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Menis, Susanna (2017) Book review: Triple 9 (2016) Directed by John Hillcoat [film]. [Book Review]

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Triple 9 (2016). Directed by John Hillcoat [film]. USA. Worldview Entertainment and Anonymous Content. Atlanta, Georgia.

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Abstract: This film review addresses the social perception of crime as represented in this crime film. Although a ‘popcorn movie’, it exemplifies a number of socio-criminological concerns. The review critically considers the role of the heroes and the nature of the outlaws within a context of police corruption. The review argues that not only does the film reflect stereotypical understandings of certain social groups, but its complete elimination of all the ‘bad’ characters reveals the ease with which our society is prepared to dispose of certain individuals.

Key words: crime films, heroes, organised crime, police corruption, marginalised social groups

**Triple 9 (2016). Directed by John Hillcoat [film]. USA. Worldview Entertainment and Anonymous Content.**

*Triple 9* is an expression which stands for ‘an officer down’, implying that a police officer has been shot and therefore all police units need to attend the scene. This does not reveal, however, that the film is really about police corruption. In Atlanta, Georgia, a crew of five gang men – including two police officers – are collaborating with the Russian Mafia to retrieve files which will allow the early release from prison of the Russian Mafia boss. This is done through a heist in which a police officer is shot on the other side of town, allowing the rest of the crew to complete the robbery while all police units attend the 999 call. The files, however, are destroyed before reaching their destination, while four of the crew members are killed and one is fatally injured.

Watching Hollywood productions very rarely, I was caught by surprise at *Triple 9*’s dynamic; ‘Was this a parody?’ I asked at the end of it. I was told that it was a popcorn movie, and this was confirmed by the reviews I read thereafter. ‘Popcorn movie’ is slang for ‘a film that appeals to a mass audience’ (Collins Dictionary, 2016), and it usually does not have ‘serious dramatic content, a weighty message, or intellectual depth’ (Your Dictionary, 2016). Can I not watch a film anymore without ‘seeing’ a ‘truth’ behind its apparently genuine and entertaining facade? I did not enjoy the film, not least because the storyline was, to put it simply, boring. However, I was intrigued by the visible popular culture and stereotypical representations portrayed in the movie. You might eat popcorn while watching *Triple 9*, but the meaning I was struck with while watching this film reflects, in my view, a number of socio-criminological debates. I will outline these below; however, my final argument

suggests that the elimination (or else, the killing) of all characters of the film but the two heroes represents what Colin Dayan refers to as the disposal of ‘nothing more than dispensable stuff’ (2016: 2).

From a criminological perspective *Triple 9* is a crime thriller which fulfils both classifications devised by Rafter (2001, cited in Yar, 2010): ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ crime films. This dual approach is not surprising and it is typical of recent crime films; according to Yar this reflects the ‘ambivalent meaning of crime that circulates in society as a whole’ (2010: 84). On one hand, the emphasis on police corruption and the hazards of crime gives ‘a pessimistic vision of social conflict’ (Rafter, 2001, cited in Yar 2010: 77) suggesting that the criminal justice system is rotten at its core and crime is here to stay. On the other hand, however, all is not lost and the two heroes, law abiding police officers, defeat those transgressors, thus restoring the ‘fundamental decency of law-enforcers’ (Rafter, 2001, cited in Yar 2010: 76). This is also significant in that it responds to a possible social anxiety; as Jewkes puts it, ‘serious offences *can* be solved’ (italic original, 2015: 196). Not only do the two heroes uncover, apprehend and ‘eliminate’ the two corrupt police officers, the storyline also makes a point by suggesting that the authorities are in control of one of the most socially threatening criminal activities, that is, organised crime. The international Latino street gang MS-13 and the Russian Mafia are depicted as uncannily violent and socially immoral, against a background which resonates a romantic vision of law, justice, authority and citizenship: ‘I would like to make a difference,’ (0:36:52) says one of the heroes.

