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A Content Analysis of Film Synopses, 1945-91

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Abstract

       Is the number of films containing crime increasing? If so, for which kinds of films? Using a sample of synopses for all films released in Britain between 1945 and 1991 we identify shifts in the major film genres and their proportion of crime contents. The overall proportion of crime films remains constant, as does the proportion of crime contents in all film genres. But this masks underlying differences. Content analysis reveals which genres, including those with both high and low crime contents, are rising or falling in popularity. It also reveals that for some genres, the proportion of films containing crime is rising. No differences were found between British and American films in terms of proportion of crime contents by genre. This historical content analysis provides an overview of trends in the inclusion of crime in film. These trends offer a broader context for the interpretation of more detailed analyses of single films. The implications for the audience's expectations of films are discussed.

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<u>Introduction</u>

From the earliest days of the cinema, there has been public concern over the putative

relationship between representations of crime in film and the incidence of crime in everyday life

(Blumer & Hauser, 1933; Dale, 1935; Garofolo, 1981; Pearson, 1983). A supposed increase in

media depictions of crime violence and mediated cultures of lawlessness and disrespect are

popularly held to be responsible for the supposed rise in crime, violence and disrespect in

society. Such concerns are premised on assumptions about the nature of media depictions. When

such assumptions are examined by content analysis, it appears that there has been no

straightforward increase in crime representations over time (for analyses of newspaper content,

see Antunes, 1977; Barak, 1994; for analyses of television content, see Cumberbatch et al., 1995;

Docherty, 1990; Dominick, 1973; Lichter et al., 1991). Most content analyses have focused on

television and the press. Perhaps surprisingly, the representation of crime in film has rarely been

addressed systematically (although see Dale, 1935 for an early study). What are the trends, if any

in cinema representations of crime, violence and moral and social norms? Undoubtedly, the

popular assumption that increasing depictions of crime and violence in the media are partly

responsible for rising crime in society is too simple. Yet Afictional films reveal something of the

dreams, desires, displacements, and, in some cases, social and political issues confronting

American society≅ (Quart & Auster, 1991, p. 2). In so doing, films may contribute to the cultural

circulation and evolution of meanings (Turner, 1993). Even this more cautious view, however,

suffers from a paucity of empirical data regarding trends in crime representations.

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Our research is pertinent to two further domains of media research; textual analyses of films and audience reception of film. In relation to textual analyses, we advocate complementarity between quantitative analyses of trends across films and the more common interpretive analyses of individual films. This is not to disagree with the critique of content analysis which stresses the importance of context in interpreting the meaning of, say, crime representations (e.g., Burgelin, 1972). However, this position may be taken too far (Thomas, 1994), resulting in a reliance on interpretations of just one or a few films judged interesting in relation to an analytic framework, whether semiotic (Stam et al., 1992), feminist (Kuhn, 1990), postmodern (Denzin, 1991) or psychoanalytic (Mulvey, 1989). We suggest that quantitative trends are also important, for content analyses provide a valuable context for interpreting the origins or innovations of specific texts. While individual studies may provide excellent analyses of particular films or film genres (e.g., the Western, Wright 1975; film noir, Copjec, 1993; or war films, Selig, 1993), they tend not to relate the genre to developments in other genres and thus fail to situate their analysis within overall historical shifts in the content or context of films (Altman, 1984).

The analysis of crime depictions in film is also important for the study of audience reception. The inclusion of crime in film would seem to offer two kinds of appeal to the popular audience. The first rests on the links between crime, action, violence, and fear. The second arises from the sense in which crime represents a challenge to the moral order. In short, crime-related events readily support a dramatic, emotive narrative, often containing violence or the threat of violence, while the treatment of these events offers an opportunity in which society, with its codes of good and bad, normative and deviant, can be affirmed or questioned (Sparks, 1992;

Thompson, 1993). Before we can understand the response of cinema audiences, research must establish what films were available to them. As Neale (1980) points out, genre provides Aa means of regulating memory and expectation, a means of containing the possibilities of reading≅ (p. 55). Some have speculated that, for example, vigilante crime films may undermine respect for authority or that classic Western may have fostered values of loyalty and community (Quart & Auster, 1991; Wright, 1975). The analysis of trends in film genres is surely a first step in the investigation of possible trends in audience expectation, interpretation and effects (Livingstone, 1996).

