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Introduction

An LAPD detective and a master thief discuss their respective lives over a cup of coffee. They comment upon their chosen careers, their relations with women, the dreams that haunt them, and the consensus that neither would change how they are. Each man has a personal notion of who he is and what he is doing and, although they are different, their commitment to their chosen beliefs, the individual philosophy each man lives by, is recognisable to the other. They sympathise with the other's position, yet both are prepared to kill the other if necessary. This commitment is the manner in which they have defined their existence, and the preceding and subsequent events are the consequences of their own personal philosophies, giving them complete freedom and responsibility for the world that they inhabit.

The scene takes place in *Heat* (1995), directed by Michael Mann and starring Al Pacino as LAPD detective Vincent Hanna and Robert De Niro as master thief Neil McCauley. *Heat* raises questions about the absence and assignation of meaning in life, suggesting that the only source of meaning for an individual can be that which the individual decides upon. Therefore, the film presents an existential conceit. From this conceit, *Heat* raises further questions about the interaction of existentialism and the social engagement of the film's protagonists.

The relationship between these two concepts, existentialism and social engagement, is the central line of inquiry of this book. All of Mann's films dramatise existential philosophy, exploring the protagonists' worldviews and the issues raised by these views. The films dramatise the philosophy through what I shall define as the protagonists' *existential guiding ethic*, which is a personally decided code of conduct applied by the protagonists to their social roles within the world of the film. In some

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cases these roles relate to crime or law enforcement, seven of Mann's films taking place in this social arena. In the other films, the existential guiding ethic relates to a broader context of historical developments. In every film, there is tension between the existential guiding ethic and the protagonist's level of social engagement. In some cases such as *Heat* and *Collateral* (2004), tension leads to isolation. In others like *Ali* (2001) and *The Jericho Mile* (1979), the tension is resolved by the society of the protagonist embracing him and his ethic, due to his positive effect upon those around him. These different resolutions demonstrate that Mann's films do not perform a straightforward endorsement of existentialism. By relating the existential trajectory of the narratives to the differing levels of social engagement depicted within the films, I argue that Mann's cinema explores both the advantages and dangers of the existential guiding ethic.

My book adds to the growing literature on this particular filmmaker. Michael Mann is a prominent director and producer in contemporary Hollywood, who maintains a high level of control throughout the film-making process. In the last thirty years he has directed eleven films, including two for television, and executive produced several TV series, *Miami Vice* (1984–9), *Crime Story* (1986–8) and *Robbery Homicide Division* (2002) (these TV shows are not discussed as part of this project as they are more diffuse and do not share the similarities of the films). Over the course of his career, Mann has collected awards and nominations for much of his work, among them Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Director and Adapted Screenplay for his fact-based drama, *The Insider* (1999). He is a head of the production company Forward Pass, Inc., and his most recent project, *Public Enemies*, was released in July 2009.

While Mann's films can be placed within established genres, their philosophical content can complicate easy categorisation. Each film features determined protagonists who maintain commitment to their particular personal beliefs, and in doing so drive the narrative and inflect the world of the film. The film's style inflects the diegesis from the protagonist's perspective to show how the beliefs affect the characters' lives, displaying the freedom and responsibility they have for the worlds that they inhabit. The films question the choices made by the protagonists, often in relation to the level of social engagement occupied by the protagonist. Mann's films are not didactic or instructive, but are problematic and frequently ambiguous, inviting the viewer to engage with the questions that the films present, including those relating to social engagement and existentialism.

Existential philosophy is a term given to a collection of works that deal with the individual who decides upon the meaning of existence and then lives according to those decisions. Writers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus formulated theories of personal freedom and responsibility, often revolting against traditional philosophy. This school of thought began in the mid-19th century and progressed during the early 20th century, especially in France during the Nazi occupation. While there is considerable variety within existentialist thought, there are certain commonalities, which can be considered the general principles of existentialist philosophy. These principles form the basis for the critical model of this study, in combination with analyses of existential philosophers by scholars such as David E. Cooper (1999), Walter F. Kaufman (2004) and Robert Charles Solomon (1974).

