neil's robberies and Vincent's process of investigating them.

Nick James has related the film's visual quality to 1980s style, the time of the first draft of *Heat*, and drawn attention to the resemblance between the views of the gunfight that take place downtown and Robert Longo's 1979-82 series of black-and-white figure drawings *Men in the Cities*. To him, the look

©Universitat de Barcelona

and sound of the film are reminiscent of early 1980s aesthetics, which was marked by a "street aspiration for high art glamour (New Romantics) and by its inverse, the uptown need for downtown grit" (2002: 88). James's comments are useful in order to trace the cultural genealogy of the film's visual and aural style, which evokes both realism and a strong influence of the experimental art of the late 1970s and early 1980s, mainly of pop and minimalism, themselves a continuation of the 1960s avant-garde. Actually, Robert Longo belonged to the wave of post-pop art that developed in New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and his *Men in the Cities* series was a clear appropriation of popular icons from Hollywood films (Suárez 2007: 11-16). F.X. Feeney and Paul Duncan have pointed to another cultural strand in *Heat*, namely its evocation of the atmospheres created by Canadian painter Alex Colville. They specifically mention the almost direct quotation of Colville's *Pacific* (1967) in a scene in which Neil is bathed in blue light as he looks at the dark sea from his modernist house (2006: 100-101). His work is itself a meeting ground of radically opposed artistic trends: Colville is a magic realist painter, his painting a combination of realism and surrealism that matches Hockney's impressionistic realism, and both are actually part of the wave of realism initiated by Edward Hopper, whose influences from the French impressionists never abandoned him throughout his career.

Painter Robert Longo provides a connection between visuals and the film's music, as he used to play in bands with experimental musicians Rhys Chatham, Glenn Branca and Richard Prince, also part of the same wave of New York art. The experimentation with string sounds finds its way into the *Heat* soundtrack via Page Hamilton, who worked with Branca in one of his guitar symphonies and collaborated with Elliot Goldenthal on the film's score. This mixes a minimalist air with powerful string and electronic sounds, creating an atmospheric but at the same time vigorous music that evokes both space and action. The minimalism is present in the ambient electronic music of Brian Eno or Moby and in the New Age sounds of cold jazz ECM icon Terje Rypdal, in compositions that oscillate from space music, which helps the film delineate its sophisticated settings, to vigorous sounds that accompany action or suspense. The most outstanding example of this mixture is probably Moby's version of Joy Division classic "New Dawn Fades", which is heard as Vincent chases Neil's car on the motorway. The post-punk mix of energy and melody is reinforced by Moby's electronic sounds, while the date of the original Ian Curtis song, 1979, points again to the same cultural genealogy as the visual texture of the film.

Heat's style actually serves to give shape to a complex film that resembles the aesthetic of noir as defined by Naremore and Kerr: a combination of realism and stylistic sophistication. This ambivalence is actually pointed out by Mann's insistence that the film is a drama rather than a genre picture, that it did not originate in other films and is thus not a collection of representations borrowed from other cycles or genres, but an account of the dramatic lives of people involved in crime. By drama Mann refers to the film's basis on real facts, real stories of cops and thieves that he had been fascinated by since he first met Chuck Adamson, the Chicago police officer on whom Vincent Hannah was drawn. Mann's account of the film is sprinkled with stories about his close relationship with the world of crime: about criminals and their codes, which inspired his TV movie *The Jericho Mile* (1979)—set in Folsom penitentiary—and about cops who took him along on their daily calls so that the

©Universitat de Barcelona

director could get a sample of police work. The use of real locations is also discussed at length not only by the director but also by location manager Janice Polley and by Gusmano Cesaretti, associate producer and Mann's long-time visual consultant, in the bonus material that accompanied the film's DVD special edition. The three of them mention the capacity of locales to evoke the atmosphere of the real places by showing how they are inhabited according to social circumstance. Thus the pit-bull den where Vincent meets with informer Albert Torena (Ricky Harris) was a real place in the midst of a cardboard-box community, the train Neil is seen to come out from in the initial scene was the blue line of the Los Angeles MTA, his house was located in Malibu and Vincent's belonged to architect Tom Maine. The diner where Neil's crew pick up Breedan (Dennis Haysbert) was the renowned "Bob's Big Boy", an icon of Southern California hotrod culture, and the famous coffee scene was also shot in a real restaurant that still advertises its appearance in the film to promote business. Mann's insistence on realism is also a reaction against the 'empty stylist' label that was pegged on him after his work in the trend-setting television series *Miami Vice*.

