

Honours Dissertation

Al Pacino vs Robert De Niro

Mann to Mann

by
Alan McCann

HEAT

Honours Dissertation
“Al Pacino vs Robert De Niro: Mann to Mann”
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10 April 2000



BA(HONS) COMMUNICATION AND MASS MEDIA

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The appendices include a critical synopsis of *Heat*, a log to accompany the supplied videotape, and a quick reference guide for conveniently checking up on characters, plot and film notes.

P r e f a c e

Where better to begin than the end.
As I write this, the rest of this dissertation is complete. It's a good point
at which to ask why...

I joined the BACMM course as a film enthusiast and I am reminded of this as I look
back on this project. I came to learn about film, and this dissertation
was borne out of a few simple desires.

I was interested in what *a* film could teach us about *film*;
in essence, to what extent could the specific inform the generic?
Furthermore, I was intent on reversing the unequal roles of writer and reader;
directors spend years on a film and we spend hours watching it – what would I find
if I invested that little bit more; could the years of production tell their story
if I listened hard enough?

In this way, a few simple naïve questions led me on an eight month quest
for answers. Finding that in film, there are no easy straightforward answers was
not really a disappointment for me; realising that was an answer unto itself.

In the process, I have been absorbed into my text – it has reciprocated the analysis.

I am now an avid Pacino and De Niro fan – I never was before.
And as I sit, at 2:37 in the morning, I find myself deeply grateful that I'm
writing this in retrospect rather than prospect;
My computer also, with its *Heat* desktop theme, Ashley Judd wallpaper,
Pacino soundbites and a gun for a cursor, has had enough.

I would like to thank the people, outwith Michael Mann, Al Pacino
and Robert De Niro, who made this dissertation happen:
Dr Myra Macdonald, my first supervisor, who turned my
favourite film into a viable academic topic;
Ian Mowatt, my second supervisor, who kept it and me going,
Dr Neil Blain, who was never my supervisor but often seemed like he was;
And my friends, without whom I'd never have bothered.

Alan M. McCann

2:46 a.m. Monday 10 April 2000



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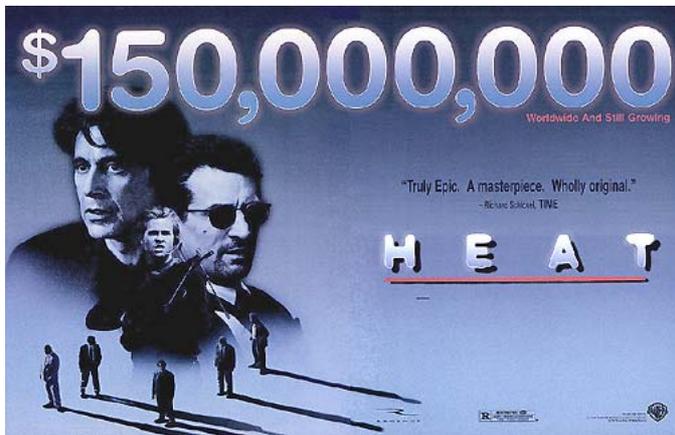
The Heat Is On.

"You wanna be makin' moves on the street, have no attachments, allow nothing to be in your life that you cannot walk out on in thirty seconds flat if you spot the heat around the corner."

Neil McAuley (DE NIRO) in *Heat*

When *Heat* was released in 1995, very few people, least of all myself, realised that it was a remake. This fact first came to my attention when, about two years ago, I was rather passively listening to the television in the background of whatever it was I was doing. I heard the lines “Now once it escalated into a Murder One beef for all of them, after they killed the first two, they whacked guard number three ‘cos it didn’t make a difference anymore so why leave a witness”. I recognised these words instantly and knew for sure I had seen this film, but as I turned to look at the television, I realised I had most certainly not. I recognised no-one in this scene, nor the scene itself, the sets, the costumes ... nothing.

I spent the next few minutes painstakingly trying to place the words, trying to trace the familiarity. Eventually, it came to me. I recognised these lines because I had seen *Heat* ... this film was *LA Takedown*.



Heat was fairly well received when it was released at the end of 1995 (overseas at the start of 1996). Critics have been divided over its merit but most opinions fall on the side of praise; interestingly, it did not do particularly well commercially in the US, making just \$3 million profit over its \$60 million cost, but it made a further \$107 million overseas, and did especially well in France. The poster above shows how it capitalised on this fact in the marketing (but note one critic’s misguided comment that it was “wholly original”).

Heat was a remake of Mann’s 1989 television movie *LA Takedown*, which was produced on a thirtieth of the budget with unknown actors and limited resources. He wrote, co-produced and directed both. In what has become a late 90s trademark of director Michael Mann, *Heat* tells its story with unashamed subjectivity, relating it through the characters rather than the events which befall them.

The Appendix contains a full synopsis if the reader has not seen the movie, but the basic story, as it is for *LA Takedown*, is that of a career-obsessed cop, Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino in *Heat*, Scott Plank in *LA Takedown*) and an equally ‘career’-obsessed criminal Neil McAuley (Robert De Niro in *Heat* and Alex McArthur in *LA Takedown* although the latter’s character name was different).

It is this unique situation which makes this topic so special. Through a number of exceptional case studies, these two movies can teach us a lot about themselves, the environments they were created in, and the mind-set of those who created them, particularly the “author” of the works, Michael Mann.

The main objectives of this study are to address, and hopefully attempt to answer, the following questions;

- ❑ What are the differences between *LA Takedown* and *Heat*?
- ❑ How can these differences (and maybe similarities) be explained?
- ❑ To whom do we attribute these, and the critical superiority of *Heat*?
 - The writer/producer/director, Michael Mann – the auteur?
 - The production environment, its constraints and requirements?
 - The actors (the biggest other authorial force in the films)?
 - Or none of the above?
- ❑ What can we learn from the unique cases these two films give us?

Examples of the last point include the fact that the two versions of the story contain one common cast member, Xander Berkeley; or that Michael Rooker appeared strongly and convincingly opposite Al Pacino in 1989’s *Sea of Love*, but showed none of those characteristics when he starred that same year as Vincent Hanna’s deputy in *LA Takedown*.

These two films are further useful because although they share the same script, they clearly have different emphases (plot in 1989, performance in 1995). Michael Mann also has trademark characteristics, evident in both, and this raises the question that, since one of these films is regarded as a classic and the other is more or less forgotten about, and given that he effectively authored both, surely then Mann cannot be the defining variable of quality.

This analysis will concentrate heavily on the *Heat / LA Takedown* distinctions, and within that concentrate heavily on *Heat* (it is by far richer, more widely discussed and hence easier to talk about), and finally, within that, concentrate heavily on theories of authorship – Michael Mann may have written these films, but who really *wrote* them?

One important admission at this stage is that this dissertation cannot avoid being rather speculative throughout. Many questions cannot assuredly be answered, and information on *LA Takedown* was difficult to get. By the end of this study, I will not be stating definitively who authored these films, because I personally do not have the *authority*

to make such judgements, but I will have presented the arguments, outlined the theories and certainly added at least a measure of my own thoughts to guide the reader on the subject.

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Heat and LA Takedown: Two Films, Too Different, Too Alike.

"If I'm there when you're coming out of a score, I'll blow you out of your socks. I won't like it but I won't think twice about it. 'Cos if the wife of some poor bastard you kill is gonna be made into a widow, or you're gonna go down, brother, hey, you're gonna go down"

Vincent Hanna (SCOTT PLANK) in *LA Takedown*
(the same dialogue, without the socks reference, formed the basis for the Pacino / De Niro showdown 6 years later)

In *LA Takedown*, the character of Bosko (one of Hanna's police colleagues) is played by Michael Rooker - someone who is best known for playing a serial killer (Henry in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*). In *Heat*, Bosko is played by Ted Levine, most recognisable as serial killer buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs*.

This is one unusual trivial similarity between two films that are ultimately characterised by their differences. In general terms, those aspects which make *Heat* exceptional only serve to exaggerate *LA Takedown*'s flaws, but conversely there are some areas in which *LA Takedown* had the right idea and *Heat* went astray.



