

Heat – an Appraisal

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This essay on *Heat* offers an analysis of the film and its effects on the writer. It provides an overview of the film and its ambitions and then situates it, perhaps quite contentiously, within a small group of select films that emerged from Hollywood between 1995 and 1999. The discussion of the film itself centres on key sequences from the narrative that exemplify the role of its two main characters, with regards to the work's overall function as a critique of Western culture.

Heat is now 16 years old and is, in some respects, beginning to show its age. Very much a film of its time and place, *Heat* distilled numerous Western societal concerns that, as we now know from the privileged position of retrospective analysis, were assuming greater and greater prevalence as the 1990s came to a close. This was a time prior to the new millennial clarion call of 9/11 where the West, and specifically America, luxuriated in its relative wealth and perceived excellence. Clinton was in office and economic opportunities appeared to be everywhere, for the broker and bank robber alike.

There was however a consequent vacuousness to the times, a spiritual and philosophical ennui that arose from the picket-fenced perfection. In the few years that followed *Heat*, films like *The Matrix*, *Fight Club* and *American Beauty*, all from 1999, were released, taking the polemic hinted at in Mann's film and energising it to the point of near absurdity. What these later films pummelled into bloody submission, and *Heat* quietly but eruditely discussed, was our emerging anxiety with our jobs, our relentless pursuit of material goods, our unquestioned nesting instincts and our largely unchallenged assumptions about love, gender roles and social conformity.

The films all presented, in various manifestations, a niggling suspicion that beneath this facile surface veneer, this patina of plenty, lay an alternate reality that would provide emancipation from the lie of our lives. Contemporary Western culture was nothing more than an artificial construct of our own (or in the case of *The Matrix*, the machines') making that had by now – the mid to late 90s – become so entrenched that it was blinding us from the truth. In the words of *The Matrix*:

Neo: "What truth?"

Morpheus: "That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch . . . a prison for your mind."

While these were not new philosophical ideas by any stretch, cinematically or otherwise, there was something very peculiar and significant about the sheer confluence of films dealing with them thematically at the dawn of the 21st Century.

The first of many

It is in *Heat* that this notion of a *fin de siècle* existentialist dissatisfaction with our lives found one its most skilled expressions in 1990s American cinema. Through its exploration of two individuals who eschew conventional careers, reject the materialistic lifestyle obsession, make minimal use of the domestic arena, and spectacularly dismiss social conformity, intimacy and gender mediation (the notion that the man can be tempered and integrated into domesticity),

Heat anticipated and attended to the intense sense of social malaise that entered into Western cinema as the 90s drew to a close.

Within the narrative construct of the film, the lives of Neil McCauley and Vincent Hanna constituted one possible response to this gnawing and seemingly American sensation that there must be something more to our lives. The American Dream, something of an unassailable national ethos by the early 90s, was, within the fiction of *Heat*'s drama, viewed less as the yardstick of civilisation and more as an empty vessel, a failed project for the creation of social and economic prosperity. In its place *Heat* posited the uniquely self-determined lives of its characters, people who were autodidactic and elected to exist out with the fold of societal normalcy, both through their career choices and their philosophies.

The backdrop to this revolutionary project was of course Los Angeles, America's most modern metropolis and a place unencumbered by any significant history or expectation. At that time, in this film, L.A. represented the future, a place where the possibility for a new kind of life experience could be pursued. It was a city that fostered a fresh brand of moral relativism, where the kind of extreme activities that both Vincent and Neil engaged in were permitted. In *Heat* the city has a sense of uniformity and purpose (that would have all but disappeared by the time of Mann's *Heat* in 2004, replaced by an interest in traversing the different ethnic domains that fragment L.A.), a distinct homogeneity, like one "mass alien landing", as was noted in *Premiere* magazine's 1996 review of the film.[1]

Under the aegis of cinematographer Dante Spinotti, the city had lost its familiar, anaemic yellow hue, its Vaseline soft focus and its beach culture inflection and assumed an altogether different persona. In the pre-millennial mid 1990s, the Los Angeles of *Heat* offered a post-millennial