Perhaps most fundamental to existentialism is the notion of personal responsibility, not only for one's actions but also for the meaning of such actions and the overall meaning of one's existence. Rather than trusting to abstract notions such as morality and the divine, existentialism argues that responsibility for answering fundamental questions such as the meaning of life and what is right must be answered by the individual, without reliance upon external sources of meaning. A paradox of existentialism therefore is that the individual has both the freedom to decide and the burden of deciding upon meaning, described by existentialist scholar David E. Cooper as both a 'sober anxiety' and an 'unshakeable joy' (1999: 128).

This paradox is a recurring concern in Mann's *oeuvre*, as his protagonists all demonstrate the sober anxiety of having to determine the meaning of their lives, and living with the consequences of such determinations. Despite the anxiety, they demonstrate the unshakeable joy of living according to what they have determined. For example, Vincent Hanna in *Heat* understands that his relentless pursuit of criminals distances him from his family, yet maintains his pursuit with passion and vigour. Similarly, Rain Murphy (Peter Strauss) in *The Jericho Mile* understands that running the Olympic Mile will not release him from his life sentence, but he pursues his record-breaking time regardless. Mann's films therefore perform *dramatisations* of existentialism, as the decisions made by the protagonists are not theoretical but practical, influencing their lives and the lives of those they interact with.

This interaction is an important aspect of existentialism, as the philosophy stresses the importance of understanding one's surrounding environment and those who inhabit it. In order to determine meaning,

one must have experience upon which to formulate a decision, and this experience comes from a sensitive habitation of one's environment, in order to understand where one is, where one has come from and where one will go. The existential decision, therefore, is one made with understanding of one's freedom and responsibility, understanding that is reached through lived experience.

Lived experience according to this understanding forms the action in Mann's films. For Mann's protagonists, the point of awareness tends to have occurred before the plot of the film has begun, and the film's narrative is concerned with showing the consequences of such decisions and the maintenance of existential awareness. The existential individual must continue to inhabit their environment sensitively and understand the experiences that they undergo. A major experience that this book discusses is the protagonist's engagement with others as, although existentialism requires understanding of one's environment, single-minded pursuit and maintenance of one's existential choice is shown to be potentially isolating. It is the tension between existentialism and social engagement that forms the central argument of this book.

Mine is far from the first book to link existentialism and film, as the influences of, and upon, existential philosophy can be traced alongside cultural developments. As existential philosophy was developed and disseminated during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, crime fiction, especially hard-boiled literature and *film noir*, was also in development and distribution, a parallel development noted by scholars such as Lee Horsley (2001), Mark T. Conard (2006) and Martin Rubin (1999). Within 20th century crime fiction, both literary and cinematic, the protagonist decides upon a specific code of conduct by which to live. This is similar to the existentialist who must decide upon the meaning of their existence.

The majority of Mann's films focus upon crime or crime-fighting, including *Thief* (1981), *Manhunter* (1986), *L. A. Takedown* (1989), *Heat*, *Collateral*, *Miami Vice* (2006) and *Public Enemies* (2009), as well as the TV series he produced, *Miami Vice*, *Crime Story* and *Robbery Homicide Division*. The self-defined code of conduct described above is apparent in crime fiction, and Mann himself has commented upon it. In an interview for the American Film Institute's documentary *The Directors: The Films of Michael Mann* (Robert J. Emery, 2001), Mann describes the protagonists of such stories as 'auto-didactic, self-taught' men (and all his protagonists *are* men) who have developed personal codes of conduct and modes of behaviour for their specific environments. They have

decided what is important to them since, within the context of the films at least, there is no meaning except that which one decides upon.

This combination of a personal code of conduct and self-determination of meaning is the existential guiding ethic. By following his ethic, the protagonist's goal is *to be what he purposes*. This term is used throughout the book as an expression of the protagonist being what he wishes to be by living according to his purpose. This is the freedom and responsibility of existentialism, discussed in detail in Chapter 2. However, a frequent consequence of the guiding ethic is isolation, the commitment of the Mann Men leading them to solitude. Mann's films raise questions about the validity of their choices, particularly in relation to the attachments that the protagonists have to other characters, which in some cases are lost and in others maintained.

Attachments are an important existential concern: although individuals may decide for themselves what is meaningful, that does not mean they exist in a vacuum. Both existential writers and Mann's films often insist upon the *need* for meaningful associations. In what I define as Mann's history films, *The Keep* (1983), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *The Insider* (1999) and *Ali* (2001), meaningful associations take the form of a *social conscience*, as the protagonists actively seek to improve the world in which they live. The social consciences take a variety of forms, and again the films interrogate the existential conceits, discussing the value of acting upon this conscience.

