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Action without regeneration: The deracination of the American action hero in Michael Mann's Heat

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Heat

ABSTRACT:

Michael Mann is one of the most respected auteurs operating in commercial Hollywood cinema, and it is no surprise that his films continue to be the subject of scholarly investigation. This article approaches Mann's *Heat* (1995) in the context of broader American mythical impulses, in relation to Richard Slotkin's "regeneration through violence" paradigm. "Regeneration through violence" has been used by both Lisa Purse, and, especially, Eric Lichtenfeld, as a conceptual framework for investigating commercial Hollywood action films. However, Slotkin's paradigm fails to account for the fundamentally pessimistic end game of numerous action films such as *Heat*. Mann's mapping of Los Angeles as a city enabling perpetual movement without destination reflects the fundamental lack of any higher purposive, existential meaning for his heroes, Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino) and Neil McCauley (Robert De Niro), and for his narrative at large. A more accurate model, perhaps, for understanding Mann's cinema (and, indeed, a large number of other American action films) might be "action without regeneration."

KEY WORDS:

Michael Mann; action cinema; Richard Slotkin; *Heat*; Los Angeles; The Western

Action without Regeneration:[1] The Deracination of the American Action Hero in Michael

Mann's *Heat*

My sanity is my greatest curse in this abode of horrors.
– Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*

The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God!
Who can tell it?
– Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Michael Mann's debut feature film *Thief* (1981) centers around master-thief Frank's (James

Caan) relationship with a crime syndicate led by Leo (Robert Prosky). Frank is a pragmatic,

excessively professional hero: the viewer is astonished by the stark precision of his work as he

breaks into a safe in the dynamic opening sequence. Every movement signifies efficiency and

economy; everything about Frank[2] is void of frill and pretension. The stark foregrounding light

both illuminates and signifies his electric precision, as does the searing electronic score by

Tangerine Dream. His acute purpose is translated perfectly into the economy of his posture as he

searches for a specific set of diamonds, discarding all superfluous booty. He seems almost

electrically fused to his environment, ready to explode into the universe in a paroxysm of action.

Three-quarters of the way through the film, this explosion takes place. Frank, at odds with both

social and criminal institutions that are equally corrupt, sets about dismantling both his domestic

and professional life. The syndicate has taken issue with his decision to leave the criminal path –

he dreams of halcyon escape with wife Jessie (Tuesday Weld) (the 'one last score' cliché of the

crime film) – and in a particularly brutal sequence Frank's partner Barry (James Belushi) is murdered and dumped in a vat of chemical waste by Leo and his cronies.

In one of the most striking sequences in the film, Frank literally dissembles the life he worked so assiduously to create – the dream of the house in the Chicago suburbs, the wife, and the kid, as represented in the prison-made collage which he carries with him, a kind of pinboard of his dreams. He has striven towards the materialization of this American dream through, as he says to Leo, "the yield of [his] labor", and now sets about destroying it with equally unyielding pragmatism. He commands Jessie to leave his life as violently as he commanded her to enter it. "So that's it?" she says, "you just dismantle it and pack it away?" He blows up his house, his bar, and his used car lot. He crumples his collage and tosses it into the street.

His dream has been destroyed because of his refusal to submit to Leo and his tyrannical organization, and once the foundation of this dream, his liberty, is threatened, he sets about decimating all of its elements. And now that his homestead has been razed to the ground, he avenges his loss, stalking and murdering Leo and his goons in a bloody action sequence before stumbling away, alone, into the Chicago suburbs, and into the night.

It is a narrative with which American and global cinema audiences are thoroughly familiar, dating back at least as far as Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* (1941). Mann moves his film beyond cliché by exaggerating Frank's characteristics to an astonishing degree, destabilizing and challenging the notion of hero and compelling the viewer to question Frank's violent impulses. *Thief* ends with the disenchantment of its hero – and the annihilation of his dream, his vision of

domestic contentment and containment. His subsequent annihilation of Leo's organization and his exit away from the suburban (as camera cranes up and over) are, indeed, both product and symbol of his disenchantment with this (American) dream.