The main thing they have in common is the story, but this is often the place where they differ most; from a common stem, both films choose different routes to telling the story of career cop Hanna and career criminal McAuley. The narrative and plot differences can be attributed to format, time, censorship and auteur choices, but

they need to be defined before they can be explained. In addition to the similarities and differences, the nature of the story itself needs to be considered, to perhaps justify why Michael Mann chose to tell it twice.

Before we can discuss Michael Mann, the studio/network environment, and the presence of stars – the three main sections of this study – we need to examine these films textually, and this will be done by means of a close analysis of the first few scenes, and what they can tell us.

Heat opens with three establishing shots of the three main stars, scenes which tell you (or maybe remind you), at a cinematically pedestrian rate, that this film has three big stars at its core. *LA Takedown* opens with sex and violence; what you would refer to in television circles as a good old-fashioned 'hook'.

The first big scene is the naturally cinematic bonds heist, which is done almost identically in both films (with only some small differences of execution easily attributable to factors of time and technical range). In *Heat*, this scene last just



over seven minutes, but is only four-and-a-half in *LA Takedown*; this raises the question, returned to later, that maybe *LA Takedown* is just a shortened version of *Heat*. Several main points emerge from this first big scene.

Firstly, the use of music is generally consistent in both films, although *LA Takedown* has a tendency to burst into rock and electric guitar interludes for no apparent reason. The compositions of both films; by Elliot Goldenthal and Brian Eno (*Heat*) and Tim Truman (*LA Takedown*) consist of Mann's usual synthesised beats; more akin to mood music than the usual movie orchestral fare. It could have been argued that *LA Takedown* took this route because it was cheaper, but the preservation of this element in *Heat* shows that it was a choice made by Michael Mann (a choice he repeated in *The Insider*). It clearly works, the understated nature of the soundtrack emphasising the suspense and drama without detracting from it. Again, it immediately seems in *LA Takedown* like a symptom of the institutional circumstances in which it was made - the typical 80s beats and predictable electric guitar cut-ins - but in *Heat* this trait does not in any way appear to be 'retro' or nostalgic. The choice of music justifies itself as a component tool in the construction of the scenes and not as a product of the cultural factors.



This music, in the long-term, contributes to the respective atmospheres of the films, but again it is not a uniform one. In *LA Takedown*, the overall mood is seedy, something the music adds to; *Heat*'s atmosphere is classy and sophisticated, and this is a mood that the regulated, unobtrusive sounds enrich.

As a specific example of *Heat*'s unusual use of music, the score for the bank heist (preceding the main shootout) consists of a continuous monotonous beat, over and over again. Listening to this on the soundtrack CD is quite annoying, but in the film, the very 'background' nature of it works superbly.

In the same way as sound is used to great effect in both films, lack of it plays an important role in *Heat*. Explosions and gunshots are frequently preceded and succeeded by bursts of often unrealistic silence (the next chapter will deal more with this trait of Mann's). The silence tends to emphasise the frequent emptiness of the scenes along with the use of LA's wide sprawling backdrops and the general contemplative tone which *Heat* adopts.

In terms of the story, this scene first introduces the level of organisation of McAuley and the villains, with their precision planning and radio-controlled pre-heist co-ordination. This is an important element of the construction of Mann's durable crime tale; the structure of the plot can be usefully analysed in terms of the establishing of sets of binary oppositions – good & bad, police & criminal, Hanna & McAuley, or even Pacino & De Niro – and their role in the construction of the overall story arc.

The bonds heist exemplifies the argument that *Heat* is just a slightly longer, more detailed and thorough version of *LA Takedown*, and suggests that Michael Mann did an hour-and-a-half version of his story then did a two-and-three-quarter hour version. A scene done with a greater variety of styles and with clearly more technical diversity and rehearsal time does not support the main contention of this study, that the two films were the product of varying personal and environmental agencies, but it nonetheless must be conceded that one big difference between the two films is the issue of more time, both to plan and to execute each scene.



The aftermath of the bonds heist is surveyed by Hanna and his team in one of the following scenes. An interesting feature of this is that in *Heat*, this scene takes place in darkness (the bonds heist is in broad daylight). Of course this is perfectly possible, it's just not conventional. Like the unrealistic convention of simultaneous thunder and lightning, two closely occurring scenes tend to take place in similar lighting conditions; the transition from day to night is usually done during lost time.

In the way that the previous scene suggested mere format-related reasons for the differences, so does this scene suggest the opposite. Michael Mann took the increased resources of the big screen film (such as the shutting down of LA streets and, later, a section of LAX airport) and added to it the creative decision that the elements of this scene would be best served by a nocturnal setting. This scene in both films is almost identical, and so is a perfect venue for more detailed analysis.



Mann clearly wants to use the striking red and blues of the police vehicles to emphasise Hanna's status; in darkness they flash all around him as he paces around making deductions and surveying the evidence. The movement underlines his involvement in the scene and the case, whereas the disinterested stance in *LA Takedown* makes Hanna seem somehow distanced from the situation. In *Heat*, Mann has it right, because one of the biggest roles this scene must play in the narrative is to tell the viewer that this particular case is going to engulf Hanna's life.

This scene alternately shows the intense organisation of the police; they too have their radios, and Hanna's rhyming off of possibilities and deductions demonstrates his experience. From the onset of both films, we see we are being shown a clash of titans, and it is uncertain who will outsmart who.

The very next sequence in both films is the departure of Waingro from McAuley's crew. Waingro fulfils a very distinct narrative requirement (or maybe option) as the member of McAuley's crew gone bad. Waingro is the true 'villain' of the piece. Intent on vengeance against McAuley, he not only provides an added plot layer and more suspense, but also a proper depiction of evil, something which the sympathetic portrayal of McAuley was always going to leave the film lacking. Waingro is given absolutely no background or moral fibre – he is pure mindless evil, an automaton who highlights the relative richness of McAuley's like-flawed but better-drawn character.

Generally-speaking, although both films have interesting ideas on character and some intriguing portrayals, the characters in both are rather flat and clichéd (the career-minded cop with the third marriage on the rocks, the gambler, the dedicated intelligent criminal, the ex-con lured back into the underworld). Mann's dialogue is sufficient but never exceptional, although in *Heat* the actors give it more life, but

Waingro (who actually receives a little more character development in *LA Takedown*) can be seen as symptomatic of a wider trend in Mann's work. That is to, after all these years, still write characters who are, deep down, either Don Johnson or nothing at all. Waingro is in essence the stereotypical monster, and later, it is the adoption of Waingro's psychotic thirst for vengeance that is McAuley's undoing.

The character in *Heat* of Roger Van Zant creates another level of villainy, the organised resourceful type. Again, Van Zant is only defined by his involvement with McAuley, and aside from fulfilling another narrative requirement (that of a villain with power), he also adds another dimension to the plot. *Heat* takes advantage of its longer running time to build a much more complex web of "who's after who" plot twists. And by introducing elements of informers and police sources, each side, good and evil, is layered with multiple possibilities and each is peppered with cracks, cracks which can be exploited. See for example the case of Breedan, the 'poor' wayward grill-man who is recruited back into McAuley's gang. Mann seems to enjoy playing with right and wrong in both movies, though specifically in *Heat*, showing what could best be characterised as "good corrupting evil and evil corrupting good", and demonstrating that in the same sense as we realise the overt similarity between Hanna and McAuley (as exemplified in the coffee scene), we see that all of the characters are just a choice away from the same circumstances.

In an interview with Mark Kermode recently (returned to in the next chapter), Mann specified that it was relationships such as Breedan's, and that between Charlene and Chris Shiherlis (Judd and Kilmer), which interested him most.



