

The Social Conservatism of Hollywood

[warning: spoilers]

The new *Uncut Gems* is further evidence for a thesis I've long maintained: Contrary to popular opinion, Hollywood makes a *lot* of socially conservative movies. When you strip away the glamorous actors and cool music, the message is clear: Live a responsible bourgeois life or you will soon be severely punished.

This is most obvious for hard-boiled crime films. The lead characters in such stories engage in an array of impulsive, brutal, and parasitical behaviors. Before the movie ends, almost all of the characters have been shot, stabbed, beaten, imprisoned, or ostracized. Many are dead, often in grotesquely inventive ways. Howard Ratner, the lead character in *Uncut Gems*, repeatedly commits fraud and adultery. He spins a web of lies and makes high-stakes gambles. In each scene, he acts on his worst impulses. For every success his duplicity brings, two failures spring. When he thinks he's won, another criminal murders him. Even if Ratner had survived, though, his dishonesty and lechery would have cost him his family.

The same goes for *The Godfather* saga, *Goodfellas* (or any Scorsese crime movie), *Pulp Fiction* (or any Tarantino crime movie), *Fargo* (or any Coen brothers crime movie), *Snatch* (or any Cockney crime movie), as well as *Scarface*, *New Jack City*, and *Boyz n the Hood*. In crime movies, people who engage in criminal behavior suffer, usually at the hands of their fellow criminals. If they don't get you, the cops will.

While crime movies focus on men, their female characters also catch hell. Women who sleep with criminals – usually against their family's advice – end up pregnant and abandoned, if not beaten or murdered. Don Corleone treats his wife with old-world gentility, but she still lives to see her eldest son full of lead. (Michael, her youngest son, has the filial piety to delay the murder of his elder brother until after her death).

The message of all this cinema: Follow the path of bourgeois virtue. Work hard, keep the peace, abstain from alcohol, have very few sexual partners, and keep your whole family *far* away from anyone who lives otherwise. Think about how many fictional characters would have lived longer if they never set foot in a bar.

Is this the message the writers *intend* to send? Unlikely. Instead, they try to create *engrossing* stories – and end up weaving morality tales.

True, Hollywood could make movies where criminals are “victims of their toxic social environment.” It could make movies where the people who face retribution are the self-righteous bourgeoisie who “created toxic social environment in the first place.” (This is

arguably the plot of *Natural Born Killers*, though that's giving it too much credit). Such stories, however, would be sorely lacking in emotional truth. You can't credibly depict the life of a criminal without showing his choices; and when you see his choices, you see all the ways he could have done otherwise, "toxic social environment" notwithstanding.

Similarly, you could make crime movies that end before the criminals get their comeuppance. Yet such stories would be dramatically inert. If a bank robber gets killed on his eighth heist, audiences want to see heists number 1, 2, and 8. If the bad guy gets it in the end, who cares about his intermediate successes? Let's fast forward to the Day of Reckoning.

Does this mean that Hollywood movies actually crime? I doubt it. The viewers most in need of lessons in bourgeois virtue are probably too impulsive to reflect on the moral of the story. They're captivated instead by the gunplay and machismo. Yet if you're paying attention, the moral of these stories remains: Unless your parents are criminals, listen to your parents.