In summary, we suggest that a broad, historical content analysis of crime in films will shed light on assumptions about trends in crime in films, will contextualise the interpretation of detailed analyses of specific media representations of crime, and will inform analyses of audience responses. Our central question, then, is whether the generic content of feature films has changed since 1945 and, if so, how these generic shifts affect the context for crime representations. Our focus is on trends in films in which crime plays a central role in the narrative, although the difficulty of determining whether or not a film contains representations of crime must be acknowledged as many films contain at least a passing mention of crime or the criminal justice system. First, we ask about the relative prominence or otherwise of the 'crime film' in relation to the fortunes of other film genres since 1945. Second, we ask about the occurrence of central events or characters related to crime in other film genres. Trends in genres containing crime can thereby be linked to historical and generic trends observable within the films released during this period.[1]

Method

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<u>The Sample of Film Synopses</u>

Our sample was based on all films released in Britain during 1945-91, not just critical or box office successes. It was not considered feasible to view a sizable proportion of films in the sample, both for reasons of time and availability of the films. Unless a box office or critical success, many films are now impossible to obtain, particularly early films, compounding the difficulties for historical analysis. This may explain why few content analyses of films are conducted.

The process of assigning a film to a generic category and determining whether or not it contains crime content central to the narrative can be achieved with reasonable accuracy without viewing, provided sufficient descriptive information is available. In classifying major themes of a film on the basis of a written precis, we follow the methodology established by Dale (1935) in his early study of film trends. We acknowledge, as did he, that subtle questions relating to film tone, treatment, etc. can only be addressed by a qualitative analysis based on viewing a small sample of films. Clearly, content analysis involves a trade-off between depth and breadth which, for the present study, is biased towards breadth so as to complement other more in-depth studies.

The limitations of adequate reference sources for films covering the period also places a restriction on historical analysis. Speed's <u>Annual Film Review</u> is the only publication which consistently and comprehensively lists and summarises all the releases in Britain by year throughout our period.[2] Of the total set of films released in Britain, we randomly sampled 20% every second year. This resulted in a final sample of 1440 film synopses to be coded (10% of the film population). This was judged sufficient to provide a reliable indication of trends in crime contents and genre classification. As the number of films released each year in Britain has

dropped steadily over the past 50 years, from approximately 400 to some 250 films each year, the numbers of films per year in the sample varied.

Coding Procedure

Following pilot research, a coding scheme was devised as follows. (i) <u>Crime contents</u> assessed whether the synopsis included mention of a crime, criminal or the criminal justice system. A synopsis includes the key elements of a narrative: main characters, main action, and setting, together with genre information. The assumption was that if crime contents were sufficiently salient to be included in the synopsis then they play a central part in the film. (ii) <u>Film genre</u> assessed the generic categorisation of films, using ten categories as follows:[3]

<u>Western</u>:   Usually set in pre-1920s frontier territory in Western USA. Typically concerns law and order conflicts, particularly between 'moral custodians' and those who threaten morality.

<u>Crime</u>: Primary focus of the narrative is on the causes or consequences of illegal activities. Central characters include criminals, victims, those who work in the criminal justice system (e.g., private eye, amateurs, police, courts, gangsters).

<u>War</u>:   Concerns activities of armed forces during wartime, including wartime spying and domestic effects of war.

<u>Romance</u>:   Plot turns on central theme of love and romance between main characters, with emphasis on love rather than on explicit sex.

<u>Fantasy</u>:   Dramatic or humorous film with a fantastic, or seemingly impossible story, including science fiction and horror.

<u>Sex</u>:   Whatever the narrative, the central concern of the film is with explicit depictions

of sexual activities.