And yet, his failure to realize this dream simultaneously signifies a kind of *re*-enchantment, albeit via a negative potential, through his apotheosis as, once again, nomadic hero, and his retreat, once again, from the domestic and the civilized. Frank has returned to the zero point, the *tabula rasa*. He has eradicated his professional and personal history, and this marks a point of departure that enables a new origin. He walks away from history to construct himself anew – to create a new collage, perhaps – recalling Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) walking away from the homestead (and a life of domestic stasis) at the end of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).

This dream of domestic happiness, within Mann's formulation of heroism (and myriad other American action narratives), *necessarily* encodes its own dissolution. The narrative achieves a state of resolution through the hero's irresolution, deracination and departure. Frank appears nowhere more activated, inspired, than in his destruction of the sites and sources upon which his domestic dream has been built. There is a gloriously visceral energy to the sequence as he destroys home and business; the viewer is (perhaps perversely) thrilled by the slow-motion destruction of the suburban, the "ordinary". Frank's fundamental impulse, it seems, moves towards disenchantment with and retreat from the domestic and the civilized. The end of the narrative becomes a point of departure away from the domestic, and Frank's status as hero is fully realized through his disavowal of domestic potential.

Cultural historian Richard Slotkin discusses dissatisfaction as a trope and product of the myth of the frontier in *Gunfighter Nation* (developing his thesis from the earlier *Regeneration through Violence*). The Frontier Myth, Slotkin argues, is characterized by three movements: separation, regression and conflict. The American frontier experience marks a separation of the American subject from the European "metropolis" in the genesis myths of America, which is transformed in the nineteenth century into the separation of the individual from the colonies themselves, from "civilized" America, thus marking the expansion of the frontier. This separation entails regression, a return to the wilderness and an embrace of primal urges and instincts, which precipitates purgative conflict. The antagonists in this mythological structure are, Slotkin argues, the displaced Native Americans and, by extension, the natural order:

> To establish a colony or settlement, the Europeans had to struggle against an unfamiliar natural environment and against the non-European, non-White native for whom the wilderness was home. Violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation. (Slotkin "Regeneration" 11)

The American subject emerges from the violent struggle regenerated, purified of the baseness of both the civilized and the savage, in this paradigm of "regeneration through violence". "The processes of American development in the colonies," Slotkin writes, "were linked from the beginning to a historical narrative in which repeated cycles of *separation* and *regression* were necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune" (Slotkin "Regeneration" 11). The status of the American protagonist in the frontier narrative, then, becomes contingent upon his propensity for, and perpetuity of, movement.

Both Lisa Purse (5) and Eric Lichtenfeld (2-3) recall Slotkin's paradigm in their discussion of American action cinema.[3] The narratives of action films, according to Lichtenfeld's reading of "regeneration through violence", are marked by the restoration of social and moral order through the violent actions of the hero – the triumphant celebration of American violence against the Other – and function as a kind of conservative affirmation of the status quo (Lichtenfeld 61). The hero is acutely moral, and he (or occasionally she) may engage in violent acts, but always for the (perceived) benefit of the society at large.[4]

Slotkin's paradigm is, certainly, valuable as a way of understanding both the narrativization and historical experience of the frontier. But it is less useful as a paradigm for interpreting action cinema. Slotkin's notion of *regeneration* is infused with a tone of optimistic triumphalism that is fundamentally negated by the extremely bleak affect of many of the films about which Lichtenfeld writes.[5] There is, in fact, a counterimpulse in American action narratives *towards* deracination, disorder and apocalypse (in the negative rather than revelatory sense), which one might call "action without regeneration."[6] This is action *without* any ultimate outcome, action that does not restore social order – in fact, the hero is often confronted with the absolute meaninglessness of his or her victory. In the "action without regeneration" narrative, the action hero is derived from a relationship to action itself rather than the outcome (moral, political, etc.) of that action, even if acts of anti-social violence explicitly ambiguate the hero's status in the eyes of the viewer.