Nevertheless, although *Heat* certainly brings into sharp focus the personal stories of its protagonists, it is undeniable that the film does so through its flamboyant visual and aural style. The director's comments cannot conceal the film's obvious attention to style by, among other devices, shooting locations in such a way as to emphasise their visually exceptional quality. Thus, apart from its real-life texture, the location for the informer scene was chosen for its surrounding heaps of yellow sulphur, which lend the space a surreal tone. The MTA scene is set up to create an almost abstract look of lights and ultramodern architecture propped up by the absence of dialogue and the presence of intense ambient music, and McCauley's cube-like house is suffused with blue light in a beautiful scene that, independently of its narrative weight, points to itself in the first place. In general, location shooting is subservient to the desire to turn Los Angeles into a secondary story to compete with that of cops and robbers, a story that uses the real city to suggest both a realistic look and a boosted aesthetic carefully planned by director of photography Dante Spinotti. *Heat* oscillates between real-life events and spaces and an evident interest in representation that results in the typical Mann touch: lengthy, visually stunning and aurally sophisticated scenes whose slow rhythm and intensity make 'what happens' less central than 'how it is represented'. The film's soundtrack further illustrates this combination, as the hyperreal sound design of Chris Jenkins coexists with the experimental percussions of score composer Elliot Goldenthal and with Moby's grandiose electronic pieces. Style in the film is thus at the heart of all the ambivalences built by the text, which lend it its characteristic rich texture, and it is this contradictory aesthetic pull that reveals the legacy of noir in the film.

More specifically, *Heat* provides an imitation of both the style and content of noir—of its suffocating atmospheres, its concern with male vulnerability, and its aesthetic elaboration—which updates the genre's uneasiness about modernity by pointing to the primacy of style in postmodern times. The stock of representations and sounds on which the film draws is given a generic texture through the conventions of film noir, which pervade both the form and the content of the narrative while at the same time reflecting the new postmodern context in which both its cultural genealogy and its story are inserted. Through

©Universitat de Barcelona

this primacy of style the film articulates its generic hybridity, as film noir serves to integrate other generic maps that reflect the postmodern turn of the text and make it take on meanings that update the concerns of classic noir. Let us see what I mean by this.