Farce: Narratives in which the situation portrayed is set up to be farcical, whether the comedy is paramount rather than incidental or secondary to the plot.

Adventure: Action-packed drama, usually involving daring feats and great personal danger to the main characters who are frequently trying to right wrongs or prevent dangerous situations (includes spying in peacetime).

Drama: The narrative typically concerns a domestic or local setting, and focuses primarily on relationships, events and their consequences.

Other: Any film which does not fit into the above, including films about animals and films for children.

The classification of films into generic types is undoubtedly difficult because no single classification system is adopted by all genre studies (Grant, 1986; Kaminsky, 1985; Thompson, 1993). Altman (1984) observes that there is a tension, little debated, between the comprehensive classifications offered by film reference books and the prototypical exemplars of a genre which comprise the canon of film criticism. These definitional problems are particularly acute for historical comparisons, yet it is here that they are particularly needed in order to examine trends in content and reception of films. Our coding scheme attempts pragmatically to reflect the overlap in genre definition between film criticism and film reference works. Following traditional procedures of content analysis, the scheme also allows exhaustive and mutually exclusive classification of the sampled film synopses.

Coding Reliability

In coding film synopses, there are two main sources of unreliability. Intercoder reliability

measures the coding agreement between independent coders. The second source of unreliability concerns the relation between the film synopsis and the actual film content: in brief, do the synopses accurately note the inclusion of crime contents when these are central to the film? (i) Intercoder reliability was measured as follows. The entire sample of film synopses was coded for crime contents and genre by one coder, and a second, independent coder checked the coding reliability for one third of the sample (i.e. all synopses from a randomly selected 8 of the 24 years). Percentage agreement between the coders was calculated for each coding category. This was high for the presence/absence of crime content (average over years = 95%). Reliability was also satisfactory for the classification of genre, especially given the difficulties of accurately categorising films by genre (average over years = 73). To achieve agreed codings, a third coder examined discrepancies and made a judgement, drawing on film reference books where appropriate. (ii) To assess the adequacy of Speed's film synopses, a second source of film synopses which covered the period was selected. The Radio Times Film and Video Guide (Winnert, 1995), provides a standard reference work for films released in Britain. A random selection of 6 of the total 24 years (i.e. one quarter of the sample) were selected for independent reliability coding for the category of crime content. Although no reference work except Speed's Annual Film Review exhaustively all films released, the Radio Times Film and Video Guide contained 63% of the films in our sample, and an independent coder used this source to code these films. This resulted in agreement for 83% of cases. This level of agreement between different reference works was considered good, indicating that Speed's synopses provided a sufficiently reliable source of information about the crime contents of films for analysis to proceed. Cases of disagreement were dealt with by retaining the coding based on Speed's

volume, as this was the more comprehensive source.

<div align="center">Results</div>

In order to analyse trends in films by genre and crime content 1945-91, we present Tables 1 and 2 which summarise the data obtained for each 6 year period for genres, relatively high or relatively low in crime respectively. This period represents a pragmatic balance between too sparse or too condensed a data matrix, so as to facilitate the interpretation of trends. For each time period, we report the proportion of all films accounted for by each genre, the proportion of all films in each genre produced in America and the proportion of all films in each genre with crime contents.[4]

For most genres, the vast majority of films released in Britain during the late 1940s and >50s were produced in America. Thereafter, American films represented some one third of the total number released, together with approximately one third from Britain and one third from elsewhere (mainly Europe). From the early 1980s, American films again dominated, representing approximately two thirds of all films released in Britain.[5] It is popularly supposed that American films are more concerned with crime than British films. A series of chi-square tests were conducted for each genre, to compare films coded for crime contents by country of production. None of these tests was statistically significant, suggesting no relationships for film genres between country of production and crime contents.