Mann's cinema is frequently characterized by its engagement with this impulse in American cultural mythology, and *Heat* (1995) can be read as an extension and elaboration of the themes of *Thief*. Tom Shone situates *Heat* within the Western tradition established by John Ford: "Michael Mann's downtown Los Angeles" is "mapped out as mythically in *Heat*… as Ford's wild country." John McCarty argues that Mann's "cinematic landscape is the mean streets of urban neo-noir." (655).[7] David Thomson similarly discusses Mann as a noir film-maker: "No one has done more to uphold, extend, and enrich the film noir genre in recent years than Michael Mann", with *Heat* being "one of the best-made films" of the 1990s (560-61).[8]

Heat uses a traditional cops and robbers narrative to explore the failure of the American dream in the face of a deracinated urban present – a common thematic trope of noir[9] – and it is in Mann's recognition of the intersection between the thematic and structural tropes of "action without regeneration", and the geographical shape / space of Los Angeles itself, that the film's genius lies. Los Angeles, as a new model for the American urban (as Julian Murphet discusses[10]) – an interstitial space that perpetuates movement (recall Jean Baudrillard's celebration of the "freedom of movement" [53] of the LA freeways[11]) – offers the ideal backdrop for Mann's exploration of the deracination of the American action hero. In *Heat*, Los Angeles becomes a character in itself, a city whose architectonics and aesthetics both reflect and enable "action without regeneration's" vision of perpetual departure and dissolution in American cultural mythology.[12]

The narrative of *Heat* is, like *Thief*, replete with clichés of the crime genre. Hard-boiled police lieutenant Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino) trails master criminal Neil McCauley (Robert De Niro)

and his gang around Los Angeles. Both men focus obsessively on their work, to the detriment of their personal lives. Both are characterized by their work ethics and the rigid codes that they follow. Both are brutal pragmatists, violent when necessary. Both are isolated from the social world around them. Both exist, fundamentally, outside of the domestic, though both are figured as surrogate fathers: McCauley to fellow gangster Chris (Val Kilmer), and Hanna as step-father to Lauren (Natalie Portman). The film oscillates between the actions of Hanna and his LAPD team, and those of McCauley and his gang, with a poetic symmetry; empathy for both "hero" and "villain" immediately establishes a symbiosis between them. Both McCauley and Hanna are "the Man who knows Indians"[13] – both know, and admire and respect, the other as their nemesis, nullifying, in Mann's film, any reading in terms of a Manichean structure (that is, good hero versus evil villain). There is a character on one side of the law, and a character on the other; they are both the "heroes" of the film, equally humanized by Mann, which accounts for Hanna's (and the viewer's) melancholy as McCauley dies at the end of the film. The law is evacuated of its symbolic power in Mann's Los Angeles; it becomes simply an arbitrary organizational principle by which the characters are perfunctorily categorized.

Heat extends *Thief* in its exploration of the urban itself – and the aptness with which the discourse of LA as simulacrum[14] lends itself to this unregenerative, perpetually mobile vision of American heroism.[15] Mann explicitly configures Los Angeles as an eccentric / decentric urban space – a city of interstices and endless points of departure, but no return. The perpetual shifting of locations – the film was shot on a record number ninety-five Los Angeles locations (Feeney 99) and there are only three sets to which the film returns, and then infrequently (the houses of McCauley, Eady (Amy Brenneman) and Hanna) – creates a perception of an urban in constant