The following three scenes in *Heat* show McAuley, Chris and Hanna in their home settings (note they are presented in the same order as the opening three scenes). In the first, we see a shadowy figure walking into a big empty house and put down a gun. Continuing the tendency to alternate, demonstrated in the film so far, between Hanna and McAuley, this *should* be Hanna, but after some long lingering contemplative shots of the figure against the ocean, we see it is in fact McAuley. His house is symbolically unfurnished (he is constantly ready to leave it all behind, he cannot

settle, etc) and the massive ocean view seems only to re-emphasise his relative loneliness in the huge urban landscape (the big ocean is also used to effect in *The Insider*). But there is always a sense of harmony present, contrasted with the chaotic domestic discord of Hanna's situation; whereby his wife doesn't understand him and his step-daughter has serious emotional problems resulting from an absent father (a step- version of which Hanna is rapidly becoming).

Similarly, Chris's (Val Kilmer) gambling is causing problems with wife Charlene (Ashley Judd, right), who cites "risk versus reward" in arguing that his crime isn't worth it for the money he's getting. "Risk versus reward" is another idea Michael Mann clearly likes; throughout the story, characters are tempted and swayed



by promises of things ranging from money to revenge. Formally, this could also be seen to be contrasting with the Hanna and McAuley domestic scenes, and their respective harmony and disharmony. Surely it would not be desirable to show the cop unhappy and the criminal happy.

As mentioned earlier, it is clear that Mann was aiming to confuse the viewers sensibilities with both versions of his story, primarily by using and breaking established conventions and secondarily by setting up a complex array of disharmonious and incongruous binary oppositions. As Hanna has his significant other, so eventually does McAuley, and the effects they both have on their respective characters is strong. Eady (the girl McAuley meets in a bookshop) is the reason why McAuley risks the bank 'score'; he is intent on taking Eady away with the money. Conversely, Justine is pulling Vincent away from the case and from his job. When he's at the hospital waiting for news of tragic Lauren (or injured colleague Casals in *LA Takedown*) and his pager bleeps, we are torn as to whether we want him to stay or go. What is more important, the big takedown or his daughter/colleague? Every time the pager goes off, we feel what Justine feels, and we feel what Vincent feels. We can't win, and this underpins the story. No-one, not good nor bad, right nor wrong, can really truly properly win.

When Van Zant double-crosses McAuley's crew, we root for McAuley, but when Hanna faces off against McAuley, we root for Hanna. Or do we? The *Heat* story is about splitting the audience's loyalties right down the middle, and about

playing with the signs and indicators which shape those loyalties. Hanna's exchange of favours with underworld figures Albert and Richard reminds us that he is not too much different from them, capable of deals with criminals, and certainly no saint. Each fraternity has a dinner scene in quick succession, but the criminal one is a lot more familial and secure (very Godfather-esque in fact – was this playing on De Niro and Pacino's past). In each scene, importantly, McAuley and Hanna are in turn drawn away from the party; by Eady and by a new crime respectively. Each obsession is that which will seemingly undo the character, McAuley's new partner and the lure of an unsolved murder, the latest by Waingro.



The best illustration of the teasing of the audiences' loyalties is the discussion wherein McAuley and his crew are asking each other whether it's worth the risk to take down the bank. The viewer watches these scenes, and with each member of the crew, we too make a decision, hoping one might leave it and go back to his family (because we know some of the supporting crew will be shot – such is fiction) but hoping that our favourite characters get to participate in the big shootout we know is coming.

And as McAuley is drawn to Eady, and Hanna is drawn to the crime scene, so Justine confesses she cannot understand why she can't "cut loose" of Vincent. Neither of these women understands their men. Intriguingly, the criminal males are presented more as breadwinners and as providing for their families, than they are as endangering them with their criminal behaviour.

A notable difference between *Heat* and *LA Takedown* is that in *LA Takedown*, Justine is proud of Vincent, despite her objections to his obsession, and it is he who is self-doubting. In *Heat*, all questioning of Vincent's career and his choices comes from Justine (Diane Venora, right), and Vincent is left to justify himself alone. And when Justine spurns him, he retreats further back into his work.



Michael Mann strives with this story to think of everything, to leave no plot facet uncorrupted and no conventions without reversal or upturning.

Chapter One

The textual analysis of these two films could go on forever, but now that some way has been made towards contrasting the films, it is time to take a further, more detailed look at the causes of these similarities and differences. The most obvious of these, and so the first we shall examine, is the writer, producer and director of both, Michael Mann.

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Michael Mann:
Writer, Producer, Director ... Author?

"A true author, whatever the medium, is an artist with godlike knowledge of his subject, and the proof of his authorship is that his pages smack of authority."

Robert McKee (1998)

Does a film have an author? *Can* a film have an author? If so, what separates the casual director from the auteur, what defines the cinematic author and how valid are these definitions in the modern cinematic climate? These questions are basic in a theoretical scheme that itself favours the how over the why, but such founding issues are crucial to the understanding of authorship, both in principle and how it relates to modern cinema, post-modern cinema, and specifically, Michael Mann.

Were the founders of auteur theory first writing on the subject today, I strongly doubt if Michael Mann would be in their top ten American auteurs; in fact, if he made the top 100, I would be greatly surprised. This is precisely why it is so interesting to discuss him. There is no pre-



existing body of literature extolling his filmmaking prowess, or confirming his place as an auteur. There is little written on him, nor on his films, nor on these two in particular, and so there exists no firm basis for this analysis or its arguments.

Those bases have to be formed in the course of this and subsequent chapters, built upon a foundation

freshly defined, not borrowed from another text; a foundation thus constantly central and constantly relevant.

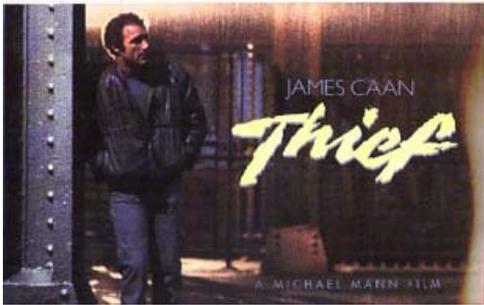
In the course of this chapter in particular, I shall have to justify my choice of director and film; Mann is no Hitchcock or Bertolucci - most people haven't heard of him, critics generally ignore him; is he an auteur or just a director? Can he be both?

In producing a film like *LA Takedown*, it is clear his vision was muffled by factors of resource and environment; he produced a reasonable film from scant resources. *Heat* has been widely described as both a modern classic and a masterpiece, but many would argue that it isn't hard to create a masterpiece with Robert De Niro, Al Pacino and \$60 million in your artist's palette. Was *LA Takedown* non-exceptional because of external factors but *Heat* exceptional because of Mann's vision?

These two films are unique, and therefore valuable, because their similarities tell us as much as their differences. Michael Mann wrote, co-produced and directed both; his fingerprints are left in every scene, but there are times when he clearly has gloves on. His vision as a director is often hidden by his common sense as a producer, whilst his imagination as a writer is dictated to by both.

True, he is no John Sayles - he has yet to add acting and film editing to his resume - but Michael Mann begs some redefinition of the concept of authorship if he is to join that club. Or perhaps it is Michael Mann that requires the redefinition.

Two core issues need outlining here; Auteur Theory in general and Michael Mann in particular. In this case, I shall let the man precede the theory which attempts to explain him. Michael Mann, born in Chicago in 1943, spent seven years at the London International Film School



(A European link which surely relates him more believably to auteur cinema). Writing for tv¹ in the US in the 1970s, he directed the award-winning tv movie *The Jericho Mile* which broke him into Hollywood. His 1981 feature debut *Thief* with James Caan, was a critical if not fiscal success and brought him his second directing job, on 1983's *The*

Keep – a financial and critical disaster, widely believed to be his worst film, and one of the worst films of the eighties.

Mann then returned to television, executive producing 1980s tv style-setters *Miami Vice* and *Crime Story*. His success here and in several small tv movies and mini-series' and the highly-acclaimed *Manhunter* earned him the chance to direct 1992's *The Last of the Mohicans*, a huge success. His career has been in ascension since, and on top of *Heat* in 1995 (essentially a cross between the psychological *Manhunter* and epic, breath-taking *Mohicans*), he has recently been nominated personally for three Oscars for his latest work, *The Insider* (for picture, director and screenplay, of which he won none).