Tables 1 and 2 show the broad trends in the proportion of films, by genre, which contain crime contents central to the narrative. The total column reveals no overall trends in the proportion of films containing crime over the period but rather a fairly steady percentage of films with crime content, averaging at 44%. However, it would be misleading to conclude that there

have been no changes in the representation of crime, for Tables 1 and 2 reveal underlying changes in the generic context for crime (summarised in Table 3). Two factors affect the generic location of crime contents within film. First, the fortunes of specific genres over the period affect the context in which crime is presented (and interpreted by audiences). Second, changes in the prominence of crime within a genre affects the character of that genre. These factors may be related, for example, a genre may become more successful if crimes become more salient within it. It is worth noting that genres contain constant or increasing amounts of crime, none show a decrease in crime contents.

Certain genres have declined from 1945 to 1991. The steepest decline is for the Western, a popular genre in the 1950s and >60s which virtually disappeared during the 1970s. To varying degrees, war, sex and romance genres also decline over the period. In each of these four genres the amount of crime is fairly constant. For war, sex and romance films this is rather low (14%, 11% and 6% respectively), while Westerns contained substantial amounts of crime (61% on average). There is also a weak decline in the adventure genre, however, there is a trend towards increasing crime contents, from around half to most adventure films over the period. Thus, the decline in these five genres has varying consequences for the representation of crime: war, sex and romance rarely provided generic 'homes' for crime; the loss of the Western has removed one popular genre in which crime was common; and the declining number of adventure films is 'compensated' for by their growing inclusion of crime -- in other words, an adventure story is, increasingly also a crime story.

Three genres (crime, drama, farce) appear relatively constant in frequency over the period, showing fluctuations but no overall trends. Of these, crime and drama are fairly well

represented genres (on average, 17% and 20% respectively, of all films) which contain constant amounts of crime (100% and, on average, 31% respectively). While, when averaged over the whole period, farce contains a similar proportion of crime to drama, this comparison neglects the historical trend, for farces increasingly contain crime, from 20% of farces in the first three quarters of the period to around 43% in the latter eight years. As a consequence, while crime and drama genres provide a constant 'home' for crime representations, the genre of farce provides a new context for depicting crime, not because farces are themselves more widespread but because they are now more likely to include crime-related plots or characters.

Lastly, one genre is increasing both in frequency and in crime contents. In the mid 1980s fantasy films accounted for nearly 20% of all films released, compared with the late 1940s and 1950s when fantasy films accounted for only 3-4% of all films released. Similarly, despite considerable fluctuations, the proportion of fantasy films containing crime has risen over the same period from around a fifth to over half.

Discussion

Several conclusions may be drawn from the present findings. Regarding the debate over links between crime in film and in society, the findings support historical content analyses of other media (notably, the press and television) by showing that the proportion of films containing crime is relatively constant for the postwar period, in contrast to commonsense impressions and moral panics (Matthews, 1994; Sparks, 1992). As nearly half of all films released in Britain include crime as a central part of the narrative structure, with little change in this proportion over the past half century, it would seem that the preoccupation with crime in

films is perennial.[6] Possibly the industry can support, and the audience expects, a certain proportion of films to concern crime.[7] Despite this constancy our future research may reveal ways in which qualitative aspects of crime representations are changing.

The inclusion of crime within diverse film genres makes it clear that the study of crime representations cannot be achieved solely by studying the crime genre. While crime films contain 38% of all films with crime contents central to the narrative, this leaves 62% of films with central crime contents which are classified into other genres. The fates or fortunes of diverse film genres, including trends in the association between crime contents and film genres, should therefore be central to any account of trends in the representation of crime in film during the post-war period. Such observed shifts in genres also have implications for studies of the textual representation of particular films, particular events, or particular groups in society (e.g., the police, criminals). While during the 1940s, most crime contents were contained within the genres of the Western, crime and adventure films, they now occur primarily in the genres of fantasy, farce, adventure, drama and crime. A consequence of the demise of the 'classic' Western is the loss of a highly moral context for crime, with clear characterisations, and strong narrative closure (Wright, 1975). This is replaced, during the 1970s, by the fantasy film, which takes a diversity of forms and which often delights in confounding expectations or formulaic conventions.