flux – Los Angeles as, in Murphet's words, a "space of fragmentation and abstraction." (3) Los Angeles assumes a quality of perpetual motion in Mann's film[16] that recalls Baudrillard's description of the city's freeways: "Pure, statistical energy, a ritual being acted out – the regularity of the flows cancels out individual destinations" (54). This circuitous motility – endlessly repeating circuits and networks of motion going nowhere – destabilizes the coherent and integrated spatial perception of the viewer; the film restlessly switches between disparate locations, making it exceedingly difficult for the viewer to perceive either origin or destination.[17] Mann shifts from neon-lit freeway to abandoned drive-in cinema to house by the sea, and the city assumes a quality of perpetual mobility, an almost surreal intangibility.[18] Los Angeles, in Mann's vision, seems to render unified perception impossible, recalling Murphet's argument that "The greatest difficulty in coming to terms with Los Angeles will always be not seeing it as such; not for a lack of representations of it, but because of their contradictory plenitude" (8).

Mann, indeed, is acutely aware of LA as a kind of Virilian "vision machine,"[19] as a city created *a priori* of historical exigency. The stylization of his images, and his re-fashioning of common LA sites in terms of the dictates of modernist art, as Feeney argues (100), along with his use of locations that seem to hark back to earlier interpretations of the modern image (the drive-in theatre, the diner, et al.) are evidence of a particular mode of envisioning that refutes historicism and its associated enabling of stable and discrete subjectivities, in favor of a fluid, decentered contemporaneity that privileges surface style over cultural and historical depth. There is a certain nostalgic aura to Mann's vision of LA (and genre), but it is a nostalgia that recognizes its own never-was with a critical consciousness that resists interpretation through Jameson's model of nostalgia as an effect in postmodern cinematic aesthetics (Jameson 19-21).[20] Mann's nostalgia,

as Christopher Sharrett argues, in "Michael Mann: Elegies on the Post-Industrial Landscape", is self-critical and self-evaluative: "Mann's nostalgic sense of the male subject is mitigated by his questioning of the demarcation of Self and Other" (255). Mann uses nostalgia – the engagement with (and re-presentation of) earlier cinematic and aesthetic forms – in a radical way, to investigate, challenge and critique the present (and its nostalgic relationship to earlier forms), rather than in a conservative manner, that is, as a benchmark of the better days of yore towards which society should aspire.

The action, furthermore, takes place in the interstitial spaces of the city: in underpasses beneath the intersection of freeways, in a dilapidated, disused drive-in movie theatre, at the dockyards, and so on. The film is set in the industrial gaps around tinseltown, *behind* the celluloid screen.

The opening image of the film situates it clearly within celluloid history, recalling Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949),[21] whilst at the same time immediately evoking a sense of American cultural mythology through its fetishization of the train, a symbol of the advent of modernity. A train emerges from the smoky-blue night, from behind a tangle of power-lines and cables, cruising towards the viewer. One reads, as it passes camera, that its destination is "Los Angeles" – an explicit signal by Mann of the geographic, but more significantly, aesthetic locus of the film-to-come. Mann's (frequently roving) camera becomes analogous to this train, "coaching" and precipitating the viewer's entry into cinematic Los Angeles.

But the energy of the train accelerating towards the viewer in Walsh's *White Heat* (originating, as it must, in Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*) has dissipated. Whilst Walsh's train

demonstrates the visceral potential of modern technology, Mann's train seems to lament, almost eulogize, the loss of this potential. The technological / electrical energy that defines Walsh's Los Angeles has become lethargic, melancholic, in *Heat* – perhaps replaced by the kind of digital inertia that characterizes the contemporary.[22]

McCauley hops from the train and walks into a hospital to steal an ambulance for a heist. As he enters the hospital, Mann's camera, described by Geoff Andrew as "sinuously mobile" (145) ceases moving for the first time since our introduction to McCauley, and lingers on a full-size replica of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Mary, mutely observant, presides over the action – Mann harks back to America's religio-moral origins and recognizes its inert, (post)modern present. The film begins with a train – one of the most popular symbols of American futurity[23] – and answers this symbol with a reproduction of Mary cradling dead Jesus, a high-cultural image characterized by its pathos and lament, perhaps signifying America's unrealized, failed potential – an image that, ironically, finds its counterpart in the final image of the film, as Vincent holds Neil's hand as he dies.