Of Michael Mann, Ty Burr of Entertainment Weekly commented on the release of *Heat*,

“The five films of Michael Mann reveal a director in a showdown with himself; the action auteur versus the intellectual stylist.” (1995)

Indeed, Mann's trademark is style and surface above all. Burr further mentions “Mann's fetish for atmosphere instead of plot, gesture in place of character, score over dialogue”. Strinati (1995) exemplifies *Miami Vice* as a perfect example of post-modern stylistically-driven television, and attributes the precise formal construction of this show and of *Crime Story* to Mann's famous attention to detail.

¹ Please note, television will be abbreviated in lower case 'tv' throughout.

In a recent FilmFour interview with film critic Mark Kermode, Mann related much of his work to an ongoing “Michael Mann mythology”. Kermode, having described *The Insider* as “dynamic and intense in trademark Mann fashion” praised its “finely detailed examinations of its two lead characters”. This was surely something Mann had nurtured in *Heat*. Mann talks of the increasing trend towards subjectivity in his work, of seeing characters “from the inside out”, something again deeply relevant to *Heat* and *LA Takedown*.



He comes across, as his films do, as a complex mish-mash of inspirations; he speaks constantly in metaphors, often musical, and micro-analyses every fine detail of his work, past and present. He is in many senses the ultimate stylistic perfectionist, and this comes across in his body of work. What are also evident are his many trademark devices, most pertinently the flashy, stylish, pop culture of his television contrasted with the grand, rich, deep themes of his cinema.



Most interestingly, in my opinion, are his tendencies towards unashamed hyper-realism. First seen in the sports cars and designer clothes of his *Miami Vice* cops, and continued through his MTV retelling of Fenimore Cooper’s *Mohicans*, Mann likes to get his point across at the expense of the ordinary or conventional. In *Heat* such qualities can be seen in the fantastic but ultimately fantastical shootout sequence, or in the blatant symbolism of McAuley’s big empty house, reflecting his lifestyle.

Robert McKee defends “Authenticity ... does not mean actuality. Giving a story a contemporary milieu is no guarantee of authenticity; authenticity means an internally consistent world, true to itself in scope, depth and detail. Authenticity has nothing to do with so-called reality” (1998, p186). Stanley Kubrick once said to an actor “real is good, but interesting is better”. Michael Mann has no qualms about sacrificing realism in setting, plot and narrative in order to satisfy his thirst for realism in character and motive.

The concept of the auteur was first coined by French critics in the magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s. The idea was that one grand creative force, usually the director, was in effect the 'author' or 'artist' of or behind the work. Thus, one single vision drew the cinematic strands together into some form of cohesive artistic form. Interestingly, the original French *politique des auteurs* was generally translated as auteur theory, but Monaco corrects that it in fact was more of a

policy than a theory (1981, p332), and film producer David Puttnam further interprets it rather as a “crusade” (1997, p250).

From this core idea of the director as composer sprang many specific examples, including the work of Hitchcock, Godard and Rossellini, to name a few. A number of key functions identified the auteur, most notably the involvement of the director's personality in the film, and from this some kind of running theme or continuity throughout their collective work; and the expression of their individuality or nuances on the screen, in such a way that the piece of cinema and the author are as inseparable and symbiotic as an artist is to his painting.

Arguments against this are self-evident. Despite the impressiveness of jacks-of-all-trades like Sayles, or the new breed of actor/producer/director upstarts like Costner and Gibson, the simple fact endures that one man cannot make a film. At least not a cinematic film. This genre is not the novel or the painting. A solitary, moody auteur cannot lock himself in a room for six weeks and eventually come out having authored a motion picture. It does not and cannot work like that.

Rather, it would seem more palatable that films are the product of a synergy of creative forces, something more along the lines of Gestalt thinking. Further, the concept of “auteur-structuralism” questions the process through which the auteur “writes” or “constructs”. John Caughie cites Peter Wollen’s assertion that “the author was the bearer of the structure ... rather than its creator” (1981, p126) and that the director perhaps represents a “principle of consistency” through which forces, foreign and domestic to the production, co-operate and vie creatively.

However, all this about synergy and structuralism would seem to contradict that which we know implicitly about what an "Alfred Hitchcock film" or a "Martin Scorsese picture" should and shall be, and what we expect from it.

Whether the creativity is synergistic, symbiotic or solitary, something draws films like those mentioned above into a designatable category. And whether the auteur is the visionary or the administrator of diverse visions, it is undeniable that someone gives the film an overall style. Perhaps then the auteur is the one who takes the chaos of the cinematic production process and channels it into a focused cinematic production. Authorship is therefore about some kind of consistency and thematic continuity, best expressed, as Caughie puts it, through the "stylistic signature" (1981, p12) of mise en scene; it is with mise en scene that the auteur "writes his individuality into the film".

LA Takedown and *Heat* were both "Michael Mann films"; his individuality was surely in both, but in each it was expressed differently; in sections of each it was maybe not expressed at all. With the lens of the tv camera and the lens of the film camera poles apart, where does this leave individuality? Again, this is a place where these two particular films excel in their value; as is the

underlying principle of this study, how better to analyse the nature and effect of this individuality than through two films which, despite being written, produced and directed by the same man, are in entirely different leagues.



Applying such an old French term to the producer of *Miami Vice* might at first seem ludicrous, but many would argue that he is an auteur simply because of the sheer volume of work or number of roles he takes. As writer, producer and director of most of his films, Mann insists on the kind of authority that makes every film truly his own. And whether the authorship is individual, multiple, collective or corporate (see Dyer 1979), he is surely its shepherd.

Is it the case then that the director transcends his environment and the limitations on his resources? One thing is clear, it is far easier to see the effect of an auteur in a film which lacks the inherent 'creative noise' and visionary multiplicity of cinema production (a fine example of this is Sidney Lumet's bauble-less directorial debut, *Twelve Angry Men*). This would seem to suggest that *LA Takedown* would be the better venue in which to study Mann; since his vision is clearer and his individuality a larger (proportional) part of the overall package.

But Michael Mann is not so simple, and this is where his appeal and usefulness in this area lies. A question which returns us to auteur-structuralism is, does Michael Mann make films within a system or does a system make films within him? Who is the originator of the piece; is it as specific as Mann or as generic as Hollywood? The immediate answer to this question is that



Michael Mann, possibly more than any other modern director, is a tv auteur when making television, and a cinema auteur when making cinema. He knows about television, he started there, and he never tries to make big cinematic tv projects, he instead saves these for the cinema.

It is almost as if he respects both the medium he came from and the medium he moved into, and finds sacred their respective conventions, strengths and weaknesses. There are of course noticeable if not notable stylistic trends, but his main ventures into cinema - *Manhunter* (1986), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) *Heat* (1995) and *The Insider* (1999) - could never betray his lowly tv origins.

This director, in my opinion, paints on his big screen in a way few others do or can. He is one of the most cinematic directors in Hollywood today. His films are grand in scale and vision whilst his television is more subtle and understated. If Mann paints on the canvas of the big screen then he clearly sees little point in trying to paint on the sketch pad of the small.

It is this contrast which highlights his authorship. A contrast which shows his evident style and also shows great, almost finely judged understanding of the nature of these two very different media. That he would choose to tell the same story on each could be put down to ambition stifled by opportunity (he made *LA Takedown* only because making *Heat* was not an option for him until he reached higher status), but I would rather suggest that Michael Mann might have known how the medium would shape each and ultimately make these two very similar productions very different.

Worth considering, given how far contemporary film criticism has now distanced itself from auteur theory/policy is that the very idea of a tv auteur has never really been considered, and we have to ask why not? If a director is an auteur in film and then directs a tv movie, why is he no longer an auteur? This issue should be related to the next chapter's discussion of the gulf between cinema and tv as art forms.

By describing Michael Mann as an auteur, I am not likening him to traditional and more generally accepted auteurs such as Bertolucci, Vigo and Hitchcock, for he will never be in their class. I should stress however that by this statement I do not mean class in terms of quality, just that Mann is a different type of film-maker, one who sees the progression of a story from movie script to tv script to tv movie, back to movie script, onto movie and finally to movie shown on tv - as an evolution, a move through a generic hierarchy, or even a creative experimentation.