It could be argued that cultural pluralism is maintained in the movie, however in line with older crime films (Rafter, 2000) the production portrays the heroes representing authority as American white males, while all the outlaw characters are either African American, Latin American or Russian-Israeli Jews. It is to some extent disconcerting that the production has

chosen to emphasise the lawlessness of traditionally marginalised social groups; indeed, a cultural and religious tension is sensed throughout the film. For example, the stereotypical representation of the Russian Jew as a capitalist monster is reflected through the lavish life enjoyed by the Mafia boss's wife, while the size of her Star of David necklace pendant stands ostentatiously against the discreet Christian cross worn by one of the heroes. Further tension is felt when one of the heroes is stopped by an African American street preacher; posters behind the preacher read 'God Hate America' and 'white man = Thief' (0:16:12). Lastly, in *Triple 9* those who contravene the law appear to pay for it with their life; death is inevitable; their life has no value in a law abiding society.

The meaning of the role of the main female character in *Triple 9* is particularly worth observing from a socio-criminological point of view. The Mafia boss's wife has taken centre stage in the management of her husband's business since he was sentenced to imprisonment. She is portrayed as a fearless woman, and although trusted by her husband, her new role is less appreciated by the gang members; as one of them said: 'Vassili kept things tight. At least you knew where you were. But this bitch? I don't know' (0:00:53). Indeed, this (unwelcomed) female domination over a group of independent and uncannily violent men is dramatically broken towards the end of the film when the gang members cause her car to explode while she is inside it. Drawing upon Tzanelli et al. (2005), this scene resolves a general social anxiety concerning female emancipation and empowerment, especially when this results in deviant unfeminine behaviour.

The meaning of the role of the Mafia boss's wife is perhaps the most complex in the film. First, she seems to represent a social threat as a Mafia boss. Moreover, she comes across as deceitful when she uses a father's care and love for his child to convince the gang member to successfully complete the heist by threatening he will never see the child again. However,

another meaning can be attributed to her role. Although loyalty to the family is a core characteristic of Mafia movies (Jewkes, 2015) it is usually a male Mafia boss who is at the centre of the storyline. In *Triple 9*, the wife's effort to maintain the business while her husband is away, the love she expresses towards him throughout the storyline, her care for her sister, and the visible affection between herself and her nephew – all these tend to emphasise her role as the family caregiver, rather than, as it usually would in Mafia movies, a successful 'supreme social authority' (Jewkes, 2015: 196). Indeed, contrary to expectations of the Mafia movie genre, with her death the family is displaced: her husband remains in prison and her sister and nephew move back to Israel. It could be argued that the film merely reflects popular views and fears about deviant women (Jewkes, 2015); or alternately, the storyline might be suggesting that the place of women is elsewhere. Indeed, twenty minutes into the film the Mafia boss calls from prison to confirm with his wife that the heist will take place; in the kitchen, wearing an apron, her hair collected at the top of her head while she is baking, she confirms that the plan is secured. Indeed, the social discourse that a woman's place is really in the kitchen is still a striking one.

Jewkes stresses the importance of the existence of violence-related scenes; without these, she argues, the film will 'leave the audience disappointed and unfulfilled' (2015: 196). Indeed, we find a similar rationale in the case of mass media – the more potent the news-worthiness of a story is, the greater the ratings and sales. This does not mean, however, that the effects of the media, and in particular visual media, should be taken at face value. Indeed, Yar (2010, p.86) confirms that crime films reflect 'a deep-seated feature of our common culture disposition'; while Rafter argues that this genre helps 'shape beliefs so fundamental that we are scarcely aware that we have them' (2000, p.47). I would like to take this even further by drawing upon Colin Dayan's perspective on the elimination of 'dispensable stuff' (2016). In

her argument, Dayan hints at a general ‘collective cruelty’ characterising twenty-first century society. However, it is not so much the killings in *Triple 9*, as a violent activity, which strikes a cord with Dayan’s perspective; rather, it is the ‘management of what is deemed refuse’ (2016: 2). All the outlaws in *Triple 9* are represented as undesirable counterparts to and nemesis of the ‘good’ American citizen; the heroes are white males while the outlaws are anything but. I argue that the death of all characters but the two heroes reveals the ease with which our society is prepared, outright, to dispose of certain individuals. Of course, some will find this thought outrageous; and yet, I was once told that reality is even worse than what is depicted in the movies.

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