Mann is, indeed, as Sharrett argues, an ironic "chronicler of the postmodern sensibility" (254). This opening sequence formalizes the transition in American cultural history from its origin as new 'moral' utopia (via Winthrope and Christianity, and as a counterpoint to European 'decadence') to the recognition of the failings of this utopian mythology / project in the face of the industrial-urban and the "closing of the frontier,"[24] as navigated in gangster films such as *White Heat*. This reversal signifies a reversion to come – the entry point into a Los Angeles of action for action's sake, violence in light of urban annihilation.

It marks an ultimate futility that characterizes the actions of both McCauley and, particularly, Hanna. Both McCauley and Hanna work outside of any significant moral context, any qualifying sense of ultimate justice or the political. They work because that is what they do, as they say to each other during the pivotal restaurant scene – the mid-point of the film and the opening of the hunt proper. "I do what I do best, I take scores," McCauley says. "You do what you do best – try to stop guys like me." Later in the scene, Hanna says "I don't know how to do anything else." "Neither do I," responds McCauley. "I don't want to either," says Hanna. "Neither do I," responds McCauley, smiling across the table at his nemesis. The law (in its relation to justice) has been evacuated of value. Mann reorganizes these characters and their motivations along the lines of labor, and integrity in labor. They recognize each other in terms of designated (but morally meaningless) labor roles – law enforcer and law-breaker; the "robber" (in the genre aesthetic) *must* "take scores", and the "cop" must try to stop him, and this is one of the sources of *Heat*'s ultimate melancholy.

In a Los Angeles devoid of the metaphysical, and even, to some extent, the physical – the physical as integral rather than vector – our heroes are left with movement and action, and little else. Their staunch work ethics are the products of the need for action and movement in a city that seems to reject stasis and domestic inertia. The film's heroes do their work because that is just what they do. There is no sense of an uplifting morality or righteousness to the enactment of justice in the film – there's no triumph on the part of Hanna, or sense of sinful greed on the part of McCauley – just each man's melancholy as they navigate (and mitigate) the *effects* of Los Angeles. Hanna is activated by his enjoyment of the hunt itself – the visceral thrill of the chase,

the nuts and bolts of the work, rather than any outcome, and the focused pragmatism with which McCauley's gang commits the opening heist is dazzling, recalling the intense focus of Frank at the beginning of *Thief*.

This kind of compulsion to work results in the disavowal of the domestic (and its optimistic realization in the American dream) for both men. The failure of Hanna's third marriage is evident in wife Justine's (Diane Venora) words to him after he has left a party to attend a crime scene, the cop-film cliché endowed with a poetic brilliance by Mann:

> You don't live with me. You live among the remains of dead people. You sift through the detritus. You read the terrain. You search for signs of passing, for the scent of your prey. And then you hunt them down. That's the only thing you're companion to. The rest is the mess you leave as you pass through. What I don't understand is why I can't cut loose of you.

McCauley's domestic principle – the necessity for his itinerancy – is similarly epitomized in the anecdote which he repeats twice in the film, one of the sources of the film's title:

> Remember Jimmy McIlwain on the yard used to say: "You wanna be making moves on the street? Have no attachments, allow nothing to be in your life that you can not walk out on in thirty seconds flat if you spot the heat around the corner."

The viewer is reminded of this mantra of sorts when McCauley is compelled to turn his back on Eady and their dream when Hanna emerges from the shadows to pursue him in the final sequence of the film.