The kind of writer who can acceptably adapt Fenimore Cooper and adapt Thomas Harris to acclaim, does not need to tell a heist story twice. The irony is of course that in practical terms, *LA Takedown* was the remake. *Heat* was the original. So when reproducing the 1989 tv movie on the big screen, Mann was returning to the original via a temporary first draft. It has been said that *LA Takedown* was the blueprint for *Heat*, but in actual fact, the script for *Heat* (originally written in 1981) was the blueprint for *LA Takedown*.



Michael Mann clearly works better when he has better resources, but this is no disqualifier of talent. Like Spielberg, Mann thinks on a grand scale; he can *smallify* things if the resources dictate, but his vision is generally expensive to reproduce.

It has long been the case however that Hollywood and Art are uneasy bedfellows. Hitchcock, although seen by most critics as a prime example of an auteur, was a paradox in that he was spawned by a system that was perceived to be in conflict with the very idea of authorship.

Moulet (*Cahiers du Cinema* 1959) said it was unacceptable to simply "repeat in cinema the discoveries of the other arts". Like *LA Takedown* was to *Heat*, all art is evolution.



To conclude this chapter, a few strings need to be drawn together. Michael Mann is surely as much of an auteur as our definition allows him to be; he has a distinctive style, yes; a notable sense of vision, yes; and a unique individuality which characterises his films. But there are different types of auteur. Hitchcock and Welles were characterised by methods of execution - cinematic techniques, a repertoire of technical tools - whereas a filmmaker like Mike Leigh tends more to be characterised by definitive thematic strands.

It is also important to remember the role of other creative forces, particularly those who work closely with the director. Mann used the same editor for *Last of The Mohicans*, *Manhunter*, *LA Takedown* and *Heat*, but another regular collaborator Dante Spinotti (cinematographer) was missing from *LA Takedown*, perhaps accounting strongly for its overall look.

Andrew Sarris said that "all directors, not just in Hollywood, are imprisoned by the conditions of their craft and their culture" (in Caughie, ed, 1981, p66); an auteur is not immune to environmental forces; art is often secondary to economy. Also, is Michael Mann an auteur as screenwriter, producer, director or all three? Can a producer have an auteur quality? (Surely consider Jerry Bruckheimer, an "action auteur" if ever there was one, whose stylistic signature acts like a footprint in every one of his films).

One important question remains; if similarities between the films can be attributed to the auteur theory, what caused the differences?

The assumption that such wider factors as mentioned above can help explain the differences and further explain the similarities between our two featured films forms the basis of the next section, which proposes confidently that no story told in such widely different media as cinema and tv can possibly turn out the same.





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The Production Environment: Cinema vs Television as Art Forms.

"The view which deprecates television as a storytelling medium points to the writer's need to honour an oppressive array of requirements foreign to the story itself. Considered the most onerous of these is the advertising sequence which obtrudes every fifteen minutes, along with its corollary requirement of a socko ending for the scene just prior to it which will bring the audience back"

David Milch (1995)

David Milch's strong criticism of the structure of commercial television in the United States is an appropriate way to begin this chapter, which aims to set out what institutional or environmental forces might explain *LA Takedown* and *Heat* as two works of visual fiction.

He clearly feels strongly about the situation, one in which he has worked successfully and to acclaim for many years. Add to this his later assertion that, by organising his narratives to naturally comprise four climactic events, he manages to balance the "capitalist system" with his "art", and the relationship between those two elements - between institution and individuality - seems a little more complicated (1995, p140). Milch makes a good point however, and highlights an important difference, of which there are many, between the media of film and television.



Television has networks and cinema has studios, but these two institutions are by no means the same, either in their composition or in their effect on media production, specifically the power of bureaucracy to stifle art. Type of audience and nature of viewing situation are also factors which differentiate the two, and thus differentiate the environment in which Michael Mann's two films were created.

If cinema is a medium of the auteur, is television a medium of the producer? This is argued by Newcomb and Alley in their 1983 book "The Producer's Medium"¹, which takes the perspective that television is a form where the producer is the main creative force, whilst also answering common criticisms about the perceived contradictions in terms suggested by juxtaposing the phrases "creativity and vision" and "American television".

This argument is rare indeed, but is essential to my own argument of *LA Takedown* as some kind of unlikely auteurist product. With Michael Mann as producer, writer and director of both, it does not bear on this discussion whether environmental factors might have affected the films' production or directorial outcomes, because these roles are more or less represented by the one individual. (It should be noted though that Mann was Executive Producer in *LA Takedown*, and one of two Producers on *Heat* - essentially he had more of a direct production role in the latter).

The distinction of directors' versus producers' media is a vital tool in explaining why *LA Takedown* and *Heat* were so vastly different in their execution. It might be the case that producer-related factors were responsible for shaping differently the written and directed matter.

¹ This book was chosen because of its pertinence to the era and production climate in which *LA Takedown* was made.

Whether this consists of networks or studios, media products are manufactured within a greater and sometimes all-encompassing industrial environment. It has been argued that Hollywood churns out film and television on a factory-like basis, a foundation which creative individuals are continually struggling against. Films and television shows are thus made through a process of perpetual creative conflict.

Successful US tv producer Quinn Martin says "you can't make shows by committee" (in Newcomb and Alley 1983, p58), but the bureaucracy is inescapable. There are huge sums of money involved in both tv and film production, and the idea of producers and directors being left alone to fashion an artistic piece without hindrance from upstairs is an unachievable ideal. And in addition to this there is the balancing of commercial success with artistic worth, two things which again are widely perceived as innately contradictory.

In the way that the previous chapter assessed the likelihood that Mann himself was responsible for the two versions of his story, we need now to look at the possibility that the very fact that *LA Takedown* was a tv movie made it inherently inferior to any feature film remake.



The television industry in the US is complex, but an outlining of the basics is necessary. With regard to the tv movie, in the 1980s the average budget was around \$2 million for a two-hour show. For this, the network would be given two showings of the film, after which the producer would be free to sell it on to cable channels or, extraordinarily, into cinemas (this latter move has been done most successfully with John Dahl's surprise 1993 hit *The Last Seduction*, although Mann's 1979 tv movie *The Jericho Mile* did it too). Understandably, the network exercises a strong degree of control over the product although this might vary depending on the bankability of the venture.

Despite the fact that tv movies tend to cost more per minute than series', the creative control from the producer's point of view is wider. Obviously, this control is even greater when the producer, writer and director are one. Such hyphenated titles are commonplace in the US system for that very reason, and Michael Mann's position as all three in both *Heat* and *LA Takedown* could well have given him the creative influence to transcend the constraints of each media system.

Returning to David Milch's colourfully worded complaint, there is of course the presence of advertising in the tv product. Presumably this would mean a different narrative structure; this is not

quite the case. Like Milch, Mann's script is one constructed with a great many such "natural climactic events". The way characters and plot have been constructed brings the story, even on film, to a series of rhythmic mini-conclusions. Robert McKee's concept of three acts and two major reversals doesn't quite apply here; Mann's story is a post-modern cocktail of lulling predictable moments and often disturbingly unexpected twists.

Thus, in my opinion, although advertising constraints could easily have been the biggest factor in the tv movie/cinema movie relationship, in this case it doesn't quite come to that. In fact, one could argue that the very idea that Michael Mann is so rooted in the tv format (especially in regard to his crime stories), he thinks up his scripts and his plots in an already-televised form. No-one can say whether this is true or not save for Mann himself, but the possibility is certainly worth considering. Having spent many years working in the television industry, it is probable that institutional forces are ingrained in his work.

Even aside from the advertising framework, it is nonetheless a notable feature of *Heat* that Mann takes advantage of the guaranteed attention of the viewer to spend large amounts of time building characters at the start of the film, time too costly on television and too risky in the age of the remote control, where the viewer is "always on the verge of leaving the channel, turning off the set, ignoring the programme" (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, p20). Contrary to some initial beliefs, television is surely **not** hypnotic, and a two-hour tv movie which expects from the outset the viewer to sit through half-an-hour of advertising had better be worth it.