In its exploration of intimacy through the personal relationships of Vincent and McCauley with, respectively, wife Justine (Diane Venora) and girlfriend Eady (Amy Brenneman), *Heat* introduces a fundamental theme of film noir: the danger implicit in forging attachments to other people. Probably the moments of the film that best illustrate this motif of film noir have thief gang leader Neil as protagonist. His philosophy of life is summarised in the brief conversation he has with his mate Chris (Val Kilmer), an immature young man whose personal life threatens to endanger the whole group. To Neil, living a normal life with wife and children as Chris does is incompatible with his professional attitude towards crime because a thief needs to be free to leave everything the moment he feels the police may have tracked him down. In a postmodern move, his identity is expressed by his lifestyle and this in turn by the empty glass cube of a house he lives in and the smart suit he wears. A brief silent interlude encapsulates these meanings and how they are suggested by the film's attention to style: Neil returns to a dark, empty house, leaves his gun on a glass table with a clink and gazes into the ocean as the moon fills the room with a dark blue light. The shot suggests loneliness and alienation as the underside of Neil's freedom, his clothes evoke the trendy fashions of *Miami Vice* and its overt quotation of Alex Colville's *Pacific* (1967) points to the film's postmodern quality, to its reliance on style to communicate with the audience. The exaggeration of contemporary competition and maximum efficiency matches the traditional individualism of crime films, pointing to *Heat*'s connections with the philosophy of complete dedication to work implicit in gangster and cop movies. The film offers a crime-world version of the doctrine of extreme professionalism that pervaded the yuppie culture of the eighties, whose aesthetic of refinement through minimalism is evoked by Neil's personal style, the design of the spaces he inhabits and by the film's score; in their turn, the three show the film's roots in the experimental art culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Like Mann's more recent *Collateral* (2004), *Heat* explores the liminal world between traditional work and postmodern consumerism, and their complex relation to the formation of contemporary identity: while traditional forms of labour still continue to play a major role in defining identity, the turn to consumerism has produced a multiplicity of new ways through which individuals can gain a sense of themselves. The coexistence of both processes in contemporary societies causes contradictions visible in texts with such a focus on the professions as *Heat* and *Collateral*. Style creates a fashionable look that impinges on the motifs of the crime film: drama here is also the drama of people's changing relationship to their milieu, of the alienation produced by postmodern forms of life, which results in the characters' need to cling to a more traditional ethos, such as Neil's longing for physical and emotional connection or Vincent's search for self-meaning in work. Ultimately, the film uses the attention to style typical of film noir in order to introduce these motifs, reminiscent of the gangster and cop movie genres, thus articulating a hybridity that allows the text to reposition its topics and its representations within the postmodern landscape.

Two other interludes are illustrative of these links with noir and of the ways in which noir articulates the introduction of new generic maps. They are

©Universitat de Barcelona

placed just after Vincent and his men have detected the presence of Neil's gang during a bank robbery downtown, and their appearance has made the thieves run away in separate directions. The first scene has Vincent return home to find out his wife Justine has spent the night with another man, her way of putting an end to a far from satisfying relationship. The next scene shows Neil looking for an escape from the country and a conversation with his girlfriend Eady in which he has to tell her the truth about his secret life: he is not a metals salesman but a thief and wants her to escape with him. The architecture of Vincent's home in the first scene becomes a claustrophobic space through shot compositions that use straight lines to confine the characters to the corners of the frame. The film identifies this architecture with Justine, while pointing out that the cause of their failed marriage is Vincent's incapacity to adapt to that postmodern style, to a new way of life where work is not everything and lifestyle advances to replace the modern primacy of labour. The only object Vincent claims from that space is his television set, which in previous scenes we have seen him watch when he returned home. On it he gets the news that tell him precisely about the crimes that he will soon be asked to look into, the work that has come to stand for his whole life. Domesticity has been reduced to this object, which does not cause him any problems, unlike his wife and stepdaughter. This view of traditional work contrasts with Neil's appropriation of the yuppie culture of the eighties, where style coexisted with work as components of what was then a new male identity. The scene between Neil and Eady is another view on male vulnerability and elaborate form: the sound of birds gradually gives way to a string composition by Terje Rypdal that enhances the dramatic quality of the scene together with its beauty. The visuals lend a coastal retreat near Pallisades a dark blue colour that matches the film's use of blue to hint at loneliness and the demands of professionalism.

In these two segments, the shadowy mise-en-scène reveals a noir aesthetic adapted to contemporary Hollywood colour cinematography which accompanies *Heat*'s turn towards the generic map Fred Pfeil termed "the sensitive-guy film" in the mid-1990s. Both Pfeil and, previously, Susan Jeffords mentioned 1991 as the year in which the representation of the transformed US American man was born in such films as *Regarding Henry* (Mike Nichols), *City Slickers* (Ron Underwood), *The Doctor* (Randa Haines) or *The Fisher King* (Terry Gilliam). The muscular and heroic men of the 1980s were replaced in these films by more sensitive, loving and protective family men after an often traumatic event and its consequent suffering made them realise their former insensitivity. By having these men first emasculated and later re-empowered as still reliable guides of their families, the films managed to apparently criticise male rule while in fact reinforcing it, since it was then justified by the new moral stature of the sensitive man (1995: 37-70; 1993). The melodramatic ingredient of this sensitive-guy genre surfaces in the representations of Vincent and Neil found in these scenes, males whose status as victims is not only accompanied by style but here also thematically signalled by it: style means the postmodern forms of identity Vincent cannot adapt to and the philosophy of no-attachments at first advocated by Neil but which now turns against him.