Hanna chases McCauley into LAX, and they stalk each other, guns drawn, around the desolate tarmac, which appears as a kind of industrial wasteland. The lights of a plane illuminate McCauley's shadow and Hanna springs around, shooting McCauley. He holds his hand as he dies, and, as aforementioned, the film ends on an acutely melancholic note. Hanna, having finally caught his quarry, looks out at the planes flying away from (as McCauley says to Eady in an earlier scene) "the city of lights." The airport is a place of transition, arrival and departure, perpetual motion – the paradoxical epicenter of the decentralized urban experience, and it is here that Hanna (as *non*-victor) is finally rendered inert through the completion of his task, the fulfillment of his work. The necessity for his action ceases here, at this point of perpetual action, in an ironic, self-destructive fulfillment of desire. It is here that Hanna should find resolution – and, perhaps, some kind of "happiness" – but he finds only melancholy and a kind of accelerated inertia, epitomized by the stream of planes arriving and departing, by the endless sprawl of lights in the night. The endlessness of Hanna's (America's) movement signifies, paradoxically, a perpetuity of stasis. The city is in constant motion (as it is depicted by Mann as an endless flux of stylized images), but there is no destination. There is an invigorating movement – a kind of electricity to this movement – but no end beyond the affirmation of the self as a moving being, as epitomized in Baudrillard's "lyrical nature of pure circulation," (27) an LA "in love with its limitless horizontality." (52) Mann's city, like the action hero, seems bereft of any higher existential or purposive framework.

Mann's own presentation of Los Angeles as a constellation of disconnected industrial topoi is itself as acute and precise as the action of his protagonists. Andrew describes the pared back nature of the final sequence, a "nightmarish, near-abstract collage of thunderous sound, primary colors, flashing lights and creeping shadows" (145) – Mann adopts the focus of Frank at the beginning of *Thief*, and McCauley at the beginning of *Heat*, in his production of action without moral consequence or even context. There is action, for the sake of action, work for the sake of work. If any moral order is evoked, it is only as part of a genre aesthetic – there is a cop, and a robber, and the cop kills the robber. Differing from the majority of contemporary Hollywood filmmakers, as Sharrett points out (254), Mann refuses to morally judge his own space, or the characters in this space, his own presentation of the city or his characters' relationships to the city, but rather focuses on unpacking the analogy between an American heroic experience characterized by action and violence *without* regeneration and the urban reality (which incorporates and is founded on representations of this reality) of Los Angeles.

Both Mark Gallagher[25] and Scott Higgins[26] have written about action cinema as a melodramatic mode. Good conquers evil, and universal order is restored, along the lines of a clearly demarcated Manichean schema. However, *Heat* (and the action film more generally, as Mattes argues[27]), is more accurately understood according to the registers of tragedy than melodrama. There is violence, but no regeneration. Our protagonists toil against (and within) an unforgiving cosmos, inevitably doomed. Optimistic resolution is impossible; our heroes continue to aspire towards some ideal of self-fulfillment – but these aspirations continue to be short-circuited by the workings of a cruel and unjust social and criminal order. Indeed, the "ordinary" characters in

Heat are perhaps the cruelest and most unjust: Alan (Hank Azaria) exploits his relationship with Charlene (Ashley Judd) to save himself, and Donald's (Dennis Haysbert) boss extorts money and extra labor from him under the threat of reporting him to his parole officer. McCauley works towards his dream of escape to a Fijian paradise, as he says to Eady during their first encounter, recalling Mad Dog Earle's (Humphrey Bogart) dreams of "breathing" in *High Sierra*. Hanna's aspirations are more complex. A classic American hero, his pleasure is centered around action – the thrill of the hunt – rather than the resolution of this action. This pleasure, for Hanna, is negated by the very achievement of resolution.

Thus, he never looks more despairing than in his final close-ups as he holds McCauley's hand, looking at the planes landing and taking off. He has caught his prey, and now he has nothing to do. The planes symbolize an action of escape, away from the neon-noir, sprawling, and labyrinthine city, towards which he can never move. He is driven by an impulse towards the restoration of order, but, as the film clearly maps out, the domestic for Hanna (and for this breed of hero) is a matter of perpetual disorder, and his fulfillment at catching his prey is a cannibalistic, self-negating experience. He has caught McCauley, and his stasis has never been more apparent.