Through specific case studies, I argue that in all of Mann's films the protagonists attempt to be what they purpose by following their existential guiding ethics. Some of these existential journeys are endorsed by the films, while others are criticised. The varying assessments of existentialism in the films constitute a non-philosophical critique of the *application* of this philosophy. *Existentialism and Social Engagement in the Films of Michael Mann* analyses the tension between the existential guiding ethic and the different levels of social engagement reached by the protagonists.

In *Thief*, Frank (James Caan) must apply his prison-based beliefs to the world outside, only to find himself choosing between these beliefs and the bourgeois middle-class life he desires. Will Graham (William Petersen) of *Manhunter* must confront his own abhorrence of murder by empathising with a serial killer in order to prevent more deaths, therefore overcoming his own psychological instability. Vincent Hanna and Neil McCauley of *Heat* are so consumed by their professions that they are only able to relate to their opposites, each man severing all other

attachments. In *Collateral*, the assassin Vincent (Tom Cruise) has become so defined by his profession that he appears to have no identity beyond it, seemingly losing his humanity through his existential guiding ethic and disengagement from others. By contrast, *Collateral's* other protagonist Max (Jamie Foxx) discovers his freedom to be what he purposes through his compassion for others. Undercover cops Sonny Crockett (Colin Farrell) and Ricardo Tubbs (Jamie Foxx) of *Miami Vice* experience tension between the fiction of their profession and their notions of personal identity, and use romantic relationships as anchors to a reality they seldom inhabit. Each of these films express tension between the guiding ethic of the heroes and their levels of social engagement, as the heroes all experience solitude and, in some cases, desolation.

In the other films, the heroes may also experience isolation, but they maintain a sense of social conscience, which makes their existential journeys different from those in the crime films. Dr. Theodore Cuza (Ian McKellen) of *The Keep* believes he can save the victims of the Nazi regime, but his goal expands into actually destroying the Third Reich, this ambition distancing him from his family. The social conscience of Hawkeye (Daniel Day-Lewis) in *The Last of the Mohicans* relates to the emerging nation of America, in opposition to the decline of oppressive European empires and Native Americans. Jeffrey Wigand (Russell Crowe) and Lowell Bergman (Al Pacino) in *The Insider* attempt to maintain integrity and personal honesty in a world governed by corporate concerns and the dehumanising effects of late capitalism. In *Ali*, the eponymous protagonist (Will Smith) uses his iconic status to inspire the underprivileged black people of the world, while maintaining his personal beliefs in the face of social and financial pressure.

When these protagonists are what they purpose, they achieve *existential authenticity*, the culmination of their existential journey. The films ask if authenticity is worthwhile, or if the existential guiding ethic ultimately leads to a hollow life. The recurring question is that of social engagement: whether the protagonist's commitment to his own purpose can be accommodated with his relations to others and, if not, whether the commitment is justified.

By studying Mann's films in relation to philosophy, my argument will engage with a number of academic debates. Within Film Studies, Michael Mann is a film-maker disregarded by scholars until recently, with only five English language books published on him and his work. The first of these, by Mark Steensland (2002), gives a brief history and assessment of each film, although in less than one hundred pages no in-depth analysis is performed. Nick James has published on *Heat*

(2002), giving a detailed discussion of Mann's crime drama that identifies a number of issues within the film; however the book is again limited by length. F. X. Feeney and Paul Duncan have compiled a detailed overview of Mann's career (2006), but their book provides a series of descriptive accounts of the films rather than any critical study.

Only two detailed texts exist on this director, both of which deliver in-depth analysis of Mann's *oeuvre*. The first is *Blood in the Moonlight: Michael Mann and Information Age Cinema* by Mark E. Wildermuth (2005), who positions Mann in relation to discussions of informatics and the post-human, specifically how the interaction of humans with information systems leads to human experience becoming 'denatured, characterised as nothing more than disembodied cultural and linguistic constructs' (6). Wildermuth relates Mann's work to the writings of Jean Baudrillard and N. Katherine Hayles, seeing Mann as an analyst of the dehumanising effects of information systems. In doing so, he locates Mann's work within a very specific academic debate, one that is also found in Christopher Sharrett's article 'Michael Mann: Elegies on the Post-Industrial Landscape' (2001: 253–63).