Deeply enmeshed as they are in the film's flamboyant style, the construction of the characters is tinged with ambivalence when they are seen to exchange their traits and worldviews, a move that introduces the genre of the buddy film. In the course of the narrative, the two characters develop and

©Universitat de Barcelona

approximate the set of values that seems closer to the other: Neil finds a lover, a taste of human warmth that Vincent has already had in his three marriages, while the cop is provided with fresh meat to kindle his hunter instincts, to become even more obsessed with his profession, exactly the professionalism Neil initially represents. Probably the most memorable scene is the meeting between the two protagonists at a roadside coffee shop, which suggests the underlying similarity between the two men, only driven to opposite sides of the law by circumstances. It leads the film towards the generic map of the buddy film, a contemporary genre that, built around a couple of male protagonists, works by both positing an all-male unit and at the same time focusing on the differences that make the buddy alliance impossible: differences of age, class and race which reflect anxiety about the possibility that friendship between men may contain a certain trace of homosexuality (Fuchs 1995). *Heat* does not seem to be channelling any restlessness about homoeroticism here but the structure of the male alliance in difference is certainly being used, in this case in order to construct a representation of male camaraderie that draws on the fluidity between the crime film position of the criminal and the avenger, only to then move towards the victimisation of the two heroes.

Summing up, the elaborate aesthetic of a contemporary crime film like *Heat* becomes the vehicle of a textual complexity, reminiscent of classic noir, that articulates a hybrid narrative. The criminal and the policeman of this postmodern noir enunciate both the social fabric and challenges to it, as they represent a part of the social establishment—work and intimacy—while opening spaces for its questioning. More specifically, Neil and Vincent are immersed in an iconography of success characteristically associated to the yuppie culture of the 1980s, itself partly inherited from the experimental art movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which the film mixes with representations borrowed from the 'sensitive guy' film and the action 'buddy film' of the early 1990s. Both criminal and cop are subservient to the ideology of extreme male individualism and professionalism that holds men need a somewhat antisocial personality to survive in the contemporary cut-throat world. The criminal shows he has adapted to such a form of life, while the cop has apparently failed to adapt, still being caught in relationships of a traditional kind and overwhelmed by the surrounding aesthetics. By gradually making both Neil and Vincent victims, the film voices the same ambivalence towards antisocial masculinity articulated by the sensitive guy films. Like those, *Heat* provides a masculinity that is reinforced through suffering: in *Regarding Henry* suffering made the man a new man, in *Heat* suffering describes the two men as the melodramatic heroes of the postmodern age, men who cannot escape the society that has forced them to become what they are. *Heat* shows how inhuman and antisocial these men are but at the same time praises them for their helplessness and for embracing a changing society. It supports the representation of extreme professionalism and masculinity as endangered cultural formations of postmodernity while at the same time reinforcing their hegemony. This hybridity serves to articulate an ambivalence towards social change that reveals a problematic relation with the consequences not only of modernity, as classic noir did, but also of postmodernity.

When the punishment of the body does appear in the final scene, we get a stylised pietà-like view that combines the typical emphatic resolution of crime stories with echoes of the fraternal male complicity in pain found in the buddy

©Universitat de Barcelona

film. Its operatic visual and aural stylisation articulates the fluidity between the positions crime films reserve for criminal, avenger and victim. McCauley is represented as the quintessential victim, but so is Hannah, who stands by his side as Moby's music and the grandiloquent space of LA's airport finally qualify both as New-Age Christ figures. Like the *Die Hard* or *Lethal Weapon* buddy films, *Heat* exhibits both a denunciation of hyper-masculinity and a defence of man's centrality to the definition of society.