Recalling Schopenhauer's metaphysics,[28] resolution for the American action hero seems to become simply a matter of the absence of physical pain. "The happiness of a given life," Schopenhauer writes, "is not to be measured according to the joys and pleasures it contains but according to the absence of the positive element, the absence of suffering." (43) The hero's world remains rift and rife with chaos, thereby lending he or she physical purpose and motivating

the action around which the viewer's visceral thrill is based. The urban continues its trend towards a decay that enables the apotheosis of the hero as rugged individual battling a hostile order (tragedy's cruel gods), appropriating its tropes (and weapons) to facilitate this struggle. Domestic and social restoration and regeneration are rendered impossible. There is violent action, but no regeneration – and, in this construction of the world, the absence of physical pain is perhaps all to which the hero can aspire – the contentment, resolution, and happiness of the subject becomes a matter of simply forgetting the perpetually painful condition of, in Schopenhauer's words, an "existence […] typified by unrest." (52) The American action hero's struggle in "action without regeneration" assumes a peculiar kind of resonance as we move towards what Charles A. Kupchan, amongst many others, has characterized as the age of the end of American power.[29] Perhaps, in a geopolitical world of multiple superpowers, American exceptionalism will be forced to measure value in negative rather than positive terms, through the absence of pain (destruction, war), rather than through territorial, economic, and material gain.

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[1] After correspondence with Dr Bruce Isaacs, I changed the title from "Violence Without Regeneration" to "Action Without Regeneration". I am indebted to Isaacs for this suggestion.

[2] Including James Caan's square jaw and rugged physique.

[3] It should be noted that Purse simply acknowledges it in passing, whereas Lichtenfeld's entire genre analysis is predicated on Slotkin's "regeneration through violence" thesis.

[4] Consider *The Avengers* (2012) as such an example from contemporary popular cinema.

[5] George P. Cosmatos' *Cobra* (1986), for example, affirms the violence of the hero on one level, but functions simultaneously (and predominantly) as a critique of this violence; as I argue in "Turning the Gun on America: *Cobra* and the action film as cultural critique".

[6] One is tempted to assign Freudian categories to these two impulses; given I have only a cursory understanding of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," I shall avoid doing so!

[7] It should be noted that McCarty also writes about "an intense shoot-out on a busy New York City avenue" as being "a particular stand-out" (657) in *Heat*, though not one of the scenes in the film is set, or filmed, in New York.

[8] It is worth noting, in the context of these comments, Lichtenfeld's insightful analysis of the American action film as a fusion of the frenetic movement of the Western with the critical and cultural introspection of film noir. *Heat* certainly fits the criteria for the action genre as mapped out by Lichtenfeld (though the film does not actually figure in his book).

[9] For a great exploration of this, see Naremore 1998.

[10] See Murphet 2001.

[11] "There is something of the freedom of movement that you have in the desert here, and indeed Los Angeles, with its extensive structure, is merely an inhabited fragment of the desert. Thus the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the desert character of this particular metropolis. And they are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move." (Baudrillard 53).

[12] Murphet writes about the construction of LA as an imaginary space, outside of / before historical contingency: LA entails "a subsumption of the real by representation [that] dates back to the very origins of modern LA, from the 1880s on, as a radical experiment in real estate speculation. If the Chicago School insisted that the dominant pattern of urbanization in America was the gradual radiation of suburbs around central industrial and financial districts, then Los Angeles, a true aberration, sprang up conversely in patches, a case of urban small-pox on the sun-baked face of Southern California." (9)

[13] See Slotkin 1973.