This may represent a shift in cultural concerns, whether within the film industry or more broadly, from the conquest of the American West, to the conquest of space, the supernatural and the future. We suggest that there is no longer contextualization of crime within narratives of progress or human/societal fallibility (both concerns of the Western, and also of war and

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adventure films) but rather within a context of increased anomie and social disintegration (common themes of fantasy films, but significant also within the crime genre itself). It is for detailed generic analysis of the fantasy film, perhaps in relation to the Western, to determine how the rise of the fantasy film should be explained, whether it represents crime in specific ways, whether it has taken over or transformed the concerns of the Western, and what themes and pleasures it offers audiences.[8]

Shifts in genre have implications not only for the meanings of crime within film, but also for the relations between films and audiences. Dubrow (1982) argues that genre describes the interpretive framework which defines spectatorship by conventionalizing a set of assumptions about the role of the viewer and, consequently, inviting certain expectations from viewers about the film they are about to see. Thus, viewers see a romance film with different expectations compared with a crime or adventure film. Moreover, the same crime may mean something different to viewers depending on the film genre. For example, crime in the western is typically embedded in a narrative of social progress (promising an increase in social order and an end to crime), while the crime film frequently portrays crime as an inevitable part of everyday life. Because crime contents are now more evenly spread across different genres, this reduces the predictability of whether or not a film will contain crime. During the 1940s the typical 'menu' of films offered to a film goer allowed them to choose between the dominant genres of romance or war (both rarely containing crime), crime (definitely containing crime), and westerns (usually containing crime). By contrast, during the 1980s and >90s, apart from the crime genre itself, the film goer could choose between the dominant genres of adventure, drama, fantasy, and farce, for each of which crime contents are relatively but not universally frequent. Hence, while the decline

of war, sex, and romance genres has little effect on the actual representation of crime within a film, it does affect the opportunity for the audience to select 'crime-free' films.

Why do audiences like crime media? Schlesinger et al., (1992) show that women victims of violence that they value what they perceive as realistic portrayals of violence because this gives them an opportunity to think through what they experienced and allows others an opportunity to understand the nature of, particularly, men's violence against women. But such an educational value for crime media does not seem to capture the commonplace pleasurable fascination with crime media. Particularly in need of explanation are the implications of the growth, and increasing crime contents of fantasy films, together with the increasing injection of crime into adventure and farce genres.

Donald (1989) discusses the appeal of fantasy in terms of ambiguities or hesitation over what is natural and what is supernatural. Schubart (1995) argues that the audience's fascination with horror lies in part in its repetitiveness, for this meets their Awish to control the dreadful events and overcome the feeling of horror≅ (p. 231). Warner (1992) suggests that the recent success of fantasy-adventure films, with their popular superheros may be explained by cultural anxieties about the decline of American power in relation to other nations. As Sparks (1992) notes, crime drama has always been read as indicative of cultural anxieties of one kind or another. Yet while various commentators have considered the historical transformations over past decades in the genres of crime and horror respectively, none have theorised the presumably concomitant changes in the audience's desires.

In summary, we have revealed some of the constancies and trends in the generic location of crime in film by this analysis of film synopses for the period 1945-91. In so doing, we have

also provided a broad overview of historical shifts in film genres which may be useful in future to contextualise analyses of film contents and audience reception. From the point of view both of interpretive film analyses and studies of audience's involvement with films/crime media, certain findings are especially worthy of note. First, that the proportion of crime films released each year, and the proportion of crime contents in all films, has been constant since the war. Second, that American and British films are equally likely to contain crime contents. Third, that it is increasingly unclear from the genre of a film whether or not it will contain crime. Fourth, that where once crime was mainly located in westerns, adventure and crime films, it is now to be found mainly in the genres of crime, fantasy, adventure, drama and farce. The consequences of these constancies and changes for crime representations and for their audiences await further empirical investigation.

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Author Note

Endnotes

[1]While our present focus is on trends in crime in films, this is part of a larger project which

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analyses crime representations in film, television, and the press both qualitatively and quantitatively, together with an investigation into audience responses to these media.