The notion of the crime film macrogenre is thus useful because it helps us discern the influence of stylistic elaboration on the interplay between the several generic maps operative in the film. This in its turn throws light on the ways in which *Heat*'s process of borrowing from the conventions of several genres articulates an ideology circulating in the Hollywood cinema of the early 1990s. The ambivalence surrounding the sensitive guy film ideology finds a vehicle for its expression in aesthetics, which brings in the melodramatic generic map present in the sensitive guy films and makes it compete with the realistic streak of the crime film, a struggle that mirrors the dynamic of classic film noir, where melodrama was also reinforced by style in competition with realistic aesthetics. The same mixture of realism and stylisation that defined film noir reappears today but the presence of a different context of available representations and thematic discourses makes it articulate a contemporary ideology. Ambivalence towards the antisocial nature of masculinity seeps through the interplay of the old crime genre formulas and the new conventions of the buddy film or the boosted melodramatic ingredient fashioned by the sensitive guy film. These new conventions point to the relevance of masculinity and work, or to the representation of the real world and its professions, in ways that classic film noir already hinted at but which contemporary cinema seems all too anxious to bring to the surface, implying the continued presence of these concerns in the contemporary society of the United States, now inflected with the styles of postmodernity. *Heat* is an example of how some classical forms refuse to die out or give way to postmodern forms and motifs. It expresses the desire to cling to representations and mores threatened by a changing society.[1]

Works Cited

Altman, Rick 1999: *Film/Genre*. London: BFI.

Feeney, F. X. and Paul Duncan. eds. 2006: *Michael Mann*. Köln: Taschen.

Foucault, Michel 1995 (1977): *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.

Fuchs, Cynthia J. 1995 (1993): "The Buddy Politic". *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. Eds. S. Cohan and I. R. Hark. London and New York: Routledge. 194-210.

Gearhart, Suzanne 1997: "The Taming of Michel Foucault: New Historicism, Psychoanalysis, and the Subversion of Power". *New Literary History* 28.3: 457-80.

James, Nick 2002: *Heat*. London: BFI.

[1] Research towards this article has been funded by the DGI project no. HUM2007-61183.

©Universitat de Barcelona

Jeffords, Susan 1993: “The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties”. *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. Eds. J. Collins, H. Radner and A. P. Collins. New York and London: Routledge. 196-208.
Kerr, Paul 1996 (1979): “Out of What Past? Notes on the B *film noir*”. Film Noir *Reader*. Eds. A. Silver and J. Ursini. New York: Limelight. 107-27.
Leitch, Thomas 2002: *Crime Films*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP.
Munby, Jonathan 1999: *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from* Little Caesar *to* Touch of Evil. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P.
Naremore, James 1998: *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P.
Pfeil, Fred 1995: *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*. London and New York: Verso.
Rafter, Nicole 2000: *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*. New York: Oxford UP.
Sharrett, Christopher 2002: “Michael Mann: Elegies on the Post-Industrial Landscape”. *Fifty Contemporary* Filmmakers. Ed. Y. Tasker. London and New York: Routledge. 253-63.
Schaffer, William 2004: “Thomas Leitch, *Crime Films*”. *Screening the Past* 17 (December). www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/ [Accessed: 4 July 2008].
Suárez, Juan A. 2007: *Jim Jarmusch*. Urbana: U of Illinois P.
Warshow, Robert 2001 (1948): “The Gangster as Tragic Hero”. *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP. 97-103.

Films and TV Series Cited

City Slickers (Ron Underwood, 1991)
Collateral (Michael Mann, 2004)
Die Hard (John McTiernan, 1988)
The Doctor (Randa Haines, 1991)
Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944)
The Fisher King (Terry Gilliam, 1991)
Heat (Michael Mann, 1995)
The Jericho Mile (TV film, Michael Mann, 1979)
L.A. Takedown (TV film, Michael Mann, 1989)
Lethal Weapon (Richard Donner, 1987)
Miami Vice (TV series, 1984-1990)
Regarding Henry (Mike Nichols, 1991)
Scarface (Howard Hawks, 1932)

©Universitat de Barcelona