[14] See Klein 1997. "Los Angeles is a city that was imagined long before it was built. It was imagined to avoid city-wide bankruptcy in the 1890s, and has stayed on a knife-edge ever since, camouflaged by promotional rhetoric" (27). This echoes Baudrillard's comment about America at large, as "a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved." (28)

[15] Arnett argues in "The American City as Non-Place" that "Space, not time, drives Mann's crime cinema;" (45) "With *Thief* (1981), Mann begins a narrative of the American city," (47) that presages the "ending of place and the coming excess of supermodernity's non-places" (47) in *Heat*, *Collateral* (2004) and *Miami Vice* (2006). Arnett's analysis, however, focuses on urban space in a predominantly formal manner – he describes the intersection of architecture and narrative in Mann's films through the lens of Marc Auge's "non-place" and supermodern excess; in doing so, his analysis glosses over the affect and genre aesthetic of Mann's films, as well as their positioning within a much broader American cultural and cinematic context.

[16] For the characters in the film but more significantly in terms of Mann's construction of cinematic space.

[17] This destabilization of the position of the viewer is replicated in a microcosmic level in Mann's approach to individual scenes: Mann's style itself gestures towards this restlessness, with its resistance to the usual master shot:close-up structure of classical Hollywood cinema. For a more detailed discussion of Mann's filmic style, see Rybin 2007.

[18] Recalling, perhaps, the historical and temporal deracination of the city about which Baudrillard writes: "The city was here before the freeway system, no doubt, but it now looks as though the metropolis has actually been built around this arterial network." (55)

[19] Note Murphet: "The vision machines and their ubiquitous products anticipate any act of seeing in Los Angeles; the commercial-visual undergirds the perceptual." (9)

[20] Jameson discusses Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* as using the aesthetics and style of film noir for "sheen" and little else.

[21] *White Heat* develops into something of a similar ode to Los Angeles / examination of the alienating effects of the urban on post-nuclear bomb consciousness – and the way heroism is able to navigate a modern cityscape using the technologically advanced tools of that modern. Mann clearly has *White Heat* in mind as he creates *Heat*, a hyperkinetic updating of Walsh's own kinetic examination of urban deracination.

[22] Mann returns to the train as a kind of primitive site in antidote to a deracinated (post)modern present in *Collateral*. It is as though the iconic status of the train in the American western (and crime) traditions (and as such a potent symbol of American industrialism – recall the train sequence in Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*) enables a return of a clearly demarcated showdown between hero, Max (Jamie Foxx) and villain Vincent (Tom Cruise) who wage war over damsel in distress Annie (Jada Pinkett Smith). In the postindustrial wasteland, a train (as opposed to the motile taxi in which Vincent and Max travel around the city for most of the film, necessary to traverse a city, that in Vincent's words, is so "sprawled out, disconnected") is, perhaps, able to recall the focused conflict required to conclude an action narrative. *Collateral*, it could be argued, explores LA vis-a-vis Baudrillard's description of it as constituted by endless lines of horizontal movement; however, it proffers, I would argue, a much clearer vision of heroism, which is why it is of less interest to me (here). By the end of *Collateral*, LA (despite – or because of – Vincent's assertions to the contrary) has become a moral space peopled by "good, hard-working people" like Max and Annie. Vincent's arrival marks a kind of infestation from an alien other – and Vincent, I would argue, occupies a sinister, criminal space in the narrative that is non-existent / never inhabited by Neil in *Heat*.

[23] Note, amongst countless examples, Thoreau's brilliant passage about the train's incursion in *Walden* (367-370) and its simultaneous affirmation and critique of the train's potential – brilliantly discussed in Leo Marx 1964.

[24] See Schlesinger 1933 and Slotkin 1985 for detailed discussions of the historical, social and cultural implications of the closing of the frontier.

[25] See Gallagher 1999.

[26] See Higgins 2008.

[27] See Mattes 2013.

[28] See Schopenhauer 1970.

[29] See, amongst many others, Kupchan 2012.