It is also worth noting the role of censorship constraints imposed by television networks. Networks are constantly open to complaints about bringing unsuitable material into the domestic context. Some elements of *Heat*, notably Lauren Hanna's suicide attempt, were perhaps too much for tv.

One of the main criticisms of television as a medium is that it is often seen as a poor quality imitation of cinema and other established forms. Is *LA Takedown* therefore a shallow imitation of *Heat*? Newcomb and Alley add that tv's formal quality comes from vaudeville, radio, film and fiction, whereas it's industrial structure comes primarily from radio (i.e. scheduling, advertising, strands). This could be seen as its excuse; if an industrial structure can comprise the economics, the advertising constraints, the lack of stars, then it might be a justification for questionable quality.

But, on the other hand, with Mann as executive producer of *LA Takedown*, does this role of his not then bridge something of the gap between network and expression? One of the big

problems of network and studio control is that those faceless executives are often too far removed from the production, and there exists a system of blame-shifting if the result is poor; another consequence is that important decisions and the motives behind them are seemingly equally anonymous. Arguably, Mann was closer to 'upstairs' when he made *LA Takedown*, since he technically let someone else produce it.

The roles of producer and director are very frequently in direct opposition; what we want to do versus what we can do, what is ideal versus what is practical, what we need versus what we can afford. Synergy of these two roles can be either constructive or destructive, perhaps even both. It is my contention that Mann's monopolising of the effort on these films was borne out of a conscious desire to protect each facet of his vision from the power of external forces.

Finally in the television field, a few small points. It is worth considering the fact that *LA Takedown* may have been part of a 'Movie of the Week'-type strand, and that perhaps the film was deliberately more formulaic so as to cater for a specific market with very specific expectations. Frequently it is the case that tv products are assumed to carry certain intrinsic elements/characters/events. The increased level of homogeneity in television could have oversimplified an already essentially by-the-book tv crime script.

Given that television, particularly American television, and quality/cultural value are not regularly associated, was Michael Mann not trying? Did the societal expectations of his 'tv movie' limit the film's ambition?

Many of the aspects of cinema production have already been indirectly mentioned; for example, if *LA Takedown* suffered from a lack of money then by extension *Heat* benefited from an abundance of it. But most pertinently, when Michael Mann replaced Plank and McArthur with Pacino and De Niro, he was opening his creative vision up to a new series of threats.





PACINO



DE NIRO

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Stars As Auteurs:

Playing “Al Pacino” and Being “Robert De Niro”

“When the performer becomes so important to a production that he or she changes lines, ad-libs, etc. then the acting of that person assumes the force, style and integrity of an auteur.”

Patrick McGilligan (1975)

“From the *Godfather* to *Scent of a Woman*;
From *Raging Bull* to *Goodfellas*;
Their performances have created a legacy of landmark films.
Now, for the first time, America’s two most electrifying actors ... collide!”

From the US theatrical trailer for *Heat* (1995)

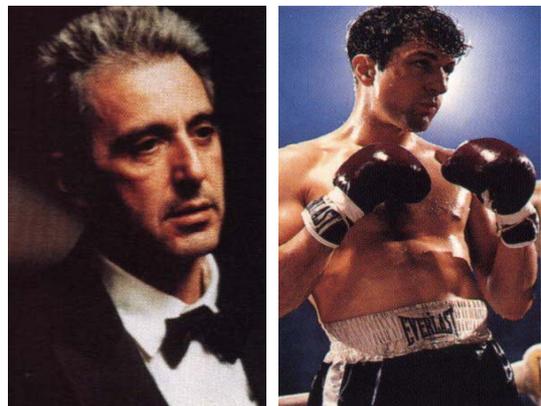
To many, there was no doubt about what made *Heat* special. It is highly likely that when Michael Mann was pitching this *LA Takedown* remake to the Hollywood studios, and asking them for \$60 million of their hard-earned money to make it, he was banking on this high-profile collision to score points with the executives. Mann himself though insists he only considered casting Pacino and De Niro when it came to writing the final screenplay.

The presence of such stars (and others; *Heat* is one of those films featuring a cast that listing magazines punfully refer to as “stellar”) instantly tie the film to the studio system, because stars and the idea of stars are arguably what made Hollywood. Thus, *Heat*’s link to Hollywood is undeniable, but the extent of that link, its effect on the film and its constrictions on Mann as “author” are open to debate. As Owen Gleiberman in *Entertainment Weekly* argued on the film’s release;

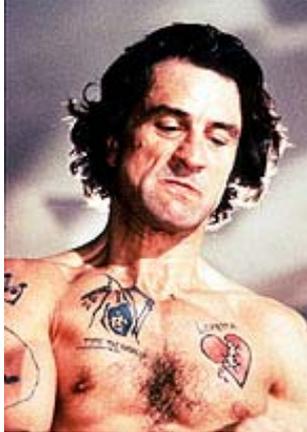
“Half-way through, they finally get an extended dialogue in a coffee shop (it's the first time the actors have ever been in a scene together), and you can feel their joy in performing. We're not watching McCauley and Hanna anymore; we're watching De Niro and Pacino trying to out-insinuate each other.” (December 22 Issue; 1995)

Moreover the same magazine made an editorial describing it as “Michael Corleone versus Raging Bull and Batman”; did Michael Mann’s over-complicated plot and cinematic vision even come into it?

The reduction of a film to the previous personae of its actors at first seems somewhat unfair, but it is this very issue that gnaws away at



Heat's claim to artistic value. Robert De Niro was of course not playing Jake La Motta (as certainly as Kilmer wasn't playing the Caped Crusader), but he maybe wasn't exactly playing Neil McAuley either; and it is such artistic compromise, catering to expectations of the audience and preferences of the actors, that casts doubt on the labelling of Michael Mann as an auteur.



Gleiberman also draws attention to something else unique about *Heat*; although the film is clearly about Pacino and De Niro, they spend very little of the 165 minutes in each other's presence. In fact, and probably surprising to anyone who hasn't watched the film, they only appear together in two scenes – the coffee-shop scene which many agree is a modern classic, and the extended denouement at the end. For a 'collision', these two men were keeping their distance. This raises the question of whether the casting and the publicity of such a casting were in fact marketing devices with limited creative impact. If the two 'giants' of American cinema don't spend too much time together, then their 'giantness' surely cannot be too constricting on the flow of the film.

In pre-production, Mann sent his actors in different directions, both researching their respective parts with homicide detectives and convicts respectively, in the weeks before filming began. Even separate, however, such commanding actors can still exert their influence, but no more so than in any other film. The fact that they spend little time together explodes any theory that together they shaped the movie; thus, it begins to appear like the strong claims of the trailer are something of a smokescreen. In *Heat*, Pacino and De Niro, their popularly held types and their actual performances, don't so much collide as skirt each other. The first scene when they do actually meet is a low-key, narrow, and subdued one. Neither actor is allowed to display the ferocity that has been both their trademarks; Mann keeps his men on a leash here.

And it is this very point that brings new light on their impact on the film. If there is one scene in *Heat* where Al Pacino is being Vincent Hanna, and Robert De Niro is being Neil McAuley (and not themselves), it is this. Pacino's calling card, what Owen Gleiberman



perceptively describes as "that thing where he speaks quietly and then SHOUTS a random

word or two REAL LOUD” (ibid.) is missing on a rare occasion in the coffee-shop scene. Likewise, De Niro’s intensity is muffled here; he is sanitised for this pivotal scene, because, for such a sympathetic dialogue, Michael Mann has to make them both seem as human as he can, and there are all-too-many scenes throughout the film where they both seem far from that.

Independent reviewer James Berardinelli says of the coffee-shop scene, “the dialogue is pedestrian, and because of the noticeable lack of intensity, the café tete a tete might as well have featured Jeff Daniels and Ed Begely” (1995).