In contrast to the thematic approach taken by Wildermuth (and myself), Steven Rybin's *The Cinema of Michael Mann* (2007) analyses Mann's *oeuvre* in terms of style, with precise dissections of the films' cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, editing and sound. While Rybin's analysis is insightful and useful, it does not create many links between Mann's films, discussing each of them as a specific text before concluding that Mann's work continues some of the themes of the 'New Hollywood' of the 1970s (187–213). Rybin discusses postmodernism, also an important consideration for Sharrett and Wildermuth, so this is an area for further study. It is a somewhat forced argument though, since Sharrett actively disregards *The Keep* and *The Last of the Mohicans* in his essay and, although Wildermuth discusses every film, his emphasis on technological forms of erasing discourse, freedom and identity is somewhat tenuous in relation to these historical films. By concentrating on style, Rybin avoids the potentially restrictive practice of thematic analysis, but his discussion tells the reader little about what the films may actually be saying.

As an alternative approach to these analyses, I discuss Mann's films as dramatisations of existential philosophy. Previous critics have related Mann's work to existentialism. James mentions *Heat's* 'rhetoric of existential motivation' (2002: 7), while Steensland labels *Thief* an 'existential crime movie' (2002: 26), and *Miami Vice* is described as featuring the existential crisis of Mann's protagonists (Fuller, 2006: 17). As Chapter 2

will demonstrate, various writers have combined philosophy and film, for example Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas A. Wartenberg (1995) as well as Christopher Falzon (2002) argue that film can explore a philosophical theory or that philosophy can be used to interpret film. By arguing that Mann's films engage with existentialism and even criticise it, this project contributes to the widening interdisciplinary study of film and philosophy.

Part I, 'Mann and Movies', lays the foundation upon which my reading of Mann's films takes place. Chapter 1 discusses Mann as a filmmaker, discussing his position as an auteur in light of various arguments on authorship. These arguments are related to Mann's schooling and career, the critical reception of his films and his levels of control within contemporary Hollywood.

Chapter 2 outlines the relationship between film and philosophy, the existential theories drawn upon in this book, and an initial application of these theories to Mann's work. As an opening example, Mann's first film, *The Jericho Mile*, is discussed as an allegory of Albert Camus' 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (Kaufman, 2004 [translation]: 375–8). *The Jericho Mile* shows the existential journey leading to a triumphant conclusion, the film affirming the protagonist's existential guiding ethic. The concerns raised and resolved in this film are subjected to further problematisation and interrogation in later films, as argued in subsequent chapters through the questioning of existential authenticity and its value.

Part II, 'Crime and Solitude', discusses the different existential journeys taken by the criminal, the policeman or the civilian affected by crime in Mann's crime films. The protagonists discussed in Chapters 3 to 7 shape their worlds according to their self-defined codes of conduct, and in doing so, often find that they exist in isolation, unable to relate to others because of their overriding endeavours. In some cases, the protagonists become so committed to their pursuits that they become less than human, which raises questions about their need to relate to others in a non-adversarial sense. When one is what one purposes, but has no social engagement, the film suggests that a person is left desolate.

In Part III, 'History and Social Conscience', social relations become more prominent, as the existential heroes relate to others through their social consciences. The existential journeys of these protagonists intersect with broader concerns as the heroes are in a position to affect society beyond their own interests and pursuits. They may have grand ambitions, such as speaking out for or defending their own people, or even becoming a champion for their chosen group. Others have a more

modest ambition, but in doing what they believe is right, they also engage in a broader set of historical events or developments.

Chapters 8 to 12 analyse the intersection between these events and the existential guiding ethics of the protagonists. The films advocate social responsibility, as they depict their heroes making the effort to change their worlds for the better, while maintaining their own beliefs. The films demonstrate that even if sacrifice is necessary, an individual's sense of self can still be maintained.

In the Conclusion I assess the overall view that Mann's films take of the relationship between existential philosophy and social engagement, and discuss *Public Enemies* as a culmination and combination of Mann's concerns. Understanding Mann's films through their engagement with philosophy illuminates their meaning more completely and comprehensively than the incomplete and sometimes forced readings by the critics mentioned above. Rather than simply advocating any single line of thought, Mann's films work as demonstrations of the need for and consequences of personal freedom and responsibility for one's own existence.

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