[2]The definition of a 'year' has varied over time in Speed's *Annual Film Review*. For the majority of our period, Speed listed films annually, defining a 'year' as the period between two summers. We sampled the films on the basis of these annual lists as provided. It is notable that Speed viewed all the films himself and wrote the film synopses single-handed until 1989/90, after which he trained and directly monitored the work of his assistant.

[3]Note that these definitions were intended to allow discrimination among the films rather than to provide a complete characterisation of the nature of each genre.

[4]There are no overall trends in the numbers of films classified as 'other', and they contain little crime content.

[5]It is noteworthy that while American films represent 57% of films released in Britain throughout the post war period, they represent some 90% of the box office hits in the sample.

[6]This relative constancy in the crime film contrasts with 'real life' crime statistics which show a considerable increase over the past forty years.

[7]While the proportion of films containing crime over the period is fairly constant, it should be remembered that the absolute numbers of films containing crime has dropped because the total number of films released has almost halved since 1945.

[8]Altman (1984) suggests that science fiction has, in key ways, taken over the generic or syntactic structures of the Western, while Haraway (1994) argues our fascination with the cyborg arises from the breakdown of key boudaries (human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/nonphysical).

Table 1

Trends in film genres, including percentage of films in each genre containing crime content, by genre, year, and production source for high crime genres

Genre	Crime			Western			Fantasy			Farce			Adventure			Drama		
Date	%[1]	US%[2]	%CC[3]	%	US%	%CC	%	US%	%CC	%	US%	%CC	%	US%	%CC	%	US%	%CC
1945-9	25	88	100	10	100	77	3	67	17	7	73	20	6	93	57	17	79	24
1951-5	15	67	100	10	100	57	4	78	22	4	38	25	14	81	63	17	55	34
1957-61	14	41	100	10	100	72	8	59	47	6	33	17	8	38	75	17	42	29
1963-7	17	31	100	10	88	69	6	50	50	9	27	33	11	67	72	16	41	33
1969-73	11	45	100	9	53	82	8	36	36	7	31	15	14	50	65	18	36	33
1975-9	16	67	100	2	67	100	16	36	4	8	50	25	5	50	88	30	39	35
1981-5	15	50	100	2	50	0	16	82	64	9	83	33	10	58	69	29	54	28
1987-91	17	83	100	0	0	0	19	74	52	9	77	54	6	67	89	18	44	36

[1]%   - Percentage of films in the genre.   [2]US% - Percentage of films which are American   [3]%CC - Percentage of films which contain crime content.

Table 2
Trends in film genres, including percentage of films in each genre containing crime content, by genre, by year and production source for low crime genres

Genre	Romance			Sex			War			Total[4]		
Date	%	US%	%CC	%	US%	%CC	%	US%	%CC	US%	%CC	N[5]
1945-9	9	95	10	0	0	0	6	71	0	84	43	231
1951-5	11	64	4	0	0	0	9	70	15	70	40	223
1957-61	12	63	4	3	20	0	11	52	13	51	40	204
1963-7	6	30	10	4	14	28	9	47	20	43	50	169
1969-73	4	53	4	8	13	13	4	29	14	41	41	183
1975-9	2	67	2	13	20	15	2	33	33	42	46	223
1981-5	4	33	4	2	0	0	4	40	0	56	45	137
1987-91	3	75	3	2	0	0	6	0	13	61	48	140

[4]Total - Total over all genres (all films coded)
[5]N   - Number of films coded

Table 3: Schematic summary of trends in generic location of crime contents in films, 1945-91

		GENRE		
		Decreasing	Constant	Increasing
CRIME	Decreasing			
CONTENTS	Constant	Western, Sex[6], War, Romance	Crime, Drama	
	Increasing	Adventure	Farce	Fantasy

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[6]Sex films, which are nonexistent in the early period, peak in the mid-seventies and then almost disappear: they therefore follow an inverted v-shaped pattern.