With their first on-screen ‘collision’ so subdued and so atypical of the men themselves, and their second and final one essentially non-communicative (they do more shooting and dodging than philosophising), it becomes evident that *Heat* is not about ‘collision’ at all. Thus, Pacino and De Niro as an acting tag team do not have much more effect on Michael Mann’s direction than Al Pacino alone does in his new film *The Insider*.

Robert De Niro himself said of the coffee-shop scene that his performance was down to “just the way it was written. It was a terrifically written scene” (from an interview in *The Journal*, 1996). He gives us here a particularly ironic insight, since this scene was not quite so good when Scott Plank and Alex McArthur said all the same lines in 1989 (see the accompanying videotape).

If these two actors affect this film (or *make* this film), then it has to be alone, and this brings us to the issue of to what extent an actor (or perhaps exclusively a good one) affects his or her film. This obviously has much wider implications beyond *Heat*; it is a hindrance (or a help) which faces every director who chooses to cast a big name.

Al Pacino and Robert De Niro are fine actors (though Coppola once described Pacino as a “self-destructive bastard”), both Oscar winners, and perhaps even unusual in that they simultaneously command great popular and critical acclaim. One criticism often levelled at the two though is their lack of variety. De Niro impersonators the world over are surely gratified that he tends to play the same people (in fact, practically everyone can do that De Niro impression which merely consists of saying “you talkin’ to me” over and over again); and the previous observation about Pacino’s acting is an acidic but undeniably valid one. Every-so-often, this actor persona and the required character part gel so perfectly that an



Oscar nomination ensues. In this way, it is easy to see how Al Pacino might, in every film he's in, to some extent play Al Pacino.

At this stage then we need to introduce the concept of "Al Pacino" as being different



from Al Pacino. Wollen (1973) highlights a need to distinguish between the star as a person and the star as an image (hence the quotation marks), and Dyer (1979, p175) explains that the actor will effectively be the author of the image, with the director as author of the film. Casting choices are as much about casting an image to a part as they are about casting an appropriately talented actor. In essence, the director should make the "familiar personality of the actor" fit with his needs (Perkins 1972, p182).

Descriptions of Pacino and De Niro as people usually contradict their screen personae (Russell Crowe, Pacino's co-star in *The Insider*, recently said that his perception of Pacino as being an "intense" person was quashed when they actually met). It is part of the actor's job to effectively convey a foreign personality to the audience, but these two in particular are renowned for putting on the same faces. As Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times* pointed out on *Heat*'s release:

"De Niro and Pacino, veterans of so many great films in the crime genre, have by now spent



more time playing cops and thieves than most cops and thieves have. There is always talk about how actors study people to base their characters on. At this point in their careers, if Pacino and

De Niro go out to study a cop or a robber, it's likely their subject will have modelled himself on their performances in old movies. There is absolute precision of effect here, the feeling of roles assumed instinctively."

There certainly isn't the time to plough through Pacino and De Niro's past roles and common types, but analyses of the pair's films definitely show some tendency towards the same level of intensity and method acting in their careers. It should be noted that in the same year as he was making *Heat*, Robert De Niro shot *Casino* with Martin Scorsese. The performances are almost identical.



If it is true then that Michael Mann did only think of people like Pacino and De Niro when writing the final draft of the screenplay for *Heat*, did he choose them because out of all the actors in Hollywood, they were most like Hanna and McAuley? Casting is both an auteur



choice and a studio imperative. He chose two of the best actors in Hollywood, who – despite having once played father and son twenty-one years previously – had never actually shared the screen together. This brings us back to the idea of a compromise; in a sense Mann opted for a combination that was big on hype but small on



commitment. It is the job of a good director to balance the economics of the system with the artistic of his craft, and not just this, but as far as possible to keep the two out of each other's way. Mann is not so talented as Spielberg, who created a three-hour black-and-white Holocaust film that a normally fickle public miraculously flocked to see; he had to keep his big draw as attractive but ultimately fictional as possible. Fictional in the sense that the two stars only really face-off after two-and-a-half hours of talky plot-weaving.

Richard Dyer explains that one of the main qualities of a star in the studio system days was that it added value to an otherwise weak production a studio which had a cheap story (such as a remake) could add stars and offer it as something greater (1979). A remake with star value; exactly what *Heat* is.

Pacino and De Niro did not just bring money to the project, they brought the image, the 'type' that has already been discussed. More prevalent to the qualities of "a Michael Mann film" were the qualities of "an Al Pacino film" and "a Robert De Niro film", because is it more obvious to the cinema-goer exactly what these latter two are. From the study of Mann in the second chapter, it is possible to determine what traits are his artistic fingerprints, but this kind of analysis is not going to be on the potential audience's mind as they ponder whether to go see *Heat* or the new Jean-Claude Van Damme film. They may remember his previous film but *Heat* is no *Last of the Mohicans*!

Rather, the two leads bring a sense of *Heat*'s identity. The potential viewer sees Pacino and De Niro and knows that their showdown will involve guns and cities not muskets and feathers. They will also be fairly assured of the film being powerful and epic, two other things we associate with *Heat*'s stars if not director.

This all takes away some of the work of the director, whose character drawing, as outlined in Chapter One, tends to be a bit banal. Pacino and De Niro make bland characters come to life; the aforementioned review in *Entertainment Weekly* says of the film as a whole, it is akin to a “grid for a crime thriller that was never filled in”. With my own views of the film’s richness, I cannot agree this far, but it would seem more applicable to say it is Vincent Hanna and Neil McAuley that haven’t been filled in. As characters on a page they are empty. On the screen they are enlivened and fleshed. And in the way it has been said Pacino and De Niro made bland characters come to life, so it is true they made tv characters (what were quite possibly made-for-tv characters all along) into film characters, and this brings us to the next section in the star debate; *LA Takedown*’s lack of them.

When watching *LA Takedown* and then *Heat*, the respective presence and lack of stars is arguably the most obvious difference, and stars do much more than the selling role referred to at the outset. We have assigned them roles of genre-defining and character-refining, so where was *LA Takedown* without them?

When *Heat* was released, the people who made it were keen to forget about *LA Takedown* (all films deplore the tag of “remake”, and the very existence of a poor made-for-tv copy is a blight in itself); conversely, the people who owned the rights to and marketed *LA Takedown* were surely delighted by the big-budget remake. The tagline for *LA Takedown* - “Hanna is the cop and the *HEAT* is on!” – was complemented by a design uncannily similar to the *Heat* poster. The aim was to capitalise on the merits of the new film, and with Michael Mann as writer/director of both, those merits were surely Al Pacino and Robert De Niro; thus, a film that they had probably never heard of, and certainly never starred in sells videos because ... well, because they’re in the remake? How damning of the star system that stars do not actually have to ‘star’ anymore to get those pounds changing hands.

In 1989, might Michael Mann have been asking of Bonnie Timmerman (who cast *Heat* and, strangely, its low-budget predecessor too); “Get me a cheap Al Pacino”; or “Get me a Robert De Niro for television”? Or, if he is to be believed about his disregard of stars until a fairly late stage in pre-production, was he asking her some five years later, “Get me a big-screen Scott Plank”?



Alex McArthur;
a tv Bobby De Niro?

LA Takedown is populated by tv nobodies, and whereas sometimes this is a good thing (*NYPD Blue* is a good example; they habitually use complete unknowns who happen to

be superb character actors), the stars of this tv movie are not just poor 'stars', they are also just poor. No-one quite carries off his/her role, and there is a permeating feeling of blandness throughout; in fact, to be fairer to the actors in *LA Takedown*, Mann's characters were fairly bland to begin with, the "grid" filled out by Pacino and De Niro's commanding performances.

It is the opposite in *Heat*. Every part is perfectly cast, even ironically Xander Berkeley who is superb as Hanna's wife's lover Ralph, after being incredulous as *LA Takedown*'s psychotic Waingro (see the videotape). This knowing (and possibly deliberately self-reflexive) nod to the choices of the past reminds us that, rather than Berkeley suddenly happening across some talent in the mid 90s, it is more likely that the longer rehearsal times and other such environmental factors drew out the more polished, enhanced performance.

Another brief but highly important consideration is that there is every possibility that the very situation of having to act alongside or opposite the likes of Mr Pacino was the catalyst for that more tangible performance. The bonus of being part of a painstakingly compiled ensemble cast would surely have had a positive effect on all the players.

Something else to consider is the fact that Xander Berkeley as Waingro was replaced in *Heat* by Kevin Gage. Given that Berkeley was one of the better known cast members of *LA Takedown* and Gage more or less unknown, this would seem to contradict the general tendency towards big stars over small ones). If *Heat* was about casting stars, then how can this be explained? Perhaps by the fact that in movie history, mindless psychopaths tend to be played by unknowns, whilst complex heroes and villains alike tend to be played by stars.

The tv movie version also shot itself in the foot somewhat by opting to cast against type. Michael Rooker – best known for his portrayal of the eponymous title character in John



McNaughton's disturbingly real *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* – here plays Hanna's deputy in Michael Mann's hyper-real *LA Takedown*. Interestingly, for more than just trivia's sake, is the fact that the very same part in *Heat* is taken over by Ted Levine, best known as Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs*; the point being that again the part is played against type, but somehow *Heat* gets away with it – to an extent because the character is down-played next to others and also because the performance is so much grittier and real.

Tying these last two paragraphs together is the presence of Michael Rooker in the Pacino vehicle *Sea of Love* (1989, pictured previous page). At the end of the film, the two showdown, and Rooker's performance is exceptionally visceral. If you haven't already noticed the connection, 1989 was the year when he played Vincent Hanna's deputy in *LA Takedown*. Another unique case study of the *Heat* / *LA Takedown* contrast, this tells us that the difference in acting between the two casts was not entirely down to talent.

The exact value of the stars who lent their personae to the *Heat* project is defined by just how much we attribute *Heat* as being a "star vehicle" – a film designed around Pacino and De Niro, and which specifically lets them shine. It is also interesting to consider the contention of Patrick McGilligan, whose 1975 book on James Cagney, "The Actor as Auteur" refreshes the argument on Pacino and De Niro's creative roles. The quotation which announced this chapter, about the point at which an actor becomes an auteur is particularly applicable to Pacino and De Niro.

Specifically, McGilligan cites the ad-libs as representing a tool of the actor's auteur status. To illustrate this we need look no further than De Niro's own classic scene from *Taxi Driver* (1976). The "you talkin' to me" scene (right), the best-remembered part of the film and undeniably an iconic screen moment, was entirely ad-libbed by De Niro. If an actor has the power to define the historical place of a film in the audience's minds (as too did Jack Nicholson's improvised "Here's Johnny" scene from *The Shining*) then we truly have no right to deny them the label of co-auteurs.



Again, it might be proper to consider the roles as perfect for the actors and the actors perfect for the roles, and one thing Mann and Timmerman can be praised for is their attention to casting diligently even the smallest of roles. There is some controversy over the merit of the next big star, Val Kilmer.

Kilmer's portrayal has been, in the years since *Heat*'s release, both singled out for special praise and singled out for special criticism. His role as Chris Shiherlis (opposite Ashley Judd), is a third and perhaps most telling facet of the film's overall star pedigree. Shiherlis was in *LA Takedown*, but was just one of McAuley's 'crew', nothing more ... in *Heat*, Shiherlis has a family,

and we witness the forces and motives which drive him to crime, and his wife to adultery and informancy. Kilmer is a star renowned for being touchy about his star status – he declined a second outing as Batman because Arnold Schwarzenegger was insisting on top billing. Would he have accepted a small peripheral role in *Heat*? Critics disagree about his effect; Owen Gleiberman describes his portrayal as “brutal” but reviewer Tyrone Burr comments that he has little enough time to make anything of the character (both *Entertainment Weekly* 1995).



Aside from the lengthening of his character, Kilmer also garnered an uneasy and almost awkward place in the film’s star-orientated structure and promotion. The opening three scenes, ambiguous juxtapositions of the three core characters, and the subsequent and identically ordered expositional character scenes confirm Kilmer’s status as an important star of the film, whilst the trailer – mostly centred on the Pacino/De Niro thing – ends on “Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Val Kilmer ... in a Michael Mann film”.

Ironically, despite all this discussion about, and consideration of, the impact of “acting auteurs” Pacino and De Niro, it may well be Val Kilmer, who plays Shiherlis more than he does Kilmer, who enjoys the greatest creative effect, positioning himself just far enough under the star system to evade its types and expectations, while carving out enough of a creative niche to make his portrayal both worthwhile and unique.

To conclude on the topic of stars, and the question of them affecting or being authors of a film, when people think of *Heat*, they think primarily of “that film with Al Pacino and Robert De Niro”, not of “that Michael Mann saga”.

Returning to the metaphor of the journalist Owen Gleiberman; *Heat* is indeed a grid, drawn by Michael Mann, based on a grid he drew six years previously, with the central squares filled in by himself in his own distinctive colour, a colour evident in his other films, but with a few new tints in the 1995 palette; a grid then filled in in a multitude of hues by a multitude of talents, drawn from their own palette’s and his too; a grid which though when viewed from up close seems transparent and bland, when seen from a distance becomes a piece of art, the lines and palettes indistinguishable and inseparable, inspired and interwoven.

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Smoke.

"The cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the arts have been before it ... it is gradually becoming a language ... a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions. The filmmaker-author writes with his camera as a writer with his pen."

Alexandre Astruc (1968)

It was stated from the outset that many of the questions of this dissertation would end up, however addressed, discussed and pondered, sadly unanswered. This does not mean that we must leave these debates unconcluded.

In the course of the last thirty-or-so pages of text, I hope I have successfully transcended the obvious in relating my arguments, and other people's, to the unique case of *Heat* and *LA Takedown*. It means nothing at this stage to argue that the \$60 million 1995 film version was better or more memorable than the \$2 million 1989 tv one; anyone could confidently suggest that. Rather, it is the case that the relationship between these two special films is considerably more complex, raising issues of authorship on a personal, interpersonal, industrial, corporate and even societal level.

Michael Mann had the raw *authority* in both to call himself an auteur, and he has arguably demonstrated the stylistic and formal integrity which endears him to the term on a more artistic basis also. We have seen how complicated and almost web-like the issue of authorship is in the contemporary film sphere, with the concept demonstrating the kind of problematic and intangible traits which make it unsurprising it has become quite unfashionable.

The economy of art has also found itself a place in the discussion, and those who see themselves as administrators of artistic creativity are often at odds, possibly innately at odds, with the auteur director. The film industry (and by extension the media industry in general) would not exist without compromise, and it is obvious that this is one skill the director, producer, writer and/or auteur must master in order to ever see his vision come to proper fruition.

It is difficult to pin down individual or collective creative threads in an industry and production environment so replete with diverse, interweaving visionary voices. Tracing Michael Mann's influence, or for that matter Al Pacino's or Robert De Niro's, is a futile, impossible task, because this – as has been mentioned in one of the preceding pages – is not the novel or the painting we discuss here. Instead, we talk of a media product which has little or no origin or destination; it just comes to be, it just exists. There are people, possibly one above all, who bring it into the world, but a film's true parents number too many to count, and any project which has so many unique individual voices is by nature therefore inherently unique itself.

If he is anything then, Michael Mann is, to return to a previous metaphor, the shepherd, someone through whom these multiple creative inputs are channelled and

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arbitrated. To these voices he adds his own, or perhaps more accurately, to his own voice he adds these others, and from the synergy and holism, a piece of cinema, a piece of television, a piece of *art*, is born.

Each player, each 'actor' (in the broad definition) contributes their own special part to the whole, as De Niro's iconic improvisations become as integral a part as Scorsese's detailed direction, and if the pieces gel naturally, something strong and longevitous has been created, something that has the potential to outlive the auteurs who created it.

If that is the challenge of cinema, then we can see both why people aspire to be a part of it, and also why only the most dedicated and obsessive manage to.



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